

SLJ Reviews the Schneider Award Medalists and Honors | ALA Youth Media Awards 2026

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Schneider Younger Children's Award - Ages 0 to 8

[Wanda Hears the Stars: A Blind Astronomer Listens to the Universe](#) by Amy S. Hansen with Wanda Díaz Merced (text) & illus. by Rocío Arreola Mendoza. 40p. Charlesbridge. Aug. 2025. Tr. \$18.99. ISBN 9781623544874.

Gr 2-5—This picture book biography with STEM connections and disability representation shares the fascinating story of astronomer Wanda Díaz Merced. Growing up in Puerto Rico, Díaz Merced was fascinated by the stars and chased her dream to study them all the way to college. But when she began losing her eyesight due to diabetes, she had to find a new way to see what she had dedicated her whole life to. Not one to give up when faced with a challenge, Díaz Merced threw herself into the field of sonification, where numerical astronomic

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datasets are turned into sound, revealing new insights into celestial activity. Mendoza's whimsical illustrations amplify the themes of magic and discovery surrounding Díaz Merced's work. Thorough back matter is available in both the English and Spanish versions, including notes from both authors, information about the scientific concepts discussed, a time line of Díaz Merced's career, and sources for further reading. **VERDICT** Readers will walk away inspired by the world around them and Díaz Merced's creativity and determination. Recommended for all libraries.-Reviewed by Maria Bohan

Schneider Younger Children's Honor Books

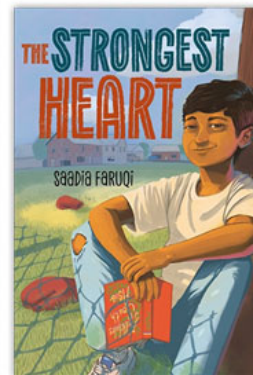
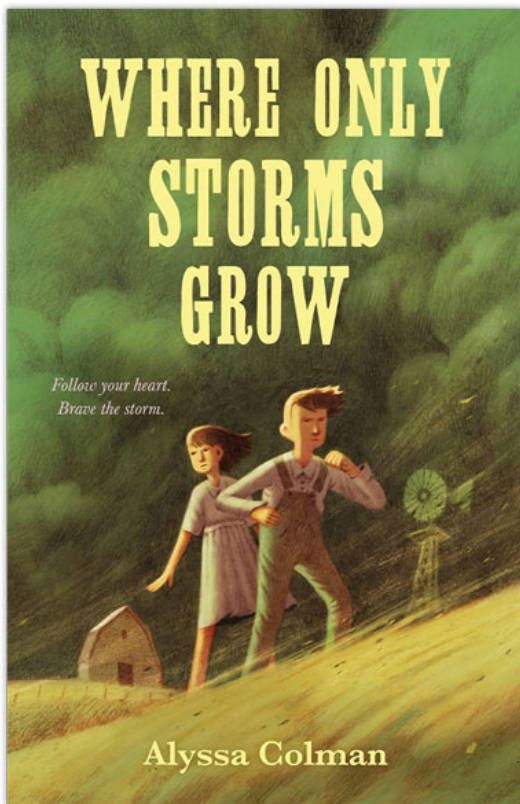
Bat and the Business of Ferrets by Elana K. Arnold (text) & illus. by Charles Santoso. 208p. HarperCollins/Clarion. Feb. 2025. Tr. \$18.99. ISBN 9780063385139.

I Hear the Snow, I Smell the Sea by Janice Milusich (text) & illus. by Chris Raschka. Random/Anne Schwartz. Oct. 2025. 48p. ebk \$9.99. ISBN 9780593308196.

★ **Toddler-Gr 2**—Neveah, under the protective and loving gaze of her mother, enjoys the four seasons without the use of sight. Nothing is said about her sightlessness; the other four senses are emphasized for each season. She tastes snowflakes during the winter, smells spring flowers in the air, hears the buzzing of bees in the summer, and feels scratchy leaves during fall. The beautiful watercolor and crayon illustration cradle Neveah, much like her mother does as the year passes, creating a comforting and soothing feeling. The child dances through the illustrations with movement felt in every picture: she waves at the ocean, delicately touches flowers, and makes a snowman that seems to bow back. Onomatopoeia is sprinkled throughout with happy “cheerily-cheerily-cheer-up” from the robins, welcoming the spring and a “scruunnch!” of boots in the snow illustrating how the girl enjoys the natural world with her hearing. **VERDICT** A lovely look at the seasons, an excellent choice for story time, that shows the sensory experience of a child who is never depicted as anything but whole.-Reviewed by Melisa Bailey

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Schneider Middle Grade Award - Ages 9 to 13

Where Only Storms Grow: A Novel About the Dust Bowl by Alyssa Colman. Farrar. Aug. 2025. 256p. Tr \$17.99. ISBN 9780374392789.

