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## Identifying Rural Salience in the 2020 Whippoorwill Book Award Winners

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### Authors

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**The Whippoorwill Book Award Committee: Jennifer Sanders, Jill Bindewald, Devon Brenner, Karen Eppley, Kate Kedley, Nick Kleese, Natalie Newsom, Stephanie Short**



The Whippoorwill Book Award committee seeks to identify high quality young adult (YA) literature that reflects the diversity of rural people and places. Therefore, the degree to which the novels have rural

salience, is at the forefront of our conversations as a committee. Rural salience means that the texts include content that is particular to and important to rural people and places.

What does it mean for a place to be called rural? The United Nations says that *rural* is difficult to define because its meaning changes from nation to nation; however, they suggest that rural is different from urban in ways of life, socioeconomic demographics, population density, and uses of space (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019; United Nations, 2017). However, we argue that the qualities that mark rural ways of life as different from urban are more complex and extend beyond geography, population, and socioeconomic variation. Rurality is a construction of both physical attributes and socio-cultural meanings (Balestrieri, 2016; Donehower et al., 2007; Howley & Howley, 2010). In addition, “the word *rural* functions for many as a marker of identity, regardless of demographic criteria or current location” (Donehower et al., 2012, p.7). Like Massey (2005), we believe that place and identity are reciprocally influenced by one another and intimately connected through a “practicing of place” (p.154). In the 2020 Whippoorwill Book Award titles, rurality is represented with distinctive features of people practicing place: enacting, constructing, defining, and redefining what it means to be part of a rural geography and culture.

The rural people depicted in our 2020 award novels engage in a practicing of place (Massey, 2005) through community action and by coming together in times of crisis to support each other. In *Larkin on the Shore*, Larkin helps her grandmother build and

rebuild a community book hub that will serve as a substitute for the closed community library. In the process of doing so, she learns about her grandmother’s relationships with community members near and far and becomes invested in the wellbeing of both people and place. This book demonstrates how people become part of a community by their actions and through their interactions with people of the community – a practicing of place (Massey, 2005). Novels such as *Someplace to Call Home* (Dallas, 2019) and *The Case of Windy Lake* (Hutchinson, 2019) depict ways that rural people and communities support one another. When Hallie’s little brother, Benny, who has Down Syndrome, wanders off and becomes lost, the whole community comes out to organize a search party for him. Similarly, when an archeologist goes missing in the town of Windy Lake, some of the First Nation people of Windy Lake organize to search for the man before he freezes from the weather. Both of these search parties involve characters enacting community values and knowledge in ways that construct who is and is not considered a member of their communities.

Rurally situated YA literature often explores how characters develop or maintain a sense of belonging to their local community or experience (and ideally challenge) instances of marginalization within that community. For example, in *Winterwood*, Nora Walker feels a sense of isolation or rejection at the start of the novel because of her family’s heritage of witchcraft. She knows people are afraid of her and believe she is a witch. At first, she embraces this outcast persona with an indignant pride, but as she grows to trust others who she thought rejected her, her feelings of isolation slowly abate. Characters in *Something Like Gravity* and *Larkin on the Shore* follow a similar pattern of feeling like outcasts in the community but eventually finding people who understand and accept them as they are.

A sense of belonging also manifests through local traditions, events, and knowledge construction

as seen in *Pumpkinheads*, *The Case of Windy Lake*, and *Someplace to Call Home*. In these books, major events and community gatherings bring characters together by serving as shared experiences and sites of shared knowledge construction. Howley and Howley (2010) propose a definition of community as “a group of people in a place who engage in the project of constructing the common good in a way that reflects but also redefines important local meanings” (p.36). *The Case of Windy Lake* demonstrates how local knowledge is a privilege that belongs to the local people, and to be considered an insider, one must prove their trustworthiness in sustaining “the common good” (Howley & Howley, 2010). *Someplace to Call Home* also reflects how the local group grows to accept outsiders as young newcomers prove they are individuals who will sustain the community. A sense of belonging is explored and fostered across the novels through the ebb and flow of trust and vulnerability between the characters.

