



The Center of Everything

Linda Urban

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Spring 2013 Kids' Indie Next List

For Ruby Pepperdine, the “center of everything” is on the rooftop of Pepperdine Motors in her donut-obsessed town of Bunning, New Hampshire, stargazing from the circle of her grandmother Gigi’s hug. That’s how everything is supposed to be—until Ruby messes up and things spin out of control. But she has one last hope. It all depends on what happens on Bunning Day, when the entire town will hear Ruby read her winning essay. And it depends on her twelfth birthday wish—unless she messes that up too. Can Ruby’s wish set everything straight in her topsy-turvy world?

The Center of Everything Details

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From Reader Review The Center of Everything for online ebook

Kathy says

I just didn't "get" this novel and I'm not sure my students will either. It wasn't just the Astronomy & Math which I found too obscure. I found the whole premise shaky from the start and the anti-climactic ending was the last straw for me. I just don't think my students will identify with the novel.

I know many of my colleagues adore her writing, so I will definitely read her two previous novels ASAP.

Chris says

The center of everything for twelve-year-old Ruby Pepperdine is her beloved grandmother Gigi. Gigi seems to know everything and Ruby is her star pupil, listening to Gigi explain about orbits and rotations and black holes and the cosmos. On Saturday nights, Gigi and Ruby climb the stairs to the roof of Pepperdine Motors and look at the stars together. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Gigi is gone and along with mourning her loss, Ruby is racked with guilt that she failed to listen to what Gigi was trying to tell her on her last days in the hospital. She is looking for a second chance; a way to go back in time and change things. Ruby believes in fate and luck and wishes that come true so she thinks that being selected essay girl in the Bunting Day Parade will help her do just that.

The Center of Everything has gotten great reviews, but I found it to be a quiet introspective book, much like the main character Ruby Pepperdine. There is very little action and the pacing of the book is excruciatingly slow. Urban carefully plants subtle clues in the text that are supposed to pique our curiosity and move the story along, but that just did not work for me. Several times, I put the book down because it just did not hold my attention, and I think this will be the case for many other readers as well.

Ruby Pepperdine's story takes place in just a small window of time – one day. She is waiting to read her prize-winning essay at the Bunting Day Parade, all the while thinking back to the different events that led her to this time. This switching back and forth in time is supposed to make things more interesting, but I thought it made the story more difficult to follow.

There is no doubt that Urban is a talented writer. She has a real understanding of how kids think and feel and Ruby's crying scene in art class when the protective layer covering her grief is "poked" unexpectedly by Nero's color wheel is exquisitely written. Urban also does a nice job with character development. Ruby's best friend Lucy is her complete opposite, and I thought that their scenes and dialogue added interest to the book.

At only 194 pages double-spaced, The Center of Everything should be a quick read, but the pacing, lack of action and switching back and forth in time will could lose readers who don't want to stick with it until the end. The cover is also boring. No real incentive to pick up the book and start reading. There are no bad situations or language in this book, although the fact that Lucy has "two "dads is never explained. Girls will relate to this book more than boys.

Jennifer says

Over the past six years, my husband, daughter and I have spent many a summer evening stargazing. In May,

when the evenings are just warm enough to sit out, we always seek out the summer triangle. Vega, Altair and Deneb will be tilted just slightly east, and by July they will be right above our heads. From My Backyard, Planet Earth, Deneb appears to be the faintest of these three very bright stars, but appearances can be deceiving. Vega, the sparkliest, is roughly 26 light-years away. The light we see from Altair is from 1995, the same year my husband and I started dating. But Deneb is an amazing 1,500 light-years away. Although it doesn't seem as twinkly as the other two, in reality, it outshines both. Every year my husband will make this observation, and every year I will be awestruck because I've forgotten it from the year before (well, maybe I'll remember it this year since I'm writing about it now). The moral of the story never fails to impress me. A star may seem pale until you know all the facts, and then it becomes luminous.

