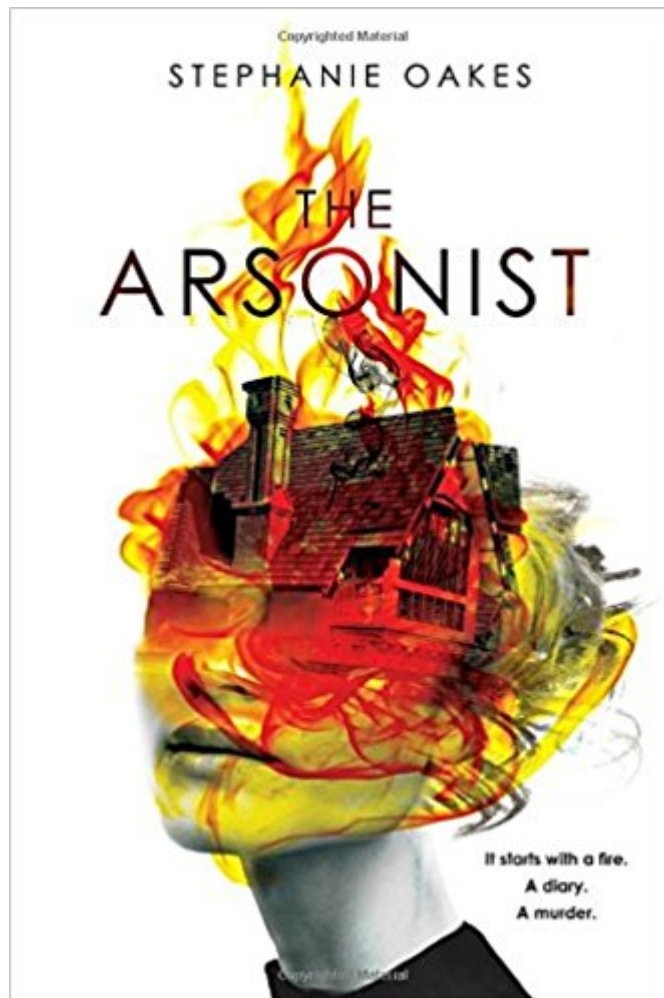


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# The Arsonist



## Synopsis

Code Name Verity meets I Am the Messenger in this riveting YA novel from Morris Award finalist Stephanie Oakes, in which three points of view are woven together in a story that's part Cold War mystery, part contemporary coming-of-age, and completely unputdownable. Molly Mavity is not a normal teenage girl. For one thing, her father is a convicted murderer, and his execution date is fast approaching. For another, Molly refuses to believe that her mother is dead, and she waits for the day when they'll be reunited . . . despite all evidence that this will never happen. Pepper Al-Yusef is not your average teenage boy. A Kuwaiti immigrant with epilepsy, serious girl problems, and the most useless seizure dog in existence, he has to write a series of essays over the summer . . . or fail out of school. And Ava Dreyman—the brave and beautiful East German resistance fighter whose murder at seventeen led to the destruction of the Berlin Wall—is unlike anyone you've met before. When Molly gets a package leading her to Pepper, they're tasked with solving a decades-old mystery: find out who killed Ava, back in 1989. Using Ava's diary for clues, Molly and Pepper realize there's more to her life and death than meets the eye. Someone is lying to them. And someone out there is guiding them along, desperate for answers. At turns heart-racing, hilarious, and heartbreaking, *The Arsonist* is an intricate tapestry of love, loss, and the mysterious connections between us all.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Layers of narrative, lies, and family legacy make for a compelling, exquisitely crafted

story."#1 New York Times bestselling author E.K. Johnston "The Arsonist scorches with intensity and fiercely good writing. An exceptional read." Jeanne Ryan, New York Times bestselling author of Nerve "This rich blend of history, intrigue, humor, and grief makes for page-turning storytelling." BCCB "The lives of all three protagonists are inexplicably linked, but the suspenseful telling of this story ties everything together for a satisfying ending...definitely a page turner." School Library Connection "The complex plot is fraught with unlikely coincidences; dangerous confrontations, lies and secrets, and leaps back and forth in time...a page-turner." School Library Journal

Stephanie Oakes lives in Spokane, Washington, and works as a library media teacher at a combined elementary and middle school. She has an MFA in poetry from Eastern Washington University. Her first book, *The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly*, was a Morris Award finalist and a Golden Kite Honor book.

The Arsonist is being billed as a YA (Young Adult) novel but I'm not sure why, other than its protagonists are all young people. It's complicated and melodramatic in the way some of the grand novels of a century and half were, but it works, really works. And when melodrama works, it sweeps the reader along on an exciting ride. This book is built on a series of surprises, one nesting inside another. I can't tell you, even hint, where the novel heads because to do so would be to destroy the surprise, and surprise is a revelation, that is a good part of what the book is about. There are three voices, speaking in rotation. The stories of the first two fall together almost immediately. The third enters later. First is Molly. Her mother threw herself off a cliff three years ago. Her father is on Death Row: he's a compulsive arsonist and people burned to death in a fire he started. Her mother's death and the awful news of her father's acts have left her frozen in the past in a state midway between anger and grief. She doesn't believe her mother is dead and she is determined to find what happened to her. Second is Pepper. Pepper Al-Yusef. His widowed father brought him to the States as an infant. His father's a nice man but a broken man, and Pepper's drifting. He's supposed to graduate from high school this spring but has just been told he'll be doing makeup work instead, mostly because he's flunked every subject he's taken. Part of the makeup work is researching and writing essays on each of the subjects he's flunked. The parts of the story that Pepper

