

Duel by [Jessixa Bagley](#), Illustrated by [Aaron Bagley](#)

Sometimes sisters don't get along so well. Sixth grader Lucy and eighth grader Gigi are sisters. Gigi has a way of making Lucy feel small. When Lucy snaps and challenges her sister to a fencing duel, she may have bitten off more than she can chew. Dad used to coach them in fencing, but now Dad is dead. Emotions are as high as the stakes in the challenge. Gigi is the star fencer for her school and a defeat would tarnish her reputation. Lucy is out of practice and needs a win to help her feel better about herself. Lots of great descriptions of fencing and the equipment used.

Good Different by [Meg Eden Kuyatt](#)

Selah knows her rules for being normal and she always, always sticks to them. This means keeping her feelings locked tightly inside, despite the way they build up inside her as each school day goes on, so that she has to run to the bathroom and hide in the stall until she can calm down. So that she has to tear off her normal-person mask the second she gets home from school, and listen to her favorite pop song on repeat, trying to recharge. Selah feels like a dragon stuck in a world of humans, but she knows how to hide it. Until the day she explodes and hits a fellow student. Selah's friends pull away from her, her school threatens expulsion, and her comfortable, familiar world starts to crumble. But as Selah starts to figure out more about who she is, she comes to understand that *different* doesn't mean *damaged*. Now she needs to get her school to understand that, as well as her friends and family, before it's too late. *Good Different* features a neurodivergent 12-year-old who discovers this unidentified part of herself (and her family) while she learns about how to navigate in a world not designed for her, and will resonate with middle-grade readers who feel "different". Written by an autistic author, this novel in verse is a perfect read-alike for fans of *A Kind of Spark* and *Starfish*.

The Ghosts of Rancho Espanto by Adrianna Cuevas

If you like books that are a little spooky, with a solid mystery that will keep you wanting to read more, try *The Ghosts of Rancho Espanto* by Adrianna Cuevas. In this book, we meet twelve-year-old Cuban American Rafa Alvarez. He tries to escape the realities of his mother's illness and his strict father by playing his favorite tabletop role-playing game with his friends. One day, he and his friends try to steal a slushie machine as part of the game. Unfortunately, Rafa gets caught, and his dad decides that his punishment is to spend a month on a ranch all the way across the country in New Mexico. He is sent to Rancho Espanto – aka "Terror Ranch."

At first, life on the ranch isn't so bad. Rafa befriends the librarian's daughter, Jennie, and the barn manager, Marcus. But soon, Rafa starts seeing a mysterious man in a green sweater that no one else seems to see. And every time he does appear, he causes chaos for Rafa – sabotaging his work and getting him in trouble.

Together, Rafa and Jennie begin to investigate these strange occurrences and try to solve the mystery of Rancho Espanto. Is the ranch haunted? Or is there something else at play here?

This book has a little of everything. The mystery blends with a touch of horror and the supernatural, as well as (a spoiler alert!) a good dose of sci-fi. This story also expertly explores themes of grief, loss, family, PTSD, and identity. With lovable characters, humor throughout, and a plot twist you won't want to miss, *The Ghosts of Rancho Espanto* is a must-read.

Grounded by Aisha Saeed, S.K. Ali, Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow, Huda Al-Marashi

Publisher's summary:

"Four kids meet at an airport for one unforgettable night in this middle-grade novel by four bestselling and award-winning authors.

When a thunderstorm grounds all flights following a huge Muslim convention, four unlikely kids are thrown together. Feek is stuck babysitting

his younger sister, but he'd rather be writing a poem that's good enough for his dad, a famous poet and rapper. Hanna is intent on finding a lost cat in the airport—and also on avoiding a conversation with her dad about him possibly remarrying. Sami is struggling with his anxiety and worried that he'll miss the karate tournament that he's trained so hard for. And Nora has to deal with the pressure of being the daughter of a prominent congresswoman, when all she really wants to do is make fun NokNok videos. These kids don't seem to have much in common—yet.

Told in alternating points of view, *Grounded* tells the story of one unexpected night that will change these kids forever.”