Gr 4-8—Colman offers readers a poignant and compassionate tale of two twins surviving the 1930s Dust Bowl in Oklahoma. Joanna and Howe Stanton were once very close, but life in Oklahoma's dust bowl is difficult and as the two have grown up, they've grown apart. Joanna struggles with scoliosis and Howe struggles to keep his love of writing a secret. When their father leaves for California to keep the family farm afloat, Joanna and Howe must battle injuries, diseases, and black blizzards to stay alive. The two discover inner strength, trust, and learn both how to help others and ask for help themselves. Readers will be swept into the dusty setting of 1935 and be encouraged to grow in their understanding and empathy for people of the past. Joanna and Howe's individual and combined journeys are tastefully crafted, and the danger and adversity they face keeps the plot moving steadily as

readers, alongside characters, wonder if things will ever get better for the Stanton twins. Luckily, Ruby the chicken and the twins' teacher Miss Landis provide some much-needed humor and hope. The Stanton twins

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are cued white. **VERDICT** Those interested in the history of the Dust Bowl and tales of resilience will enjoy diving into this novel exploring a difficult and harrowing historical period.-Reviewed by Sarah Braun

Schneider Middle Grade Honor Books

Octopus Moon by Bobbie Pyron. Penguin/Nancy Paulsen. Mar. 2025. 336p. Tr \$18.99. ISBN 9780593616291.

★ **Gr 3-7**—Pearl, 10, is at the beginning of her fifth grade school year in Florida and trying to get a grip on the anxiety and dark feelings that have been washing over her. She’s like an octopus, with touch receptors all over its body and feeling everything. In years past, Pearl has been able to settle into the routines of a new school year, but this year is different. Despite having two best friends and a supportive family, Pearl finds her emotions continuing to crash like waves on the shore. She struggles to eat, sleep, smile, or enjoy the daily activities she once did. Even her beagle, Tuck, can’t seem to pull her up for air. Finally, Pearl’s parents take her to a therapist, where she learns some useful coping skills to navigate the ups and downs of depression. Pearl’s struggles will resonate with readers who grapple with feelings of not being enough. Secondary characters are fleshed out in her two best friends, who are also having personal challenges. Pearl adopts good management skills in the form of setting goals, using beads on a string to document the things she’s able to do each day, as well as repeating some mantras —“My family will always love me. The ocean will always be there. The moon is always full”—to assist her in moving forward in life. All characters read as white. **VERDICT** This is an important purchase for all children’s and teens’ library shelves.-Reviewed by Tracy Cronce

The Strongest Heart by Saadia Faruqi. HarperCollins/Quill Tree. Mar. 2025. 384p. Tr \$19.99. ISBN 9780063115859.

★ **Gr 5 Up**—Faruqi’s latest takes a deep dive into what it’s like living with a parent experiencing mental illness. Mo is an eighth grader with a secret: he lives with a monster. The monster, Abbu (dad), is prone to outbursts, criticizes Mo fiercely, hallucinates, and hears voices. His mom is in Greece helping refugee children, leaving Mo alone with the monster. When Mo and the monster go to live with his aunt and cousin, readers slowly learn that Abbu has schizophrenia. As Mo adjusts to life

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in Texas, he deals with school bullies, bonds with his cousin, and navigates the anger and resentment he feels for his parents. With the help of his aunt, his biology teacher, and his growing Muslim faith, Mo starts to think maybe he's been wrong about his dad. When his dad is hospitalized following a really bad episode, Mo is forced to confront whether Abbu is really a monster or just ill. Faruqi draws on her own experiences with her father's mental illness and gives Mo the support she wishes she'd had via his aunt Naila, making this a story that will grip students from the beginning. Faruqi also uses the South Asian folktales that Mo loves sharing to further explain the lessons he's learning. The scenes where readers see Abbu's episodes are written to show how scary they are for Mo without being overwhelming for middle school readers. **VERDICT** Recommended for its realistic depictions of mental illness, family struggles, and emotional growth, especially where writers like Jasmine Warga and others are popular.-Reviewed by Amanda Viau



Schneider Young Adult Award - Ages 14-18

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Whale Eyes: A Memoir About Seeing and Being Seen by James Robinson (text) & illus. by Brian Rea. Penguin Workshop. Mar. 2025. 304p. Tr \$18.99. ISBN 9780593523957.

