

## **Children's Books for Building Character and Empathy**

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One focus of Invitational Theory and Practice is creating positive environments that summon each individual to “develop intellectually, socially, physically, emotionally, and morally” (Purkey & Novak, 2008). Children’s literature is a rich resource for teachers and parents to focus on emotional and moral development. This article will provide background information on the nature of literary response and the characteristics of literature that engender responses related to character and moral development. Examples and related activities teachers can use to help children process the stories will be shared. To appreciate the power of children’s literature to impact children’s character and empathy, it helps to examine the nature of literary response. In *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem* (1938), Louise Rosenblatt outlined her Literary Transaction Theory. As illustrated in Figure 1, each of us comes to the reading experience with our own set of background experiences. Those experiences will influence how we interpret the texts we read. This is also true for authors, who draw upon their own pools of experience in writing their books. The important thing to remember about this is that it is not static. As our experiences change, we will interpret texts in new and different ways. Authors may even come back to their own writings with new interpretations over time.

**Figure 1: Rosenblatt’s Literary Transaction Theory**



Rosenblatt (1938) goes on to describe two different roles, or stances, of reading: efferent and aesthetic. The efferent stance involves determining the information that can be derived from the reading. The aesthetic stance relates to the experience of the reading, the feelings and images that flow with the words. Readers will switch back and forth between the two stances. Kiefer, Tyson, & Huck (2014) point out that, in addition to past

experiences and stances, the developmental level of a child will also determine how he or she responds to a particular book. Thus, it behooves teachers to take special care when selecting books for their students.

Kidd and Costano (2013) describe Theory of Mind as the human ability to understand our mental states (i.e., beliefs, intents, desires, pretenses, knowledge, etc.), and to understand that others also have mental states that may be different from our own. They go on to say that Theory of Mind (ToM) is one of the most amazing products of human evolution because it allows successful navigation of complex social relationships and helps support the empathic responses that maintain them. Deficits or breakdowns in this set of abilities are marked by interpersonal difficulties, including the breakdown of positive interpersonal and intergroup relationships.

Kidd and Costano's experiments indicated that reading literary fiction temporarily enhances Theory of Mind (Kidd & Costano, 2013). Literary fiction is a term principally used for certain fictional works that hold literary merit. That is, they offer deliberate commentary on larger social issues, political issues, or focus on the individual to explore some part of the human condition ("Literary Fiction," n.d.).

What is it about literary fiction that enhances empathy? According to Kidd and Costano (2013), reading fiction increases self-reported empathy. It expands our knowledge of others' lives, helping us recognize our similarity to them. It forces us to engage in mind reading and character construction, thus engendering empathy towards those characters. Although fiction may explicitly convey social values and reduce the strangeness of others, the observed relationship between familiarity with fiction and Theory of Mind may be due to more subtle characteristics of the text (i.e., fiction may change how, not just what, people think about others). Miall and Kuiken (1994) contend that writers of literary fiction use phonological, grammatical, and semantic stylistic devices like alliteration, metaphor, rhythm, and simile, to defamiliarize readers (i.e., unsettle their expectations and challenge their thinking).

Along the same lines, Barthes (1974 as cited by Kidd & Costano, 2013) distinguishes between writerly and readerly texts. Readerly texts—such as most popular genre fiction—are intended to entertain readers, who remain mostly passive. Writerly—or literary—texts engage their readers as creatively as if they were the writer him/herself. Bakhtin (1984 as cited by Kidd & Costano, 2013) described literary fiction as polyphonic, meaning the authors tend to convey a "cacophony of voices." (p. 378). Thus, readers of literary fiction must contribute their own voice and enter into a vibrant discourse with the author and his/her characters.

This discourse forces readers to fill in gaps and search for meanings among a spectrum of possibilities.

How does this apply to books for children? While books for children are arguably less complex than adult literary fiction, they can evoke Theory of Mind responses in young readers. Those that are well-written and comply with criteria for excellence for their genre and literary elements are most likely to evoke Theory of Mind responses. For example, a complex character in a middle grade or YA novel will appeal to children or teens on different levels, especially if that character is overcoming difficulties the reader can relate to. Even a simple text in a picture storybook can contain alliteration, rhythm, metaphor, simile, imagery, and word play to capture the imaginations of young readers.

Piaget and Kohlberg studied the moral development of children and concluded that as children grow in intellect and experience, they move away from the concept that morality is based upon adult authority and constraint and towards the idea that morality is influenced by group cooperation and independent thinking (Kiefer, Tyson, & Huck, 2014). This explains why books that fall out of favor with children tend to be those that are the most didactic or preachy. While good books have good messages and themes, children do not like to be hit over the head with them. Like adults, they like to get the message through relating to the characters.

The idea that we should be exposing our children to literary fiction to develop their Theory of Mind is difficult in a time when increasing emphasis is being placed on nonfiction reading. Figure 2 is a chart of the change in percentages of emphasis between fiction and nonfiction in the Ohio English Language Arts Standards, which are based upon the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

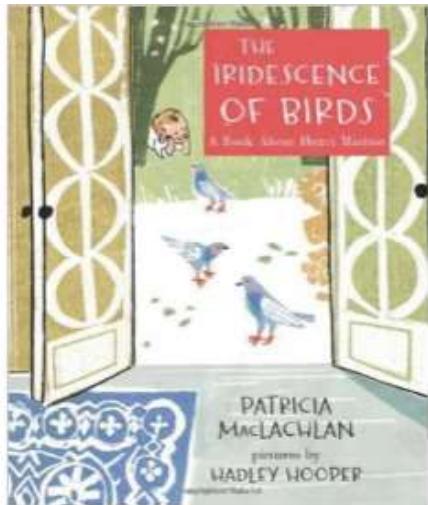
**Figure 2. Increasing Focus on Nonfiction Text from OH ELA CCSS.**