At first glance, Ruby Pepperdine seems pretty dull, too. She doesn't stand out in a crowd like her theatrical, high-maintenance best friend, Lucy. She isn't quirky like Nero DiNero, who draws attention with his curiosity and questions (the boy has a mind like a revolving door). Ruby is predictable. She is reliable. Her family owns a car dealership, for goodness sake. But like any classic introvert, there is a lot spinning around inside her that no one knows about. Or, at least they won't until she's chosen to read her winning essay in the Bunning Day parade. Lucy has a something in her she needs to sort out, and until she does, her Universe is slightly out of orbit.

This is a superb book, beautifully written. It's the kind of book that stands alone and yet somehow reminds you of other books you've read (in fact, many of these "other" books are mentioned in this one, which I'm sure is no accident). There is so much packed into this slim novel - magic and hard reality, guilt and hope, misunderstandings and epiphanies. And I love how entire chapters are devoted to characters we meet briefly, almost randomly, but as they are also in Ruby's galaxy, they are part of her story. It makes me shiver thinking about it how perfect it is. Loved this book!

Melissa says

Beautiful book. Was already a fan of Urban but this just firms it up. The writing is so nice with the recurring theme of circle/cycle/rings and even donuts! Definitely easy for a young reader to pick up on w/o hitting you over the head with it. Ruby's questions about Gigi's death, the opportunity to redo or fix our history are questions many of us have. The references to Newbery books and book displays in the youth dept. of her library naturally appealed to me! I think the book would be good for a reflective child - the pacing is pretty slow.

Donalyn says

No one writes characters like Linda Urban. She understands that even kids have lots to think and worry about in their lives.

Carmen says

There are two schools of thought about the secrecy of wishes. One is that you should always tell, because you never know who might be able to help you get what you wished for. People who believe this often appear on talk shows. Share your dreams with the Universe, they say.

The other school holds the birthday candle philosophy: to tell a wish is to ruin its chances of happening.

This book is excellent. And it sounds rather boring. I love when I dread reading a book and then it blows me out of the water. I did not want to do anything but read this book. I did not want to take any breaks. And that means a lot.

This book is about a lot of things: doughnuts, grief, boys, friendship and wishing.

But mostly it's about a 12-year-old girl named Ruby Pepperdine.

She is the winner of the annual essay contest about the town founder who invented doughnuts.

She is deeply sad about the recent death of her beloved grandmother, Gigi.

She is intellectually stimulated by a boy with a nice smile named Nero.

And she knows that the wish she made on her birthday is coming true.

The only question is how?

...

I liked the way this book explored a lot of topics, but never came across as heavy-handed or preachy. Nor was it a "sad book" even though it dealt with someone you love dying.

Urban does a great description of the depression that comes from grief. After Gigi dies, everything slowly goes back to normal. But not for Ruby. She still doesn't feel normal.

By then everybody else was back to normal. By then, Ruby figured out, you were not supposed to be so sad.

So she wasn't.

Instead, she went underwater.

That's what it felt like, at least. Every action, every movement, took twice as much effort, as if it were happening in slow motion. Voices sounded further away, and it took such work to make herself heard that Ruby stayed quiet.

This is such a great description.

That's not the only time Urban is good with words. This is how she talks about **reviewing books**:

In her years as a Bunning Elementary student, Ruby has been asked whether or not she liked a particular book seventy-four times, although she could not tell you this number exactly. What she could tell you is that if you said you liked this part or that part, people would fill in the rest. If they liked the book, they would think you did too. And if they didn't, that you didn't either, and they'd think the one part you mentioned was the ONLY part you liked. Most of the time, Ruby figured, people just wanted you to agree with them. And so most of the time she found a way to do so.

The only person she feels comfortable telling her **true book feelings** to is Nero DeNiro, an inquisitive boy from her class who always calls her *Ruby Tuesday*.

And since this is a book about 12-year-olds, of course we have some friendship drama between Ruby and her

bff Lucy.

"I tell you EVERYTHING and you didn't tell ME anything!"

Ruby's stomach hurts remembering what she had said back. "Mind like water."

