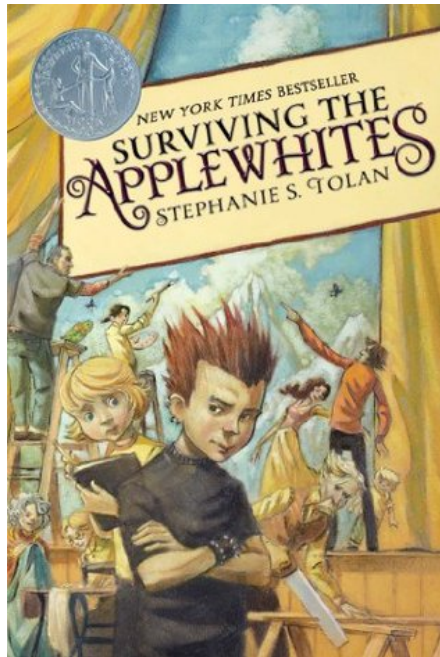




Surviving the Applewhites

Stephanie S. Tolan

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Jake Semple is notorious. Rumor has it he burned down his old school and got kicked out of every school in his home state.

Only one place will take him now, and that's a home school run by the Applewhites, a chaotic and hilarious family of artists. The only one who doesn't fit the Applewhite mold is E.D. -- a smart, sensible girl who immediately clashes with the unruly Jake.

Jake thinks surviving this one will be a breeze . . . but is he really as tough or as bad as he seems?

Surviving the Applewhites Details

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From Reader Review Surviving the Applewhites for online ebook

Josiah says

When reading a Newbery book, I generally enter into the experience with higher expectations than I have for most other books. That gold or silver medal on the cover, letting me know that the ALA Newbery committee for that year considered the novel I'm holding in my hands to be worthy of mention alongside such classics as *Charlotte's Web*, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* and *Number the Stars*, is perhaps the most important external sign I look for in the books that I read.

Surviving the Applewhites isn't a typical Newbery book, but it is a nice, uncomplicated story. A twelve-or-thirteen-year-old juvenile offender named Jake has bounced between several schools recently, the adults at those schools never really giving him a chance to show that he's not as bad as the official reports make him out to be, but now he has landed in a school completely different from any of the others in which he had been briefly enrolled. The homeschool "academy" run by the Applewhites is as relaxed and freeform as a legitimate school can get, with students allowed to choose their own courses of study and go about the process of learning however they wish. The Applewhites are an artistic family that doesn't much believe in the idea of limitations being set on personal creativity, and so those who attend the school (mostly the family's own children, with the exception now of Jake) are pretty much free to do whatever they want (within reason, of course).

It doesn't take long at all (actually, I was surprised it didn't take longer) for Jake to begin showing himself to be much more than the brooding delinquent that the judicial system had labeled him. The Applewhite family may be undeniably eccentric and susceptible to taking on big, crazy projects at the drop of a hat, but beneath it all is an extraordinarily close family unit (even though they may not seem very close to an outside observer), and each one of them as individuals are worth getting to know. For Jake, settling in as a temporary member of the Applewhite family means becoming like an unofficial older brother to four-year-old Destiny (a boy, despite the name), and taking over responsibility for Winston, the family dog, who apparently is under the impression that he is now Jake's pet. Being adored and admired by anyone is a totally new feeling for Jake, and maybe more than any other reason, it is the affection of Destiny and the dog that help Jake finally turn around his life.

Surviving the Applewhites is a low-pressure and comfortable sort of story, noticeably without any incidents that are likely to leave sear marks in your heart or make your blood boil. It is an interesting book, though, engagingly written and featuring a couple of characters that I really liked. However, I must admit that for a year of children's literature in which *Blue Eyes Better* by Ruth Wallace-Brodeur, *What Would Joey Do?* by Jack Gantos, *Loser* by Jerry Spinelli and *Ruby Holler* by Sharon Creech were not recognized by Newbery, I can't clearly see the rationale by which *Surviving the Applewhites* was named a Newbery honor book. The story's appeal is easy to see, though, so it wasn't surprising when Stephanie S. Tolan released a sequel, *Applewhites at Wit's End*, in 2011. When readers love a story, why not go back and spend a little more time with the characters?

Alex says

This book has genuinely changed my life more than once. I first read it in the fourth or fifth grade, and fell in love with E.D., who has become a more accurate portrayal of myself since then. I turned to this book whenever I was upset, or excited, or confused, and somehow, rationally or not, it always provided. I literally finished an essay about it last week, and I am now a junior in high school.