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Literary</b>	<b>Informational</b>
4	50%	50%
8	45%	55%
12	30%	70%

## Literary Nonfiction

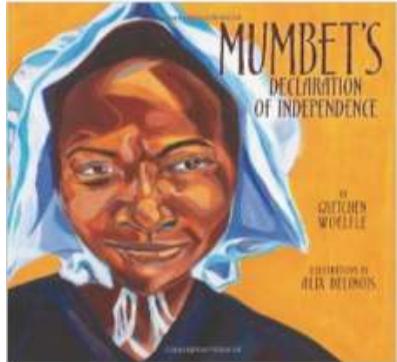
The new emphasis on nonfiction is giving rise to a new kind of literary nonfiction that focuses on nonfiction topics but in writerly ways that inspire empathy. Here are a few examples:

*The Iridescence of Birds: A Book about Henri Matisse* by Patricia MacLachlan, illustrated by Hadley Hooper



This beautiful book only contains two sentences, one of which lasts for 16-page turns and describes the childhood of Henri Matisse in a dreary northern French mill town; how his mother brought color to their lives through her painted plates and the fruits, flowers, rugs, and fabrics she brought into the house; and how young Matisse raised pigeons and was captivated by their iridescence. Hooper's pictures, in slightly muted colors, look like woodcuts and show how Matisse's childhood experiences influenced the designs of his adult work as a fine artist.

*Mumbet's Declaration of Independence* by Gretchen Woelfle, illustrated by Alix Delinois



Mumbet was a slave owned by Colonel John Ashley, the richest man in Berkshire County, Massachusetts. She had no true name, but was called many by her abusive mistress. Her desire for freedom was her everyday companion. When the Colonies declared their freedom, Mumbet heard the new constitution's promise that "All men are born free and equal" at a public meeting. She convinced a young lawyer to sue Ashley for her freedom, arguing that the line meant everyone. In 1781, she won. Soon after, slavery in Massachusetts was abolished, freeing all 5000 slaves in the state. This book puts a face on the institution of slavery, which textbooks may not do as well.

*Star Stuff: Carl Sagan and the Mysteries of the Cosmos* by Stephanie Roth Sisson



In the Milky Way galaxy, on the third planet from the sun, in a big city, in a small apartment, lived a curious boy who was fascinated with the stars, loved science fiction, and had a vivid imagination, all of which lead him to research more about the universe. Sagan and other scientists sent out mechanical probes, including Voyager I and II, and analyzed what they found. He used television to share the resulting knowledge, sparking the public's imagination. Charming illustrations include a foldout that gives a sense of the vastness of the night sky. This book provides children with an example of someone who turned his childhood dreams into a career.

### **Activity—Literary Nonfiction**

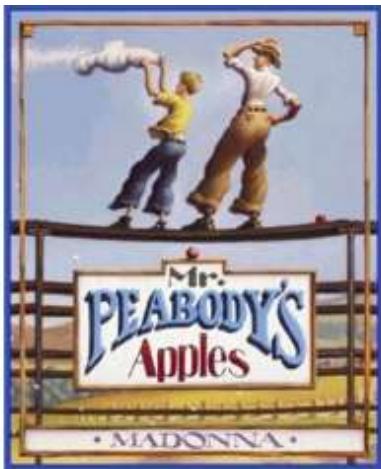
After reading the above three books and other literary nonfiction, children can list the basic truths of the stories. They can compare these books to straight nonfiction about the same topics and discuss how the authors use figurative language to make readers care about the main characters. They may also be inspired to read more about their lives.

### **Using Literature to Build Character**

Teachers can directly address building empathy by helping children understand positive character traits through story. Here are some books that address Invitational Education's elements of trust, respect, care, optimism, and intentionality.

## **Trust and Respect**

*Mr. Peabody's Apples* by Madonna (Illustrated by Loren Long)



Inspired by a 300-year-old Ukrainian story, but set in 1949 in a tiny American town, this is the story of big-hearted and much beloved Mr. Peabody, an elementary school teacher and Little League coach. When Tommy Tittlebottom sees Mr. Peabody take an apple without paying for it, rumors of Mr. Peabody's apparent theft cause children to stay away from Little League practice. A simple explanation puts the rumors to rest, but as Mr. Peabody points out, small talk can lead to big trouble.

**Activity—The Pillow Metaphor.** Discuss the feather pillow metaphor in *Mr. Peabody's Apples*. The pillow represents Mr. Peabody's integrity, truth, and reputation. The feathers represent gossip. When the pillow is torn, feathers fly out into the world. The last illustration symbolizes the fact that a few feathers are still out, meaning not all people in Happville know Mr. Peabody is not a thief. The pillow is together, but the stitching shows it is still damaged.

## **Responsibility and Perseverance**

*The Most Magnificent Thing* by Ashley Spires

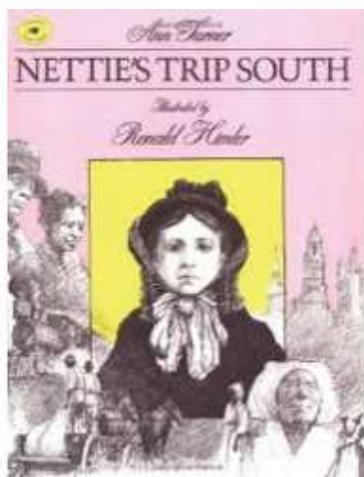


A little girl and her canine assistant set out to make the most magnificent thing. But after much hard work, the end result is not what the girl had in mind. Frustrated, she quits. Her assistant suggests a long walk, and as they walk, it slowly becomes clear what the girl needs to do to succeed—persevere!

