



## Breakout

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Nora Tucker is looking forward to summer vacation in Wolf Creek--two months of swimming, popsicles, and brushing up on her journalism skills for the school paper. But when two inmates break out of the town's maximum security prison, everything changes. Doors are locked, helicopters fly over the woods, and police patrol the school grounds. Worst of all, everyone is on edge, and fear brings out the worst in some people. Nora has known her whole life. Even if the inmates are caught, she worries that home might never feel the same.

Told in letters, poems, text messages, news stories, and comics--a series of documents Nora collects for the Wolf Creek Community Time Capsule Project--Breakout is a thrilling story that will leave readers thinking about who's really welcome in the places we call home.

## **Breakout Details**

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Author : Kate Messner

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## From Reader Review Breakout for online ebook

### **Rachel Harder says**

This was one of the most captivating and brilliant books I've read in a long time.

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### **Rebecca Donnelly says**

I'm really looking forward to introducing my library kids & the adults in their lives to BREAKOUT. First, because it's Kate & it's got all the hallmarks of one of her beloved middle grade books: a North Country setting, relatable kids and families, & an accessible route into a difficult topic. On the surface, BREAKOUT is about a northern NY community affected by the escape of two inmates from the local correctional facility one summer—a thing that happened in my area in 2015. But Kate uses that setup to explore something much deeper about this rural area, a place that gets a significant amount of economic investment from hosting state prisons: systemic racism. This isn't a feel-good story about overcoming differences. BREAKOUT is told from many perspectives as a community time capsule project. Wolf Creek is small & mostly white. More black men are incarcerated in the prison than there are white people living in the town around it. We hear from Nora and Lizzie, Wolf Creek middle schoolers who are working on the project. We hear from Elidee, a black girl from New York City, who has moved upstate with her mom to be near the prison where her brother is incarcerated. Nora, Lizzie, and other Wolf Creek residents are proud of their little town & everything they take for granted about their lives. They think they're welcoming and open-minded. They think they're trying their best to make Elidee welcome. Meanwhile, Elidee's entries show all the microaggressions and misconceptions she has to face every day. If that was the only way this book handled race & racism, it would be useful but not unusual. But Kate goes beyond that. She provides a model of sorts for white people having discussions about racism with each other. Elidee is specifically not the educator. She responds to questions about race & racism by suggesting that white characters do their own work to learn. This also isn't a white-person-learns-not-to-be-racist redemption arc. Nora's brother, a college student home for the summer, gives Nora a lot of the answers & context she needs to begin to understand the injustice of mass incarceration, systemic racism, and how her own behavior is playing into stereotypes. If white people are going to change anything about racism in this country, it'll be by getting up the courage to talk to and teach each other, not by relying on people of color to reach out and educate us. BREAKOUT gives us a way to start that conversation with our kids.

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### **Jillian Heise says**

There was more to this than I expected from the teasers and knowing some of the background of the story from Kate's posts. I was drawn in by the different layers to the story, the multi-genre method of telling it, and the characters authenticity. And Messner allows the characters and circumstances to delve into deeper issues of racism and systemic oppression, in a way that is engaging and developmentally appropriate for the targeted age level, making this a must purchase for intermediate and middle grades classrooms and libraries.

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## **Rebecca Soffermaп says**

I just finished Breakout and I hardly know what to say except please do yourself a favor and read it! I've been a fan of Kate Messner's books for years but this is by far her best and perhaps most important work yet. I thought I was going to be reading a book based on the true story of a prison breakout that happened near my home, which had me intrigued from the start. But the book also takes on the issue of white privilege in the context of a rural north country town where most kids have no idea what it really means. The epistolary style makes it so engaging and accessible for the middle school audience. Honestly, it's a very rare author who truly writes appropriately for middle schoolers (many books are either slightly too mature or too goofy), and so far I have yet to read a book that quite takes this perspective. Many excellent books have been written about race and class and privilege, but I sometimes have trouble getting my white students to read them because they take place in urban settings or for whatever reason they feel they can't relate. The combination of black and white middle schoolers as narrators and the rural north country setting will hopefully make this book more accessible to those who think racism is a problem they have in cities or in the south, but "not in my hometown." I cannot wait to share this with my own middle schoolers and hear the conversations that follow. Oh, and did I mention this book also includes references to some of my favorite poets AND makes a strong case for documenting sources and avoiding plagiarism? A librarian's dream!

