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# The 2023 Whippoorwill Award: The 2023 Whippoorwill Award: Complex Representations of Rural Identities and Places

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# The 2023 Whippoorwill Award: The 2023 Whippoorwill Award: Complex Representations of Rural Identities and Places



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#### Invited Article

# The 2023 Whippoorwill Award: Complex Representations of Rural Identities and Places

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Now finishing its fourth award cycle, the Whippoorwill Award (whippoorwill.weebly.com) continues to recognize quality rural literature for young people. Every year, the award committee selects up to ten books that portray and honor the complex experiences of rural cultures and communities. The award was created with a desire to help young rural readers, teachers, librarians, and other community members locate books that position rural people as more than just the butt of a redneck joke. This fourth cycle celebrates books published in 2022, and the winners include ten books diverse in genre and representation that depict rural people and experiences in nuanced ways and celebrate rurality, even as they tackle important social issues and challenges in rural places.

Several of the criteria the Whippoorwill Committee uses to evaluate submissions revolve around the representation of rural identities (Whippoorwill Committee, n.d.) including these:

- The literature portrays characters and settings accurately and authentically in terms of physical characteristics, social and economic statuses, intellectual abilities, and other human attributes.
- The literature avoids stereotypes of rural people and places by representing the complexities of the situation, problem, and/or people.

• The literature contributes to the body of diverse YA literature by providing representations of diverse people and places.

In our deliberations, members of the committee find ourselves frequently returning to how and whether submitted and winning books continue to complexify, deepen, and add nuance to our understanding of what rural identity is and what qualifies as a "rural book." Anecdotally, over these past four cycles, the selection committee has noticed an increase in the number of submissions featuring multiply marginalized rural representations and identities. Rural identities are already at the margins or marginalized, in that they are often portraved in stereotypical ways or as foolish, backward, and less deserving of success or excluded from mainstream or valued pursuits and accomplishments. Many characters in this year's Whippoorwill winners are multiply marginalized because they are rural and have identities that intersect with other marginalized identities including LGBTOIA+ identities; feature characters who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous and bi-racial; or have a disability. Even this year's genres invite readers to consider multiple marginalization. Several titles are from the horror genre and/or feature the supernatural which tend to be considered pedestrian and less than realistic fiction. We have also begun to notice how in- and out-migration tend to play a frequent role in helping us analyze and think about rural culture and identity-building.

#### **Horror and Rural Identity**

The identities of both places and people play a huge role in the construction of horror stories. In 2022, author Liz Carey compiled a collection of Rural Monsters, Myths, and Legends, stories originally published in the rural online news source and then compiled into a book published for adults. In the teaser summary, Carey noted that rural places have "forested woods...remote lakes...and sprawling fields...[creating] plenty of room for the wild and weird to take root" (Carey, 2022, unpaged). However, rural horror stories are not always as simple as being far fetched or scary; in fact, "they offer a valuable window into the unique culture and community of places often unseen and underappreciated" (Carey, 2022). Examining the impact of monsters, myths, and legends can highlight important nuances of the rural communities in which those events happen.

Likewise, horror is rooted in primal empathy because mortal humans all share the same weaknesses and are connected to one another by our fears of death, disease, and loss (as well as our search for joy, love, and community). So, "to learn what we fear is to learn who we are. Horror defines our boundaries and illuminates our souls" (del Toro, 2013, p. xi). Further, horror provides opportunities for readers to acknowledge, name, and critique the worst aspects of our world—to critically read what is "wrong with the world" (Link & Grant, 2014, p. vii)—and who they are in it. Horror doesn't shy away from the negative aspects, from the monsters, of the world so that we might call them by their names and vanquish them.

This year's winners include several texts that use horror conventions to invite critical thinking and discussions about rural people and places. Angel Falls by Julia Rust and David Surface explores generational trauma and healing through the use of the preternatural and the geographical features Carey (2022) describes. The Weight of Blood by Tiffany D. Jackson invites readers to face rural sundown towns and their role in the systemic oppression of Black folks. Man Made Monsters by Andrea L. Rogers traces how systems of White supremacy and Indigenous oppression have impacted past, present, and future generations of rural Native people. The Gathering Dark, a collection of short stories from contributing editor Tori Bovalino, explores a number of issues salient to rural places such as the conflict to leave or stay, feelings of isolation and connection, and what it means to be an insider/outsider of the

community. All these stories face and critique social issues that exist in rural places; however, none of them paints rural people and places as all bad—or all scary. The treatment of rural communities and the issues that exist in them invite nuanced and critical readings of the identities of rural people and places, asking us to think about how we can make the world better.

