

# Young Adult Fiction recommendations



Unless otherwise stated, these book reviews were taken from a Daily Telegraph article entitled 'The 37 best young adult books of 2014' and can be viewed by following the link: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11030589/The-best-young-adult-books-of-2014.html>

The books reviewed over the following pages are in stock at Arden. Unfortunately, some of the titles featured in the Daily Telegraph list are yet to be published and some are currently in hardback only.

Everest Files – Matt Dickinson	Page 2
Bombmaker – Claire McFall	Page 3
Half Bad – Sally Green	Page 4
Bone Jack – Sara Crowe	Page 5
Replica – Jack Heath	Page 5
The Bubble Wrap Boy – Phil Earle	Page 6
We Were Liars – E Lockhart	Page 7
The Castle – Sophia Bennett	Page 8
Raging Star - Moira Young	Page 8
Split Second/Every Second Counts – Sophie McKenzie	Page 9
Night Runner – Tim Bowler	Page 9
The Impossible Knife of Memory – Laurie Halse Anderson	Page 10
Salvage – Keren David	Page 11

## Everest Files – Matt Dickinson

There could hardly be a more dramatic setting for an action adventure series for young adult readers than Mount Everest

Matt Dickinson, who made a successful ascent of Everest's perilous North Face in 1996, has followed up his excellent Mortal Chaos YA trilogy with the first of what will be a trio of thrillers set in Nepal. The Everest Files, a gripping and touching story, is a fine start.

What makes the book so interesting is that the story is centred on a 16-year-old Sherpa called Kami. The novel begins by showing Nepal through the eyes of an American gap year student volunteer called Ryan Hart, who is working for a medical charity. You feel Ryan's sense of walking off the edge of the map into a world you can't even find on Google Earth. When he meets a young Nepalese girl called Shreeya, he answers her plea to find out what happened to Kami during an ill-fate attempt to climb Everest.

The romance of Kami and Shreeya is moving (especially the scene where they try to save a family of snow leopards from hunters) and we slowly learn the truth about what happened to Kami. The account of the Everest mission is full of well-told drama. Actor Brian Blessed, who has climbed to 27,000 feet on Everest, says the descriptions of the expedition in Dickinson's novel are "masterful" and believes Dickinson is right to focus on the Sherpas. "Everyone who knows Everest knows it means the Sherpas," Blessed said.

Westerners disturbing the natural order of the Nepalese mountains – and the spirits of Everest – is a strong theme of the novel, which is dedicated to three Sherpas the author has climbed with.

Climbing Everest is now big business and the tension between the Sherpas (who are living hand-to-mouth) and the Westerners is palpable. The book is bursting with colour (down to the leeches and bugs that are full of green gunk) and you feel the convincing threat of frostbite (fingers and toes left as stumps), sun blisters, altitude sickness and the looming constant danger of death. On Everest, you can be killed by avalanches that are about as predictable in their behaviour as the way "the penny falls in an amusement arcade".

Kami and the other young climbers see dead bodies that have been blanched by the sun and which bear the damage of scavenging birds, and you feel the "bone-crunching fatigue" of the climbers in a place where breathing feels like "seventy per cent of your lungs have been amputated".

The expedition is led by a dishonest, publicity-seeking American politician called Alex Brennan and the mystery behind the trip is left nicely balanced for a sequel that will feature more of Ryan.

"The very word Everest seemed to be loaded with a spectacular type of magic," writes Dickinson. This is a thoughtful and pacy adventure story.

## Bombmaker – Claire McFall

The Scottish Independence referendum in September gave 16 and 17-year-olds the first chance to cast a vote. The debate is clearly important so Claire McFall's new YA novel called *Bombmaker*, about a divided and violent Britain, is highly topical.

McFall, who grew up near Glasgow and teaches English in a secondary school in Peebles, has written an original and controversial thriller about what happens to a Scottish teenager called Lizzie when the English government puts up border walls to keep the Scots (and Welsh) out. Any Scots found in England can be branded with a tattoo and then executed without trial if found in England a second time.