**Activity—Perseverance.** Carol Dweck is the Stanford psychologist whose work around achievement and success has helped us understand the power of having a growth mindset, rather than a fixed one (Glenn, 2010). A growth mindset allows us to learn from trial and error, recognizing the value in failure, as well as in hard work and dedication. Ask students to write about or discuss a time when they had to persevere to accomplish a goal.

## Care

*Nettie's Trip South* by Ann Turner (illustrated by Ronald Himler)



In a letter to her friend, Nettie describes her trip to the pre-Civil War South. She remembers the sweet cedar smell in the air and the sun pressing on her head. But she cannot forget Tabitha, a slave at the hotel who has only that one name, or the heaps of rags the slaves use for beds. Most of all, she remembers the slave auction where people were bought and sold like sacks of flour. These images haunt Nettie and she cannot help but wonder what life as a slave would be like. Based upon the diary of the author's great-grandmother, this is a poignant and compelling look at slavery.

**Activity—RAFT writing.** Try RAFT writing to get students into the minds of the characters. RAFT stands for:

R = Role

A = Audience

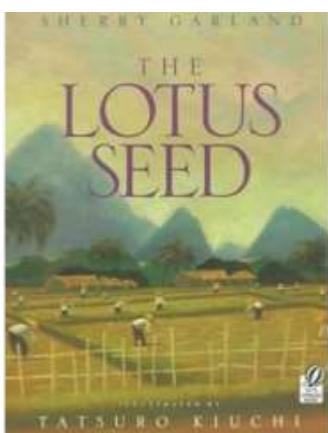
F = Focus

T = Topic

For example, pretend you are Nettie and write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper describing the inhumane conditions of slavery you witnessed and urging changes in the law.

## Optimism

*The Lotus Seed* by Sherry Garland (illustrated by Tatsuro Kiuchi)



A young girl sees the last emperor of Vietnam cry on the day of his abdication. She takes a lotus seed from the palace gardens as a remembrance and keeps it with her through the vicissitudes of war, flight, and emigration. One summer, a grandson steals it and plants it in a mud pool near the family's American home. The following spring, a lotus grows. The now elderly woman gives a seed to each of her grandchildren, passing on a tradition and her memories.

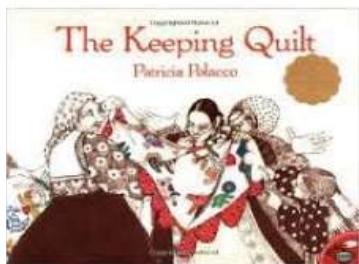
**Activity—What is optimism?** Discuss the following questions related to optimism:

1. How was the lotus seed in the story a symbol of optimism?
2. When was optimism illustrated in the story?
3. Do immigrants come to America with a sense of optimism? In what ways?
4. How does optimism help people who are experiencing difficulty?
5. In what other situations is optimism helpful?

Then, create a word web graphic organizer for optimism. Display the word in the middle. Use the spokes to describe meanings, antonyms, synonyms, related phrases, examples, and a dictionary definition. Include personal connections to the word as well.

## Intentionality

*The Keeping Quilt* by Patricia Polacco



“We will make a quilt to help us always remember home,” Anna’s mother said. “It will be like having the family back home in Russia dance around us at night. And so it was.” From a basket of old clothes, Anna’s babushka, Uncle Vladimir’s shirt, Aunt Havalah’s nightdress and an apron of Aunt Natasha’s become *The Keeping Quilt*, passed along from mother to daughter for almost a century. For four generations the quilt is a Sabbath tablecloth, a wedding canopy, and a blanket that welcomes babies warmly into the world. The quilt remains a symbol of their intentionality in preserving their family love.

**Activity—Intentionality.** Intentionality means, “done with purpose.” In *The Keeping Quilt*, a family uses the quilt to intentionally preserve their Russian past for future generations. Give each student a quilt square in which to draw something that represents intentionality. The squares could contain covers or pictures from books that illustrate intentionality. Create a class quilt from the squares and display it.



This is Patricia Polacco’s actual keeping quilt, now on display at the Mazza Museum at The University of Findlay.

## Using Literature to Build Empathy

Certain categories of books are likely to evoke empathy and improve Theory of Mind. Generally this is because the characters in the stories are well developed and the conflicts are relatable to readers. The categories include the following:

1. Books representing people with disabilities.
2. Books about bullying.
3. Books representing people of different cultures.
4. Books representing dystopian societies.
5. Any work of fiction or fantasy in which the characters are multi-dimensional and evoke caring in readers.

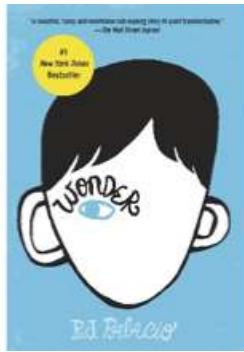
## Understanding People with Disabilities



A good place to start when looking for excellent books about people with disabilities is the Schneider Family Award books, indicated by the above medal on the cover. The Schneider Family Book Awards honor an author or illustrator for a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences. The book “must portray some aspect of living with a disability, whether the disability is physical, mental, or emotional.” Each year three awards are given for birth through grade school (age 0-10), middle school (age 11-13) and teens (age 13-18) (See <http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/schneider-family-book-award>).