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## **Alex (not a dude) Baugh says**

It's two weeks before the end of school and the kids in Wolf Creek Middle School in upstate New York are looking forward to summer vacation. This year, however, they have a summer assignment to submit at least 5 items to be put into the Wolf Creek Community Time Capsule to be opened in fifty years. For best friends and lifetime residents of Wolf Creek Nora Tucker and Lizzie Bruno, the assignment is pretty interesting. Nora's father is the superintendent town's maximum security prison, and Lizzie's grandmother works in the prison kitchen.

But for Elidee Jones it's a very different story - she and her mother have just moved to Wolf Creek from New York City, a decision made when Elidee didn't get into the elite charter school she had applied to and since her brother is incarcerated in the prison, the move would make visiting him a lot easier. Nora and Lizzie are curious about Elidee, but find her to be unfriendly at first. Nora is also upset because she used to be the fastest runner in gym class, and Elidee beat her timing by 30 seconds running a mile.

But no sooner does Elidee begin school in Wolf Creek then two inmates escape from the prison and everything comes to a halt. People are told to lay low at home while an intense manhunt begins. Lizzie's grandmother is in the hospital so she's staying at Nora's and the two girls can't wait to get out of the house to find out what's happening. At home, Elidee writes letters to her brother Troy and begins to explore her own creative voice through poetry, influenced by Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton, a play she saw with her NYC class just before moving.

As the days go by and the inmates aren't caught, the kids return to school and slowly Nora, Lizzie and Elidee form a tentative friendship. But the manhunt, the presence of reporters in town, the stress of thinking the two escapees might be everywhere and anywhere in or around Wolf Creek begins to crack open the friendly façade of the town's residents. Soon, Elidee is noticing racially based comments, behaviors, and microaggressions at school and in town, and experiments with recording her anger in different poetic forms. But Nora is also becoming aware that her beloved Wolf Creek isn't the warm, welcoming place she always

thought it was, as she notices how people, including her mother, have an unconscious racism that makes them see Elidee not as a middle school kid, but as a racial stereotype. Thanks to her older brother, however, Nora also begins to understand some of the ways that systemic racism plays out in communities and especially disproportionate number of incarcerations of African Americans, as well as other social injustices faced by people of color in this country.

And Lizzie, well, she learns what it means to have a family member incarcerated when it comes out that the escape was an inside job.

Told through variety of methods - letters, text messages, poetry, recorded conversations, new reports, even comics, and by various people beside Nora, Lizzie and Elidee - Breakout is based on a real prison escape (and being a New Yorker, one that I remember quite well). Elidee's presence and the breakout aren't the main storyline, but really the catalyst that brings out people's true feelings about race and racial profiling. Once they see this happening, it is up to Nora and Lizzie to figure who their own authentic selves are and not Elidee's job to teach them or change them. Elidee's presence in the story is to find her own authentic voice as a poet for expressing her feelings about what she experiences.

Breakout is a fast read, but we get to know the main characters so well. I loved watching Elidee's growth as a poet, Nora growth as an empathic person (who knows what she will do with that) and Lizzie's growth as a journalist. But I really enjoyed seeing Elidee's growth as a poet. I think a lot of people don't realize that copying the style of greats artists is one way to get there. And Elidee has chosen some of the best - Langston Hughes, e.e. cummings, Jacqueline Woodson, Nikki Grimes, and of course Lin Manuel-Miranda. Interestingly, we never really discover why Elidee's brother is in prison and we don't need to know.

Breakout is a timely book and one that should be on every middle grade classroom, and every middle grade library.

This book is recommended for readers age 10+  
This book was an EARC received from NetGalley

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### **nicole says**

Eildeeeeeee <3 <3 <3 I loved this book from top to bottom - the multiple format telling (text messages, letters, news clippings both "real" and parody), Nora becoming woke to the harsher realities of her sleepy hometown, Lizzie's humor and techniques to improve it, and Eildee writing her way out. I also loved the way Messner included so many outward connections - Hamilton and Lin-Manuel Miranda, Jacqueline Woodson, Nikki Giovanni, Prohibition, Black Lives Matter, William Carlos Williams, there's so many places to go after reading this. Sent one of our fifth grade teachers to check it out ASAP!