This is the second novel from McFall, whose first book, *Ferryman*, was today announced as the winner (Older Readers Category, 12-16 Years) of The Scottish Children's Book Award, the country's largest children's book prize and one voted for exclusively by children. This new story will carry weight.

*Bombmaker* is the story of what Lizzie has to go through to stay alive in a hostile and divided UK. What happens, of course, is that she falls in with criminals and exploitative men.

The Scotland she has escaped is described as being cut off "in poverty and squalor like some third world country". There is no welfare state, no jobs, no food. No hope.

The opening third of the book is gripping and atmospheric. The book captures the atmosphere of her penned-in existence and how frightened she is of the "stop and grabs" employed by the security forces in London to capture rogue Scots.

She has become part of a vile bunch of criminals, led by gangster brothers Samuel and Alexander. "Samuel had the intricate, symmetrical knot tattooed on his left cheek, whereas Alexander's cheek was beautifully smooth, lasered clean. Alexander was also a hell of a lot meaner," Lizzie says. It's quite clear that Alexander owns her life (and body) completely. When she falls for someone else, the danger increases.

Lizzie has a special talent, though, that he needs. She can make bombs. He sucks her into a life of terrorism. In a key scene, she bombs the Home Office Information building and one of her explosions results in the death of women and children, although her remorse seems a little weak. Overall, however, the novel is a dystopian thriller (as Lizzie tries to escape her life) rather than a treatise on separatism and national identity.

The book feels a little over-long (at 372 pages) but is well-paced and not without subtle moments. Lizzie says of her own hardened expression, "I'm too worldly-wise for my eighteen years. It was a hard face to look at."

McFall's novel should certainly stimulate debate among first-time voters in Scotland.

## Half Bad – Sally Green

There's not much hubble and bubble but there is plenty of toil and trouble in Sally Green's debut YA thriller *Half Bad*. Witches are old hat in children's fiction but Green manages to bring something new to the party simply because of the dynamism of this edgy and gripping tale.

The novel by Green, 52, who had worked in finance and been a full-time mother, was quickly snapped up with a large advance and has been sold to publishers in 42 countries. The film rights to *Half Bad* have been bought by Fox 2000 and Karen Rosenfelt, producer of *The Twilight Saga*. Happily, Green's book is not just hype.

The opening third is perhaps the most satisfying part of the novel. The scenes are nasty, brutish and short (part one, called 'The Trick' is 18 pages and one chapter, called 'The Cage', is a mere 55 words) as we are introduced to the predicament of protagonist witch Nathan Byrn, who is held captive and being tortured.

It's dark stuff. I'm "lying in a brew of my own sick and piss", Nathan says, as he contemplates the "White witch from hell" who is his tormentor. This middle-aged woman, Celia, is described as being ugly with "fat, slobbering lips". This is no fake-stern Professor McGonagall. Celia is also a dab hand at martial arts and has a pretty foolproof way of keeping Nathan in the compound. If you try to escape the perimeter, she warns him, "the liquid in your wristband will burn right through your wrist".

There are droll moments to lighten the darkness, as when Nathan sarcastically describes her job: "imprisoning, beating, scaring physically and mentally a boy who isn't yet sixteen years old . . . a boy who has never done anything wrong . . . they're all part of the plus points of the job."

*Half Bad*, set in modern-day England, is the first in a trilogy and this first volume centres on Nathan's quest to find his outlaw father. We learn all about his notorious witch family and we see the way he has grown up. It's a world where the Council of White Witches of Scotland and Wales can have Black witches captured or killed on sight – and Nathan is suspected of being one. He is hunted for most of the novel. It's like a chase movie in fiction form at times.