Some examples across the age ranges follow:

### *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

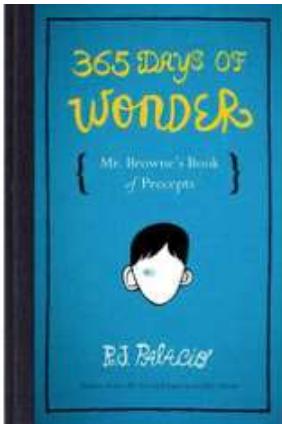


August Pullman, age 10, has a facial difference that caused him to be home schooled and avoid people. In his fifth grade year, he goes to school for the first time. The beauty of this story is that it is told from the perspectives of multiple characters, allowing readers a much more complex understanding of Auggie. The following review by Sarah Jones (17 March 2012) demonstrates the power of this book to evoke empathy:

My 5th grader has craniofacial anomalies and I feel that this book could not have been better written. Palacio caught Auggie’s voice and captured his challenges and strengths so

beautifully I still can't believe that she doesn't have a child who is living this life [...] Many small moments [...] struck me to the core—Auggie's feelings about Halloween, the way Auggie has an easier time when his classmates understand that there's more to him than his face [...] The most emotional moment [...] came toward the end [...] when his father tells him that he loves the way Auggie looks [...] exactly how my husband and I feel about our son. (para. 1-2)

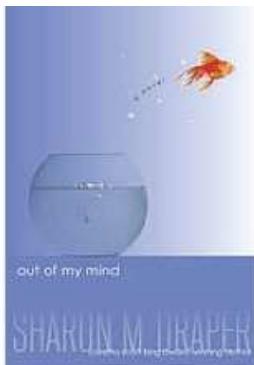
**Activity—Precepts.** Mr. Browne, Auggie's English teacher, is fond of precepts, which he defines as “rules about really important things” or “words to live by.” For example, his September precept is, “When given the choice between being right or being kind, choose kind.” *Wonder's companion book, 365 Days of Wonder*, lists these precepts.



Try doing Mr. Browne's precept assignment:

1. Create a special section in your notebook.
2. Each month, copy a selected precept into it.
3. The class discusses the precept and what it means.
4. At the end of the month, each student writes an essay about what the precept means to him/her personally.
5. Over the summer, Mr. Browne asks his students to write their own precept on a postcard and mail it to him.

*Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper

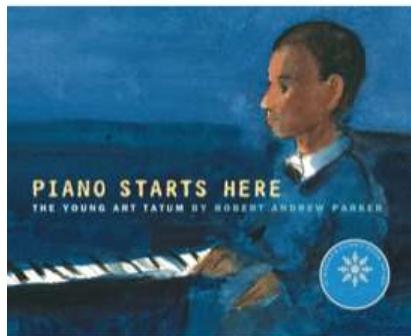


“From the time I was little—maybe just a few months old—words were like liquid gifts, and I drank them like lemonade. I could almost taste them. They made my jumbled thoughts and feelings have substance. My parents have always blanketed me with conversation. They chattered and babbled. They verbalized and vocalized. My father sang to me. My mother whispered her strength into my ear. Every word my parents spoke to me or about me I absorbed and kept and remembered. All of them... I have never spoken one single word. I am almost eleven years old.”

Melody is the smartest kid in her school, but no one knows it because she can't talk, walk, or write. Being stuck inside her head is making her go out of her mind—until she discovers a tool that helps her speak for the first time. At last Melody has a voice!

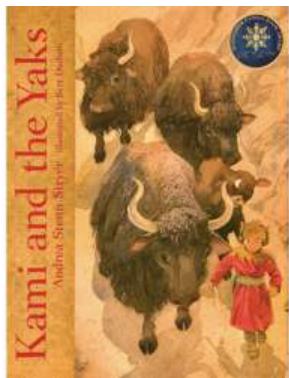
**Activity—Writer's craft.** One focus of the Common Core State Standards for English/Language Arts is the writer's craft. One theme of *Out of My Mind* is the power of words in Melody's life. Draper demonstrates her own exceptional power to use words to evoke images and convey empathy for Melody. Work in small groups to examine how she does this. Share. Next, do interactive editing on selected pieces of writing to enhance the word choice to convey more vivid images and evoke empathy for the characters.

*Piano Starts Here: The Young Art Tatum* by Robert Andrew Parker



Bad eyesight does not stop Art Tatum from learning to play the family piano as a young boy. Art's musical career grows from playing professional shows in his hometown of Toledo, Ohio, to appearing with jazz bands across the country. Additional biographical information is in the endnotes.

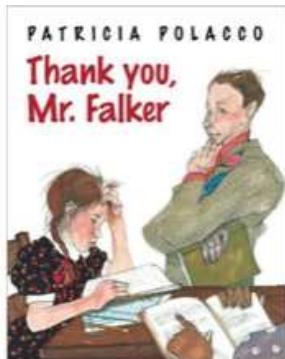
*Kami and the Yaks* by Andrea Stenn Stryer (illustrated by Burt Dodson)



With a storm approaching, Kami—a Sherpa boy who is deaf—finds the littlest of his family's four yaks stuck in a crevice. Kami bravely rushes home, acts out the yak's plight in sign, and then leads his father and brother to the rescue.

**Activity—Understanding personal disabilities.** *Kami and the Yaks* and *Piano Starts Here* are for younger children and feature characters that overcome personal disabilities to accomplish something. Help children put themselves in the shoes of Art Tatum and Kami by using blindfolds and earphones to simulate their disabilities.

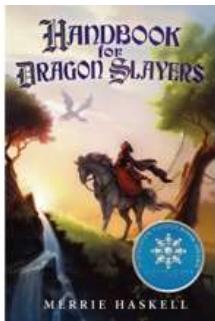
*Thank You, Mr. Faulker* by Patricia Polacco



When Trisha starts school, she cannot wait to learn how to read, but the letters just get jumbled up. She hates being different and starts to believe her classmates when they call her a dummy. Then, she gets Mr. Faulker as her fifth grade teacher. When he discovers that she cannot read, he takes the time to help her overcome her reading problems.

**Activity—Compassion.** Mr. Faulker exhibits more than compassion for Trisha: he takes action to help her. Discuss actions we can take when we see someone who is struggling.