The most definitive moment when it touched my life directly was when a kid very, very similar to Jake Semple came to my school in eight grade. I was pretty inclined to believe the awful rumors about him, until he started walking home with his new girlfriend, who went the same way I did. Even though many rumors were true (he was horribly addicted to nicotine - I remember he would have to smoke as soon as leaving school grounds, but he would adjust his position in the group so that the wind blew the smoke away from the group, and repeatedly told off the idiot boys in the group about how terrible smoking was and how desperately he wanted to quit), he was a genuinely nice person most of the time. Going back to *Surviving the Applewhites* and reading Jake Semple again, in conjunction with the appearance of this kid, finally broke my childlike and simplistic moral value judgments. Without Jake, I don't think I would have broken that mold for a much longer time.

My copy of *Surviving the Applewhites* has literally every page of Chapters 6, 7, and 8 clumsily taped into the binding, and I have a feeling that in a few more years, that area will expand dramatically, because I can't picture the relevance of the *Applewhites* decreasing in my life, especially as I get more and more involved in theatre.

Maddy says

Cute message, predictable plot, and stereotyped characters, but I still enjoyed it. Quick read for *Battle of the Books* at the junior high.

Hanah says

I read this in my quest to read every children's book featuring modern homeschooled characters (there are shockingly few out there). It's a fun story about a homeschooling family that takes in a rebellious boy who has been expelled from school for getting into too much trouble. The story is about how the boy relaxes into his new situation and finds the freedom to discover himself in the midst of it.

The book relies on the stereotype of homeschoolers as eccentric, artsy types, but they're not too off-the-wall for my tastes. Non-artsy talents are definitely recognized and valued through the plot of the book, which I found very important.

The story is very well-written. In particular, I was impressed by the way things that seemed upon introduction to be random colorful details--such as the angry goat, E.D.'s butterfly project, and Govindaswami--turned out to be crucial to the plot. Almost nothing here was extraneous, and it all tied together very nicely.

I do worry about Jake, the rebellious kid, though. He was sent away from home partly for his behavior but also because his parents had been sent to prison on nonviolent drug charges. He barely thought about his parents for the whole story after that. What kind of relationship does he have with them, and what will happen when they're out of prison and it's time for him to go back home? Maybe this is addressed in the sequel--which I plan to read sometime later, when my kids are old enough for this book.

Janet says

A bit over the top, but full of heart and tons of fun, this is the story of an apparently incorrigible middle-school delinquent and the artistic, eccentric family who might just bring him around. Jake Semple has been kicked out of every school in Rhode Island, and sent to North Carolina to live with his grandfather. After being expelled from yet another school, Jake finds himself taken in by the Applewhites, a sprawling family of artists with a disorganized homeschool and just one highly organized family member. E.D. feels distant from her family because she is pragmatic and not arty. She is annoyed by the presence of Jake, who by virtue of age is stuck in E.D.'s "class". The plot, such as it is, revolves around the Applewhite father's attempt to stage a multiracial community production of "The Sound of Music", and about Jake's and E.D.'s gradual transformations as they reluctantly get to know each other and, more importantly, themselves. I was not convinced of the badness of Jake, who came across as fairly mild from the start, or at least not horrible enough to conquer a whole state full of middle schools (even a small one). And E.D. was, perhaps by design, a rather colorless character for a protagonist. For those reasons I hesitated over three stars vs. four, but it's just such a big-hearted book, I had to be big-hearted too. Stephanie Tolan was born in Ohio and *Surviving the Applewhites* is a 2013-2014 Choose to Read Ohio selection (<http://library.ohio.gov/ctro>).

Michael Fitzgerald says

Disappointing and definitely not worthy of its Honor. The book loses its focus about halfway through and becomes a farce. The "deep" philosophical messages are shallow and laughable: "Education is an adventurous quest for the meaning of life, involving an ability to think things through." Really? That word salad is the best you could come up with? Characters are caricatures: the Indian guru, the domineering stage mother, the painfully introverted creative teen, the prima donna ballerina, the ultra-demanding author, et al. Much of the book's humor only exists because of these hackneyed characters; it's not genuinely funny. It's like an old TV sitcom, complete with canned laugh track.