There is gore aplenty (some of the witches supposedly feast on live hearts) but there are also tender scenes, particularly Nathan's romance with Annalise and his touching bond with his brother Arran. *Half Bad* doesn't always feel particularly original (scenes are set in mysterious alleys) but it is full of suspense. We wonder whether Nathan is capable of evil, as a sinister witch called Mercury predicts with the words: "Killing is in your blood, Nathan. It's what you are made for."

The book ends on a neat cliffhanger, when much of the hurly-burly's done, but I'm betting that a lot of readers will be sufficiently gripped to return for Green's 2015 sequel, to be called *Half Wild*.

## Bone Jack – Sara Crowe

Bone Jack hooks from the opening atmospheric chapter. Much of the action is set on Stag's Leap, a place recently full of burning sheep and government agents in bio-hazard suits. It feels like the edge of the world.

The central character, Ash Tyler, is 15 and has a father who has returned from war a broken man. Ash's best friend Mark is lost in grief for his own dad, who has killed himself. Ash's only escape is his lonely mountain running, training to be the stag boy in the annual Stag Chase.

In this modern young adult fantasy novel, there are terrifying things waiting in the shadows. Are ghosts real? Is Bone Jack, the wild man and soul-taker who guards the boundary between the living, real or just a folklore figure? Sara Crowe summons him with enough power to make you feel as though his "mad blue eyes" are staring at you.

Crowe, who was born in Cornwall, studied cinema at university and went on to teach photography studies, and her descriptive powers help bring alive the strange and scary mountain where figures move with supernatural speed and nothing makes sense.

This debut novel is full of powerful characters – Mark's teenage sister Callie is very well drawn – and the drama comes to a gripping finale on the day of the Stag Chase.

There is also a moral in this haunting and affecting tale about our destructive time and the desolation of feeling lost in life. "The sicker the land is, the stronger its ghosts get," says Ash's friend Mark. Bone Jack is a powerful and beguiling YA novel.

## Replica – Jack Heath

Robots have come a long way since C-3PO and R2D2. Google is planning driverless robot motorbikes and in Kunshan, China, this week a restaurant opened where four short humanoid machines greet customers, act as waiters and fry dumplings in the kitchen. So Jack Heath's sci-fi YA thriller about robots, Replica, makes a timely read.

The opening three chapters are terrific. The novel opens with the words "I can't move my legs", as Chloe Zimetki, a teenager with a glittering nose stud, wakes to find that she is no longer human. She has no pulse and her pupils don't dilate. She has no idea how the sadistic captor has detached her head "as neatly as a Lego brick". Her life, her memories, her identity, have been stolen.

The novel morphs into a pacy conspiracy thriller and at times the frenetic action – Chloe is pursued by men in gas masks with pump-action shotguns – and somewhat unconvincing plot about a mysterious Quantum Mechanical Processor get in the way of the characters. Chloe, who is in love with a girl called Becky, never feels fully fleshed out and the ending feels rushed. A shame, because there are interesting questions raised by Replica: if you're a mechanical duplicate of a person, complete with all their memories, to what extent are you not them?

Incidentally, the cover art (featuring an android doppelgänger) is particularly striking.

## The Bubble Wrap Boy – Phil Earle

Phil Earle has written a series of powerful and sympathetic young adult novels about teenagers, including the award-winning *Being Billy*. His new YA novel, *The Bubble Wrap Boy*, has those qualities, too, but also marks a change of direction, because it is his most overtly humorous book.

The main character, Charlie Han, has his own problems, not least his insecurities about his height. He is either patronised or insulted. Jibes such as "Chinese Midget", or "special-needs one", really wound.

Yet Charlie is resilient. In musing on his "life as a short-arse", he thinks about all the various tyrants with "small-man syndrome": Genghis Khan, Pol Pot, Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler, adding wittily: "Mind you, I bet Genghis's mum was easier-going than mine."