narrates are his essays back to his teacher. In every essay, regardless of what the topic, Pepper bends it into a running narrative of the exciting summer life he's now leading working with Molly in a hunt for hidden truth. The third speaker is dead, Ava Dreyman, the "Anne Franke of East Germany, interred by the secret police (the Stasi) and murdered in an East German prison in 1989. The publication of her secret diary that same year sparked the uprising that brought down the Wall. Many strange things happen as this engrossing novel wends its way to conclusion. The ending is upbeat but not without its tones of sadness, and never pollyanaish. There may be more coincidences in this book than you expect to encounter in everyday life, but they work. This thoroughly enjoyable book blends an old style preoccupation with storytelling with modern sensibilities about what it is like nowadays to be a young adult. That means you'll never lose interest in reading this book and you'll always want to know what happens next. For the most part, you won't be able to figure that out until it happens.

I was intrigued but uncertain about *THE ARSONIST* so I trotted off to the library to get Stephanie Oakes' other book, *THE SACRED LIES OF MINNOW BLY*. *MINNOW* blew me away with its great characters, superb writing, and unique story. I plowed through that book, but not before choosing this new one. *THE ARSONIST* did not disappoint. In fact, it was even better. With *MINNOW* you saw the world from one perspective. In *THE ARSONISTS* three very different voices are present and they are all captivating. I loved Molly and Pepper. She is thoughtfully shown as someone seeking the truth and trying to retrieve her life from where her parents have seemingly destroyed it. Pepper is so funny and quirky that I had to share bits of his narrative with my husband. Pepper is snickering out loud funny at times. And Ava. What to say about Ava's story. I didn't like her much but I clung to every word about her and her life in East Berlin. The author did an amazing job of creating tension and stress and bringing to life the horrors of living under that totalitarian government. It was gripping. And this is why I now adore Oakes. There aren't many YA authors who can weave angst and humor together this well. In fact, when I finished *ARSONIST* I was in that fuzzy, real life is out of focus state that really good books leave you in. None of the characters were flat. Not even Margaret, Molly's cousin --and 3rd tier player-- who is there just to antagonize her. *THE ARSONIST* has young characters but it's Adult at heart. The depth of the characters, the intricacies of the writing and plotting.... Honestly, I had no idea how this book was going to end. \*\*Candidate for one of slots in my personal Top Ten Reads list.

This book has every positive element you want in a novel. I don't really see this as a YA novel per se, although the two main living characters are seniors in high school and Ava Drayman, a teen born in 1972 in Germany is a large driving force that moves the story along at breakneck speed. Despite having a young cast of delightful and very plausible characters that you feel grow with you or vice versa, this is a very serious book that I highly recommend for any age reader. This book is written from the perspective of three different characters with their own way of seeing things.

**Dramatis Personae:** Molly Mavity, 17. She is the daughter of a convicted murderer who is currently on death row. Her mother's whereabouts are unknown and Molly never gives up the ship in hoping for her return. Since the age of 12, she has been raised by her cousin-in-law and is still trying to solve the mystery of where her mother vanished and the reason or reasons for said disappearance. She is a student at the Keller School, a special school for disturbed girls and her cousin Margaret, a major thorn in her side with a slew of psychological problems is also a Keller student.

Ibrahim "Pepper" Al-Yusef is a boy from Kuwait. He has a service pug named Bertrand because he has epilepsy, but the curly tailed dog is not very helpful. Bertrand, as typical of pugs is very cuddly and would rather cuddle than work. Pepper faces an additional challenge of having to write several essays in order to remain in school. Fortunately his three best friends lean on him to stick with school and it is plain that these three very different boys, each with his eyes on success care about Pepper and are really good for him. Sadly, a girl named Petra, a girl who catches Pepper's interest uses him and betrays him. His astronomy based analogies are very interesting and speak to a strong intelligence base. Like Molly, he is motherless. Pepper's mother died in childbirth due to an oil explosion in Kuwait the day he was born. Pepper and his father since emigrated to the United States and he has a very curious tie to Molly. Their paths intersect under very bizarre and curious circumstances.

Ava Dreyman, 17 a fiercely independent girl from East Germany who was a freedom fighter who was killed in 1989. Her efforts and subsequent murder led to the destruction of the Berlin Wall. Her story begins in 1986, three years before the demolition of the Wall. She lives in the GDR (German Democratic Republic, the former East Germany) and her life, like those of Pepper and Molly include danger by fire. Her life also includes armed guards who patrol the Wall and impose a very strict curfew on minors after a certain hour. Somebody sends Molly a mysterious package. The contents of that package brings her in contact with Pepper and directs her toward Ava's murder. Who sent the package? What were the contents? And did whoever send it know Ava personally and/or have a hand in her death? Will the two unwitting sleuths unravel this set of mysteries? Did whoever send the package know that fire is the common link that brought these three very different kids together? Will they, too die at age 17 like Ava? And are Molly and

Pepper in danger? This is an excellent fast paced read that will keep readers' interest from start to finish. Despite the very serious themes, the author has managed to write with a light, deft touch and insert levity in places. This book is also about the continuum of time and space - could Ava have in any way been involved with anybody who could currently endanger Molly and Pepper? This is a very riveting book that is impossible to put aside once having started. I cannot recommend it enough. It gives a good history of Germany before the Berlin Wall became history in November of 1989 and it also gives a more than a cursory glimpse into the Gulf War of the early 1990s. Each one of the characters from the main characters to those less prominent give the story meaning and voice. I cannot recommend this book highly enough.

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