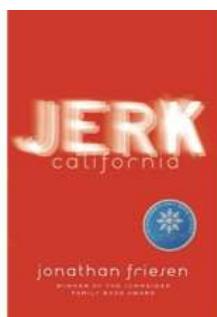
*A Handbook for Dragon Slayers* by Merrie Haskell



Reluctant Princess Tilda, sheltered due to her deformed foot, longs to escape her destiny of quietly managing her kingdom. A thwarted kidnapping sends Tilda, her handmaiden Judith, and Lord Parzifal on a dragon-hunting quest. Supported by friends and dragons, Tilda realizes her physical limitations do not define her.

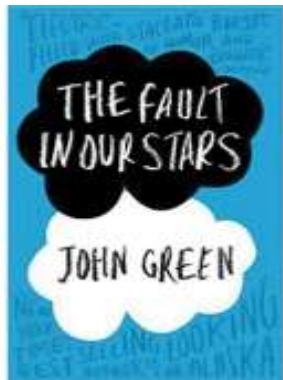
**Activity—Metaphor.** Tilda ends up having an unusual relationship with the very dragons she set out to slay. Explore the metaphor of dragons together. What do they represent? How was the dragon an appropriate metaphor for Tilda's situation?

*Jerk California* by Jonathan Friesen



Isolated at school and tormented at home by his stepdad, Minnesota high school senior Sam Carrier feels defined by his Tourette syndrome. But long-distance running, his deceased father's friend George, a special girl named Naomi, and a road trip to Jerk, California, change his perspective. This YA novel contains some strong language, but really gets readers into Sam's head as he struggles to keep himself under control.

*The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green



Despite the tumor-shrinking medical miracle that is buying her a few more years, Hazel's diagnosis has always been terminal. But when she meets Augustus Waters at Cancer Kid Support Group, Hazel's story takes on some new plot twists.

**Activity—Quotations.** Insightful, bold, irreverent, and raw, *The Fault in Our Stars* contains many thought-provoking quotes worthy of discussion. Over 175 are posted at this Website:

<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/the-fault-in-our-stars>.

### **Understanding the Many Sides of Bullying**

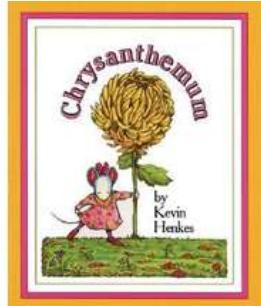
*Bully* by Laura Vaccaro Seeger



Bully does not have a kind word for any of his friends. When the other animals ask him to play, he responds with, "Chicken! Slow poke! You stink!" Seeger's bold, graphic artwork pairs with spare but powerful words, making this tale tender, funny, and thought provoking.

**Activity—The Power of Words.** Discuss with children the words Bully used to insult the other animals. Why do these words have the power to hurt us? What strategies can we use to deflect such hurt? List these on a chart for future reference.

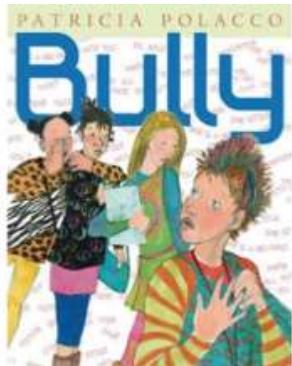
*Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes



Chrysanthemum thinks her name is absolutely perfect—until her first day of school. "You're named after a flower!" teases Victoria. "Let's smell her," says Jo. Chrysanthemum wilts. Suddenly her name seems not so special.

**Activity—All Kinds of Names.** Ask the children to share the stories of how they got their names. Bring in a baby name book and look up the meaning of the names of the children in the class. The variety should lead to interest, not teasing.

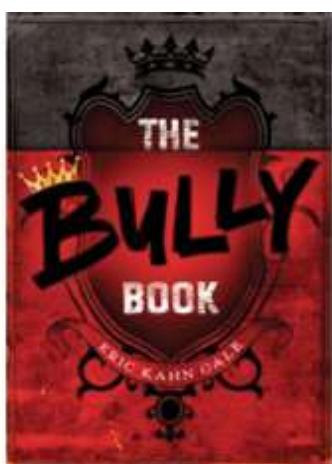
*Bully* by Patricia Polacco



Lyla finds a great friend in Jamie on her first day of school, but when Lyla makes the cheerleading squad and a clique of popular girls invites her to join them, Jamie is left behind. Lyla knows bullying when she sees it, though, and when she sees the girls viciously teasing classmates on Facebook, including Jamie, she is smart enough to get out. But no one dumps these girls: now they are out for revenge.

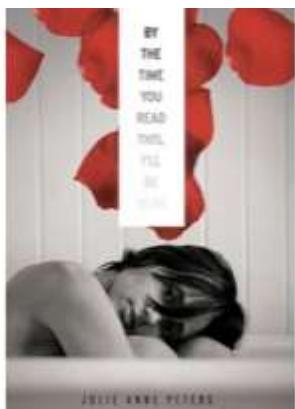
**Activity—Cyber bullying.** This is a good book to use to promote discussion cyber bullying. Help children develop positive strategies for dealing with social media. Chart these for future reference.

*The Bully Book* by Eric Kahn Gale



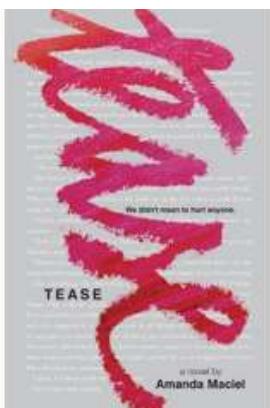
Eric Haskins coasted through elementary school without attracting undue attention. But this year he is the Grunt, the kid everyone in sixth grade hates. Unsure of what he did wrong, Eric becomes obsessed with getting his hands on the mythic *Bully Book*, which will supposedly tell him why he has been designated the Grunt. Eric keeps a journal, pages of which are intermixed with pages from *The Bully Book*. Reading the two together highlights how enigmatic bullying is for the child on the receiving end of a set of unwritten rules. The fact that *The Bully Book* writes those rules down adds a conspiratorial menace, reinforcing the insidious nature of bullying.

