Book Buddy, January 2023

“Survivors, All”

 A new year offers the opportunity to think on serious subjects and challenge ourselves to improve in all sorts of ways. The characters in Clover’s January books, “Survivors, All” display admirable qualities worthy of emulating. They persevere and are victorious in the end despite great odds.

 The characters include a pachyderm that suffers mightily, a girl determined to preserve the past, and six plucky sisters bearing the brunt of mistreatment. Young readers will be transfixed by the courage that shines bright in each of these unputdownable picks.

 One can only imagine the hurt and heartbreak endured by an elephant dubbed “The World’s Loneliest Elephant” in a picture book “Based on the True Story of Kaavan and His Rescue,” by Ralph Fletcher.

 Though Kaavan was born in a Sri Lanka orphanage, he soon found himself sent to Pakistan, at the request of the president’s daughter who wished to have a pet. Sadly, at age 1, the bull elephant ended up in a badly managed zoo for the next 35 years. Kaavan had nowhere to roam or veterinarians to provide needed care. But Kaavan did have a friend, Saheli, a female elephant he had a “special bond” with for 22 years.

 When Saheli passed away it was like Kaavan’s soul was lost—grief took hold and he developed an aggressive nature. Dr. Amir Khalil, an Egyptian veterinarian, heard about his plight and approached the government of Pakistan asking that the elephant be moved “to a better place.” The caring doctor’s attention spearheaded a campaign that meant another move for Kaavan, to a home in Cambodia that provided a boost the elephant needed to finally prosper.

 Emotion is on display in this moving book illustrated by Naoko Stoop, pictures painted on wood, then enhanced digitally. Pay particular attention for a tiny red bird flitting about from page to page, a symbol of freedom and hope for Kaavan.

 People were close to one another and life was good in Eishyshok, Poland before the Germans invaded in World War II. After that the shtetl was decimated, its residents killed, only a few surviving. The story of Eishyshok, and how one individual helped resurrect memories of those who lived there, is told in “The Tower of Life: How Yaffa Eliach Rebuilt Her Town in Stories and Photographs,” by Chana Stiefel.

 Yaffa was a happy girl—her family warm and loving. She especially liked visiting with her Grandmother Alte who took photos of townspeople with a camera her husband brought back from America. But all of that changed with Hitler’s drive to rid countries of Jewish people. In two days, 3,500 individuals from Eishyshok lost their lives.

 Yaffa’s family escaped, ran and hid in one place or another until the war ended. When it did, they still had their memories captured in photographs they’d saved. Later, when the family immigrated to America, the photos eventually gave birth to an idea Yaffa had when she was approached by President Jimmy Carter to help design an exhibit for the new Holocaust Museum being built in Washington, D.C. Yaffa knew exactly what to do, and her contribution, and those of other Jews, can be viewed at the Holocaust Museum at the “Tower of Faces.”

 Illustrations by Susan Gal further enhance the drama of this powerful picture book.

 “Sisters of the Lost Marsh” might be written for children, but this gothic novel will keep adults fully engaged too. The immersive read is set on the lowland marshes of southern England, on land the sea has tried to claim as its own.

 Against this eerie, fog-laced background, Author Lucy Strange weaves the mysterious tale of six sisters, children whose loving mother died in childbirth, leaving her daughters with Dadder, a black-hearted father, who drinks too much, doesn’t care a whit about them and believes the family is cursed. The girls only kindness comes from their wise Grammy who lives with them and does her best to offset their father’s cruelty.

 Willa, the third oldest sister, narrates the story which opens with a serious conflict that permeates the book. Dadder is making a deal to get a handsome horse from Silas Kirby—a man almost as cruel as Dadder. A deal is struck, a promise is made. If Dadder will agree to his oldest daughter Grace marrying Silas, the admirable horse will be his.

 Naturally this isn’t acceptable to Grace, to Grammy or the other sisters. Willa is especially infuriated and voices her disapproval openly to Dadder, which eventually costs her dearly. When the Full Moon Fayre visits the area, Grace and Freya, the second oldest sister, convince Dadder to allow them to go the festivities. Excited, the girls set off, with Willa secretly joining them. Later only one comes home—Grace has disappeared in the night.

 So begins Willa’s courageous quest to find her sister, a frightening venture with ghostly repercussions certain to provide chills in a book that begs to be read in one sitting.