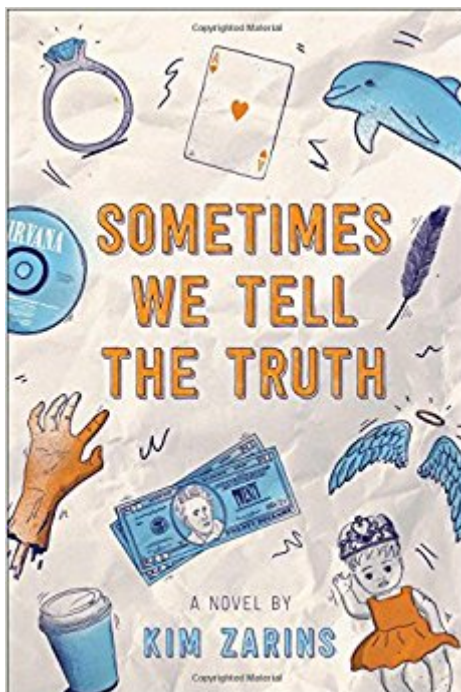


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Sometimes We Tell The Truth



Synopsis

In this contemporary retelling of *The Canterbury Tales*, a group of teens on a bus ride to Washington, DC, each tell a story—some fantastical, some realistic, some downright scandalous—in pursuit of the ultimate prize: a perfect score. Jeff boards the bus for the Civics class trip to Washington, DC, with a few things on his mind: -Six hours trapped with his classmates sounds like a disaster waiting to happen. -He somehow ended up sitting next to his ex-best friend, who he hasn't spoken to in years. -He still feels guilty for the major part he played in pranking his teacher, and the trip's chaperone, Mr. Bailey. -And his best friend Cannon, never one to be trusted and banned from the trip, has something big planned for DC. But Mr. Bailey has an idea to keep everyone in line: each person on the bus is going to have the chance to tell a story. It can be fact or fiction, realistic or fantastical, dark or funny or sad. It doesn't matter. Each person gets a story, and whoever tells the best one will get an automatic A in the class. But in the middle of all the storytelling, with secrets and confessions coming out, Jeff only has one thing on his mind—can he live up to the super successful story published in the school newspaper weeks ago that convinced everyone that he was someone smart, someone special, and someone with something to say. In her debut novel, Kim Zarins breathes new life into Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in a fresh and contemporary retelling that explores the dark realities of high school, and the subtle moments that bring us all together.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Gr 8 Up "This updated version of *The Canterbury Tales* is a compelling LGBTQ coming-of-age

story. When things get rowdy on a class trip to Washington, DC, English teacher and chaperone Mr. Bailey tells the students they each have a chance at an A "all they have to do is tell a story. Jeff Chaucer, a student on the bus, writes down the tales as they are told and compiles them. Though the frame of the narrative is the same as the classic, between the pieces there are interludes focusing on Jeff, and this is where Zarins's novel really shines. Jeff is a self-conscious writer who just wants to get to DC and see Georgetown, where he is matriculating in the fall. Through hearing his classmates' tales, the protagonist begins to question who he is, what he believes, and whether he is as alone as he thinks. Zarins is adept at giving the students their own voices, making the entries genuinely feel like the product of many different narrators. Each individual selection matches up with a story in *The Canterbury Tales*, sometimes down to the names of the characters and every plot point. This could frustrate readers of the original, but the more tongue-in-cheek references should keep these teens grinning. For new readers, it should serve as an enticing entry point into the original. VERDICT An updated version of Chaucer's classic that will appeal to fans of Rainbow Rowell and David Levithan. —Alexandra Patterson, Mercersburg Academy, PA

In *Sometimes We Tell the Truth* (S. & S., Sept. 2016; Gr 10 Up), an update of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, 21 field trip "bound high school seniors load onto a yellow bus for the six-hour journey from Canterbury, CT, to Washington, DC. In order to keep the calm en route, Mr. Bailey challenges his charges to a storytelling competition "fantasy, fiction, based-in-truth, or whatever" and whoever tells the best story earns a free A in civics. Would-be author Jeff, constrained by easily triggered asthma as well as social insecurities, serves as narrator, while obsessing about his own turn (he recently published a story in the school literary journal that earned him accolades "even from the popular kids" and hasn't been able to write a word since) and his proximity to Pard (once best friends, the two have been estranged for years, and Pard came out of the closet sophomore year, and suddenly Jeff just can't stop thinking about him in unexpected ways). Like the original characters, Kim Zarins's cast represent a cross-section of society and are drawn with rather broad strokes, and their stories and interactions cleverly echo, reinterpret, and allude to the source material (an appended list pairs contemporary individuals with their 14th-century predecessors). These tales reference other works of literature (classics and current young adult fare) and often unwind with bawdy content, raucous language, and scandalous sex scenes. Whether zombie war epic, love story between an angel and a devil, or "Harry Potter" fan fiction, the tales "entertain and elucidate, bestowing upon Jeff and his classmates the ability to see into, empathize with, and possibly understand the lives of others as

well as their own. --Joy Fleishhacker (School Library Journal 9/19/16)

