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REVIEW: Swallow Me Whole

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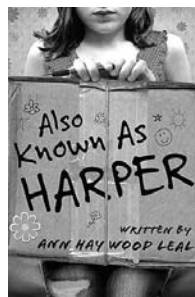
people who are not as well-known yet played key roles in establishing libraries for, and opening professional librarianship to, African Americans. The chronology suffers occasionally as Battles places people or events out of order, or mentions someone who will not be fully identified until several pages (i.e. years) have passed. Sticklers for political correctness will note a few uses of the term “colored” and the author’s sympathetic ear for Blacks who chose to make the best of segregation. The short chapters — some covering only a few years’ time — and clear prose will make this account very accessible to students from high school through college. Highly recommended to academic libraries and collections supporting African American studies, or library science programs. Includes end notes, works cited and index. ►►

— Reviewed by **Maureen Puffer-Rothenberg**
Odum Library
Valdosta State University

CHILDRENS/TEENS

Also Known as Harper by Ann Haywood Leal (Henry Holt and Company, 2009; ISBN: 978-0-8050-8881-6, \$16.99)

Have you ever been down on your luck and can’t seem to get back on top? Well that is exactly what has happened to fifth grader Harper Lee Morgan. Since her father left, her mother has been struggling to pay the rent and put food on the table. Then after a few missed rent payments, Harper and her family are now faced with the new realities of being homeless. The worst news for Harper comes when she must stay out of school to watch after her younger brother, Hemingway, missing the annual school poetry contest. Poetry has always been the one place where Harper can find solace and peace within her complicated life, and to miss the contest for the second year in a row is essentially devastating. To top it all off, Harper’s schoolmate, neighbor, and cruel arch nemesis, Winnie Rae Early, makes it a daily ritual to squash Harper’s hopes and dreams of a better situation for herself and her family. Leal’s characters are detailed and emotionally intricate, forcing the reader feel as if they are sharing in the same life struggles. Their trials and struggles of homelessness and rejection become your own. The antagonist of the novel is one reader’s will love to hate, with a Nurse Ratched-esque personality that will invoke unfounded depths of anger within the reader’s soul. However in the end, it is delightful to see the family find strength in the written word: Harper’s poetry or more specifically the great novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* to which



Harper is named after. Intended for readers ages 9-12, Also Known as Harper is a heartwarming and triumphant tale for every literature buff. ►►

— Reviewed by **Jennifer Green**
Snellville Branch
Gwinnett County Public Library

Swallow Me Whole by Nate Powell
(Top Shelf Productions, 2008; ISBN 978-1-60309-033-9, \$19.95)



A 2009 Eisner Award winner for Best Original Graphic Novel, *Swallow Me Whole* follows teenage stepsiblings Ruth and Perry through days of coping with high school, peers, and a home life with caring but unknowing parents and a feeble grandmother dying on the sofa. The kids confide in each other matter-of-factly about hearing things no one else can. Ruth is obsessed with insects, collects specimens in jars and can be overwhelmed with visions of insect swarms. She cannot walk across the grass because of all the tiny life forms she sees— and hears— there. Perry struggles with a wizard pencil topper that talks to him about a mysterious “mission” and pesters him to draw things the reader doesn’t see. Ruth is diagnosed as a possible schizophrenic and starts taking antipsychotics, while Perry’s doctor feels his talking pencil topper is a relatively minor problem. In spite of her parents’ concern, professional help, medication, a boyfriend (who she realizes draws her away from her insects) and a work-study job she likes, Ruth disappears into her own fantastic visions. In the end her fate is not clear, and the now-deceased grandmother appears to Perry, warning him not to be “swallowed whole” in the same way. The black-and-white illustrations are very dark, shadowy or muddled. Conversations occurring around Perry and Ruth are deliberately cut out of the frame or made illegible, nicely conveying the clamor of conversations in high school hallways. Powell has created an affecting, disturbing and sad picture of disordered teens, and how mental fragility can persist in spite of a family’s best efforts. Highly recommended for graphic novel collections. ►►

— Reviewed by **Maureen Puffer-Rothenberg**
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Valdosta State University