"This is not a stupid pebble, Ruby Pepperdine! This is a meteor! You have hurled an enormous METEOR into the lake of our friendship. You've caused a tsunami!" Lucy had balled her fists and dashed away, and Ruby was left bobbing stupidly in her wake.

I was surprised at how great Ruby's budding relationship with Nero was. He's so teasingly kind to her and I was getting such a kick out of his obvious interest in her. Rather sad when the middle-school level book I'm reading about 12-year-olds is more romantic than the majority of Harlequin books. o.O

"Also," says Nero, "how come nobody gets named Callimachus anymore?"

Ruby can't help laughing. "Would you want to be named Callimachus?"

"I don't want to be named Nero," says Nero. "That's the trouble with names. You don't get to decide your own. Somebody else picks them."

Ruby likes her name. She is Ruby Giselle Pepperdine. The Ruby part has pep and the Giselle has elegance. When she goes to college, she thinks, she might ask people to call her Giselle. Until then, she's fine with Ruby.

"Maybe superheroes," says Nero. "Maybe superheroes get to choose their own names. And villains. I mean, what parent is going to name his kid the Green Goblin?"

"They named him Norman," says Ruby, who saw a lot of superhero movies during Uncle Dave's shifts watching Gigi.

Nero grins. "I never know what to expect from you, Ruby Tuesday."

Is he joking? She and Nero aren't friends or anything, but they have been in class together for three years in a row. Everyone knows what to expect from her. That's why people always pick her to bring notes to the office or to help take care of little kids. They expect her to do what she's supposed to do. Everybody says so. Her parents. All her teachers. Lucy.

"Are you making fun of me?" Ruby asks.

"Blue color-wheel paper. Essay Girl. Norman Goblin. All unexpected," Nero says. "I was giving you a compliment. Now you say thank you."

He IS making fun of me, Ruby thinks, and she gives him a raspberry, which makes him laugh. "See what I mean?"

Aw, there's so much cuteness in here. If you're a parent, don't get excited - the most these kids do is hold hands.

And I love that Ruby is the kind of girl who doesn't say 'thank you' when someone orders her to say 'thank you,' and I love that she is kind of quiet and calculating.

The names in this town (speaking of names) are rather crazy. I noticed Titus, Carter-Ann, Serendipity, Chance, Effie, Talia... etc. etc. This lends a rather other-worldly feel to the book that I liked. I mean, this was nowhere near the levels of weirdness of A Snicker of Magic, instead it was just a sprinkling. I liked it.

...

Tl;dr - A stunning children's book, equal parts thoughtful and funny. It took me by surprise. I recommend this.

Not available in Spanish.

Betsy says

There are only two things I require from life: Donuts and good books. Obviously that statement is false, but it sure sounds good. I like donuts. I like good books. And a good book that involves donuts? Cosmic all-encompassing donuts that aren't afraid to ask the big questions? Even better! Now I've followed the career of Linda Urban over the years and the simple fact of the matter is that with each of her books she gets better. Her latest, *The Center of Everything* follows its predecessors *Hound Dog True* and *A Crooked Kind of Perfect* into the familiar realm of quiet thoughtful fiction. A literary work of middle grade to its core, I'm not going to tell you that every kid that reads this book is going to love it, because it simply isn't true. This is a book for the thinkers and the dreamers. Philosophical kiddos. Smarter than the average bear, Urban's put her neck out there and written something big in a small package.

Everything hinges on Ruby getting this right. Today, after all, is Bunning Day, the most important day in Bunning, New Hampshire. It's the day she'll get up and read her award winning essay in front of everybody. And in that moment she'll be able to make everything right with her best friend Lucy and her new friend Nero. They'll forgive her. And that wish she made on her birthday, the one that is destined to come true . . . well, that's a given, isn't it? Trouble is, even the best laid plans of mice and men sometimes go horribly awry. It's Bunning Day. Ruby has her notecards in her hands. The parade has begun. Something is going to happen.