This story has a mystery, family dynamic issues, differing religious points of view within Islam, friendship and relationship issues and more. There is a lot here about identity and figuring out who we are as well as who we are indifferent situations. There are some difficult choices that have to be made and the kids are pushed out of their comfort zones.

The Guardian Test by [Christina Soontornvat](#), Ill by [Kevin Hong](#)

Imagine you are living happily on an island with your grandparents, talking with your plants and pet goat. Life is slow and peaceful. Then you discover you've been accepted to the Guardian Academy on Lotus Island, an elite school that teaches you how to transform into your magical Guardian form and protect the natural world. But how did this even happen? You never applied!

That is what our young hero, Plum, is faced with. After her parents die at sea, she is raised by her grandparents on a quiet farm on a quiet island. But they see magical ability in her and send in an application to the Guardian Academy. Plum, faces a lot of challenges in the coming months, moving away from the only life she has ever known, being around a lot of people, making friends with people (who are so much more complicated than plants and goats!), and learning how to access her Guardian form.

Will Plum be able to adapt to all these changes? Will she learn to navigate human relationships? Will she become a Guardian?

Just a Pinch of Magic by [Alechia Dow](#)

This dual perspective cozy fantasy centers around two 12-year-old girls who feel like outsiders in a magical town named Honeycrisp Hill in Rhode Island. They find acceptance and friendship in each other and must team up to save the town from black magic- all while getting their dads to date each other!

Winifred “Wini” Mosley is a plus-size Black girl and a baking enchanter. Her single father owns a magical bakery where all the food is enchanted with ingredients like love or good luck. When Wini was an infant, her mother cursed the town and left- causing the townsfolk to dislike the Mosleys and bully Wini. Their bakery is failing due the rising cost of magical ingredients. Wini decides she must save the bakery by casting an illegal spell to gather the most expensive ingredient: love.

Meanwhile, Kaliope “Kal” Clark is a mixed white and Latina girl who moves to Honeycrisp Hill with her single father so Kal can learn her word enchanter magic. Kal experiences anxiety, and this is dealt with in a positive and age-appropriate way. Her father opens a haunted bookstore. There are whispers of black magic around their bookstore and home, and Kal wonders if the sudden reappearance of her estranged grandfather has anything to do with it.

Wini’s illegal spell backfires and brings an official Enchantment Agency investigation. Kal befriends a haunted book with dire consequences. Wini and Kal must team up to save Honeycrisp Hill from black magic. Along the way Wini discovers what really happened with her mother’s curse.

This cozy fantasy has excellent world-building, some black and white illustrations, and includes 5 baked goods recipes.

The Lost Library

by Rebecca Stead and Wendy Mass

Have you ever wondered what secrets a library could hold—even one that burned down years ago? *The Lost Library* by Rebecca Stead and Wendy Mass is a mysterious and heartwarming story about a small town, a hidden past, and a curious boy named Evan.

One day, Evan stumbles upon a little free library filled with old books—and a talking cat named Mortimer! As he and his best friend, Rafe, start uncovering the library's secrets, they realize there's more to their town's history than they ever imagined. With a mix of adventure, friendship, and a touch of magic, this book weaves together different voices—including that of the long-lost librarian—to reveal a story about the power of books and the importance of the past.

If you love books, mysteries, and a little bit of magic, *The Lost Library* is a must-read. Who knows? It might just make you look at libraries—and cats—a little differently!

The Lost Year by Katherine Marsh

In the early days of the COVID-19 shutdown, 13-year-old Matthew is stuck at home with his mom and GG, his great grandmother. Since GG is 100 years old, Matthew and his mom are doing what they can to keep her safe, which leaves Matthew feeling very isolated and alone. To make matters worse, Matthew's journalist dad is stuck in Paris.

When Matthew's mom takes away his Switch console for two weeks, he starts spending more time with GG and helps her organize some of her belongings. What begins as a chore, quickly becomes the highlight of his day when Matthew finds a photograph of two young girls and convinces GG to share the story of her childhood.