*By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead* by Julie Anne Peters



After a lifetime of being bullied, Daelyn has had enough. She has tried to kill herself before and is determined to try again. Though her parents try their best to protect her, she finds a website for completers and blogs on its forums, sharing her personal history. The only person at school who tries to interact with her is a boy named Santana. Even though she treats him poorly, he won't leave her alone, causing her to wonder whether it is not too late to let people into her life after all. Peters shines a light on what might make a teenager want to commit suicide and what might bring her back from the edge.

*Tease* by Amanda Maciel



Emma Putnam is dead and Sara Wharton, her best friend, and three other classmates have been criminally charged for the bullying and harassment that led to her shocking suicide. Now Sara is the ostracized one—guilty according to the media, the community, and her peers. Between meetings with lawyers and a court-recommended therapist, Sara reflects on the events that lead to the tragedy and her own undeniable role in it. Somehow she must find a way forward, even as she feels her life is over.

*Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli



From the day she arrives at quiet Mica High in a burst of color and sound, nonconformist Stargirl is one of the popular ones. Her smile captures the heart of Leo Borlock and she sparks school-spirit with just one cheer. Everyone at Mica High is enchanted with her—until they decide they are not. Suddenly Stargirl is shunned for everything that made her special to begin with. Leo, desperate with love for her and panicked by her reversal in status, urges her to become normal—the very thing that could destroy her.

**Activity—The many sides of bullying.** Use the four previous books and others like

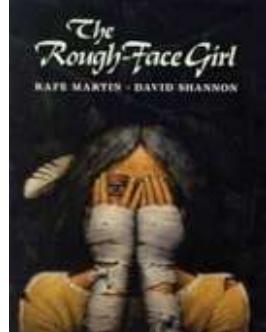
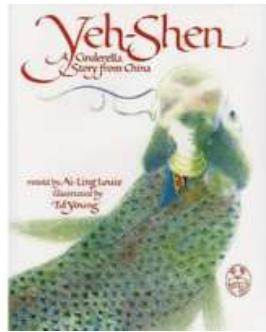
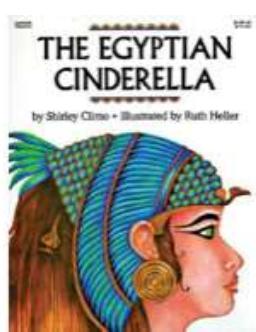
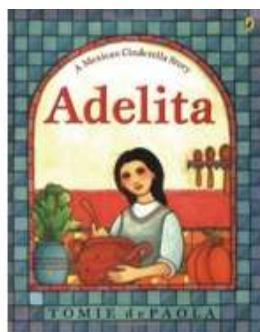
them to set the stage for critical thinking about the many sides of bullying and its diverse victims. How is social media a double-edged sword? How can our attitudes toward it protect us? Try doing this in literature circles, where the students choose their book and participate in chapter-by-chapter discussion related to it as they read. Then come together as a whole group to share.

## **Understanding People of Other Cultures**

There are several ways literature can raise cultural awareness. First, reading the folklore of a country or culture enlightens readers as to its traditional beliefs, customs, and stories that were originally passed through the generations by word of mouth. Some books illustrate or celebrate culture. These may be fiction or nonfiction and typically have more modern settings than traditional tales, which tend to be set during once upon a time. Such books often show universal aspects of being human, despite cultural differences. Still other stories have conflicts that are a result of differences in culture and beliefs. Some of these deal directly with racism. Some are transplanted culture stories in which a character suddenly has to cope with living in an unfamiliar culture. Others show what happens when cultures collide. These may be stories of wars, feuds, or misunderstandings related to cultural differences.

### **Folklore.**

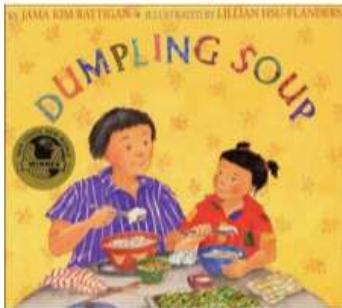
It is said that there is a Cinderella story for every culture in the world. These covers illustrate some from Mexico, Egypt, China, and Native America.



**Activity—Exploring multiple cultures through folklore.** Gather as many different versions of Cinderella, or another folktale, as you can find. Share these with your students. Discuss the similarities and differences among the versions. How do these books convey the cultures they represent? Chart this.

## **Books illustrating culture and cultural universals.**

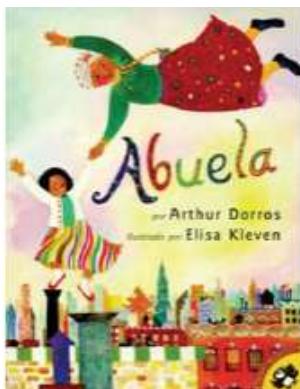
*Dumpling Soup* by Jama Kim Rattigan



Marisa gets to help make dumplings this year to celebrate the New Year. But she worries about whether anyone will eat her funny-looking dumplings. Set in the Hawaiian Islands, this story celebrates a joyful mix of food, customs, and languages from many cultures—all in Marissa's extended family.

**Activity—Cultural sharing.** The foods prepared by the family in *Dumpling Soup* reflect the mix of cultures in their family. Host an international food day in your school or classroom, asking students to bring dishes to share that represent their cultural heritage.