Some books are told in the course of a single baseball game (Six Innings). Some in a single day (33 Minutes). This book takes place in the course of a single parade route. It's a trope that requires a fair amount of potentially confusing flashbacks, which, with any other writer, might be a bit of a problem. But since small town parades are their own little universes in and of themselves, it turns out that Ms. Urban has a lot to work with. In fact, I found that this particular point of view was utterly unique. Perspective, you see, is a very big part of *The Center of Everything*. I've rarely seen a book for kids so willing to switch focus without giving even a hint of whiplash in the process. Much of the book is written entirely in the present tense. Well, not entirely exactly. There is the occasional moment when the book leaps into present tense second-person (which is a trick in and of itself). The reason for this switch becomes apparent when you realize that for much of it Ruby is talking to herself. Thanks to her grief, Ruby suffers a kind of self-imposed disconnect from the world around her. She often equates this with being underwater. "Every action, every movement, took twice as much effort, as if it were happening in slow motion." The moment of release comes when she laughs for the first time since her grandmother's death. "Ruby laughs a real out-loud laugh, which is something you can't do underwater. It requires real oxygen to laugh."

Then there's the aforementioned fact that parts of the book allow the minor characters in the parade to strut and fret their page or paragraph upon the stage, and then are heard no more. These glimpses into other people's brains serves to distinguish the novel from one of those books filled with quirky small town characters. Small town these people are. Quirky? I'd say no. And in seeing them we give Ruby context outside of herself. We don't have to spend the whole novel inside of her brain. There's great good to be said

of that.

Is there a term for much of what Urban is doing here? I almost want to call it kid-logic, but if I'm going to be honest that's not quite right. Instead it's this tricky combination of children's intelligent observations coupled with superstitions, signs, and urban legends. These observations include things like Ruby's technique for not getting called on in class. "In third grade she figured out that if you put your hand up in class when everyone else did, you probably wouldn't get called on, but you also probably wouldn't get called on when nobody put their hand up either. Teachers mostly picked the kids who never put their hands up . . ." After that the author has managed to tap into the logical thought process of a kid dealing with illogical emotions, then translating them into kind untruths for the sake of the adults around her. How do you do that as an author? Then there are the urban legends. To my mind, urban legends that originate with children and as close as kids come to creating their own original religions. In fact without mentioning religion in any way, Ruby is trying to give a sense of order to the world, and the way she does that is through legend and superstition. Her moment of clarity comes when everything starts tumbling about her ears. "What if there is no supposed to? What if there is no one way things are meant to be? What if it all is just random and spinny and wild?" We all grapple with these questions sooner or later. This book just gives a nudge in the direction of "sooner".

The biggest criticism the book has to face at this point in time is the pace. When you pick up a Linda Urban book, you are not going to encounter a car chase or an exploding helicopter or much outside of a human's head. There's a lot of internalizing in a Linda Urban book. That's what drives some folks nutso. Of this book I've encountered at least two librarians who found the pace too slow for their liking. One even suggested that perhaps the narrative leap to other characters involved in the parade could have been removed to keep the book shorter. This of a 208-page title. So we can pretty much say with certainty that you shouldn't hand this book to a reluctant reader or a kid who needs a death-a-minute to keep their eyeballs glued tight. This is a book for a good reader who can appreciate some fairly fine writing.

Literary children's books are the ones unafraid to take it slow. In this particular case, slow and sad (but not depressing, which is a fine line to walk). They are not to everyone's taste. Yet it's no crime to write a book for kids that asks the big questions. Ruby never turns to the reader and says "Is there a God?" or "Why are we here?" but the questions and theories she does devise are part of the greater whole. Framed in a single day between realistic kids and near absent adults, Urban successfully pulls everything together. What a kid gets out of this depends on how much they're willing to put into it. More thoughtful than most, this one's a keeper. A book for children with an inclination to think.

For ages 9-12.

Niki (Daydream Reader) says

Listen.....I don't know how Linda Urban does it! Every time I read one of her books I fall in love with the characters! I literally wish her characters were real people so I could know them in real life. If you haven't read *The Center of Everything*, *A Crooked Kind of Perfect* or *Hound Dog True*. You are missing out!

