

ENTERTAINMENT

Fiction takes center stage on 2022 list of Michigan Notable Books

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Ellen Airgood's first novel was a Michigan Notable Book in 2011, but making the list again this year was no less thrilling for her. "I don't take it for granted," says the self-taught writer who lives in the Upper Peninsula. "It makes me feel like the book is officially for the state and its people."

Airgood's second novel, "Tin Camp Road," follows single mother Laurel Hill and her precocious daughter, Skye, in their struggle through rural poverty in the remote U.P., where the local school has just four children to a classroom. Their life gets even harder after they're evicted from their home.

It's an ideal fit for the Michigan Notable Book award bestowed by the Library of Michigan annually since 1991. Each year, the list features 20 books published during the previous year in any genre. The only criteria: Books that are chosen must be set in Michigan or by a Michigan author. Airgood's novel meets both.

Tim Gleisner, head of collections at the Library of Michigan, says the selection committee — about a dozen folks from the academic, publishing and library worlds — pores over upward of 400 titles to figure out "the best of the best" books that honor the state. "We live and work in such a geographically diverse state, from Detroit to one of the last remaining wildernesses," he notes.

Gleisner, who has been on the committee the past seven years, says this year was especially strong for fiction and young adult and middle school books, including "Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories for Kids" by Cynthia Leitich Smith, a collection of stories for middle school readers, and "Whisper to a Rallying Cry: The Killing of Vincent Chin and the Trial that Galvanized the Asian American Movement," a nonfiction book also for young readers by former Detroit News journalist Paula Yoo.

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There's art and history in "Pewabic Pottery" by Thomas W. Brunk and politics in the memoir "Getting to the Heart of the Matter" by the late Sen. Carl Levin. "Obviously with his passing, it's more poignant," says Gleisner.

For fans of mystery-thrillers, there's "Dead of Winter," a fictional story set in Mexicantown by Stephen Mack Jones. "A lot of people outside Detroit don't know anything about Mexicantown," says Gleisner. "It's a good entry point to anyone new to (Jones') work."

The U.P. is also a popular theme this year. "The Firekeeper's Daughter" by Angeline Boulley is about a young woman caring for her mother when she gets entangled in a criminal investigation. And, of course, there's Airgood's "Tin Camp Road," which was named a best new book by People magazine.

Airgood says the book was a chance to more accurately portray rural poverty than she did in her 2011 novel, "South of Superior." "I realized I left rose-colored glasses on," she says — something she discovered after readers noted that her descriptions of poverty paled when compared with reality.

"I would never romanticize being broke," says the author, 55, who grew up reading books and riding horses in Michigan's Thumb before getting her bachelor's degree from the School of Natural Resources and Environment at the University of Michigan.

"I use the phrase 'the working poor.' It's often what I've been part of. We have our dreams and hopes and are all trying to figure it out," she says. "It doesn't matter where you fall on the financial spectrum."

When she's not writing, Airgood drives 20 miles from the home she shares with her husband to bake and wait tables at their family-owned diner in Grand Marais. That work made her a better writer.

"I never had jobs where I had to pay attention to people one at a time," says the former timber cruiser and air quality sleuth. "I became attuned to people and what makes them tick. People have told me I write good dialogue, and if I do, it's because I've heard so many people say so many things."

Airgood hopes that the book is enjoyable and also that it brings about understanding and respect for people like her characters. “If you lead the kind of life that Laurel and Skye do, it might validate you in a way. And if you don’t, I wanted to gently open a window in to a different lifestyle.”

Similarly, Cynthia Leitich Smith, who edited and contributed to “Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories for Kids,” aims to enlighten young readers about Native American culture through intersecting fictional short stories and poems that take place at a powwow in Ann Arbor.

“I wanted to show intertribal diversity,” says the Austin-based best-selling children’s and YA author and enrolled citizen of the Muscogee Nation.

Smith, who got her law degree at the University of Michigan in 1994, says it was there that she discovered the city’s annual Dance for Mother Earth Powwow, an international celebration of Native Americans. Her tie is one reason she chose the setting.

That setting also qualified her for the Michigan Notable Books award. “I was overwhelmed by gratitude,” says Smith of learning of the honor, which she sees as a validation of the cooperative efforts of the contributors, all Native Americans.

“It’s an ‘us’ project,” she says. “It filled me with hope that these kinds of projects that reflect community can inspire more of that among our kids in our society. ... To have the state say these values are important to us, that’s tremendously meaningful.”

Michigan notable books 2022

Book descriptions were provided by the Library of Michigan and lightly edited by the Free Press.

'Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories for Kids,' edited by Cynthia Leitich Smith

A collection of intersecting stories and poems set at an Ann Arbor powwow that bursts with hope, joy, resilience, the strength of community, and Native American pride. In a high school gym full of color and song, Native American families from the United States and Canada dance, sell beadwork and books, and celebrate friendship and heritage. They are the heroes of their own stories.

'Call Me Athena: Girl from Detroit' by Colby Cedar Smith

Written from the perspective of three very different narrators, this enchanting multi-generational novel in verse follows Mary, the American-born daughter of Greek and French immigrants living in Detroit in the 1930s, as she struggles for independence, equality and identity.

'The Cut' by John Wemlinger

Alvin Price and Lydia Cockrum literally bump into each other in the summer of 1870 and fall in love. They come from vastly different backgrounds, and their relationship encounters struggle amid the feuding farmers and powerful lumber industry in Manistee. In addition, a terrible storm on October 8, 1871, will sweep across the upper Midwest, setting off fires in Chicago and dozens of other cities, including Manistee. Will their love endure?