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### **Christie Allred says**

The premise drew me in and I love the cover. But I struggled to connect with the characters and the dialog did not seem natural in many places. It was very slow paced and repetitive as well. It didn't help that I'm not into poetry, rap, or political hot topics in children's books either—the racism message was very heavy handed. Had I known ahead of time, I would not have read it. Obviously there are many who enjoy this

story, so you'll have to try it out for yourself, but it wasn't my style. I did like the interesting format though, and my favorite "scene" was when the main character's mom helped her understand the full picture of civil disobedience.

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### **Rana says**

I love a good epistolary, but I haven't come across many in the middle-grade level. This one is told 100% through letters, text messages, newspaper articles, etc. with no prose to tie them together. The letters really serve as the prose to tell the main story. This is, I think, the only downfall of the story. I'd like to have seen fewer of the letters and more narrative, but I appreciate the effort of the letters and the relevance of the text messages being included. (A pet peeve of mine is books which opt to either ignore the significance of technology in our current communications or those which use antiquated technologies to demonstrate current communication.)

This book is kind-of, sort-of loosely based on a true story - the escape of 2 inmates from Clinton Correctional Facility in upstate New York in 2015, not far from the author's home. I like how she takes a real-life event and makes it accessible for children. She is able to capture the irritation of all of the children who are missing out on outdoor fun as the troopers search for the escapees, and the fear of her younger brother who has trouble going to bed without all the possible hiding places being checked. Yet, she does all this in a way that isn't the kids doing all of the work and finding the bad guys and being the heroes. She also addresses some racial injustices which are often seen in a small town which is lacking diversity, and I think this is important for children to begin paying attention to, even at a young age.

Side note: I was able to attend an event where Kate Messner was promoting this book, and she's just delightful! I enjoyed hearing her tell about the process it took to write this story, especially to write from a different voice than her own. It's clear she was prepared to challenge herself, but wanted to make it as authentic as possible for her readers.

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### **Lorie Barber says**

So I cry a lot when I'm reading books. That wasn't true for this one. But as I reflect on what I've just read and write my review, I am in tears.

Breakout is unequivocally in my top 3 for best books ever written for middle-grade readers. In an effort to educate myself on racism and oppression in the United States, I have read a lot of YA fiction (Angie Thomas, Nic Stone, Jason Reynolds are a few that spring to mind) that has tackled the tough topic of racism. I've been waiting for a middle-grade book to do that same thing. Some have touched on it, writing books with strong points-of-view from people of color. But, to my knowledge, no one has ever tackled racism from multiple points of view. Kate Messner has done it. What's more, she did it by invoking some of the greatest writers both past and present (Hughes, Woodson, Miranda) and infusing the book with their perspectives and the perspective of Elidee, one of the protagonists. And they way Messner tells the Elidee, Nora, and Lizzie's story is singular: through many different perspectives, from the girls', to journalists, to recordings, and text messages. She did an absolutely MASTERFUL job of weaving prejudice and systemic racism throughout the plot, uncovering it like an onion without ever becoming preachy. And those Hamilton lyrics?! COME ON. Such an exquisite bonus.

And you know it's good when my 15 year-old daughter reads the back cover and says, "Can I read this real quick before you send it off?" Thank goodness she's got the night and the morning before the mail goes out and Breakout continues on its #bookexpedition. I will miss it once its gone.

I am absolutely mesmerized, gobsmacked, and shook to my core by this book. I have students who need it RIGHT NOW, and the only downside is that these students will be moving on to 6th grade middle school by the time it's published. So I have to start talking about it RIGHT NOW so they don't forget. Please do yourself and your students a favor and put Breakout AT THE TOP of your TBR, Book Talk, First Chapter Friday, or whatever pile you need to in order to get the word out. There are students who need this book both as a window and as a mirror.

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### **Donalyn says**

Engaging and thought provoking. One of my favorite Kate Messner books, yet!

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### **Rachel Polacek says**

4.5 -- LOVED this story and the different pieces of writing used to tell it. This also got me down a rabbit hole researching the actual prison outbreak from 2015 and those from Alcatraz!

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### **Katie Zarzour says**

Breakout  
by Kate Messner

“You know what I’m tired of? Living with all of these rules. I’m tired of not having freedom.”