One of the things that makes the book click is the funny interplay between Charlie and his mother, who is so paranoid about danger that she even makes Charlie wear swimming goggles if he is decorating a Christmas Tree (to be fair, those tough Nordic non-drop needles could have someone's eye out). He starts seeing home as a prison. "Imagine Shawshank with shoutier guards," he says. In exasperation, he shouts at her: "All you want to do is wrap me up in cotton wool!"

The trouble really starts with his secret hobby of skateboarding. When mum finds out, there is an almighty bust-up ("*Britain's Nuttiest Woman*" comes out to play), triggering a sequence of events in which Charlie discovers the heartbreaking reason for his mum's anxieties.

The plot glides along at a nifty pace (Charlie's big-nosed friend Sinus, who has a wall fetish, adds to the fun) in a novel that has some serious points to make about teenage self-image and what it's like to be accepted – and vilified – in an age of YouTube postings and camera phones.

## We were liars – E Lockhart

The goings-on within a rich and spoiled New England family, as they spend their summers in a gorgeous private island off Martha's Vineyard, might not sound like the basis for a gripping young adult novel but National Book Award finalist E. Lockhart's *We Were Liars* is just that. It's a mysterious and addictive treat.

The family are the Sinclairs ("our smiles are wide, our chins square, and our tennis serves aggressive") with Grandad, an old-money Democrat and an old-man bigot, sitting atop the family tree, keeping his daughters competing over their possible inheritance like a WASP King Lear. "He was drunk on his power," we are told.

The liars of the title are the three eldest Sinclair grandchildren – Johnny, Mirren and Cadence – and Gat Patil, a visiting friend who threatens to overturn the social order when Cadence (Cady) falls in love with him.

The story is a ticking time bomb as we slowly find out about the tragedy that has made Cady sick in body and mind. A strange accident has left her with amnesia, doped up on Percocet and admitting: "I hate my f----- hacked-up mind."

As well as a mystery, this is also the love story of teenagers Cady and Gat. Cady is likeable but self-centred. When Gat complains that he is on a privileged island where everyone is rich and white "except Ginny and Paulo", Cady asks: "Who are Ginny and Paulo?", prompting Gat to slam his fist into his palm and say: "Ginny is the housekeeper. Paulo is the gardener. You don't know their names and they've worked here summer after summer. That's the point."

Cady's mother is as unpleasant as the grandfather - she drinks too much, has a steely voice and a hard, bitter mouth - and you can almost smell the expensive, lemony perfume each time she wafts into the room.

There's an element of quasi-fable to a novel – which *Fault in Our Stars* author John Green has said is Lockhart's best book – which is full of wry observations and snappy dialogue. The twist, when it is revealed, is dramatic and severe.

Ultimately, despite being spoilt, the four liars are presented sympathetically. As they sit round thinking up inspirational quotes, 15-year-old Mirren offers: "Be a little kinder than you have to."

It's not a message that her greedy and manipulate older relatives would ever espouse.

## The Castle – Sophia Bennett

The Castle opens with a typically English scene: a wedding at the ancient church of St Thomas the Martyr in Winchelsea, with bridesmaid Peta Jones in a garish satin dress (apricot or peach coloured, she's not sure), reflecting on her fellow bridesmaids, "three tall blonde girls, also dressed à la fruit".

The problem is that the blonde trio (the Darling D's of Damaris, Davina and Desdemona) are about to become Peta's half-sisters, as her mum marries their father Rupert. It's made somehow worse for her that he likes to be known as Rupe. The bigger problem is that Peta doesn't want her mother to marry Rupe, because she is sure that her father, supposedly killed by a bomb in Baghdad, is still alive.

Her father did lots of "secret army stuff" and when she gets a bizarre coded telephone message (her phone goes off during the wedding ceremony) warning her that people called Ingrid and Marco are out to get her, it's the start of a mystery thriller that launches Peta into a world of thieves, gun runners and slave traders. As she sets out to rescue father, she has to come to terms with the truth about this "absent hero".

