

Great Stories in Difficult Times

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By an interesting coincidence, the 2011 Newbery and Coretta Scott King Book Award winners feature national hardships in the 1930s and social revolutions in the 1960s as background. All are narrated by preteen girls; *Moon Over Manifest*, *Turtle in Paradise*, and *One Crazy Summer* have successfully reenacted the lives of families during troubled times in the past. Targeted for children and young adults, these stories serve as brilliant and pleasurable narratives that expose youths today to teenage life amid significant historical events.

Were you ever unwillingly sent away by someone you trust, say, your closest family? Have you been requested to travel alone, reluctantly, to a different place? Did you have to live with someone you barely knew as a teenager? Perhaps you have had an experience similar to these youngsters. These are the commonalities the young girls have encountered in their stories, all taking place in the eras of national economic downfalls and radical social movements. Because of their excellent storytelling skills, the three authors have not only created characters living in the past within carefully constructed plots worthy of prominent literary awards, but, furthermore, have won the hearts and praise of numerous literary critics and youthful readers

Each author's careful planning of characterization, setting, plot, themes, and closure has contributed to the development of an intriguing story. As far as characterization is concerned, Abilene (in *Moon Over Manifest*), Turtle (in *Turtle in Paradise*), and Delphine (in *One Crazy Summer*) are all strong, independent "functional orphans" (Nikolajeva 149) whose parents are not always present, nor do they have the capability of parenting. Abilene is an adventurous tomboy who is determined to find out her dad's past when she is sent to the town he used to call home. Turtle, a girl with wisdom beyond her age, discovers myths and facts in her family roots that her mom never mentions. Delphine, mature and calm, is always on the lookout for her younger sisters as they travel across the country to meet a mother who abandoned them years ago. The three dynamic first person narrators tactfully invite audience of all ages to join them in the very summer when their enthralling stories take place.

The settings themselves provide an additional lure, as readers can experience previously unknown times and spaces through novels. Both *Moon Over Manifest* and *Turtle in Paradise* recreate vivid scenes from the Great Depression. As Abilene arrives in Manifest and walks to town with Shady, her dad's friend, all she sees is "dry and stale... The stores were dingy. Gray. Every third one was boarded up. The only awnings left were torn and

saggy... a few tired souls holding up a doorway here and there" (Vanderpool 13). What Turtle experiences in the Great Depression is sadly similar. Folks go to bed hungry, men fight over scraps in garbage cans, and worse. Even Key West, Florida, the paradise as Turtle's Mama describes it, is no more than "a broken chair that's been left out in the sun to rot," just as Turtle sees herself (Holm 13). Set in the 1960s, *One Crazy Summer* depicts the Black protest movements and the prevalent racial discrimination of the time. Delphine and her sisters are cautioned to act right in public to avoid "disgracing the entire Negro race" (Williams-Garcia 11). The inequality and disrespect encountered by black people at that time is immediately portrayed when a large white woman at the airport calls the three sisters "adorable dolls" (Williams-Garcia 15), pinches one of their cheeks, and gives them some coins. According to Delphine, it feels like they're zoo animals.

Appealing stories come with layered, intriguing plots, and these three novels are no exception. There is a home-away-from-home pattern in the three girls' journeys as anything exciting always takes place outside the protagonists' original home. Each of the characters comes to understand that "home" might not be found in the place left behind, spiritually or physically. In *Turtle in Paradise*, Turtle gradually pieces puzzles together and discovers her family roots at Key West, where she and her mom feel a sense of belonging. For Abilene, a little detective work in *Manifest* not only allows her to understand the mystified past of her dad, but helps to bring him home. As for Delphine, the one summer she joins her mom in Oakland gives her a chance to realize why her mom has chosen to leave her girls behind and fight for personal freedom. In their journeys, our heroines discover myths, stumble over obstacles, and solve problems with their friends' company. Without Disney-like sugar-coating happily-ever-after endings, the bitter-sweet closures in *Moon Over Manifest*, *Turtle in Paradise*, and *One Crazy Summer* help these novels become compelling ones that are even more realistic and appreciative stories to share with readers young and old.

Works Cited

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