Please support your local library or independent bookstore! <http://www.indiebound.org/book/978054...>

Dana says

Lovely story about a girl named Ruby who has lost her grandmother and whose last words Ruby didn't really pay attention to. Now Ruby wants that time back so she can "listen" to what was said. So she makes a wish she hope will come true during the annual Bunning Day festivities when the whole town will hear her winning essay. Beautifully told and written and at the same time very relatable to a child.

Rachael says

When I was about halfway through *The Center of Everything*, I tweeted, "Reading *The Center of Everything* and wondering: if it won the Newbery, would it be the first Newbery winner that name checks the Newbery?" Leaving aside the issue of the Newbery name-check, what the hell am I doing wondering whether my very first 2013 read will win the Newbery? What am I comparing it to?

Nothing. The rest of this publishing year is a black box. Could be filled with *When You Reach Me*; could be filled with *Smokey the Cowhorses*. It makes these first reviews kind of difficult to write. I assume that's why the Newbery Committee doesn't start nominating until late in the year, and why *Heavy Medal* goes on hiatus until the fall. How do you know if a book is distinguished if you don't know what field of contenders it is distinguishing itself from?

Since we here at *About to Mock* are intrepid/stupid year-round bloggers, we just have to assume that the publishing year black box is Schrodinger's box - that it is chock full of both superstars and duds - and evaluate the books we read accordingly. Given those hypotheticals, do I consider *The Center of Everything* is a genuine contender? Why, yes I do.

The Center of Everything is, in the most basic sense, another dead grandparent book. Ruby's beloved grandmother Gigi has died, and Ruby is having a hard time getting over it. Gigi was the kind of woman whose strength holds the whole town together, and nothing seems the same without her. But Ruby is convinced that when she reads her prizewinning essay at the town's annual parade, it will fix everything - including her broken friendships. She's just not sure how.

The plot of *The Center of Everything* unfolds in concentric circles, switching back and forth between the day of the parade and the events leading up to it, and gradually filling in crucial details. Thematically, Linda Urban is preoccupied with circles (well, really tori, or donut shapes) as well. These manifest both symbolically - the emotional ripples of any given event, social circles of inclusion and exclusion - and literally. The town is obsessed with donuts, and Ruby, in attempting to bring about her wish, fixates on the physics of tori and begins to see them everywhere. This is a meticulously and elegantly plotted book.

If the plotting and structure are painstaking, however, the characters feel deceptively effortless. Ruby and her friends talk and act like real kids. They're interested in things like physics, astronomy, and acting, but they are limited by a typical 12-year-old's abilities. Other characters are introduced very briefly as well, such as the woman who plans the parade each year, and the new middle school librarian tasked with introducing Ruby's speech. Urban takes a risk in shifting the entire narrative point-of-view to these characters, but I think it's an effective gamble that ultimately serves the theme. Readers understand long before Ruby does just how everything is coming together.

Or at least they will on a second read. And whatever else happens, this book merits a second read.

(Cross-posted from *For Those About to Mock*)

Jenna Friebe says

Note: ARC received from NetGalley

Ruby Pepperdine lives in the town of Bunning, and today is the town parade. Ruby has been going to the parade for years, but this year is different. For one, she is the “essay girl” which means that she gets to read her essay about Captain Bunning, the man who created their town and is also famous for putting a hole in donuts. Also, this year the parade is happening without Gigi, Ruby’s grandma who passed away.

Ruby is a believer in destiny. Because of a series of events up to this day, she expects that her wish will come true before the day ends. However, maybe Ruby would be in a better mood if her friends Lucy and Nero weren’t mad at her. This book takes place throughout one day, although most of the story is told through flashbacks of the events leading up to now.

I loved this book. Linda Urban writes beautifully and really captures the emotions of all her characters. This book has situations and emotions that are so easy to relate to, but there are also really quirky elements (donuts, wishes, time-travel...) that make the book incredibly interesting. I highly recommend this book, and I hope it gets the attention it deserves.

Kate says

I’ve read and loved all of Linda’s books. I think *The Center of Everything* is her best one yet.