#### **Queer Identities in Rural Places**

Just as horror gives us a specific look into the darkness that exists in the world, the number of submissions of books containing queer rural identities provide evidence of folks who are striving to bring light into darkness. In our current cultural moment multiple legislative decisions, all-to-frequent book bans, and near constant political rhetoric have made life more difficult for folks with queer identities, including those in rural spaces. Rural identity is complex; it includes both objective and subjective components. This means that rural identity is tied to places of residence and work, but also social and cultural meanings (Cain, 2021). Growing up rural means taking on many societal and cultural perceptions and reconciling those with individual perceptions of identity. Rural students develop an understanding of themselves as individuals and how they identify by reconciling their self-perceptions and how they are perceived by others (Ketter & Buter, 2004). Because of this, rural students who are navigating identity exploration are often marginalized and are underrepresented. The increase of submissions featuring rural LGBTQIA+ identities helps to "negate the assumption that rural students are monolithic and that rural areas lack diversity" (Cain & Willis, 2022, p. 75).

Award winners telling queer rural stories this vear included stories with characters that both accepted and struggled to accept their LGBTQIA+ identities, and stories where their LGBTQIA+ identities were both challenged and heart-warmingly accepted by families and community members. For example, The Complicated Calculus (and Cows) of Carl Paulsen by Gary Eldon Peter features a gay main character who knows and accepts his queerness as he works to navigate how that identity fits into the greater identity landscape of the people around him. In A Little Bit Country, readers see both—a character who tries to hide and deny his queerness and another who accepts it openly—while occupying a rural town. Among other salient themes, many of this year's winners highlight the complexities of

navigating rural places as queer youth. They don't shy away from the challenges that queer rural young folks can face, but they also don't depict rural places as wholly homophobic, offering readers an opportunity to engage with a more complex understanding of rural places.

#### In-/Out-Migration

Rural places and people are not static. Rural people frequently out-migrate and leave their rural towns when their line of work or goals or interests lie outside of their rural hometown (Parton, 2023). Despite the dominant narrative that in order to be somebody, rural young folks must leave their hometowns, sometimes they leave and stay gone for good and sometimes they return (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Parton & Kuehl, in press; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Whenever geospatial borders are crossed, cultural exchange happens and the people and places are changed in the process, revealing aspects of the cultural practices and knowledges associated with those places (Parton, 2023).

Three of this year's winners featured in-/outmigration in ways that invite readers to think about how we define rural identity and what qualifies as a rural book. In Rachel Bird by Becky Citra and Vicious Is My Middle Name by Kevin Dunn, the main characters move to live in rural places that belong to their mothers but not to them. Rachel, in Rachel Bird, moves with her sister to live with grandparents she's never met on a remote Canadian ranch. Though she is from people who have generational ties to the land, Rachel does not (initially) identify as rural and it takes time before she chooses to learn the place of her people. Syd, in Vicious Is My Middle Name, moves to live with her grandparents in rural Appalachia. She too is from the people but not the place. Like Rachel, she learns and cares deeply for that place throughout the book, eventually fighting for its survival.

An out-migrant story, Phil Stamper's *Golden Boys* tells the story of four friends from rural Ohio who end up in nonrural places during the same summer. One travels to France to study abroad, one travels to Boston to save the trees in Boston's park system, one stays with family in Florida to work at their arcade, and one takes an internship with a senator in Washington, D.C. Although the majority of the action does not take place in a rural setting, *Golden Boys* is a Whippoorwill Book book because it tells the story of four rural people. Despite leaving their rural town, all the boys grapple with and

maintain their rural identities. As rural people in nonrural places, their interactions with nonrural people reveal and highlight rural culture and knowledge.

One final identity that we saw this round (and that we'd like to see more of) is the representation of rural people with disabilities. There are characters with disabilities in both *Golden Boys* and *Air* by Monica Roe. *Air*, in particular, addresses the challenges of having a physical disability in a small rural place, particularly in terms of infrastructure. Emmie's school's lack of accessibility for folks who use wheels for mobility drives the action of the plot. Her story gives readers the opportunity to think about rural infrastructure and support as well as what it really looks like and means to help someone.