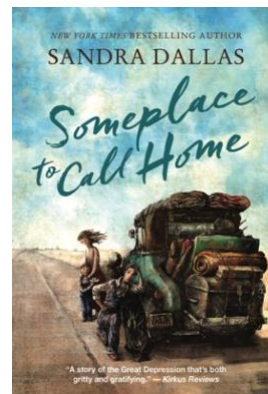
A connection between people and land is another aspect of rural salience that permeates these award-winning novels, highlighting ways in which rural is more than just a scenic setting. *Winterwood*, *Someplace to Call Home*, *The Case of Windy Lake*, and *Where the Heart Is* explore ways in which individuals utilize, protect, and interact with the land that surrounds them. *Winterwood* recounts how the lineage of Walker women magically and naturally connect to the forest through their practices of collecting herbs, protecting trees, and growing gardens. Similarly, Hallie collects dandelion leaves and tends a neighbor’s garden to provide for her and her brothers in *Someplace to Call Home*. Rachel’s family in *Where the Heart Is* has a garden and a pony, afforded by the accessibility to land that is taken away when the family can no longer pay for their home. Rachel also watches as her favorite meadow is turned into a hobby farm where she eventually works as caretaker of the animals. In *The Case of Windy Lake*, the Mighty Muskrats’ cousin, Denice, is protesting the environmental damage caused by the local ore mining company and demanding meaningful consultation with the Windy Lake First Nation. Through her advocacy, she establishes her role in the community and the land as something in need of protection and care. Plots such as these that explore how and why people use land and the tensions that arise at the intersections of space, human lives, and economics provide in-depth treatments of rural settings that move beyond overly

simplistic representations of rural as idyllic and quaint backdrops.

Below you will find brief reviews of each of the seven award winning novels for 2020. We encourage teachers to critically examine the representations of rurality in these novels alongside the narratives that get told about their own rural places. How might we help young people construct new narratives that represent the varied ways in which they interact with the land? What relationships and cultural ways of being distinguish them and their place? What events and traditions contribute to their sense of belonging, and what issues of marginalization need to be confronted?

### The 2020 Award Winning Books

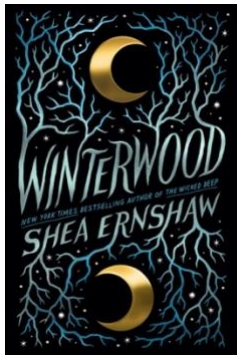
Nominations for the 2020 Award were books published in 2019, enabling the committee to have sufficient time to review all of the nominations in that year’s publication cycle rather than having to wait for late submissions from a current year’s fall or winter releases.



**Dallas, S. (2019).**  
***Someplace to call home.***  
**Sleeping Bear Press.**  
**240 pgs.**

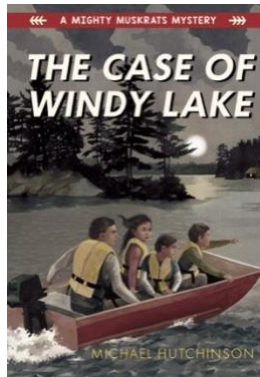
Sandra Dallas’ historical fiction novel *Someplace to Call Home* tells the story of one family’s Dust Bowl migration during the Great Depression, addressing issues as relevant in rural America now as they were in 1933. After the collapse of their family farm and their parent’s death, twelve-year-old Hallie Turner and her brothers, one older, one younger and with developmental differences, leave Oklahoma to find a better life. Along the way, they face hunger and hardships. When their jalopy breaks down in rural Kansas, Hallie and her brothers camp on the side of the road, where they are found and befriended by a farming family with welcoming hearts. The Turner children continue to face hardships: the rural community they enter is suspicious of outsiders, calling Hallie and her brothers “squatters” and accusing them of stealing local jobs. Hallie has to care for her younger brother and protect him from prejudice about Down Syndrome. However, she