Right away, when we meet main character Ruby Pepperdine, we know that the stars are not quite aligned in her universe. Something has knocked things out of orbit, and Ruby is unsettled as she waits for the Bunning Day parade to pass by so that she can do the job she has to do, the thing she believes will make her wish come true and put everything right.

It’s a little later, bit by bit, that we begin to understand that Ruby is grieving the loss of someone she always considered to be the center of her universe. Add to that the challenges of changing middle school friendships, a new friend who’s a boy, and a very old town superstition involving a sea captain, a quarter, a birthday, and a donut, and you have a magical book indeed.

It’s not literal magic. There’s no time travel, even though the narration does take us smoothly and seamlessly back and forth from present times to what happened a while ago.

And there are no witchy spells or psychic abilities, though the point of view changes, too, allowing us to see inside a lot of different minds along the parade route. *The Center of Everything* is written in third person omniscient, which means the reader has the opportunity to check in with any number of characters passing by Ruby in that parade. Aside from Ruby herself, who won my heart, I think this might be my favorite thing about this book. As a reader, I loved spending just a few seconds inside everybody’s head because somehow, it captured the warmth and joy of small-town life in a way that was just so funny and wonderful. Case in point: the flag girls from the high school, carrying a banner that says BUNNING DAY...

Behind the banner is the rest of the flag squad: six girls in matching sleeveless sweaters and pleated skirts. In

November they will wear those sweaters over turtlenecks and wave their flags at football games and wish that they were warmer, but now, in the late-June heat, the girls have lobster-red faces and each is using her own favorite curse word to swear she will never try out for flag again. Next year, thinks their captain, Talia O'Hare, I am joining the show choir instead.

And as the parade continues...

The car with Uncle David and the town manager is followed by Grannies for Groceries, who have joined the Soup's On Food Co-op in their shopping cart brigade. The third cart on the left is being pushed by Mitzie Oliver, who is wondering why it is – even in a parade – that she always chooses a cart with a back wheel that won't turn.

I am totally in love with this slice of life that marches past in *The Center of Everything*. I want to go to this parade and know these people, and in a way, I feel like I already do, thanks to that omniscient point of view that let me spend a few moments with each of them, seeing how they're all connected.

But the story always comes back to Ruby. It's her story, after all, and her moment is coming. She has to get it right so things can be the way they're "supposed to" be. Ruby is very good at doing what she's supposed to do, and if you are like that or you have a kid like that, you know exactly what I mean. But what happens when you look back on a moment – an important one – and don't know what you were supposed to have done? What if there is no "supposed to?" That idea rocks Ruby's universe – even as the time comes for her to do the thing she is supposed to do, the thing she's been waiting for while nearly the whole parade passed by.

This is a perfect mentor text for students to use when they're playing around with different points of view. After sharing some of the parade perspectives aloud, students could write their own short descriptions of an event that's experienced by many people (a parade, a football game, a wedding) in that omniscient point of view, providing numerous views of the events from all different views.

If I wanted to go all Common Core Standards on you right now, I would trot out these 4th and 5th grade reading standards that have *The Center of Everything* written all over them:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.6 Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.6 Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.

But really...you probably shouldn't even talk much about Common Core Standards while you're reading *The Center of Everything*. It's an exceptional book, and I would hate for you to get standardized testing germs all over it.

Instead, you'll want to read this one aloud because the language sings. You'll want to read it for the voice, for the humor, and for the interconnected stories that fit like a perfect puzzle. You'll want to read it for that made-of-awesome small-town New Hampshire parade. And you'll want to read it for Ruby. Mostly for Ruby. She's a girl you know, so your heart will ache for her and celebrate with her, and when you turn the last page, you just might understand where to find the center of everything, too.

I support independent bookstores. You can use this link to find one near you or order *THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING* on IndieBound: <http://www.indiebound.org/book/978054...>

Stephanie says

The Center of Everything is a short book, but oh, it is really beautiful. Set in one day - the day of the big parade, the day that the whole town comes together - it's told in a series of short vignettes, from a variety of viewpoints, that all circle around and back to eleven-year-old Ruby Pepperdine...and oh, wow, do I love Ruby.

