

Children's Literature Reviews

Item 39 of 130

Spelldown

Karon Luddy.

Cataloging in Publication

[Publisher description](#)

[Sample text](#)

New York : Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2007.

p. cm.

Annotations:

In 1969, the town of Red Clover, South Carolina, led by an enthusiastic new Latin teacher, supports thirteen-year-old Karlene as she wins her school spelling bee and strives to qualify for the National Bee, despite family problems and a growing desire for romance.

Best Books:

[Children's Catalog, Nineteenth Edition, Supplement, 2007](#) ; H.W. Wilson; United States

[Kirkus Book Review Stars, December 1, 2006](#) ; United States

[Middle and Junior High School Library Catalog, Supplement to Ninth Edition, 2007](#) ; H.W. Wilson Company; United States

[Publishers Weekly Book Review Stars, January 8, 2007](#) ; Cahners; United States

Horn Book Guide:

Fall 2007 Intermediate Fiction Rating 4, Recommended, with minor flaws.

Reading Measurement Programs:

Accelerated Reader

Interest Level Middle Grade

Book Level 5.5

Accelerated Reader Points 8

Lexile, MetaMetrics, Inc.

Lexile Measure 880

Reading Counts-Scholastic

Interest Level 6-8

Reading Level 4.6

Title Point Value 14

Lexile Measure 880

Reviews:

Kay Weisman (Booklist, Jan. 1, 2007 (Vol. 103, No. 9))

Thirteen-year-old Karlene Bridges lives for spelling bees. She spends hours learning new words from her family's two-volume dictionary, but she tends to clutch in the final round. When her Latin teacher, Mrs. Harrison, agrees to coach her for these events, Karlene begins winning. Despite problems at home (particularly her father's

alcoholism) that threaten to derail her success, her confidence grows. This first novel, set in a small South Carolina town during the late 1960s, brims with music and pop-culture references. Character development is strong, although Karlene's close relationship with the Harrisons (they informally adopt her, providing her with clothing, support, and a room at their house) make strike readers as odd, given today's tendency to mandate professional distance between student and teacher. Karlene has typical middle-school preoccupations (such as her first kiss), and her upbeat determination to succeed and her humorous observations about the world around her will make this a popular choice. Category: Books for Older Readers--Fiction. 2007, Simon & Schuster, \$15.99.

Gwynne Spencer (Children's Literature)

Karlene Bridges is the best speller in her family. She is also the best speller in all of South Carolina. In between those two contexts, she shares with readers--in an enchanting first person narrative--her friendships with an extraordinary teacher/mentor (Mrs. Harrison), and Karlene's best friend/boyfriend/heartthrob (Billy Ray), as well as her problems with her father and his drinking. Each chapter begins with a tough spelling word that sets the tone, and every chapter delivers to the reader an opportunity to meet a bright, dedicated, competent eighth-grader who is not into drugs or body piercing or running away from home, just spelling competitively and winning. Every chapter is a delightful encounter that celebrates academic excellence without veering into geekdom. It is funny, poignant, inspiring and would be a terrific read aloud for grades 6-9, especially in those weeks before a spelling bee. I do not want to give away the ending, but you just know if Karlene does not win the National Spelling Bee, you are going to want to fling yourself under a passing truck. Do not do anything brash. Read this book, and then spell yourself s-a-t-i-s-f-i-e-d. (Note: one of the nice details of the spell-down scene is Karlene's outfit which includes her red cowboy boots, which show up on the cover.) 2007, Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, \$15.99. Ages 10 to 14.

Kirkus (Kirkus Reviews, December 1, 2006 (Vol. 74, No. 23))

An ambitious teen with a voluminous vocabulary beats the odds and spells her way to success. Thirteen-year-old Karlene Bridges lives in Red Clover, S.C. in 1968, where her "heart aches for some . . . freedom." Karlene would rather "be tumbling down Niagara Falls in a big, stinking barrel than stuck in Red Clover" for the rest of her life. She has big plans to win the Shirley County Spelling Bee, and her free-spirited eighth-grade Latin teacher, Mrs. Harrison, offers to coach her. Reinforced by Mrs. Harrison and her budding sweetheart, Billy Ray, Karlene sweeps the county and state spelling championships, earning a chance to compete in the National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C. But when her alcoholic father ends up in rehab, Karlene wonders if she has what it takes to be a real champion. Karlene's engaging personal journey from word whiz-kid to winning young woman is artfully glossed with the emerging feminism of the late 1960s. This first-rate spell-down will have readers spellbound. 2007, Simon & Schuster, 224p, \$15.99. Category: Fiction. Ages 10 to 14. Starred Review. © 2006 Kirkus Reviews/VNU eMedia, Inc. All rights reserved.

Jane Mouttet (Library Media Connection, August/September 2007)

Luddy uses a common school occurrence, spelling bees, as the basis for this middle grade novel. The chapters are titled with spelling words and their definitions. 13-year-old Karlene is a good speller, but she does not do well in front of people. With Mrs. Harrison's help as coach, Karlene makes it all the way to the National Spelling Bee. Karlene's family is poor and her father an alcoholic, yet Karlene rises above her circumstances to achieve success. Potential purchasers should be aware of possibly offensive language, references to sex, and religious references. Luddy's plot idea is a good one, but is not presented in a way appropriate for all readers. Additional Selection. 2007, Simon & Schuster, 224pp., \$15.99 hc. Ages 12 to 15.

Karen Coats (The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, June 2007 (Vol. 60, No. 10))

Plucky thirteen-year-old Karlene is a spelling prodigy, and she's determined to become the National Spelling Champion of 1969. What might hold her back, though, is her father's spiraling descent into alcoholism, which results in her mother having to put in extra hours at the mill and leaving Karlene to look after her twin brothers. Fortunately, a new teacher arrives who takes Karlene's breath away with her elegance, her wit, and her commitment to Karlene's success. At first, Karlene's South Carolina dialect seems overly cutesy, as peppered with mild profanity as it is with advanced vocabulary words and snippets of lyrics from Motown, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, but once Luddy settles into her storytelling, Karlene's colorful narration offsets a genuinely tragic picture of her father's breakdown and leavens the triumph of her progress through local, state, and finally national spelling bees. Karlene's support system represents the changing social picture of the late '60s—her father's staunchest AA ally is a black cab driver named Kelly, and her teacher, the wife of the mill manager, is a liberated woman with a master's degree and two children as well as a boundary-breaking commitment to Karlene (she calls

her at home, has her spend the night when she babysits, travels with her to Washington, etc., all to ensure that her home life doesn't interfere with her dreams). Readers who like family drama, success stories, and colorful protagonists will all find something to latch on to here. Review Code: R -- Recommended. (c) Copyright 2006, The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. 2007, Simon, 211p., \$15.99. Grades 5-8.

Horn Book (The Horn Book Guide, Fall 2007)

Super speller thirteen-year-old Karlene Bridges lives in the mill community of Shirley County, South Carolina. When a friendly new teacher/spelling coach practically adopts Karlene, she begins to see that her future can be better than her present. Her voice is strong and distinctive, and the 1960s setting is well realized, though Karlene's frequent allusions to popular songs grow tiresome. Category: Intermediate Fiction. 2007, Simon, 211pp, 15.99. *Ages 9 to 12*. Rating: 4: Recommended, with minor flaws.

Subjects:

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