fighters to find a way to attend school, where she finds a supportive teacher and, eventually, understanding friends, and Tom finds work as a farm hand and local mechanic. *Someplace to Call Home* is about tensions in small towns – tensions between distrust of outsiders and the importance of caring for one another. Ultimately, this book shows how small-town people and institutions – neighbors, the church, the school, and even law enforcement – can provide the support that newcomers need to feel welcome. Dallas creates a vivid picture of Dust Bowl era hardships, and the Turners find a place to call home in this warm-hearted book for middle grades readers. (DB)



**Ernshaw, S. (2019).** *Winterwood*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers. 352 pgs.

Nothing good lives in the Wicker Woods. Even Nora Walker, a daughter of these woods descended from generations of Walker witches, only ventures there when the moon is full and the forest is sleeping. As a finder of lost things that the woods covet, Nora happens upon a boy, Oliver, who went missing from the nearby wayward boy’s camp. Having no memory of how he got in the Wicker Woods, Nora attempts to unravel the night of Oliver’s disappearance and discovers her own magical power through personal sacrifice. Ernshaw’s *Winterwood* is a haunting love story that blends natural with supernatural and folklore with fairy tale. The rural, Pacific Northwest (PNW) setting permeates every inch of this story but feels familiar to anyone who has strong connections to old-growth forests, PNW plants, and soil, recognizable even in the barest cold winter months of this story. *Winterwood* demonstrates how rural people, especially women, can have unique bonds with land, through their knowledge of its biological and cultural histories, stories, and legends. (SMS)



**Hutchinson, M. (2019).** *The case of Windy Lake: A Mighty Muskrats mystery*. Second Story Press. 160 pgs.

*The Case of Windy Lake* is the first in a new detective series for middle grades by #ownvoices author Michael Hutchinson, a Canadian First Nations member of the Misipawistik Cree Nation. The story centers on four youth – cousins – who live in a First Nations community near Windy Lake in rural western Canada. An archeologist is sent to the Windy Lake community by a mining company. The mining company intends for the archeologist to eventually give the go-ahead to begin mining, even though not all in the First Nation community are in agreement with them accessing the land to extract resources. The four cousins, nicknamed the “Mighty Muskrats,” set out to solve the case of the missing archeologist in a telling reminiscent of a classic detective series.

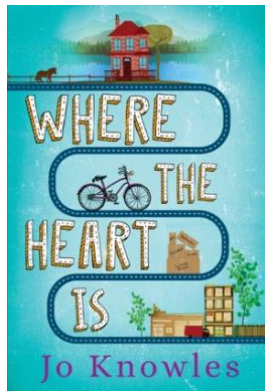
Eventually, the Mighty Muskrats uncover the conflict between the community and the mining company and realize the mining company has plans to manipulate and profit off the people of Windy Lake. Through this process, Hutchinson artfully mixes the political elements of land rights, community, and resource extraction in a middle-grades novel. Put the Mighty Muskrats Mysteries on your list of recommended series books as a modern and political take on the issues and struggles that First Nations communities face. (KEK)



**Mills, J. (2019).** *Larkin on the shore*. Red Deer Press. 299 pgs.

*Larkin on the Shore* by Jean Mills tells the story of Larkin Day, a sixteen-year-old girl sent to live with her grandmother in Nova Scotia after a difficult end to her school year and the gossip that ensued as a result. Larkin’s grandmother Anne, a retired high school principal and respected leader in the town, is opening a book hub to replace the library the town has recently closed, and Larkin

spends the summer helping her grandmother while also dealing with her own mental health issues and her mother's most recent stint in a drug rehabilitation facility. When someone sets a fire in Anne's book hub, the community falls into old habits, blaming the local scapegoat Billy Greenfield who, despite his best efforts to clean up his life and redeem his reputation, cannot escape the small town's scrutiny. It is not until Larkin, tired of gossip and determined to set the record straight about Billy, proves to her grandmother and the entire town that their talk is unfounded that she begins to feel a sense of belonging in the community that she now finds herself. *Larkin on the Shore* displays the worst and best of small-town life: petty gossip and false assumptions but also unwavering support and acceptance. Larkin spends most of the book observing this dynamic from the periphery as she deals with her own issues, but once she intervenes to help Billy, she finds her own place in the community, and through vindicating Billy, she also heals herself. (NN)



