The Berlin Boxing Club
by Robert Sharenow
6/11  978-0-06-157968-4  $17.99

Karl Stern is blond and fair-skinned and is not an observant Jew, so he is surprised when a gang of Nazi bullies in his Berlin school discover his secret and beat him up. Later that night at his father’s art gallery, he meets the German boxing champion Max Schmeling, who offers him boxing lessons in exchange for a painting. Over the next four years, Karl trains hard in the sport, transforming his lanky build into a muscled physique, and follows the sport with a growing passion, most especially Max’s fight and rematch with Joe Louis. But Germany, too, is changing under Hitler’s regime, and the changes affect every aspect of Karl’s life: love, friendship, family, education, and housing. The story reaches its climax on Kristallnacht: Karl’s father is seriously wounded, and Karl must seek help, first from a cross-dressing homosexual with a strong allegiance to his father and then from Max, who prepares the way for him and his younger sister to escape to America. The novel ends without the family reunited, but Karl is left ruminating about what it means to be a man. With its sports component and direct narrative style recommending the book for boy readers, this is a meaty, readable account of the perils and pitfalls of daily life in Nazi Germany. JONATHAN HUNT

Jasper Jones
by Craig Silvey
Middle School, High School  Knopf  312 pp.
Library ed.  978-0-375-96666-8  $19.99

In this Australian import, Jasper Jones—town outcast, juvenile delinquent, and general scapegoat—shows up at thirteen-year-old Charlie’s window one night and takes him to a grove along the riverbank, the scene of the apparent murder of the daughter of the shire president. Convinced of Jasper’s innocence, Charlie helps him hide the body until the two boys can find the murderer and bring him to justice. It’s a heavy burden for Charlie to bear as he courts the sister of the dead girl, chafes at the racism his Vietnamese best friend encounters, and witnesses the deterioration of his parents’ marriage. As secrets come rattling out of the closet, the characters are forced to make difficult choices in the satisfying resolution to this gothic-flavored coming-of-age tale. The mood and atmosphere of the 1960s small-town Australian setting is perfectly realized— suspenseful, menacing, and claustrophobic—with issues
of race and class boiling just below the surface. Smart, sensible, and likable, Charlie is drawn with a deft hand, and his first-person narration astutely captures not only a sociopolitical cross-section of his community but his tumultuous family situation and internal life as well. JONATHAN HUNT

Like Pickle Juice on a Cookie
by Julie Sternberg; illus. by Matthew Cordell
Primary Amulet/Abrams 122 pp.
3/11 978-0-8109-8424-0 $14.95

It’s the summer before the start of third grade, and eight-year-old Eleanor is bereft when her babysitter Bibi moves away to care for her sick father. Her parents tell her that she doesn’t need Bibi as much anymore, and that everything will be okay. “‘Everything will not be okay,’ I said. / ‘This is as bad as somebody dying,’ I said.” Eleanor’s parents treat her with compassion, and her new babysitter Natalie sensitively gives her room to grieve, letting Eleanor set the tone. Gradually, she begins to get over the sharp sting of doing familiar things with a new person and even begins to enjoy doing new things. One day, they set up a lemonade stand; on another, they go on a walk taking pictures of flowers. Most mornings, they sit quietly and even meditatively on a bench in Eleanor’s Brooklyn neighborhood, people-watching and waiting for Val, the letter carrier (and now a friend), to bring Eleanor a letter from Bibi. Sternberg uses short sentences spaced on the page in very short lines, like poetry, and keeps the twenty-seven chapters very brief. The line drawings add humor, while the first-person narration and the authentic and very specific details of Eleanor’s emotional journey will help draw child readers into her story. SUSAN DOVE LEMPE