This quote stood out to me as I read Breakout by Kate Messner. Nora Tucker and Lizzie Bruno immediately introduce Wolf Creek as a happy, friendly, and welcoming little town, but so many rules are put into place when two inmates break out of Wolf Creek Correctional Facility. Does Elidee Jones see Wolf Creek as the happy and welcoming town that everyone says it is? Nora says that she is tired of living without freedom. Do we even live with freedom in our society? What does freedom look like for everyone?

When I opened the first page of Breakout and saw the hybrid version of writing that Kate Messner chose, I was very excited to begin a different type of book than I was used to. I have read a lot of Kate Messner's books, and I was particularly excited about this one. I found Breakout to be different from many of her books that I have read. First of all, I was not used to her writing about social issues. I have read many books that tackle social issues head-on, but this book was very different. I found it to be just addressing the issue, not giving the reader questions about how to solve it. I also found it to be very dragged out. These were some of the reasons why I would only give it two stars.

There are three main perspectives from which the book is written. Nora Tucker, who has been a resident of Wolf Creek for her whole life and is white, Lizzie Bruno, who is Nora's best friend and also white, and Elidee Jones, who just moved to Wolf Creek, and is a person of color. These three narrators offer different perspectives, and that is something that I really enjoyed. All three protagonists chose different way to narrate the story. Elidee wrote poems and letters to her brother, Nora wrote letters for the time capsule, and Lizzie recorded conversations and wrote satire. Watching the story unfold through the lens of these three girls is something that I really appreciated about this book.

As for the plot, I found it to be pretty dragged out. The majority of the story was illustrating the town during the inmates' escape, which got boring after a while. I wish that Kate Messner would have included more about Elidee, and the discrimination she received as a person of color in Wolf Creek's society. Only three instances come to mind when I think about the book addressing race as a social issue. The first being when Elidee and her mom come to the ham supper, and Mrs. Jablonski dismisses their desire to help out (Messner 193-196). Another instance is when the search for the inmates is in full swing. During this time two officers see Mr. Washington (the only other person of color in Wolf Creek) running in the woods, and they immediately assume he is one of the inmates (Messner 275). The final instance is at Nora's house, when Sean asks his dad about the racial diversity of the prison workers (Messner 77-79). Mr. Tucker gets very defensive and doesn't answer the question directly. All three of these scenarios have the ability to propose a bigger discussion or teaching about race; however, none of them spark that conversation. That discussion and teaching is a big thing that this book lacks.

While I was hoping for a complex novel that tackled social issues head on, *Breakout* talked about social issues in a different way. The main critical concepts present in this book are race and the injustices of the prison. These are particularly present because of the lack of diversity in Wolf Creek, and also the bias and injustice in their legal system. The prison breakout and the evolving friendship of the three protagonists did give a unique perspective, and I loved the way that it was written. I wish that it would have challenged me to ask more questions, and teach me something new about race. All in all, I enjoyed the writing and getting to know the characters, but I was longing for a head first conversation about social issues.

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### **Wendy Garland says**

When two inmates escape from the local jail, an extended manhunt causes Nora to think twice about her small, safe and friendly town. Nora and her journalist buddy Lizzie set out to listen and report on the situation which we read about via letters, texts, and transcripts for the town time capsule. What they learn is that people are more than the choices they make. They also discover that their quiet little town was more racially biased than they imagined. Kate Messner does a brilliant job of gently weaving race into the storyline. Nora begins to look at her town through a lens of race and privilege that she didn't see before. Kate Messner leaves readers with thought-provoking questions about the choices we make and the way we view others around us.

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### **Kari says**

I was so impressed with this! It's huge but easy to read (the texts and cartoons helped it stay fast-paced) and

it is a great introduction (especially for white kids) to some big ideas about injustice. Give this to your little activists and watch them fall crazy in love with this book.

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### **Jennifer says**

Just my opinion, and I mean no disrespect. I'm a big fan of Kate's books and I know she worked hard on this one and did a lot of research but it just didn't work for me. I think this would've worked better as narrative non-fiction or even historical fiction since the story did closely mirror the breakout event. I thought the racism pieces were very didactic and felt like a forced lesson for readers, rather than a natural unfolding of the story.

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