Ruby has always been the girl who works hard to do everything right - the quiet girl, the helpful girl, the girl who never causes any trouble. But she is tortured right now with the absolute certainty that she did one crucial thing terribly wrong with the person who meant most to her...and maybe, just possibly, today might be the day that she can finally fix it.

This is a book about the aftermath of loss, but what really makes it such an achievement is that it's wonderfully wry and funny at the same time that it's also heartfelt and real. It's honest in its depiction of grief without ever being depressing. Ruby is dealing with loss, and yes, it still *hurts* - part of her problem is that she feels like she *should* be over it by now, but she isn't - but overall, this is a really uplifting novel, full of love. It's sad and sweet and funny, too, and it has a perfect ending.

Each new Linda Urban novel I read feels very different from the last, but every one of them has been wonderful. She's one of my favorite authors working in MG fiction right now.

(e-ARC read via Netgalley)

Lorna says

What a lovely book, crafted beautifully by Linda Urban. Ruby is her small town's Bunning Day Essay Girl and we follow her through her day as she prepares for her speech. Through flashbacks, we learn that not all is perfect for her, even on this day of honor. She misses her Grandma Gigi terribly and wants for anything to relive her Gigi's last day. Urban is a master at conveying children as complex emotional beings. And nobody does a more emotionally packed short sentence than Linda Urban. For those who've read it, you know what I mean: "There is no apple crisp." Wow.

Barb Middleton says

One of my favorite starts to a book is Linda Urban's, "A Crooked Kind of Perfect," with the protagonist complaining about having to play a wheeze-bag organ versus the elegant piano. Here comes another hilarious start, but with a Captain fighting to keep his boat afloat in a terrible gale by eating donuts spiked on the spokes of his ship's wheel; thus, inventing the donut hole. Urban has a whole or hole lotta fun with wordplays and slang. "The Hole Shebang" is my favorite. The 1960s "Gilligan's Island" TV show's theme song started ping-ponging around my brain during these silly parts. "Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip. That started from this tropic port, aboard this tiny ship. The mate was a mighty sailin' man, the Skipper brave and sure. Five passengers set sail that day for a three hour tour. A three hour tour."

It didn't help that the book took me three hours to read. Ping. Ping. Here comes my theme song. Or Poke.

Poke, as Ruby Pepperdine would say. Her grandma has just died and she is trying to squash her emotions, except they "poke" her in unexpected ways. When Ruby wins an essay that she has written on Captain Donut she gets to read it at the annual Bunning Day festival. Things fall apart leading up to the special day when her best friend gets angry over her sharing a secret wish with a boy in her class.

Urban plops her trademark quirky characters that are lovable, memorable and odd. Lucy is the drama queen who tells Ruby she has thrown a meteor into their lake of friendship causing a tsunami. She is the yin to Ruby's yang and their chemistry bubbles with fun. Nero is a different story. At first, Nero sounds too witty and old to me but he's funny so I don't particularly care. "Once a person kazoos in the lunchroom, she's lost her right to privacy," Nero says. "It's the fate of all celebrities." Urban develops him more in the proceeding chapters and shows he is thinker to the point he exasperates his teachers. Hence, when Nero points out characteristics in Ruby later in the story, I have bought into his character, and believe in it. Make no mistake, Captain Urban knows exactly what she is doing with this crew of characters.

The plot is solid and not too complex. The main character deals with friendships and grief with a slow buildup in the beginning. Quite a bit of the text involves interior monologue and not much action. Patient readers will be rewarded by the end as Urban brings it all together. Ruby has a "wish" and the reader doesn't know what it is. Urban uses this to bring tension in chapters, specifically six chapters in the first part of the book and it slowed the pacing too much for me even though the chapters were short. You'll have to decide for yourself. Grab your copy and drop anchor. "You're sure to get a smile..." Ping. Ping.

Reading Level 5.9
