

Butterflies: BANKS STREET Best YA Books for 2012

‘Curl up on the lounge, ignore the telephone and enjoy *Butterflies*.’

Cosmopolitan Magazine (COSMO)

READ IT –Butterflies

Susanne Gervay

Katherine was severely burnt at the age of three, but she refuses to be a victim. At 18, she’s going through the same stuff most women her age do – boy troubles; exams; struggling with ambition, and deciding what to wear to parties. But there’s something special about the way Katherine handles her problems, something that inspires, yet at the same time evokes a flood of tears. Curl up on the lounge, ignore the telephone and enjoy.

Cosmopolitan Magazine

www.cosmopolitan.com.au

Katherine is 18 years old and facing fears that every teenager faces; boys, school and a job. But Katherine is facing something else as well, something bigger; she is facing surgery for burns. For years Katherine has hidden her scars from the world and now she thinks it's time to change her appearance for the good.

I thought *Butterflies* was a great book which showed inspiration and will power to never give in when there is something you are passionate about. It tells of relationship problems and family life at home for a single mother and her two daughters. Life is not always what it seems and that judging people by their appearance is never a nice thing to do.

This book has a lot of heart and soul and it was great how Katherine's friends were supportive of her decision to go ahead with the surgery. Having support from people you care about like friends and family is something to be truly happy about.

One of the best parts in the book is an information reference by Hugh Martin. I agree totally with what he said about people who are severely burnt, have treatment and then return to the community. They are 'Survivors' and that the word "survivor" is the only word that comes close to describing them.

Susanne Gervay is a fantastic author with a lot of talent; I look forward to reading other books by her.

Katherine, aged 14, Coolamon, New South Wales

Compelling?

Moving?

Inspirational?

You're not even close.

You're not even close to the power that this book holds. Through the eyes of Katherine, a 17 year old girl who was severely burnt at the age of three, the reader goes on a journey. A journey of insight into what life is like dealing with both emotional and physical scars, the final year of school, having your first boyfriend and having your father suddenly come back into your life. Katherine's story is one that reels you in, and won't let you go, until the very last word...

Susanne Gervay has crafted this book beautifully, and its gift of strength and hope will stay with the reader, long after the book is put down.

Natasa, Year 10, Canberra, ACT

<http://goldcreek.act.edu.au/yara/>

BooksYALove

If the scars are only on the outside, why can't people see past them to what's really inside? Katherine's big sister thinks she should have been able to keep her from tumbling into the firepit as a toddler, even though Rachel was only in elementary school herself. Her mother couldn't recognize her baby in that hospital burn ward and her father couldn't cope with staying in the city for her medical care. Mama cleaned houses so that she could be with Katherine through every new skin graft and therapy session, instead of taking the girls back to her parents' home in Italy.

Yet Katherine is more a normal teen girl than she is a plastic surgeon's project, even if some people label her disabled when they see her disfiguring scars. Filled with hope amid all the the surgery and worries, *Butterflies* reflects what teen burn survivors told the Australian author over and over - "I'm still me."

Book info: *Butterflies* / Susanne Gervay. Kane Miller, 2011. [author's website]
[publisher site] [book trailer]

My Recommendation: Katherine is not the burn scars that cover her face and body. Her swim team victories prove that, her academic performance does, too. Is hoping that one more surgery will make her look more like everyone else such a bad wish? Nearly 18, she doesn't want to be defined by the accident that almost took her life as a toddler. Dad left her and mom and big sister Rachel soon after her fall into the garden firepit. Mama sat beside her after countless surgeries and skin grafts, giving up her career so that Katherine had every chance. And she has her mother's gentle stubbornness to thank for finding a school where she's just another teen, a little nervous about her first dance, wondering if any boy will ask her. When her swim coach suggests that she try out for the Australian Paralympic team instead of National Team, Katherine realizes that she's not willing for someone else to set limits on her and begins training to become a surf rescuer. William from school starts dropping by the café where she works – life is getting better, isn't it? Her

grandparents visit Sydney from Italy, bringing sunshine and love. Even Rachel is beginning to hang out with her college friends instead of hovering over Katherine. But she's determined that it's time to ask the Professor to rebuild her missing ear. The gifted surgeon has assured them that someday her skin will be smooth, but surgery has no guarantees – is Katherine ready to risk a failed skin graft on her face? The author's time spent with burn survivors enlivens every page of this story of triumph and hope, brimming with life and thankfulness for the skilled hands of doctors and therapists who help so many. (One of 5,000 books recommended on www.abookandahug.com) Review copy courtesy of the publisher.
<http://booksyalove.blogspot.com>

SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL

"High school is hard enough for teens who look normal, but for Katherine, who fell into a fire when she was three years old and endured 37 surgeries to repair the damage, it's even worse. She is getting ready to graduate and seeking independence, but she is self-conscious about her appearance. She is sensitive to the fact that Mum, who tells her she is beautiful, tries to give her confidence and works hard to make a living for her and her sister as their father left shortly after the accident. Katherine holds back tears when a classmate makes a rude remark, and a boy whom she dates a couple of times withdraws. Even though she is needy at times, her best friend is always supportive. Katherine is a swimmer, but when the coach recommends that she compete in the Paralympic Games, she realizes that others see her as handicapped instead of scarred, and she pushes for more surgery. Whenever readers think that Katherine is moving forward and accepting herself, she has a setback; she refers to herself the Beast. Readers will wait for the Beast to retreat for good and cheer when it finally does. This hopeful, heartfelt novel will give teens an understanding of what it means to have a reason to be self-conscious. Librarians won't be able to keep it on the shelf."

- School Library Journal (Starred Review)

SWON LIBRARIES

ROYAL Review – Butterflies by Susanne Gervay

Reviewed by Kim Thompson, M. Ed, MLIS

Kenton County Public Library

Publisher: Kane/Miller Book Publishers (2011)

ISBN: 9781610670432

Grades: 7, 8, 9, 10, 11

Use: Recreation

Reference Aids: Appendix

Genres: Coming of Age, Family, Realistic

Literary Merit: Very Good

Characterization: Very Good

Recommendation: Recommended

Level: High School

Summary:

Severely burned as a child and left with disfiguring scars, seventeen year old

Katherine refuses to accept limitations as she tries to lead a normal life.

Unfortunately, her overprotective mother still sees her as needing protection, thus

adding fuel to the conflict that naturally occurs between teen and parent. Katherine learns to set her own limitations and her mother must learn to let her go and allow her daughter to define herself as less the victim and more the victor.

Evaluation:

Heart wrenching and beautiful are the two words that immediately came to mind as I read "Butterflies." The true terror and depth of Katherine's burns and recovery are deftly shown through the movement of the text between flashbacks and the present. Gervay paints a picture of Katherine as she grows and changes allowing the reader to believe in her as a real person. Unlike other teen angst books, Katherine does not dwell in her angst, but moves beyond it and chooses to leave the misery and find joy in her daily life. Gervay has done an excellent job of examining a topic not often seen in books for young adults- burn survivors who are not victims, but victors. Gervay allows Katherine to win at the end- not because she suddenly becomes amazingly beautiful, but because she always was beautiful and knew that within herself. Kudos to Gervay for painting the reader a picture of a self-reliant teen girl who does not depend on a boy to make herself feel valuable. Highly recommended for libraries- school, public and personal- who want to add to their girl power collections.

Comments: webmanager@swonlibraries.org

This book is the most beautiful book in the world. It shares the life of Catherine who is 18 and was severely burnt at the age of 3 with over 50% of her body burnt she struggles through with exams, her boyfriend, school, surgery, and her Dad coming back.

I would recommend this to everyone (probably 12+)

Sarah-Jane, 13 Student reviewer

Auckland City Libraries

Katherine is just like any other eighteen year old - she has dreams and she has insecurities. Still, she is keenly aware that she doesn't *look* like other eighteen year olds. An accident at the age of three has left her with severe burn scars.

At times Katherine believes that no one else can possibly understand her problems, but as she deals with them and grows, she learns to communicate - with those around her and with herself. She faces her troubles with dignity and with humour, refusing to give in to self pity.

Butterflies is a superb young adult novel. Author Susanne Gervay has a wonderful talent for creating stories which explore serious issues with a perfect blend of humour and empathy, of detail and entertainment. Her books don't hold back from the truth, but are positive and uplifting.

Butterflies is an inspirational novel by an inspirational author.

