

*Cut Off*. By Jamie Bastedo. Red Deer Press, 2015. 338 pages.

*Nighthawk!* By Jaime Bastedo. Red Deer Press, 2013. 245 pages.

Reviewed by Addley C. Fannin

In the young adult market there is no flaw more tragic than an inability or unwillingness to understand one's audience.

Jamie Bastedo's *Cut Off* starts out very strong, full of big ideas and high stakes to draw the reader's attention. The protagonist, Indio, is a budding guitar prodigy under the thumb of his abusive, controlling father. Half-white and half-Mayan, his isolation is only furthered by a struggle to parse his mixed-race identity growing up in his mother's home country of Guatemala. His family's wealth serves to further divide him from the harsh reality of the other, poorer citizens. Worst of all, his father's gold-mining operation is at violent odds with the local population—an unflinching depiction of ecological devastation, violent extortion, cultural destruction and class struggles that seems designed to force the (presumably Canadian) audience to confront the atrocities committed in Central America by North American companies.

But ultimately, none of that matters. Not one of those big, important themes is the vitally important, "life threatening" issue at the heart of this story. No, all this build-up is just backstory for the truly important issue at hand, which is:

Internet addiction.

And that's where the book falls apart.

As writers and scholars of YA, this needs to be stated: teen culture *is* internet culture. Disregarding or, worse, belittling and misrepresenting the part of a teenager's life that is or can be experienced online is, at best, condescending and, at worst, utterly out-of-touch with your target audience.

It doesn't help that the internet depicted herein is only a bare-bones approximation. There's no mention of social media or really any of the apps or sites that have occupied teen attention in the last decade, nor is there any honest discussion of the actual threats posed by the internet, such as scams or predators. Harassment and bullying

are touched upon, but only barely and in the most blatantly unrealistic ways.

Worse, the immense positive potential of the internet in terms of creativity, activism, self-empowerment and community are painted as shallow and “not real” because they’re “done for attention.” Scenes of an abused child finding connection with other people, including his real-life classmates and other abused children in explicitly parallel situations, are bizarrely described in the same tone and language as the first joint from *Reefer Madness*.

Of course, even if the internet usage portrayal was accurate it wouldn’t change the fact that readers are expected to believe that Indio’s problems stem entirely from his internet use, not post-traumatic stress from witnessing a woman’s violent murder, a lifetime of abuse at the hands of his father, the loss of his beloved dog, or being severely injured in a freak hailstorm.

Nor would it have made up for the fact that nearly all the big, interesting ideas and high stakes found in the first third of the book are misrepresentations, mentioned in passing after Indio’s family moves from Guatemala to Calgary but otherwise left by the wayside. Even his father’s abuse is brushed aside by a few months of “detox” in the Yukon woods, a conclusion that is not only unsatisfying but borderline offensive. The restorative power of nature is a big theme in northern lit, but in this it is not used well at all.

Thankfully, no such issue hamstrings Bastedo’s middle grade work, *Nighthawk!*

The protagonist and point-of-view character of *Nighthawk!* is exactly that, a nighthawk bird with the narrative voice of a teenage boy who struggles with his inability to master the star-reading navigational technique needed to guide them on their migrations from the Amazon to the Arctic and back.

Overall, the book has a similar tone to and fits in nicely with others in the same through-the-eyes-of-animals genre, such as *Watership Down*. Also like that book, *Nighthawk!* doesn’t hold back on the brutality of the animal kingdom, even opening on the rather terrible death of the protagonist’s fledgling brother. It’s also an excellent demonstration of Bastedo’s expertise as a biologist, as the little details about the development and life cycles of nighthawks and their environment as well as the behaviours of the many other birds that they encounter ground the book quite nicely in the real world.

While it might be a bit brutal for the younger edge of its target age-range, the story is solid and interesting enough to hold kids' attention while teaching them a bit about the eternal mystery of bird migration. Where it stumbles is in pacing, starting off with a few big attention-grabbing moments before skipping over what should have been a significant bit of character development in only a few lines.

Thankfully, it all eventually comes together to feel like it's part of the same story, unlike the frustrating first third of *Cut Off*. And the story itself is a good one, offering a peek into some of the little adventures happening around us in the natural world. It simply would have been better if the pacing were improved and the author focused more on the parts of the story that are most interesting to a reader.

In an interview found in the back of *Cut Off*, Bastedo says that he, as a writer, knows a good story when he hears one, and that is certainly true. The loving description of *Nighthawk's* tundra and the nail-biting first third of *Cut Off* prove that he has the potential to deliver truly captivating experiences. But those experiences will be limited unless the author also considers the reader, whether as a cultural group or as a single person hungry for the story he's not telling.

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*Voice in the Wild: A Memoir*. By Laurie Sarkadi. Verge Communications, Yellowknife, 2017.

Reviewed by Daryl Farmer

While the cover identifies Laurie Sarkadi's *Voice in the Wild* as memoir, the book also effectively serves as an environmental writing hybrid. Each chapter is titled after a specific animal, bird, or insect—"Gorilla," "Wolf," "Dragon Fly," and so on—and perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of the book is the way Sarkadi then intersperses italicized sections about each species throughout, weaving them together with her own personal story. These italicized sections range from natural science, behavioural characteristics, mythology, news stories, and personal anecdotes. They are set up to run parallel with events in Sarkadi's life. In this way, the lives of the creatures she has encountered—near her Northwest Territories home, on her travels, or