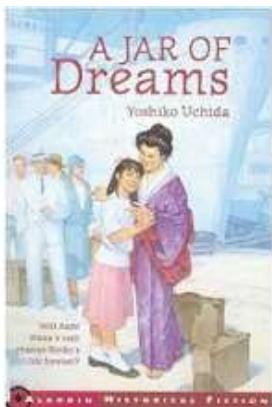
*Abuela* by Arthur Dorros



While riding on a bus through Manhattan with Abuela, her Spanish-speaking grandmother, a little girl imagines that they are carried up into the sky and fly over the sights of New York City. This evocative story demonstrates the loving bond between child and grandparent.

**Activity—Grandparent show and tell.** Invite grandparents to school. Children can introduce them and their backgrounds, sharing special names they are called and where they came from. The class can then entertain them with reader's theater selections. Finally, share snacks that represent their cultures or family traditions.

## *A Jar Full of Dreams* by Yoshiko Uchida

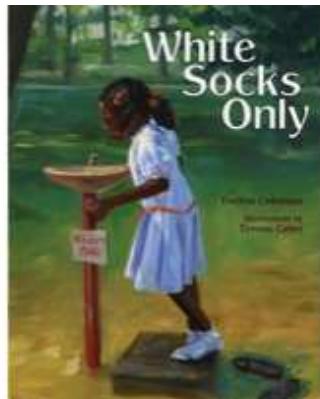


Growing up in California during the Great Depression is not easy for eleven-year-old Rinko. She desperately wants to fit in with everyone else, but instead she feels different because she is Japanese. But when Aunt Waka comes to visit, she brings old-fashioned wisdom from Japan and reminds Rinko of the importance of her Japanese heritage, as well as the value of her own strengths and dreams.

**Activity—Venn diagram.** Use a Venn diagram to show the parts of the story that are universal aspects of being human and those that are specific to Rinko’s Japanese culture.

## **Books illustrating colliding cultures.**

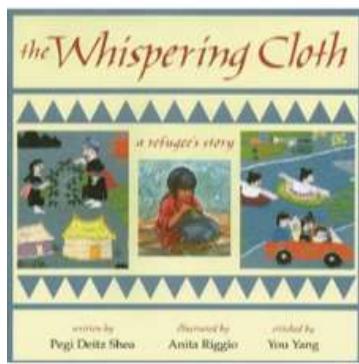
*White Socks Only* by Evelyn Coleman, illustrated by Tyrone Geter



In the segregated south, a young girl thinks that she can drink from a fountain marked “Whites Only” because she is wearing her white socks.

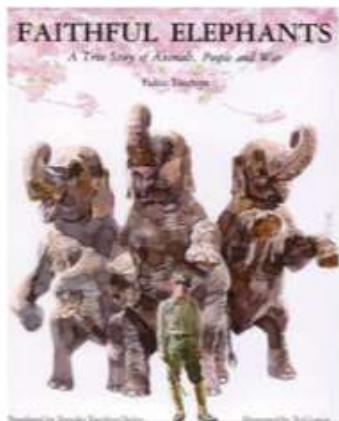
**Activity—Racism.** Research the historical context of the story. Discuss the meaning of the word racism and create a t-chart with the word Racism at the top and two columns below, one for Looks Like and the other for Sounds Like.

*The Whispering Cloth: A Refugee's Story* by Pegi Deitz Shea, illustrated by Anita Riggio and stitched by You Yang



This moving and poignant tale depicts life in a refugee camp in Thailand. Mai lives there with her grandmother and spends her days listening to the Hmong women as they stitch and talk, making pa'ndau—brightly colored story cloths—to sell to traders. Mai wishes she, too, could make a beautiful pa'ndau, but struggles both with finding a story and perfecting her stitchery. By going back into her own brief and tragic past, she finds a story to stitch—one of hope and faith in the midst of war and detention.

*Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People and War* by Yukio Tsuchiya



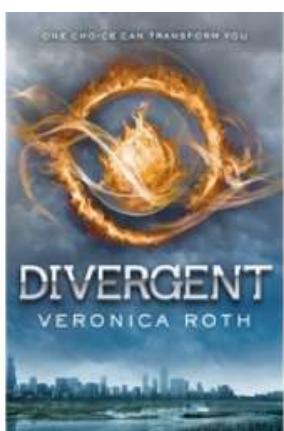
A zookeeper recounts the story of John, Tonky, and Wanly, three performing elephants at the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo. Bombs are dropping on Tokyo and people will not be safe if the animals get out. By order of the army, the elephants are to be put down. Their keepers weep and pray that World War II will end so their beloved elephants might be saved. This story is an example of what happens when cultures collide.

**Activity—Discussion web.** This is a graphic organizer in which a question is posed, such as, “There are times when orders should not be followed.” On one side, write arguments in favor of the statement. On the other side, write arguments against it. After group discussion, write a conclusion at the bottom.

## Dystopian Novels

A dystopia is a community or society that is in some important way undesirable or frightening. It is literally translated as “not-good bad-place” and represents the opposite side of utopia. Such societies appear in many artistic works, particularly in stories set in the future. Dystopian fiction features dehumanization, totalitarian governments, environmental disaster, or other characteristics associated with a cataclysmic decline in society. Dystopian fiction provokes thought in readers about how they would respond under similar circumstances.

