The Manth people are at last free to seek their promised land, led by Bowman and Kestrel’s mother, a prophetess. But the journey is long and hard, filled with many dangers, enemies, distractions, and temptations. And each of the travelers is preoccupied with his or her own worries. Bowman is torn between his attraction to Sisi, a former princess, and what he believes is his destiny—to sacrifice himself for the good of the people. Kestrel also feels a pull toward a mission, toward something—but for some reason, she cannot envision her life beyond the journey. Again Nicholson uses his screenwriting skills to produce a lively, fast-moving adventure.

My Personal Review:
Children’s books about the horrors of standardized testing are increasingly popular these days. From Edward Bloors well-intentioned, Story Time to The Report Card by the otherwise talented Andrew Clements, these books have attempted to capture the dangers of this destructive teaching tool. Both books have fallen short, leaving some people to wonder if there could ever be a book that discusses this controversial subject well. What few people know is that there’s a fantastic well-written and beautifully put together fantasy series that begins with the horrific results of what happens when a society bases all decisions on testing. Regular methodical testing. In William Nicholson’s, The Wind Singer, (the first in his Wind On Fire trilogy), the term dystopia takes on a whole new look and meaning. In a book that is simultaneously wise, beautifully penned, and deeply moving, The Wind Singer, gets to the bottom of rigid test-based communities and show us a great worst-case scenario.
Aramanth is a community that loves its tests. Living by the daily pledge, I vow to strive harder, to reach higher, and in every way to seek to make tomorrow better than today, its citizens embody the ultimate caste system. Based on strict standardized testing, people live according to how well they test. The nicest homes belong to those members of society that answer quizzes effectively and intelligently. For those people who dont like tests or dont do well on them for a variety of reasons, they live on the bottom rungs of society. Theres very little rebellion in Aramanth due to its rigid control of any possible insubordination on the part of its citizens. That is, until the day little Kestrel Hath decides that she doesnt want to live in a world based on testing anymore. Suddenly shes endangered her family and herself. There seems no escape from Aramanths rules and regulations, until the ancient Emperor, a disused ruler, tells Kestral about the Wind Singer. This gigantic and ancient construction of pipes that towers over the town was once given the ability to sing to its citizens, calming their hearts and making them happy. When the key to the Wind Singers voice was stolen, the society became cold and hardened into its current state. With her twin brother Bowman and their initially unwanted tagalong Mumpo at her side, Kestral and company embark on a quest to save Aramanth from itself once and for all.

I nominate this book for the title, Perfect Distopian Novel. Ive not fallen for a fabulous fantasy in a long time, and this book has everything you could want in it. A great (and little used) moral. Characters you care about deeply. A gripping plot. Everything. I greatly appreciated that the parents of the heroes in this book were not only both alive (not usually the case in fantasies) but also active, amusing, and subversive aids to their kids efforts. Too often parents fret and flail in childrens novels, adding nothing to the story but woe. In this book Mr. and Mrs. Hath recognize the quest their children are on and decide to raise a little hooplah in Aramanth on their own. The results are quite fabulous. I was also impressed by the character of Mumpo. A developmentally challenged boy who loves the Hath twins desperately, Mumpo could easily have been a kind of mock- Forest Gump character, spouting simple platitudes and giving everyone around him a patented new outlook on life. Ugh. Theres a little of that, but Nicholson is clever enough to know how to give Mumpo more complexity than Mr. Gump. His character learns and grows (sometimes frighteningly) through his experiences and his very existence makes the twins kinder people through his presence.

There are an awful lot of other great moments in this story, though. For one thing, I think it contains the scariest evil army Ive ever read. You can keep your The Lord of the Rings-type orcs and goblins. I personally believe that the army of the Zars, a relentlessly cheery troop of endless, young, white-suited, peppy people given to singing Kill Kill Kill at the top of their voices, is the most horrifying group to ever appear in a childrens book. The Zars are rivaled in evil, however, by a prematurely old group of children with the ability to suck the youth out of anyone they touch. Worst of all is the evil spirit-lord, the Morah. The Morah has long since convinced the
citizens of Aramanth that hes a myth. It reminds me of the quote, The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist. With these incredibly awful foes, its a wonder Kestrel and Bowman keep their wits about them. Finally, the book has a deep emotional core that I think will be appreciated by all readers. The Hath family is very loving and caring. The bond between the twins is deep and Nicholson deftly portrays the depths of Mumpo's loneliness and despair. Plus the book has an amazing array of different worlds through which the kids travel. From the deep mud world below Aramanth to a traveling city on wheels (somewhat similar those found in the more recent Hungry City Chronicles by fellow Brit, Phillip Reeve), Nicholson creates new fantastical universes out of thin air. The result is a book thatll have you continually reading for hours on end, unable to stop even part way through.

The most recommended fantasy book in schools nation-wide is undeniably Lois Lowry's, The Giver. I suggest that, as good as it is, we give, The Giver, a break for once and encourage our kids to read The Wind Singer instead. Those children that suffer under the strain of repeated testing will appreciate the books strong message. Children who like great action sequences and heightened danger will fall for the books fast-paced escapes and battles. And those children that simply like a good story with good writing will be entranced. I say with conviction that this is probably one of the strongest British fantasy book for children written in the twenty-first century. Its simply the best.

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