**Knowles, J. (2019).**  
*Where the heart is.*  
**Candlewick. 304 pgs.**

Who am I? What is home? In *Where the Heart is* by Jo Knowles, 13 year-old Rachel grapples with fundamental questions about identity and friendship amidst a family crisis. Her life-long

friendship with Micah is changing for reasons she doesn't immediately understand. Boys begin to show interest in her, yet deep down, that doesn't feel right. Her family's income insecurities have intensified to the point where they are no longer a private matter, making her noticeably different from her growing circle of friends when all she wants is to belong. The rural place where Rachel lives is more than a simple backdrop to the story. From Knowles' descriptions and deep integration of the novel's places, her house, the barn, the neighbors' farm, and the lake, painted with just enough detail, it becomes clear that place *makes* Rachel. Knowles develops a sense of place through descriptions of what Rachel does each day that summer, by showing Rachel's important struggles with questions about how her home has shaped her, and through Rachel's internal



**Rowell, R., & Hicks, F. E. (2019).** *Pumpkinheads.* **First Second. 211 pgs.**

conflict of figuring out what that will mean if she has to leave. The story deftly engages young readers with issues around sexual identity, place, loss, and class in ways that are honest, believable, and never didactic. (KE)

It's Halloween night at DeKnock's Pumpkin Patch. The air is crisp and cool, but for Deja and Josie the mood is bittersweet. The promise of college enrollment the following autumn reminds them that their four-year run as co-workers at the patch, and their lives in their small town, will soon come to an end. The night rolls on, and both commiserate about their lasts – cups of cider, corn maze runs, and (crucially!) chances for romance. Taking place over just that final night at the patch, Rowell and Hicks' exuberant graphic novel spotlights the complex emotions that college-bound, rural youth may feel as they negotiate their educational aspirations with their connection to community. Then, October slips into November. When the novel concludes, readers are left aware that their relationship – like Josie and Deja's – with their rural community can become as fluid and long-lasting as their relationships with those they love within it. (NEK)



**Smith, A. (2019).**  
*Something like gravity.*  
**Margaret K. McElderry Books. 386 pgs.**

In this masterfully crafted story in two voices, Chris and Maia become fast friends after Chris nearly runs Maia over with his aunt's station wagon. Chris is staying with his aunt for the summer in a rural town in North Carolina, trying to emotionally heal from a brutal attack and to give his mom some space to deal with Chris coming out as transgender. Although Chris is escaping to the country, the author, Amber Smith, avoids the stereotypical characterization of rural as respite by showing how people in rural towns

deal with just as many socio-emotional difficulties as people from urban areas. Maia, who happens to be Chris' new neighbor, is fumbling through the grief of losing her older sister to a sudden death and the awkwardness of her divorced parents co-habiting because of rural housing challenges. Maia and Chris lean on one another for support and quickly become more than friends. When Maia learns that Chris is transgender, she has to decide if that fact affects how she feels about Chris. Through all the turmoil, the ever-present stars (vividly visible in a place with little light pollution) serve as Chris' comforter, teacher, and guide. The stars and his friends and family help Chris learn that we are "all at various stages between being born and dying" and that "the universe is full of paradoxes" (p.25 & p. 375). (JS)

## Authors Notes



Book review authorship is indicated with the author's initials at the end of the review.) If you or your library purchase copies of these books and would like to put the Whippoorwill award seal on the covers,

please contact either committee co-chair at the addresses below. Include your name and mailing address, and we'll ship you the decals!

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