

The Hero's Crossroads:

That Fateful Moment of Decision

by Todd Mercer

Better young adult fiction eclipses old-hat conflicts of domestic disobedience and school strife. It forces heroes into agonizing choices, then spins out consequences with a wider range of outcomes than the last generation grew up expecting. One doesn't have to be eighteen years old to have a lasting impact on others' lives for good or ill, or to choose a permanent trajectory. That reality may not be fair, but savvy teen readers quickly discard idealistic fantasies.

Protagonists among these books wrestle with exploitation, imprisonment, and abandonment issues we wish teens would never have to face. They must commit to a side during wartime, without an obvious default position, and struggle to embrace their destinies. The teen years are composed of a seemingly endless series of exclusive choices, few of which are adequately addressed by small-minded public service announcements.

Historic Dilemmas

The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation: Volume II: The Kingdom on the Waves by M.T. Anderson (Candlewick, 978-0-7636-2950-2) looks at the American Revolution from a unique vantage point. When the embattled British governor of Virginia Colony, Lord Dunmore, guarantees freedom for blacks who take up arms on his behalf, the classically educated Octavian is one of many to throw in against Liberty-loving slave-owners. Anderson convincingly defies convention, casting the British in a fairly favorable light, showing that justice and injustice are determined by perspective. He's thematically concerned with shifting identity: "How do we change—within moments the whole form of our habits and dispositions may become alien to us, and we almost cannot remember what we were." Volume I won the National Book Award, and this book is no less notable.

The Freedom Business (Wordsong, 978-1-932425-57-4) is a cross of forms encompassing an original narrative transcribed from a 1798 manuscript by the one-time slave Venture Smith, poems from Newberry Honor author Marilyn Nelson, and art by Deborah Dancy. Smith was born the son of West African royalty; once in bondage he was determined to work his way free. Through industry, thrift, sharp thinking, and good luck, Smith secured

his own liberty, then his entire family's. The next step was to pay off the masters of other slaves in hopes of gaining motivated labor for his burgeoning enterprises. Smith died with an impressive inventory of property, but dismayed at how few of those he freed showed meaningful loyalty.

Struggles Within Living Memory

Child of All Nations, (Overlook Press, 978-1-59020-099-5) written by the exiled German novelist Irmgard Keun in 1938, was recently translated into English by Michael Hofmann. It follows the hotel-to-hotel nomadism of a wide-eyed girl whose innocent misunderstandings of adult situations create humor in the midst of grimness. The first-person narrator is the daughter of an upbeat but deadbeat father who is essentially an artistic con man. He constantly robs Peter to pay Paul, usually keeping a city ahead of his family, comforted by mistresses. The narrator's mother hides quiet desperation, projecting positive cheer.

After the fall of Saigon, nineteen-year-old Mei Phuong escapes Vietnam on an overloaded boat with her younger brother and sister in tow, destination unknown. Conditions onboard deteriorate until Mei sees a woman prepare to leap to her death: "We watch her as if we are watching a play, no one moves to stop her, no one really believing she will do what she obviously is about to do." *Weeping Under This Same Moon* by Jana Laiz (Crow Flies Press, 978-0-9814910-0-4) contrasts Mei's uncertain life with that of Hannah, a privileged but unhappy teen from Westchester, New York, who blossoms as a volunteer helping Vietnamese newcomers in the Bronx. Hannah's affection for photography parallels Mei's passion for painting, but art is a luxury and refugees deny themselves nonessentials.