The strength of Sophia Bennett's latest YA novel is Peta, whose sharp and ironic voice is a constant pleasure. When she stows away on a villain's boat, she says: "This whole 'hiding out on the blingiest yacht on the ocean' thing wasn't helping."

The Castle is a fast-paced and witty adventure.

## Raging Star – Moira Young

Saba is ready to seize her destiny and defeat DeMalo...until she meets him and finds herself drawn to the man and his vision of a healed earth, a New Eden. DeMalo wants Saba to join him, in life and work, to build a stable, sustainable world...for the chosen few. The young and the healthy. Under his control.

Jack's choice is clear: to fight DeMalo and try to stop New Eden. Presumed dead, he's gone undercover, feeding Saba crucial information in secret meetings. Saba hides her connection with DeMalo and commits herself to the fight. Joined by her brother, Lugh, and her sister, Emmi, Saba leads a small guerilla band against the settlers and the Tonton militia. But the odds are overwhelming. Saba knows how to fight—she's not called the Angel of Death for nothing. But what can she do when the fight cannot be won? Then DeMalo offers Saba a chance—a seductive chance she may not be able to refuse. How much will she sacrifice to save the people she loves?

The road has never been more dangerous, and betrayal lurks in the most unexpected places in the breathtaking conclusion to the Dust Lands Trilogy. (Blood Red Road, Rebel Heart, Raging Star)

(This review was taken from [www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com))

## Night Runner – Tim Bowler

You're in assured hands with a YA novel from Tim Bowler – he's written 20 books for teenagers and won 15 awards, including the prestigious Carnegie Medal – and *Night Runner* has all the usual characteristics of balancing gripping action and engrossing characters.

Teenager Zinny gets sucked into a life of crime after realising his family is in danger. Zinny, the main character, is surrounded by rotten adults, including his drunken and abusive father ("his face hard and angry") and there is a touching scene in which Zinny has to help his father get dressed after another night on the booze has left his hands "like jelly".

Zinny is a tremendously sympathetic hero and the action does not falter as his life comes under threat from criminal gangs, who only occasionally drift into Seventies Minder-like gang talk. *Night Runner* is well-written and solidly plotted, so the story doesn't collapse under the weight of the violence. The minor characters – such as the school bully Spink and headmaster Mr Latham – are interesting in their own right.

The ending is pretty uplifting, too.

## Split Second & Every Second Counts – Sophie McKenzie

*Split Second* is set in a politically corrupt, dystopian London in the near future, where government cuts mean money is tight, and food is scarce. It tells the story of Charlie and Nat, the two main protagonists, whose lives are changed irrevocably after a terrorist bombing at a London market. Months later, they meet each other and the two become closer, bound by the explosion that devastated their lives and triggered a whirlwind of events beyond their control. As the two develop their relationship, Charlie becomes suspicious of Nat who keeps a sinister secret about the explosion. Both hell-bent on revenge and desperate for answers, the two delve into a world of secrets and corruption that extend to even the highest levels of society.

I quite enjoyed this book and like all of McKenzie's work, it surpassed my expectations. *Split Second* was surprisingly unpredictable, fast-paced and packed with plot twists. The chapters were short and explosive, and combined action, adventure and teenage romance with a large dose of unexpected betrayal.

Mckenzie uses dual narrative, alternating between Nat and Charlie's points of view, which adds to the depth of the story, and also makes you feel more sympathetic towards the characters. I'm looking forward to the second instalment, *Every Second Counts*.

In the follow-up novel to *Split Second*, McKenzie delivers another punchy adventure as Charlie and Nat learn some hard truths about the secret cell they have joined to fight terrorism. It all feels pacy and modern with computer hacking, YouTube videos, safe houses and human bio-weapons, and it has a strong moral core.

## The Impossible Knife of Memory – Laurie Halse Anderson

Laurie Halse Anderson has never been afraid to tackle tough issues in her young adult fiction – such as sexual assault, suicide, addiction, eating disorders – and *The Impossible Knife of Memory* is no different.