'Day of Days' by John Smolens

Decades after experiencing the Bath School bombing in Clinton County, survivor Beatrice Marie Turcott recalls the spring of 1927 and how this haunting experience leads her to the conviction that one does not survive the present without reconciling hard truths about the past.

'Dead of Winter' by Stephen Mack Jones

Detroit ex-cop August Snow must fight for his life and the soul of Detroit's Mexicantown when a local business owner is targeted by an anonymous entity that is linked to a dangerous net of ruthless billionaire developers.

'The Dockporter: A Mackinac Island Novel' by Dave McVeigh and Jim Bolone

It's the summer of 1989. Jack McGuinn is a dockporter who transports tourists' luggage piled high in the basket of his bike on Mackinac Island. He's got the season wired tight: a family cottage on the bluff, a dream job and a loyal crew of hell-raising, tip-hustling buddies. When his old friend-turned bitter rival challenges him to ride a record-setting load, he takes the bet and soon realizes he's carrying not just suitcases but also the future of the island, which is about to be paved over for profit.

'Early Morning Riser' by Katherine Heiny

Jane moves to a small town in northern Michigan to teach second grade and immediately falls in love with Duncan, a charming if not entirely reliable woodworker who she soon finds has been with nearly every woman in Boyne City. Follow Jane through the course of several years as she navigates the humor and disaster of a most unconventional relationship, all while trying to find a deeper kind of happiness.

'Firekeeper's Daughter' by Angeline Boulley

Eighteen-year-old Daunis Fontaine of Sault Ste. Marie, who is part Ojibwe, delays attending the University of Michigan to care for her mother and reluctantly becomes involved in the investigation of a series of drug-related deaths.

'From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry: The Killing of Vincent Chin and the Trial That Galvanized the Asian American Movement' by Paula Yoo

An engaging and well researched nonfiction book about the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man beaten to death in Detroit by two white men, and the lenient sentence given to those who killed him. The protests that followed helped create what came to be known as the Asian American movement.

'Getting to the Heart of the Matter: My 36 Years in the Senate' by Carl Levin, with Linda Gustitus

Carl Levin, the longest-serving senator in Michigan history, was known for his dogged pursuit of the truth, his commitment to holding government accountable and his basic decency. His book traces his story from his early days in Detroit as the son of a respected lawyer to the capstone of his career as chair of both the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations.

'Long Road to the Circus' by Betsy Bird, illustrated by David Small

Twelve-year-old Suzy Bowles dreams of life outside the small town of Burr Oak, Michigan. After she stumbles upon an opportunity to learn ostrich-riding with the infamous Madame Montetta, her obligations on the family farm threaten to derail her dreams of a bigger life.

'Miles from Motown' by Lisa Sukenic

After moving from her beloved Detroit neighborhood to an unfamiliar suburb outside the city, Georgia Johnson submits an entry to a poetry contest for only Detroit residents and uses her Aunt Birdie's address. As she tries to settle into her new life, Georgia misses her older brother, who is deployed in Vietnam, and everything else that was familiar to her. At the same time, she's eager for news about the poetry contest that might arrive in her aunt's mailbox.

'Never Saw You Coming' by Erin Hahn

In this powerful story about forgiveness and love, 18-year-old Meg Hennessey travels north to Michigan's Upper Peninsula in order to meet the family she never knew existed and instead falls for Micha Allen, who is dealing with his own traumatic past.

'The Other Me' by Sarah Zachrich Jeng

This unpredictable sci-fi thriller begins when a failed artist accidentally opens a door to an alternate reality where she never pursued her dreams and must uncover the forces behind the switch before time runs out.

'Pewabic Pottery: The American Arts & Crafts Movement Expressed in Clay' by Thomas W. Brunk, foreword by Martin Eidelberg

This chronological history of Pewabic focuses on the pottery as operated by its founders, Mary Chase Perry and Horace James Caulkins, and proceeds through to the beginning of the Pewabic Society in 1979. It explores everything from the personal lives of its founders and prominent potters to tiles, glazes and Pewabic's place at Michigan State University.

'Private Love, Public School: Gay Teacher Under Fire' by Christine A. Yared

Gerry Crane was a talented high school music teacher, loved by students and parents, and lauded as one of the best teachers at his school. Everything changed once word spread that he had married a man. Follow the events of the true story of what happened when members of a Midwestern community demanded that their religious beliefs be imposed on a public

'Standpipe: Delivering Water in Flint' by David Hardin

This memoir of the author's work as a Red Cross volunteer delivering emergency water to Flint sets the struggles of a city in crisis against the author's personal journey as his mother faces dementia and eventual death. The book is an intimate look at one man's engagement with both civic and familial trauma.

'Tin Camp Road' by Ellen Airgood

In a novel set against the wide-open beauty of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, a young single mother and her 10-year-old daughter stand up to the trials of rural poverty and find the community they need in order to survive.

'Trout Water: A Year on the Au Sable' by Josh Greenberg

At the beginning of trout fishing season, Josh Greenberg — proprietor of a fishing tackle store on America's most famous trout-fishing stream, the Au Sable River — is struggling to cope with the slow death of a close friend. Over the course of the fishing season, he'll revisit that relationship and its importance to him as he finds solace, and maybe something more, in fishing.

'Up North in Michigan: A Portrait of Place in Four Seasons' by Jerry Dennis

These essays capture a lifelong journey to better know northern Michigan by exploring it in every season, in every kind of weather, on foot, on bicycle, in canoes and cars. The essays are more than an homage to a particular region, its people, and its natural wonders. They are a reflection on the Up North that can only be experienced through your feet and fingertips, through your ears, mouth, and nose — the Up North that makes its way into your bones as surely as sand makes its way into wood grain.