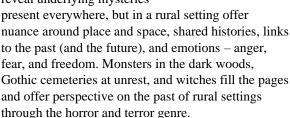
Read on to learn more about each of the books and how they spoke to specific evaluation criteria.

#### The 2023 Whippoorwill Award Books

Bovalino, T. (Ed.) (2022). The gathering dark: An anthology of folk horror. Page Street. 272 pages. The Gathering Dark is an opportunity to read stories in rural and remote settings, from a plethora of authors, in an anthology style text, with stories drawn from legends and local lore.

Those who enjoy short fiction, horror, deep forests, mysterious women, fires and the resulting ashes, and shadowy strangers in town should pick up this book to read under the covers at night.

The secrets and terror conveyed in these stories reveal underlying mysteries



Like in much of rural fiction, there are themes of toxic families and communities coupled with links to tradition and the past. The legacy of rural histories and legends is ever present in Bovaline's collection of horror stories. (KK)

Citra, B. (2022). Rachel Bird. Second Story Press. 232 pages. What can be found on a ranch in rural British Columbia? Horses, of course, and the haunting cries of loons. Lakes and canoes and a rodeo. A country store and absolutely no cell phone



service. An exuberant dog and two aging grandparents they never even knew about. For Rachel and her little sister Jane, what can be found in a rural place is an unfolding series of mysteries and, just maybe, the loving home they need.

Rachel Bird, on its surface, follows a fairly common plot--that of city kids

sent to the country for the summer to heal from trauma or find peace. Rachel Bird, however, brings depth, complexity, mystery, wonder, and new shades to this familiar tale. Rachel and Jane have been (reluctantly) cared for by their uncle and aunt in the city since their mother's death by overdose. Something terrible has happened to Jane's arm, something Rachel won't talk about. The siblings end up staying with grandparents on the family ranch in British Columbia with their formidable, patient, and reserved grandmother Margaret and the increasingly aging Grandpa Wayne, who is searching through the artifacts of his life for a photograph no one else must see. As Rachel and Jane learn more about the mysteries of the ranch--their mother's childhood friend and their uncle's tragic death by gun violence-they also begin to tell their own tales, and in so doing, find the peace they need to grow.

Rachel Bird, with complexity and grace, shows us that rural places can be healing, but only when the people who live there face up to the complexities and challenges, the family tragedies and social morays, and turn to each other for strength and support. Rachel Bird tells a compelling and engaging story of rural redemption. (DB)

Dunn, K. (2022). Vicious is my middle name. Fitzroy Books/Regal House Publishing. 288 pages.

"Vicious is my middle name" (p. 1). Sydney seems to walk off the page and stand face to face with us as she utters these words. Together we are confronting the awkwardness that is the first day of eighth grade in a new place. Sydney moves with her mom to her grandparents' house in Beaver Dam North Carolina (located in Appalachia) after her dad dies. Sydney's mom, a generational native of Beaver Dam, sees the

move as a way to tap into the support of family and community and leverage access to affordable higher

education. For Sydney the move feels less advantageous. Her new peers see her as an outsider—born and raised elsewhere—precipitating a series of struggles.

Sydney often turns to family and friends to seemingly ask: "Are you seeing this too?" Versions of this question arise in



response to things such as local power structures maintained by prominent families and the pending decision to build an asphalt plant near the school. Importantly, author Kevin Dunn surrounds Sydney with characters that push her from questions to actions. This novel is an essential read for rural youth who may be inspired by Sydney to see the possibilities in their communities, as opposed to the narrative of limitations they so often hear. (JY)

# Jackson, T. D. (2022). *The weight of blood*. Katherine Tegen Books/HarperCollins. 416 pages.

Maddy Washington has been passing for White her entire life, following strict orders of her white father, Thomas Washington. She has been the target of

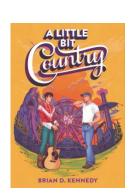
bullying her entire high school career, which she dealt with to keep her important secret: she's biracial. After a surprise rainstorm reveals her secret, a viral video highlights Springville's racist roots. In order to demonstrate their inclusivity, the senior class decides to integrate prom for the first time since the school has been



desegregated. When the girlfriend of the Black, allstar quarterback convinces him to take Maddy to the integrated prom as another demonstration of inclusivity, some of her classmates take this as an opportunity to seek revenge on Maddy for keeping her racial identity a secret. What her classmates don't know is she is keeping another secret. A secret that will change Springville forever.

