

number of scenes bordering on ridiculous, this book kept me turning pages and laughing out loud until the end. — *Vanessa Salvia*

Escaping the Rez

THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN by Sherman Alexie. Illustrated by Ellen Forney. LITTLE, BROWN YOUNG READERS, 2007. HARDCOVER, \$16.99. WINNER, 2007 NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S LITERATURE. A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE CHILDREN'S BOOK OF 2007.

I recently reviewed Sherman Alexie's 2007 novel *Flight* as a young adult work, but Alexie himself says he didn't think of it that way. The violence, he thought, wasn't the usual young adult fare. Then *Absolutely True Diary* came out, and if the alcoholism, severe beatings and violence of poverty aren't as harsh as things that occur in *Flight*, I'll be hornswoogled. In any case, the YA community is (mostly) hailing *Diary* as the second coming; it was crowned with a National Book Award and should be a shoo-in for the Printz honor list as well as other YA awards. *Absolutely True Diary* also centers around a teenager, this one much more like Alexie himself than was Zits in *Flight*. This one is a Spokane Indian living on the reservation; his name is Junior; he's smart; he gets attacked a lot; he leaves the reservation for a white school where, his teachers on the rez tell him, there's the possibility of hope.

Hmm, Alexie readers might be thinking, sounds very familiar from *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* or many of his other books. True, but *Diary* features some of Alexie's best writing of recent years, a mix of the unbearable and the humorous with Alexie's patented grimly desperate optimism, and Ellen Forney's funny, painful illustrations mesh perfectly with Junior's voice. What Junior loses by leaving the rez can't be regained, but he has to leave to survive, and there's no one better than Alexie at explaining how this tears people apart. Despite some horrifying losses, though, Junior ends up with a tentative, tenuous feeling of hope, of being able to connect in both worlds. And perhaps *Diary* will lead youth readers into Alexie's other work, especially his short stories or poetry (some of which appears in different form in *Diary*). Not that YA work should be a gateway drug, but if it

works in this case, I'm pleased; all of Alexie's work, from poetry to short stories to novels, deserves a wide readership both in the adult and teenage worlds. — *Suzi Steffen*

The Clockwork God

MAINSRING by Jay Lake. TOR, 2007. HARDCOVER, \$24.95.

Hethor Jacques, a young clockmaker's apprentice, can hear the finest watch ticking, can hear if the tiny gears are in tune or awry ... a fine skill to have in his future profession, but even better when living in the mechanistic world created by Jay Lake in *Mainspring*. The Earth, divided east to west by a mountainous brass wall, rolls along a colossal solar gear, ticking through each day and year in this carefully calibrated universe. Lake takes a stand in this novel: God exists and He really did make the world; these gears and wheels didn't evolve. So when a midnight



visit by a brass angel leaves young Hethor charged with the duty of winding the mainspring of the world, his adventurous journey is most definitely a spiritual one as well. How he comes to terms with this mythical charge as well as how he makes his way through this fantastic world makes for some great rainy day reading. Author Jay Lake is an Oregonian (up Portland way) and winner of the 2004 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. — *Paula Hoemann*

First Say Farewell

RULES FOR SAYING GOODBYE by Katherine Taylor. FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX, 2007. HARDCOVER, \$24.

The protagonist of Katherine Taylor's first novel is named Katherine Taylor. In an interview, the author has said this is a sort of double bluff, taking on the habit readers and reviewers have of



assuming that novels featuring characters that sound rather like their authors are thinly veiled autobiography. The conceit fades away, though, as the book zips through the fictional Katherine's childhood and teen years at boarding school, coming to rest in her post-collegiate, uncertain existence in New York City.

Though good things often seen to come her way — a rent-controlled Manhattan apartment, for example — Katherine muddles along, bartending, thinking about writing, smoking endless cigarettes and noting gorgeous details of life in New York ("Second Avenue was always full of squashed fruit," she observes; dreamily counting the crushed oranges nearly gets her killed). Her relationships drive the story; an English boyfriend leads her to one life in Europe while a later love gives her a reason to move to Rome. But it never works out — not the love, and not the life. "Maybe it's time for you to start thinking about what it is you really want," Katherine's boyfriend tell her, gently summing up the problem in one simple sentence. *Rules* is a book full of failure, uncertainty and growth of the awkward, painful kind that results in lonesome weekends and too many glasses of wine, but it's so acutely depicted that it's captivating rather than depressing. Katherine is a chilly voice, an unfinished person looking for the next life-shaping thing; she wants to write fiction but finds herself writing magazine profiles, telling the stories assigned to her rather than her own. Until, one assumes, she got around to writing this novel, which at times reads like an unbelievably well-written, candid journal. But Katherine isn't Taylor and Taylor isn't Katherine, or if she is, it's irrelevant; this selfish, slowly growing character takes on plenty of life of her own. — *Molly Templeton*

Wait For It ...

UN LUN DUN by China Miéville. DEL REY, 2007. HARDCOVER, \$17.95.

Those who have read some of Miéville's adult science fiction works may be surprised by the playfulness of this long middle-grade book. The story questions both predestination and the familiar Tolkien (and Biblical) tropes of those who are picked by some greater force to take up a mantle of



heroism. Instead, Miéville suggests, you don't need to be a prophesied hero like Lyra Belacqua of *The Golden Compass* — or even Frodo Baggins — in order to shoulder a quest, especially if you accept the help of a motley crew upon your journey. But this heroic journey, which ends by skewering the nostalgia and lost-world determinism at the conclusion of many fantasy stories (if Miéville had his way, Milo would never say goodbye to Tock, nor Frodo to his homeland), wanders delightfully through wordplay so enjoyable that adults and young readers both will giggle even as they recognize the authorial message about the bad guy.

Talking much about the plot would reveal some of the joys of the book too soon. And if you pick up a copy, don't scan the back of the hardback edition, which tries to capture readers by quoting one of the more amusing constructions of the narrative and ends up spoiling some fun. In any case, heroine Deeba's courage and adaptability combine with Miéville's obvious adoration of his constructed world to create a superb adventure that should charm many a young reader and even manage to amuse older youth who like a good yarn. Like most great middle-grade adventures, *Un Lun Dun* has no hint of sexuality and no "bad" language; if you know a strong reader ages 8-12 who has gobbled the *Harry*

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