When the book, which begins as a troubled-teen-forced-to-do-unschooling story (which could have been interesting enough) veers off into being a musical-theater-production-narrowly-avoids-catastrophe story, it's just entirely too predictable. The only thing the overachieving Applewhites lack is singing talent? Oh, this new kid will amazingly sing, with no prior experience. Yep. The littlest kid (ridiculously named Destiny) wants to be in the show? We can engineer an accident and a contrived jokey resolution (involving cantankerous pets on the loose) that lets him. After the mean old establishment type cancels the show, the unappreciated daughter who just doesn't fit in will save the day and everyone will come together. Cliche? Check. Trite? Check. Boring? Check.

We get Important Messages about diversity (as if no amateur production of a musical ever had a multi-racial cast) and about pulling together and how everyone is special and important in his own special way - very obvious overstated messages that are unintentionally funny because of their earnest delivery. By no means is this a subtle book. I am further disappointed to learn that there are not one, but two sequels. The writing itself is not of high quality - I think it must be the situations and topics that make people want to like the book. When you examine it closer, all the little seams show and you find it's only a canvas sky hanging over a muslin tree, but pretending and aspiring to be so much more.

Robert Sean Leonard's narration is ok, but it is shocking that he evidently does not know the correct pronunciations of the words "scythe" and "aphid." There was another mispronounced word, too, that I can't recall now. Does no one listen to the reading before approving it?

Jacki says

North Carolina! woo!

I think that's what originally sparked my interest in the book.

The book was well written, though rather predictable. It was subtle where it needed to be, explicit where it worked, and well rounded in it's characters. The use of flipping between E.D.'s and Jake's perspectives was very effective with clean breaks in between. There were a few places that I hoped for more expansion and exploration and the goat's role seemed to cut itself short. But overall, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

It could be said that the characters are unrealistic in their representation and the troubles of a foster child with Jake's background is severely understated. I would argue that his background is not as troubled as the opening would lead us to believe. So his parents grew and sold pot. That's hardly a hardened background. They weren't meth dealers. And it becomes increasingly obvious that his attitude is shallow. He's not quite as bad as all the schools fear that he is and when smoking and cussing fail to establish his badassery, he's left looking like the Bart Simpson of the group. Honestly, the selfish pursuits of the Applewhite family leave them almost more screwed up than he is.

Kristine says

Seriously I could not have expected a less realistic representation of the metamorphosis of a teenage foster child. I wanted to shake the author and ask her why a teenage boy abandoned by both parents as well as booted out by his grandfather had no REAL issues with trust, attachment, or authority. Seriously even the best of the best kids are going to have a MUCH harder time than represented here. The thought process of Jake when thinking about his life and choices just seemed way too simplistic.

I also didn't like at all how selfish every Applewhite character was -- it seems like the philosophy of every family member was, "it's all about ME, ME, ME!" It was impressive when they came together at the end to pull the play off; but even then most of them seemed a little self-serving . . .

sigh . . .

p.s. if this sounds like the jaded ramblings of a former foster parent of a teenager coming of age, it is.

Sara says

Ummmmmm... was there a point to this book? Because it didn't seem like it. First of all, Jake wasn't even that bad. I'm sorry, but he wasn't. He smoked for like the first few chapters and then gave it up because everyone kept stomping on his cigarettes (Wouldn't a bad kid have done it anyway in secret?). He swore at first but then that got less and less as the book went on. And if he was really bad enough to burn down a school wouldn't he have like hit the dog or Destiny if they were really bothering him? I mean, honestly? What kind of person has the guts to burn down a school but can cope with taking care of a dog and a little kid? Oh, that's right, NO ONE! And the whole play thing was kind of dumb. I mean it was sort of realistic, it just wasn't interesting enough to be put in a book.

David Slater says

The setup: a teen delinquent is given one last chance to avoid juvie at a home school run by a madcap family of artists, the Applewhites. While the book's leisurely-paced charm is undeniable, so are its various flaws. First, the quirky cast of characters are straight from stock (distracted writer, kooky vegetarian New Ager, drama-queen...dramatist), though young readers are not likely to know or care. Much more significant is that the setup is revealed to be a contrivance, as the swearing, smoking delinquent almost immediately drops his pose (one we learn has been imposed upon him) by accepting a singing role in the Applewhites' planned production of *The Sound of Music*--the rather dubious message being it's just that simple to change in the right environment. The book's other messages are equally wobbly. It makes fair points about the best education being about the freedom to find one's passion, yet the Applewhite adults are self-absorbed, however amusingly, to the point of criminal neglect. And this reviewer will always object to teaching children of any age, as the Applewhite's visiting guru does (as does the climax of the story) that "all problems in the world are for the best."