Aussie Reviews - <http://www.aussiereviews.com/article1180.html>

It's hard enough being a 'normal' teenage girl. Seventeen-year-old Katherine has the added problem of being badly scarred from burns she suffered as a small child. She tries to cover the side of her face and neck with a long hairstyle, and endures endless rounds of surgery in the hope of one day being smooth and beautiful. Amidst the pain and shame she navigates the normal rites of youth - boys, schoolwork, friendship and conflict with parents.

Susanne Gervay depicts her character's insecurities and fears with warmth and sensitivity, allowing the reader to sense the real strength and vulnerability of the burns victim. Flashbacks, identified by italics, give us glimpses into the long journey Katherine and her close-knit working-class family have made.

A book that will inspire courage and empathy.

<http://bellasbooks.homestead.com/indexaugsep02.html>

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Compelling?
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REACT ACT Department of Education

In this challenging but inspiring book we meet Katherine, a 17 year-old who suffered horrific burns at the age of three. The whole story resonates with her courage and determination, and the warmth and love she receives from her mother, sister and friends. 'Butterflies' is a great reminder that all people are individuals, and deserve the same attention and opportunities. Although the central character is nearly 18, the book is suitable for those aged 14 and over and for adults too.

Melbourne's Child

Traumatic experiences, such as those of a burn survivor, can be difficult for others to understand. That's where novels such as *Butterflies* are so valuable. Susanne Gervay's novel is a particularly compelling story of a young girl, her loves, friendships, and family relationships We experience that unforgettable 'coming of age' time with

Katherine but equally we see through her eyes as a three-year-old and the defining moment in her life – that experience of burning.

The story is cleverly told through flashbacks and current day scenes with natural dialogue and episodes from school and home. These ensure young readers' avid attention. Through these we can understand Katherine's gritty courage and stoic determination forged through many painful hospital surgeries. These same qualities drive Katherine to excel in school and in sport and we cheer with her as she succeeds. The author's smooth storytelling style adds to that feeling that we are part of this young woman's life.

Katherine's burn experiences are sufficiently detailed to enable readers to fulfil their curiosity and fears about what it means to be a burn survivor. No longer are we outside this traumatic experience. We can now empathize. Characters that we come to care about very much doubly enrich the whole experience.

Professor Belle Alderman, University of Canberra

This story speaks of great pain, trauma and broken relationships and how love and courage triumph over all. Katherine, at 18, is in her final year of high school. At 3 years old she was severely burnt. Only the fierce and loyal love of her mother and her sister, Rachel, and Katherine's own refusal to live her life as a victim, help her face the future with the hope and courage that she does. The issues of adolescent relationships, dreams and aspirations, anxieties and fears are dealt with well. There are flashbacks to the past traumatic events, which are very vivid and add great depth.

Susanne Gervay has written with sensitivity and wonderful humour. The relationship between Katherine and her mother and sister is particularly warm and real. A compelling story. Recommended for older readers.

Reading Time CBCA Review journal Australia

Butterflies tells the story of Katherine, a seventeen-year-old Italian-Australian girl who is still disfigured after falling into a fire pit when she was three years old.

Butterflies is told through a combination of Katherine's tumultuous and sometimes disconnected thoughts, recollections of events in the past – how she was burnt, time in hospitals – and Katherine's present life. I thought this was a really beautiful novel; written prettily but simply, and I found Katherine to be a layered and interesting character – not just a burns victim, but also a teenage girl, an Italian-Australian, who fiercely refuses to be called 'disabled'. The other characters were kind to her but they still fought – her mother, older sister Rachel, friend Jessie – and Katherine also struggled within herself, making for an often sad, but ultimately heart-warming, novel.

There were only a couple of things that threw me off – firstly, Katherine was really quite stubborn. It took me a while to warm to her, but her struggles with her burns and operations, and poor self-image made her occasional sharpness understandable, and by the time the novel ended, I was really happy for the way things worked out for her. Secondly, I really felt it should have been in first person – the way the novel jumps between her inner dialogue and

third person descriptions of her day to day life distracted me, and I wish the novel had have stayed in Katherine's head the whole way through.

Apart from those two, minor things, this is a really lovely novel, written almost lyrically, and Katherine is a relatable character – stubbornness and all – who you really feel for, the further you get into the novel. Even though the majority of readers of this book wouldn't have burns covering their body, the things that Katherine experiences – pressures from her mother, friends, exams – are all very ordinary, and stuff that teenage readers will understand, especially Katherine's struggles with self-esteem and self-image (that's something, I think, that affects everyone).