Anderson, the 52-year-old New Yorker who has been honoured by the American Library Association for her contribution to YA writing, tackles an issue that blights many families in the US: the complex effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. The novel is now out in paperback in the UK.

Truck driver Andy, a veteran haunted by what he remembers of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq (memories that are described very graphically and powerfully), has taken his daughter Hayley on the road for five years, home-schooling her as they travel. But when they finally find a permanent home, Hayley finds it hard to adjust.

Anderson is adroit at describing how alone and bewildered Hayley feels among the "normal" high school students: "their shiny-teeth smiles made happiness look easy," she says. The relationship between father and daughter fractures. She says it is hard to know how to play the game when the rules keep changing. Her only friend, Gracie, is distracted by the messy divorce her parents are going through. You feel for Hayley and understand why she finds it hard to trust people, even the boy she falls for called Finn.

Anderson's portrayal of families shattered by war, death, divorce and addiction is brutally honest, but there are moments of wry humour. And ultimately this is a novel that explores love and affection, even under the most testing circumstances.

## Salvage – Keren David

"I spent the night propped up against the sign Clive has on the pavement. 'SALVAGE' it says. I'm beyond saving, though. I'm damp, I smell, I disgust myself, so God knows what Holly and Finn think." Aidan is in a bad place, and while he is not guiltless, this is largely due to circumstances beyond his control. Whether he's salvageable or not is the engine that turns Keren David's fifth YA novel.

Who am I? Why am I this person? Who could I be in spite of, or because of, parents and upbringing and chance? Such questions never go away, but the drive to ask them is at its most intense when adulthood looms. With *Salvage*, David gives us her own take on the nature v nurture debate. The hook is compelling: two estranged siblings, removed from a broken home and brought up in vastly different circumstances, make contact with each other after spending their formative years apart. Brother and sister take turns to narrate their story from two sides of a gaping social divide, giving us interior and exterior portraits of each as they move into a minefield of social difference and familial ties. It's a page turner: David choreographs a cast of engaging characters through a fast-moving narrative that explores the sobering consequences of a damaged childhood and the fragility of the family unit.

Cass, the youngest, was adopted by a Conservative MP and resides in the leafy home counties where she is "head-girl material and heading for Oxford", both academic and attractive (though her diffidence has won her a reputation as an ice queen). *Salvage* opens in rom-com style with Cass rebuffing the advances of Will, a sixth-former from a neighbouring private school. Will is popular, handsome ("a local landmark, like the art deco cinema"), and has a healthy ego. "It cannot be denied," he tells her, that "the whole of Year Seven is in love with me. Boys and girls. And quite a few of Year Eight, as well." The attentions of this attractive charmer lighten the tone of the novel, allowing for an element of humour in a story that is often stark. Cass, however, is less preoccupied with the opposite sex than with the crisis that is consuming her family following her adoptive father's scandalous affair with a twentysomething intern. It is a Facebook message that Cass receives from someone purporting to be her brother that brings the two together. Will turns amateur sleuth when Cass asks him to accompany her to London to investigate the claim.

Keren David's writing has broad appeal: it has heart without being sentimental, is skilfully plotted, and its emotional and moral landscapes are nuanced. So, if Aidan is handicapped by near-illiteracy, has been exposed to violence and has endured both a difficult upbringing and a second estrangement from his biological mother, he is still able to sustain friendships, a decent job and a good relationship with a single mother older than himself. Equally, Cass's expensive education doesn't guarantee emotional intelligence; nor does having a father who is an establishment figure give her family immunity from heartbreak.

Aidan has a tattoo on the nape of his neck that reads: Hope. This accomplished novel seeks out the positive and redemptive: we see a succession of characters cope with the challenges life throws at them – and move on. David ends her story in an unexpected and satisfying way, and while I suspect some readers will question the optimism with which the narrative is ultimately suffused, I'd be surprised if they didn't enjoy this gripping ride.

(This review was taken from The Guardian website)