Sps says

When I wasn't very far into this (60 pages or so) it already bored me. The characters were flat stereotypes and I got no sense of their interior lives, despite lots of telling-rather-than-showing on Tolan's part. Furthermore, I work with four-year-olds, and that ain't a four-year-old. Especially not one raised in a chaotic environment of adult narcissists who do not engage with the child.

Could I predict the plot? You bet. Did I care about what happens to these characters? Heck no. I don't feel there's anything to be gained by reading the book vs. the plot summary.

However, I can see how the very two-dimensionality and conformity to known stereotypes could make this an appealing read for some kids. It won't ask too much of them, and may amuse those who believe themselves (or friends) to be Bad Kids or Artsy Kids.

Rosa says

Jake Stemple is considered one of the ultimate bad boys. He's been kicked out of every school he's ever attended. Then he ends up at Wit's End. Wit's End is where the Applewhite family lives. The Applewhite children are all home schooled and Jake's grandfather has decided that Jake will be joining them. Jake moves in with the Applewhites and realizes that they are all crazy artists, but he is eventually sucked in and joins the family for a massive project that will take everyone's skills.

I liked watching Jake find his place in the Applewhite family. He gets sucked in so subtly he clearly doesn't realize it at first. I also like that you get into Jake's brain as he realizes how many of the things he's doing

weren't about him but were in fact about how he wanted others to perceive him.

I like the insight into E.D. as well. She is clearly the odd one out but she still plays a vital role in the family. The play could not have been pulled off without her.

I guess I've been reading too much fiction where relationships play a heavy role. I was totally expecting E.D. and Jake to end up in some kind of relationship and that never happened and it felt so much more right because of it.

There was lots of humor and lots of hard work. Destiny is a great example of that. He's a funny kid but he takes a lot of work. It was also interesting to see the amount of work that went into putting on the play.

Lisa Rathbun says

For me, this was forgettable. The characters are weirdly self-absorbed but also all amazingly come together to help put on a play at the end. The kids work unrealistically hard on their homeschooling, instead of goofing off listening to music or playing video games all day, which I think they might tend to do realistically if they had as little adult supervision as they did in this book. I liked E.D., but by the end the focus on her seemed to just drop; I missed her perspective at the end. It seemed comically silly at times (the goat running into the house, the happy guru cooking) yet it seemed to be trying to be serious not silly.

(I'm also tired of the whole "integrated" or multiethnic play idea. Why hasn't anyone decided to do "A Raisin in the Sun" with a fully diverse cast? I would have been annoyed at a cast with von Trapp children of three different races. I like more verisimilitude in my drama.)

The story seemed too tame for older kids and too boring for younger kids. Although I was slightly amused by the eccentric family (and I did like the parts about the butterfly), ultimately I found this book pretty boring.

Ms. Darcy says

I admit I have not read this book in years, but I remember it being one of my favorite books when I was younger. I still get really excited whenever I see a Great Spangled Fritillery. As a homeschooler myself, I thought the Applewhite family was a hilarious. Yes, they are all completely over the top and absurd, but I think they are better done than most characters you will find in books targeting at this same age group.

What also really appealed to me for this book is that the youngest kid, I forget his name, IS one of my brothers. I don't know how the author did it, but that kid IS my brother. Of course, my brother has yet to discover a talent in singing, but there's time yet!

I identified a lot with E.D., and actually, after reading this book, I was inspired to try doing the same thing she did with her school. I, too, live in a crazy homeschool family (NOTHING like the family in the book, but still crazy!) and this book actually really inspired me to take charge of my education and not have my school

be something my mom hands to me. This book, I think, is partly responsible for where I am today and inspired the drive I apply to my schoolwork. For, as this book showed me, I can really decide what I want to do, and do well in it if I work hard enough.

If you've read the book recently and are banging your head against the wall at my inaccuracy, then I apologize. I literally have not read this book in six years. It left a deep enough impression, though, that I still remembered it clearly enough to write the above!

Read it, it's a great story and may inspire you to do a play, or categorize every butterfly in your state, or something bigger!

Jerry says

This one had its moments, but, overall, it was a dud.