In 1932 Kyiv, Mila is the daughter of an important party official in Stalin's USSR. As Mila goes about her daily life, attending school, piano lessons, and Pioneers meetings (the young people's group in support of Stalin and the Communist Party), she is unaware of the famine facing millions of people living in the countryside outside Kyiv. Until a child claiming to be her cousin shows up at her house one afternoon.

Helen lives in Brooklyn in 1932, but she has family still living in Ukraine in the USSR. As she begins to hear stories of the famine ravaging the countryside, Helen decides that she must act. The official news from the USSR is that there is no famine, but Helen works to find ways to share what is actually happening with the world, or at least her small corner of it.

Told in alternating perspectives, *The Lost Year* is a story of three cousins on two continents and the lengths that some people will go to in order to survive. The story covers lesser-known topics of the 1930s and focuses on the importance of family. It also addresses themes of disinformation, censorship of the press, and blind loyalty to a political leader.

Operation Final Notice by [Matthew Landis](#)

Ronny needs \$878 by January 4th to keep his family's only car from being repossessed. He has only just learned what a "Final Notice" is and he is worried about how his family will survive without their car. Since his dad got injured he can't work anymore. In the meantime, his best friend Josefina, a master cello player suffers from stage fright. This is something she has to overcome in order to make it into the prestigious music academy Maple Hill. Things don't always go as planned and Ronny and Jo come to understand that they will have to rely on each other to achieve their goals. Told in alternating voices.

Rewind by [Lisa Graff](#)

McKinley is 12 in the year 2018 living in Gap Bend, Pennsylvania. The best thing about the town is the annual Time Hop- a giant party where the town celebrates a single year in history. This year they're celebrating 1993 and McKinley is so excited! She has even designed the perfect 90s outfit herself. Unfortunately, her no-fun father decides she has to stay home and care for her grandmother. McKinley decides to bring her grandmother and sneak in anyway- and that's where the disasters begin. Not only does McKinley get caught at the Time Hop by her dad, she also gets into a huge fight with her best friend Meg. Even worse, McKinley time travels back to the year 1993!

She meets Meg's mother Jackie and her own father as middle schoolers in 1993- as well as her grandmother before she had her disabling stroke. This yields some surprises- such as her father's undiagnosed learning disability and her grandma's sewing talent- and opportunities to help. In her quest to return home, McKinley assumes she must "fix" her father but soon learns she must look inward instead.

There are plenty of humorous moments and 1990's nostalgia in this science fiction tale. The chapter titles are hit '90s songs and the cover is bright and appealing with a Saved By The Bell '90s aesthetic.

Roll For Initiative by **Jaimie Formato**

This is gamer/D&D story that isn't really either of those things, but has enough of both to keep gamers interested.

Riley has always looked up to her older brother Devin who introduced her to D&D and did a lot of the parenting after their dad left and with mom always working. Devin gets a scholarship to study game design on the other side of the country and Riley is a bit lost, but it also becomes a chance to find herself outside of her brother's pretty big shadow. She ends up starting her own D&D group and writing her own adventures. Her brother is less than helpful and she realizes his overprotectiveness has stifled her independence including within the D&D world. The question of

how important following the exact rules within a fantasy realm is one that gamers will often wrestle with. How much freedom is too much? It's a question Riley and every GM/DM has to figure out for themselves.

There are a lot of things going on here about friendships, insecurities, income disparity and more.

Ultimately the books is about finding your voice and having the confidence to use it.

Two Tribes by [Emily Bowen Cohen](#)

Mia's parents aren't together anymore. She lives with her mom and stepdad. Stepdad is Jewish and he introduces Mia to the many traditions of the Jewish faith. While she enjoys learning about this and works to adapt to these new ideas, she longs to learn more about her Muscogee father. He lives in Oklahoma with his new family and doesn't communicate much with Mia and her mom. Mia makes a daring plan to take the money from her bat mitzvah and catch a bus to Oklahoma to see her dad without Mom knowing. She learns a lot about identity and about who she is and who she wants to be.