

Book Reviews

Two sites I recommend for online book reviews:

www.bookloons.com and www.goodreads.com

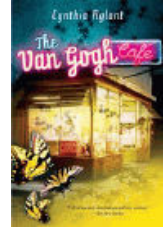
Here are a few that I pulled up. I'd recommend finding books that are of high interest to your class for this discussion.

The Van Gogh Café by Cynthia Rylant

Harcourt, 2006 (2006)

Softcover

www.bookloons.com



Reviewed by Ricki Marking-Camuto

Cynthia Rylant's *The Van Gogh Café* is a short, simple read about the magic that occurs in everyday life. Ten-year-old Clara loves living in Flowers, Kansas with her dad. Every morning before school, she helps him serve breakfast at the Van Gogh Café.

The Van Gogh Café is located in what used to be a theatre, and Clara thinks that is why so much magic happens in her dad's café. Whether the odd occurrences are magic or just small, everyday miracles that are only really noticed by those looking for the fantastic, is debatable. But to Clara, everything that happens in the Van Gogh Café is extraordinary from an opossum that helps a widower get a new lease on life to a lost seagull that finally finds its way to California - and everything in between.

Although short, *The Van Gogh Café* is an uplifting read that offers readers a quick pick-me-up for those days when all the magic seems to have disappeared from the world. To Rylant's Clara, there is always magic at the Van Gogh Café. one just needs to step on in.

Claire rated it: ★★★★★ 11/28/07 www.goodreads.com (Personal review)

The Van Gogh Café by Cynthia Rylant

When I was seven or eight years old and home sick from school, my mom brought me two things in bed: a hot cup of Earl Grey tea and this darling book that I always keep nearby. Of all the books in the entire world, this is the one that stole my heart.

Clara is an imaginative, precocious young girl who lives in Flowers, Kansas with her dad. They own a cafe on the main street in town, a cafe that was once a theatre. The magic in those walls still makes funny things happen in the cafe, and Clara notices it all. Like the possum...

Barely 100 pages, this book can easily be read within an hour. Any time I feel upset, sick, depressed, or simply bored with life, I escape to the Van Gogh Cafe. It's a dream of a children's book that will certainly inspire and entertain any adult with an imagination...

MY LIFE IN DOG YEARS BY GARY PAULSEN

From www.goodreads.com:

[Heather](#) rated it: ★★★★★

09/05/07

recommends it for: Middle schoolers and adults

While this is a YA book, it has so much to offer adults. It really is a little memoir, focusing on the author's interactions with various dogs throughout his life. It's really poignant and emotional, sad and funny.

[Tiki](#) rated it: ★★★★★ www.goodreads.com

04/02/08

bookshelves: [young-adult-picks](#)

I wasn't even a dog lover when I read this... A great read-aloud too. Think of the stages in your life through the pets you had. This book shows how pets can help a person deal with a dysfunctional family life.

THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM BY PAUL CURTIS

[Maggie](#) rated it: ★★★★★ www.goodreads.com

04/07/08

bookshelves: [historical-fiction](#), [juvenile-fiction](#), [lis-565](#), [siblings](#)

Read in April, 2008

CIP: "The ordinary interactions and everyday routines of the Watsons, an African American family living in Flint, Michigan, are drastically changed after they go to visit Grandma in Alabama in the summer of 1963."

The many adventures of the "Weird Watsons" of Flint, Michigan are recalled in this book, told from the perspective of 10 year-old Kenny, the middle child. The exploits of his older brother, Byron, nicknamed "Daddy Cool" by the family, are hilarious, and the parents reactions are even better. Although mostly a humorous novel, the book also introduces readers to the reality of discrimination and racial tension, culminating with a fictionalized account of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, which claimed the lives of four African American girls, all of whom the book is dedicated to. The reader has a first-hand account of the emotions that young Kenny experiences, having thought that his younger sister was a victim of the attack. Curtis' debut novel for young readers is a wonderful way to learn about our turbulent past in regards to racial discrimination without being too preachy. A highly recommended read for children ages 8 and older.

Booklist review (Aug '95): "Gr. 4-8. In a voice that's both smart and naive, strong and scared, fourth-grader Kenny Watson tells about his African American family in Flint, Michigan, in 1963. We get to know his strict, loving parents and his tough older brother, who gets into so much trouble his parents decide to take him back "home" to Birmingham, Alabama, where maybe his strong grandmother will teach him some sense. Several of the family stories are a bit self-conscious (we keep being told we're going to laugh as Dad puts on a show and acts the fool), but the relationships aren't idealized.

Racism and the civil rights movement are like a soft rumble in the background, especially as the Watsons drive south. Then Kenny's cute little sister is in a Birmingham church when a bomb goes off. She escapes (Curtis doesn't exploit the horror), but we're with Kenny as he dreads that she's part of the rubble. In this compelling first novel, form and content are one: in the last few chapters, the affectionate situation comedy is suddenly transformed, and we see how racist terror can invade the shelter of home."

Kirkus review (Sept. '95): "Curtis debuts with a ten-year-old's lively account of his teenaged brother's ups and downs. Ken tries to make brother Byron out to be a real juvenile delinquent, but he comes across as more of a comic figure: getting stuck to the car when he kisses his image in a frozen side mirror, terrorized by his mother when she catches him playing with matches in the bathroom, earning a shaved head by coming home with a conk. In between, he defends Ken from a bully and buries a bird he kills by accident. Nonetheless, his parents decide that only a long stay with tough Grandma Sands will turn him around, so they all motor from Michigan to Alabama, arriving in time to witness the infamous September bombing of a Sunday school. Ken is funny and intelligent, but he gives readers a clearer sense of Byron's character than his own and seems strangely unaffected by his isolation and harassment (for his odd look--he has a lazy eye--and high reading level) at school. Curtis tries to shoehorn in more characters and subplots than the story will comfortably bear--as do many first novelists--but he creates a well-knit family and a narrator with a distinct, believable voice."