

# THE RISKY BUSINESS OF GROWING UP

Five dramatic YA titles remind us that youth isn't all about puppy love and teen angst



The young folks in these five novels are up against some pretty steep challenges: Pestilence, war, vampires, Nazis, eugenics, secret societies, deadly foes. Throw in a dash of dyslexia, a pinch of anorexia, and a helping of unhealthy athletic competition and you've got yourself a full larder of summer reads that make life at home seem not so terribly bad.

For those young readers who are experiencing the inevitable rough patches, these titles serve as a reminder that many of the direst troubles can be surmountable—or, at least, survivable. These authors and their very human protagonists (even the one who turns immortal) testify that however dark and threatening it gets, this lifetime offers boundless opportunity for growth—even for greatness—if we only muddle through.

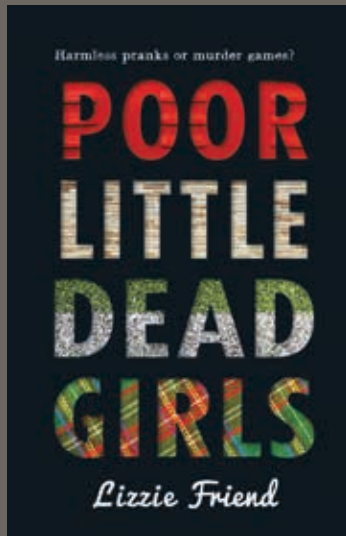
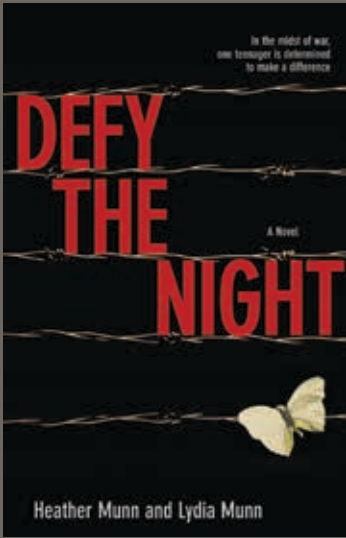
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BY LEIA MENLOVE



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## DEFY THE NIGHT

Heather Munn and Lydia Munn, Kregel Publications,  
Softcover \$14.99 (320 pp), 978-0-8254-4321-3

Sometimes parents just don't understand ... that kids just want to save the world.

In the Munn sisters' premier novel, *Defy the Night*, a young heroine named Magali risks her life to rescue children from deadly Nazi internment camps. Surprisingly, Magali also suffers from typical teen hangups—her parents are a drag, school fails to inspire, friends are complicated, and so on. The novel is at its dramatic best when Magali is on life-saving missions, yet her personal growth occurs in the quieter moments while she contemplates the expectations placed upon her.

"You know, Magali, women just have to accept certain limitations ... saving lives, fighting Vichy, well no," says her mother, who, despite the inherent sexism displayed here, only wants her daughter to be safe. Magali's conflict then becomes one not only against Nazis, but against her fearful parents as well.

"It never occurred to my mother to wonder ... if I might actually save someone," she realizes. Magali is an intensely interior, headstrong character, and the authors provide her grim narrative with a great deal of attention to emotions. The result is a read that flies during the baby-saving missions and tends to drag a bit when Magali is safely home. At such moments *Defy the Night* delivers (and sometimes belabors) mature concepts about pride, achievement, and fear.



## POOR LITTLE DEAD GIRLS

Lizzie Friend, FW Media, Hardcover \$17.99 (288 pp),  
978-1-4405-6395-9

These private-school gals are just so very pretty, witty, and privileged, you could die.

*Poor Little Dead Girls* is a chick-lit-flavored thriller that follows lacrosse star and scholarship student Sadie in her days at an exclusive DC prep school. Surrounded by heiresses and nobility, she is swiftly recruited into a secret society that claims benevolence (think: medical care for the needy, free Chanel dresses for Sadie, and the obligatory hot guy just dying to date her). But then there's the little matter of the dead bodies and kidnappings.

Of course, Sadie is nobody's fool and soon gets savvy: "The outside was the only thing about these people that was predictable. Once you got beneath the surface, there was no telling what you might find."

A modern thriller with snappy dialogue and mystery to keep the pages turning, this novel shovels out dose after dose of suspense. If the resolution at the end seems a little too pat—we can only hope it's because author Lizzie Friend intends a sequel—after all, conspiracies have a way of lasting, especially conspiracies of the rich and famous. "They're just as screwed up as the rest of us—they just have better costumes to wear," says one character.

Friend's first thriller is vividly written. For the most part, she avoids the clichés that YA writers fall into, though there are a few too many "racing hearts," etc. *Poor Little Dead Girls* makes up in fun what it lacks in gravitas. It's light, frothy, with just the right amount of tabloid kicker.

### COUNTING TO D

Kate Scott, Elliot Books, Softcover \$13.99 (228pp)  
978-0-9895947-0-7

Even certified geniuses have trouble in school now and then, especially if they have dyslexia.