Overall, *Butterflies* offers a fascinating insight into life as a burns victim, as well as that of a teenager, and is told wonderfully. I think this would really appeal to teenage girls.

Review by Stef Bowe YA author and reviewer

Young and curious, baby Katherine can't help but peer over the edge of the fire pit. The orange and red flames attract her eyes. Such mysterious wonder.

What would happen if she touched it? With no one in sight, Katherine extends her arm just inches too far. This is a tragic mistake. Rachel, her sister, screams for help. Their father, however, is convinced that she pushed her baby sister into the fire. She is accused of pushing the person she loves so greatly into the pit. She's accused by her own father. Did Katherine really just reach out too far? Or is her only sister responsible for the scars that will stay with her forever?

“The petrol burnt fiercely. Acid flames covered Katherine's brown hair and her head, burning her hair, her face, her body. Acid flames covered her arms and her little body's chubby folds and soft baby skin.”

The agony that Katherine experiences throughout her lifetime is carefully depicted throughout these pages. Set in Australia, you do feel as if you are there. From the wildlife to the slightly different vocabulary, we know we aren't in the United States. The main character is a swimmer, a big sport in Australia. She is a swimmer whose own coach wants her off the team because she's so different looking. While Katherine is always outside and in nature, I'm not sure why the author picked the title “*Butterflies*.” Maybe it's because of the symbolic aspect of butterflies. They are transformed so dramatically. Whether it is the painful fire that practically consumes Katherine or the rough behavior from upperclassmen in her school that make her feel even more self-conscious, either way, Katherine comes across as an everyday girl. Yet, she has elements of heroism in her blood, and one truly loyal friend who helps her cope. It is fascinating to find regular teen problems combined with a terrible disaster. The problems Katherine faces create an amazing page turner.



This book is a phenomenal work of art. It portrays the most subtle, yet deep emotions that make you crave more. The main character is continually trying to figure out how she really feels. Her life is out of balance, and she's always trying to get some equilibrium. Will the bully stop taunting her? Will the others stop laughing at her?

Susanne Gervay uses unusual techniques to tell this story. The author introduces her main character in the present moment, during an awkward incident at school. But then, there are flashbacks. Through these flashbacks, you come to understand Katherine. **The author introduces her main character's unimaginable horrific scarring, but at the same time, successfully makes you feel as if you were the one living with burns. Wishing you were someone different.** Gervay also effectively portrays Katherine's relationships with her sister, mother, friends and most noticeably, her father.

Aside from the conflict of her being 'different' from everyone, a large part of the plot focuses on the main character being curious about her father. She doesn't really know him. He left her mother because raising the children was too




difficult. Not only has he become an alcoholic, but it is never clear if one of his daughters injured the other on purpose. Did he just imagine it while he was drinking? Katherine's father cannot deal with this uncertainty at all. It is heartbreaking to experience Katherine's intensifying anger towards him, as he comes to visit at random times. **Many years without him makes it hard to tell if she will let him back into her life, or forget him forever.**

Katherine just wants to lead a normal life, one with a father and with the skin everybody else has. She is tired of the endless skin grafts and how differently people

treat her. Will Katherine's wishes be fulfilled? Will she learn to live with her looks, with who she is? Or will she get the scars removed, the way one doctor suggests. If her scars are no longer evident, will she change entirely? Is it more important to fit in, or to be yourself?

I would rate this book a solid 4 out of 5. Susanne Gervay does a great job of creating a believable character with unique needs, and a dream that might come true. Read it and find out if it does!

Katie Champlin



***Katie Champlin** lives in Maine and enjoys hiking, water-skiing, lounging at lakes, reading and writing poems, being the coxswain on the crew team, and dancing. She has grown up with a small family and lots of traveling, one day she would love to visit Australia; maybe even Antarctica! Her friends and family mean the world to her because of their support with everything.*

‘Butterflies’ is ‘... a compelling read whatever your age.’

TV Week

Literary Journals:-

‘This is a credible and moving account of a young girl’s recovery.’

Australian Book Review

‘A compelling story’

Reading Time, literary review journal