I adore *Sometimes We Tell the Truth*. I think it's well-written and beautifully thought out. Not only is it a fun interpretation of the classic English frame narrative, but it also stands out as a solid story, even independent of Chaucer's legacy. In other words, I appreciate this book as a Chaucer interpretation, but I also appreciate it as an approachable, forward-thinking novel. It doesn't force the *Canterbury Tales* on any of its readers -- I have read this book through a medievalist's lens, but over and over I found myself getting lost in the YA mindset. I read this book at the same time that I took a class focused on Chaucer (first the *Legend of Good Women*, then *CT*) with Dr. Cynthia Camp at the University of Georgia, and it really helped me connect with the tales on a more personal level -- not only as a medievalist, but as a young adult. For reference, I turned twenty years old around the time that I finished this book, so I really did identify with their confusion and self doubt. I saw parts of myself in almost all of the characters, and Zarins did a great job creating realistic characters that are also recognizable within the typical YA high school trope characters (e.g. the jock, the cheerleader, the pothead). There will be spoilers from here on! Making the *Knight's Tale* out of zombies? Genius. Making the *Franklin's Tale* into Harry Potter fanfiction? Fantastic. Making the *Pardoner* clearly intersex with no room for misinterpretation? Absolutely brilliant. Making *Pard* (the *Pardoner*) intersex was a brilliant decision for a couple of different reasons. As a student working with the *Canterbury Tales*, Zarins' physical description of *Pard* is identical to the *Pardoner*: the same stringy hair, the same high voice, the same smooth face. Zarins takes the chance to overtly say that *Pard* is intersex (which, based on the *CT* Prologue, seems likely. While these could be "normal" traits, Chaucer-poet seems to emphasize them as though he were abnormally effeminate -- or rather, less traditionally masculine) where Chaucer does not. In addition, the mere existence of intersex individuals is often erased in literature, so introducing an important and likeable character with legitimate struggles in a YA novel is one step in a very long process to normalize the existence of intersex individuals. Furthermore, the fact that *Pard* presents as a gay man and is mostly accepted by his peers (but is still afraid to come out as intersex) gives legitimacy to the idea that the LGBTQIA+ community is being accepted in stages. I talk so much about *Pard* because he was one of the most interesting characters, not only in *SWTtT*, but also in the original *CT*. I really do appreciate what Zarins does with him here. I think one of the only things I would like to see is the tale of *Briony*, the *Prioress*, more accurate to Chaucer's story. That being said, I can definitely understand the difficulties involved with modernizing such an anti-Semitic story.

I finished this AMAZING book last night. A book that I stayed up later than I should have to finish. A book that I want to buy dozens of copies of so I can hand them out to total strangers. A book that I wanted to start re-reading the second I finished the last word. What is this book, you ask? Well, last weekend on Twitter, I saw a retweet about Chaucer YA. Just let that sink in for a minute. Chaucer. YA. CHAUCER. YA. Kim Zarins wrote a YA adaptation of The Canterbury Tales in which high school students share stories while stuck on a school bus from CT to DC. So, obviously, I needed to own that. I loved it pretty wholeheartedly from the second I noticed the character named Alison, and my appreciation for the work Zarins did grew immeasurably with every character analogue and retold tale (most of which track pretty exactly to Chaucer's "original" versions). I was especially taken with Zarins's approach to updating the tales themselves. She noted that Chaucer often engaged in "for lack of a better term" 14th century "ælfen fiction." He recycled stories by Aesop, Ovid, Herodotus, Boccaccio, etc. So, she updated those plots by turning them into 21st century fan fiction, basing them on Charlotte's Web, the Chronicles of Narnia, Twilight, Harry Potter, Discworld, and more. It's an inspired choice and makes for some fun commentary by the other students on the bus as they recognize, cheer, jeer, and elaborate on their classmates' tales. I need to get into some spoilers below to explain the connection to Linda's article, but you can totally stop now with full assurance that this book has my highest possible recommendation. (I will include the caveat that the book -- following Chaucer's version -- has some raunchy moments and that some of the stories involve elements of dubious consent, though the actual students on the bus don't engage in anything more than kissing and intense flirting.) [HERE THERE BE SPOILERS] Last night, 2/3 into the book, my jaw dropped and I involuntarily said, "OH, WOW!" out loud even though I knew my husband was already sleeping. Zarins, who has a Ph.D. in Medieval Lit, looked at the original text and the scholarship about the Pardoner, and chose to make that character intersex (presenting in the book as male and gay). The relationship between Jeff and Pard occupies much of the interstitial space of the novel, as Jeff confronts his feelings for Pard and learns Pard's secret. Pard's story (not his TALE, but his character's arc) is beautifully told. I was initially nervous about the way Jeff narrates his longterm internal conflict over his feelings for Pard, but I should have trusted Zarins, who shows Jeff's growth in a way that feels real. And THAT's why I suspect that this book will start to appear on banned book lists "because of its unflinching portrayal of young people finding their identities, even though the path to those identities is painful, even though the path to those identities may involve saying or doing hurtful things, even though the path to those

identities may not seem "normal" to book banners. Seriously, read this book. Donate copies to libraries. Hand it out to strangers.

So... I love YA fiction. I love John Green, but sometimes his characters seem a bit fake to me. I've often felt this was the case when writers of YA novels try to make their characters intelligent or book smart. They succeed, but then their characters lack verisimilitude. For me, the big success of Kim Zarins' novel is that each one of her characters is REAL. Like, if I was on a field trip leading a bunch of high schoolers to, I don't know, Great America, this is what they would be like. There's a real danger in having every character tell a story because, from the author's perspective, the story has to be told well enough to draw the reader in and yet still be true to the teller's character. How she accomplished this is beyond me. The characters struggle and stumble through their tales; some don't even finish. And yet, each tale grips you and still feels true to the character telling it. Such an impressive feat. The other main big success for this novel is its ability to tackle large social and personal issues without being pedantic or sentimental. Throughout the novel, the characters discuss rape, sexual orientation, homoeroticism, mental health, and other issues with the narrative still feeling like it's moving forward. This is due mostly to the main character, Jeff, who acts as the narrator for the story, and is well chosen as the main character. There's stuff I could say about its parallels to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which it's a retelling of, but in my opinion that's a secondary thought. The main thought is this is a damn good book.

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