Sam isn't your ordinary genius. Sure, she's been invited to join a so-called "Brain Trust" of brilliant teens, and she's enrolled in half-a-dozen AP-level courses. But when her fellow wunderkinds discover her big secret—that she's hiding dyslexia so severe that she can't read—she faces serious social and academic repercussions. *Counting to D* poses critical

questions about the nature and scope of childhood learning disabilities and the limitations of our education system to manage or even discover them. Ultimately, the message is a positive one: author Kate Scott herself suffers from dyslexia, and she's written a valuable contribution to YA fiction.

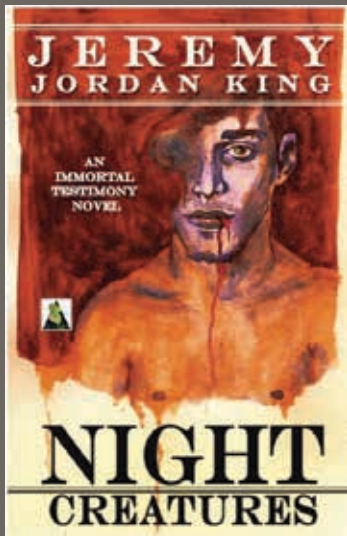
When Sam ends up in special ed despite extremely clever ruses, she is humiliated. After all, kids can be cruel. "You believe what you want to believe. You see what you expect to see. You think it's impossible to be smart and dyslexic, so obviously, I can only be one," she says to a friend who can't reconcile Sam's inability to read with her genius at math.

Sam's life has been about proactivity, hard work, and problem-solving, yet she is as normal a

teenager as young readers will have met: she worries about boys, popularity, her clothes, and her distant friendships. An unlikely heroine who doesn't use a bow and arrow or a magic wand, Sam solves her problems by thinking outside the proverbial box, even when she can't read what's in it. The content is simply written and moves along at a brisk pace. Sam's story lacks thrills and chills, yet it is a believable, straightforward narrative that will be at home in any young person's library.







## NIGHT CREATURES

Jeremy Jordan King, Bold Strokes Books, Softcover \$11.95 (264 pp), 978-1-60282-971-8

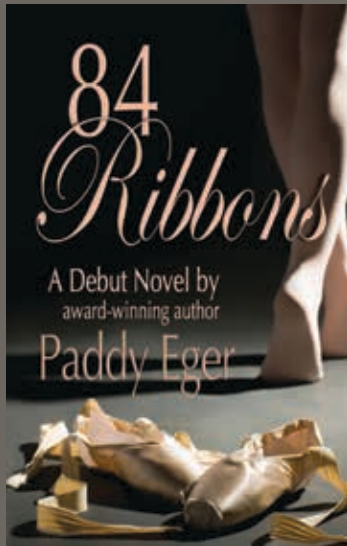
Could vampires cure one of the modern age's most terrifying epidemics?

When Bryant moves to Manhattan, he is absorbed into the swinging 1980s gay scene—complete with bathhouse sex and bar romance. Yet behind all the fun, a then nameless disease (AIDS) is gaining traction. The early segments of *Night Creatures* take us back to a terrifying era, and first-time author Jeremy Jordan King renders them with dark, longing energy. But when his character contracts AIDS, he is cured by (of all things) sex with a stranger.

Even if the premise is sometimes silly, *Night Creatures* is always emotionally charged. It is a unique contribution to the growing corpus of YA-LGBT titles.

“So the Night Creature is reborn with a new purpose. He is saving man,” muses one character. King’s conflation of ancient evils with fresh ones succeeds on an emotional register, if not on a logical one. He writes of the “haunting dark spot in our histories” that AIDS deaths cause in unsupportive families. His imbuing of repressed grief with gothic energy feels appropriate, given the fear some families have of homosexuality.

And to clarify: *Night Creatures* is a YA novel—not middle-grade or younger. It contains explicit sexual situations and vividly wrought violence, and its themes, while often at odds with one another,



are certainly for a mature palate. Overall, this is an engaging read, with some erratic plot turns and a few slow moments. King shows a great deal of creativity, if not restraint, in this work of fiction.

## 84 RIBBONS

Paddy Eger, Tendril Press, Softcover \$16.95 (360pp), 978-09858933-2-3

In this riveting ballet story set in 1950s America, Paddy Eger reminds us that not every ballerina gets her fairy-tale ending.

Seventeen-year old Marta Selbryth always dreamed of being a professional ballet dancer. When she secures a position in an esteemed dance company, she discovers that the world of professional dancing is no warm and fuzzy haven. A mean-spirited Madam, a skeptical choreographer, a nasty neighbor, and a series of injuries plunges her into anorexia, heartache, and self-doubt—moments that are gently written and always believable. Eger, a former dancer herself, brilliantly details the day-to-day life of this world.

“If she wasn’t dealing with her tiredness and almost losing her position, she’d be exhilarated by the fragile strength that blossomed inside her, allowing her to dance even though she should collapse from lack of sleep and food. Maybe this was how it felt to be an adult,” thinks Marta. In such moments of interiority, the author’s passion for the subject is restrained; she does not overstate the character’s sacrifices and successes.

One of the novel’s themes is an unusual one for YA: the recognition that one is not entirely in control of destiny. For example, Marta wonders, “What do you say to someone like Madam who dislikes you, someone who controls your future?” Indeed, it becomes unclear not only whether Marta will maintain her position in the company, but whether she will survive it. A pure coming-of-age tale with moments of quiet drama, *84 Ribbons* is about thriving despite the imperfections of life. ♥

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