The rural setting of this story highlights the antiquated rules some rural communities still follow, even if they do not necessarily believe in the foundation of those rules. Springville is a sundown town where the Black community still uses the power plant's end-of-shift alarm as their "warning" to return home before sundown. The official laws of the sundown town are no longer in place, but the societal expectations of those antiquated laws still exist. It's easy to assume this story takes place in the past, but smartphones and the internet are prominent--especially since the viral video is the impetus for all the events that follow. This novel, with nods to Stephen King's *Carrie*, highlights the impact of implicit biases and microaggressions and what happens when we aren't willing to face those biases and move toward a more inclusive community. (EB)

Kennedy, B. D. (2022). A little bit country. Balzer & Bray. 352 pages. Brian D. Kennedy's admiration for Dolly Parton spills over into the pages of this young adult romance set in Jackson Hollow,



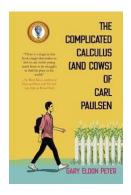
Tennessee with Wanda
World (a fictional
Dollywood-like park) as its
center stage. Protagonists
Emmett and Luke's
relationship sparks after a
chance meeting while
working at the park. Kennedy
artfully uses the joy
associated with romantic
comedies to position readers
to consider the experiences of
members of the LGBTQIA+

community in rural Appalachia and the role of tourism in rural economies. Through Emmett's ambitions to top the charts as one of the first successful gay country music stars readers are confronted with questions about the inclusivity of the country music industry, while Luke's struggle to come out as gay to his family and friends brings to the surface how a teen can feel unseen and fear becoming unwelcome in the generational structure that is often thought to be a hallmark of life in rural Appalachia. (JY)

Peter, G. E. (2022). The complicated calculus (and cows) of Carl Paulsen. Fitzroy Books/Regal House Publishing. 164 pages. Carl lives on a family dairy farm in Minnesota with his father. His mom passed away a few years earlier, and he and his dad struggle to keep the farm financially productive and also respect her longtime wishes for the farm and their shared family history on the farm. The situation is reminiscent of the farm crisis of the 1980s, the

difficulty maintaining small family farms today, the knowledge that generations of one's family have been stewards of the land and the animals, and the complexities that arise when a family must make difficult decisions for the future.

Throughout this context, Carl knows he is a gay teenager, and this



comes to light in the narrative while Carl explores a crush on a new classmate named Andy. A common critique with depictions of rural settings and LGBTQ characters is that there is all-encompassing homophobia and that LGBTQ individuals must flee to larger and more progressive places to realize their lives. However, Carl's LGBTQ struggle in a rural area is nuanced; the book isn't about a caricature of homophobia in his community. Carl's queer story and process of coming out presents a family and community that doesn't unilaterally hate queer people and assumes an audience that also has nuanced views of queerness in rural settings.

Had Carl's story been available to me as queer Midwestern kid from a farm family, the narrative would have suggested to me that leaving home was not the only option for a fulfilling life, and that not everyone in the community would shun me. Peter writes a nicely nuanced, beautifully narrated story that complicates the intersection of queer and rurality. (KK)

Roe, M. (2022). *Air: A novel*. Farrar Straus Giroux. 274 pages. What do you do if the only decent place to get air is a skatepark over an hour from your house? Emmie Ethridge thought she had

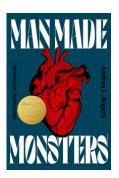
the perfect setup with a halfpipe her father built in her backyard. But, ever since her mom died two years ago, her father isn't too keen on her using the ramp. And the rest of her small South Carolina town isn't so sure she should be going fast and doing tricks either, given that she's in a wheelchair. Monica Roe's debut novel Air looks at how people with disabilities



experience rural places. Not only must Emmie

navigate the usual middle-grade complexities of friendship drama, budding romances, and complicated relationships with family, but she must also try and navigate a town without sidewalks, a school grandfathered in before ADA codes, and people with misplaced intentions who unwittingly rob her of her agency. Emmie's dream is to do WCMX tricks on the big stage, but she knows she'll need a sturdier wheelchair in order to do that. Emmie and her friend, Ale, raise money through a successful online business, but when their school's new principal announces a fundraiser to help, Emmie isn't sure how she feels about the sudden generosity. Air examines how accessible rural places can be and how one can find the power to advocate from within themselves. (AH)