★ **Gr 5 Up**—Robinson turns the lens on himself in this moving memoir of his life with a visual anomaly called strabismus. The book is an outgrowth of a short film that Robinson made after studying at Duke University’s Center for Documentary Studies, which was picked up and presented by the Opinion desk of the New York Times in 2021. After years of living with the condition and trying to explain it or help others see past it, Robinson settles on the term “whale eyes” to describe the misalignment of his eyes: “We love looking at whales. And yet none of us have ever questioned the fact that we can look into only one of their eyes at a time.” Robinson effectively uses second-person narration and carefully plotted and illustrated pages to take readers through the experience of trying to identify letters, track strings of them across the page, and decode their meaning. He puts readers in the position of sitting through dreaded silent-reading time in elementary school, getting the “wrong” answers every time on vision tests, and stepping up to the T-ball plate, only to strike out. He credits his mother’s innovation and persistence in helping him succeed in school and also advances in technology (like digital audiobooks and screen highlighting tools) that make texts more accessible. The last third of the book is focused on Robinson’s career using film to tell stories that will “get people to care” about issues or lives they may not know anything about, or even find off-putting at first glance. With Rea’s affecting and mesmerizing line drawings, this is an important book for all readers. **VERDICT** Highly recommended for all middle and high school collections, as well as the parent/teacher shelves in public libraries.—Reviewed by Jennifer Costa

Schneider Young Adult Honor Books

The Golden Boy’s Guide to Bipolar by Sonora Reyes. HarperCollins. Sept. 2025. 384p. Tr \$19.99. ISBN 9780063358409.

Gr 9 Up—In a follow-up to *The Lesbian’s Guide to Catholic School*, after going inpatient last year, Cesar Flores is ready to win back his ex-boyfriend Jamal, embrace being out as a bisexual, and continue with his meds and therapy. Except The Thoughts keep reminding Cesar that maybe Father John is right that being queer means going to hell. As Cesar struggles to reconcile his faith with his heart, he experiences a manic episode that convinces him everyone would be better off without

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him. Forever. Grounded in their own experiences with severe mental illness, Reyes presents a nuanced story centering Cesar's unreliable narration of his healing journey once he is diagnosed with bipolar disorder and can see his symptoms (including suicide ideation) for what they are. **VERDICT** This companion novel is a perfect entry point for the Flores family and a lovely continuation of their story.-Reviewed by Emma Carbone

The Poetry of Car Mechanics by Heidi E.Y. Stemple. Astra/Wordsong. Apr. 2025. 256p. Tr \$19.99. ISBN 9781662660214.

★ **Gr 5 Up**—Stemple's novel in verse tells the story of 15-year-old Dylan as he struggles to connect with his grandfather, who has become his guardian after his mother has been absent for the past three years. While dealing with his mother's unpredictable mental health was not easy, she understood Dylan's softness and love of poetry. His grandfather, however, has a much narrower view of masculinity, and the two clash over race and xenophobia. They find common ground while working in his grandfather's auto shop. The logic of machines speaks to Dylan, as does his love of birding and nature. His encounter with an injured hawk leads Dylan to a journey of self-discovery and acceptance. Stemple's artful writing will have readers flying through the pages, though the emotional depth deserves a moment to pause and savor each word. Many readers will find Dylan's journey relatable, even without sharing his experiences. Back matter includes resources on mental health and bipolar disorder. **VERDICT** A must-purchase title for any library serving teens, though still relevant for younger readers. Hand to fans of tender explorations of young masculinity like Kenneth M. Cadow's *Gather*, Shifa Saltagi Safadi's *Kareem Between*, or Alicia D. Williams's *Mid-Air*.-Reviewed by Monisha Blair

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