Rogers, A. (author) & Edwards, J. (illustrator) (2022). *Manmade monsters*. Levine Querido. 336 pages. Debut Cherokee author Andrea L. Rogers follows several members of an extended family tree across ten generations and two hundred years, from 1839 to 2039. In this collection of 18



short stories, she captures
Native histories and current
realities through a blend of
historical fiction and horror
fantasy. Rogers weaves a
tapestry of Native cultures and
the atrocities Cherokee people
have endured, tempered with
the revenge of vampires and
werewolves that keep the
reader turning the page. In
addition to fast-paced

storytelling, stunning illustrations by graphic artist Jeff Edwards, also a Cherokee Nation citizen and Oklahoman, begin each chapter. The black and white images are created in a style that echoes traditional printmaking, often incorporating the Cherokee syllabary.

One of the reasons *Man Made Monsters* made our award list is it represents Cherokee language and culture, Indian Territory, and Oklahoma in such a rich and nuanced way. Unlike some other Whippoorwill titles that exude rurality from cover to cover, this book incorporates rural places and identities more subtly—through the connections among all things, through the characters' actions and movement through lands, through lived experiences, and through traditional folklore. Some of the stories take place in metro areas like Fort Worth, Texas, or Tulsa, Oklahoma. Nonetheless, because of the forced

relocation of Cherokee people (and many other tribal nations) to the remote lands of the Oklahoma region, these stories are deeply rooted in rural spaces and rural histories.

Man Made Monsters is a gem that seems destined to be treasured, having already won several awards, including the Walter Award, the ALA Best YA Fiction Award, and now The Whippoorwill Book Award. If that doesn't make you go out and grab a copy... (JS)

Rust, J. & Surface, D. (2022). Angel Falls. YAP Books/Haverhill House. 318 pages. When Jessie moves to Beauport, a small seaside town, with her father, leaving her mother behind in New York City, she discovers the isolated trails of Angel Falls.

this place is uncovered through encounters with locals, including sixteen-year-old Jared, a local boy who feels at home in the forbidden woods.

Together, Jessie and Jared begin to discover the dangerous secrets that illuminate the interweaving connections among people, place, and history, requiring them to

The mysterious history of

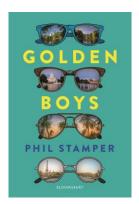


work together to save their own families.

The creative way the authors juxtapose perspectives offers readers an invitation to know and deeply care about Jessie, Jared, and their families. The considerations for generational family dynamics, what it means to be from a place, and the tensions people feel between loving a new place while also wanting to go "home" speak to important components of rurality. Representations of rurality (Beauport) and urbanity (New York City) are contrasted in ways that add to the complexity of the story. (MY)

Stamper, P. (2022). Golden boys. Bloomsbury. 384 pages. The summer before senior year, four friends set off on their own to leave their rural town in pursuit of internships and adventures away from each other. Gabriel, Reese, Sal, and Heath have a friendship forged by their dreams, academic achievements, and queerness. Gabriel spends the summer volunteering with an environmental nonprofit in Boston. Reese hones his design skills at an American school in Paris. Sal tests his mettle

volunteering for a senator on Capitol hill. And Heath ventures south to Florida to work at his aunt's



boardwalk arcade. Away from one another for the first time, separated by miles and time zones, the boys have time and space to figure out who they are—both alone and in relation to one another. Can their friendship survive the time apart?

Because this story features rural people outside of a rural setting, it helps to diversify and complexify our

understanding of rural places, people, culture, and

knowledge. Gabriel, Reese, Sal, and Heath's experiences as rural people outside of their rural homes really challenge readers to think about how we define a "rural" book, especially because the movement of characters across rural and urban spaces uses that juxtaposition to highlight the commonalities and differences. It also helps readers identify aspects of rural culture that might not be especially visible while still in a rural environment. For example, there is a particular way that rural people value and expect hard work which, especially as Sal's experiences demonstrate, can be detrimental. *Golden Boys* may not feature a rural setting, but it is a rural book because of the rural identities, cultures, and knowledges it portrays. (CP)

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