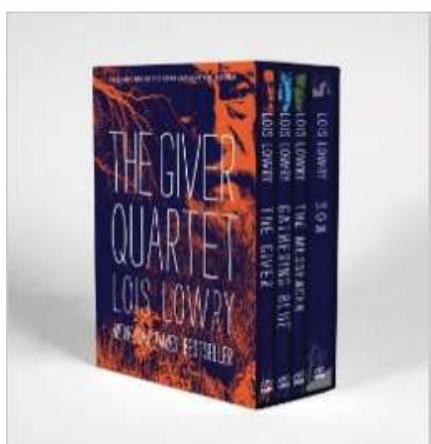
## *The Divergent Trilogy* by Veronica Roth



In Beatrice Prior's dystopian Chicago world, society is divided into five factions, each dedicated to the cultivation of a particular virtue: Candor (the honest), Abnegation (the selfless), Dauntless (the brave), Amity (the peaceful), and Erudite (the intelligent). Once a year, all 16-year-olds must select the faction to which they will devote the rest of their lives. Beatrice makes a choice that surprises everyone, including herself. During the highly competitive initiation that follows, Beatrice renames herself Tris and struggles with extreme physical tests of endurance and intense psychological simulations. But Tris also has a secret she has kept hidden because she's been warned it could mean death. As unrest and conflict in the society grow, Tris learns that her secret might help her save those she loves.

**Activity—Personality types.** How do the factions compare to personality types like those of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® or similar personality tests? What happens when people are “typed” as narrowly as they are in Divergent? Is that a recipe for disaster? Do we do people a disservice to try to categorize them? What benefit is there to having people of mixed strengths and weaknesses work together to accomplish tasks?

## *The Giver Quartet* by Lois Lowry



This series includes *The Giver*, *Gathering Blue*, *Messenger*, and *Son*. Jonas lives in a dystopian world in which children are given their work assignments at age 12. Babies are manufactured—carried by young women called vessels and then assigned to couples. “Failure to thrive” babies and old people who are no longer useful are “released,” i.e. killed. When Jonas learns that baby Gabe is set for release, he steals him and escapes. In subsequent books, readers learn about other villages in a world changed by some unnamed disaster. The characters all come together in *Son*, in which Gabe’s birth mother goes through a harrowing adventure to find him.

**Activity—Text connections.** As students read, ask them to record their text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections for later discussion.

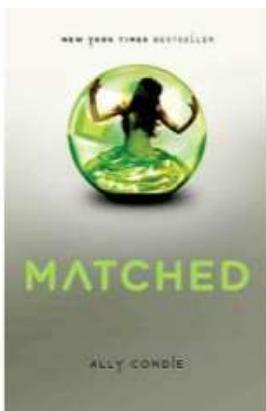
*The Hunger Games Trilogy* by Suzanne Collins



The nation of Panem arose from the ruins of a place once known as North America. Panem contains a shining Capitol surrounded by twelve outlying districts. Long ago the districts waged war on the Capitol and were defeated. The surrender terms force each district to send one boy and one girl to appear in an annual event called The Hunger Games, a fight to the death on live TV. Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen saves her sister, Prim, by volunteering to represent District 12 in her place.

**Activity—Critical literacy discussion.** This type of discussion takes a closer look at power relationships among characters. Who has a voice in Panem? Who doesn't? What power relationships are revealed in the story? What ideologies shape the discourse in the society?

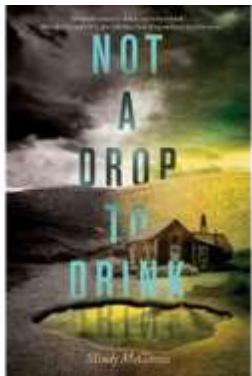
*The Matched Trilogy* by Ally Conde



Cassia has always trusted the Society to make the right choices for her: what to read, what to watch, what to believe. So when Xander's face appears on the screen at her Matching ceremony, Cassia thinks he must be her ideal mate...until she sees Ky's face flash for an instant before the screen fades out. She is told it was a glitch, but Cassia begins to doubt the Society's infallibility and begins questioning their authority and motives.

**Activity—Cubing.** Create cubes with the following sides:  
Describe it, Compare it, Associate it, Analyze it, Apply it, Argue for it.  
Use these to analyze Cassia's Society.

*Not a Drop to Drink* by Mindy McGinnis



In a frontier-like world where water has become the most precious commodity, teenage Lynn has been taught to defend her pond against every threat, especially people looking for a drink. Though she and her mother are surviving, they live an isolated and lonely life. But when strangers appear and her mother is killed, Lynn must reach out to others to survive.

**Activity—Writing roulette.** This is a free-write strategy. Each student starts a story, perhaps a prequel of how water became scarce or a sequel of what would happen next. After a preset time, students pass their paper to their neighbor, who adds to the story. After a set number of exchanges, the original owners can see how their idea developed.

### **Works of Fiction or Fantasy**

In order for fiction or fantasy to work to develop empathy and Theory of Mind, the characters must be multi-dimensional, often conflicted. The author evokes caring for the characters in readers through the use of powerful words, literary devices, and vivid imagery. The author may also offer deliberate commentary on larger social and/or political issues or may focus on an individual character to explore some part of the human condition. These are writerly stories, in which the reader enters the world of the story and is swept along with the characters and events. Many of these stories are multilayered, with many characters that readers can relate to, love, root for, hate, laugh with and at, and model themselves after. Sometimes there are conflicted characters that may appear one way to readers, but then turn out to be different.

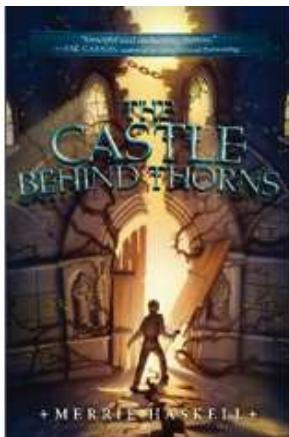
## *The Harry Potter Books* by J. K. Rowling



This series explores the growth of Harry Potter from age 11-17. Harry is a complex character who has to adjust to the magical world and then to the fact that the evil Lord Voldemort wants to kill him. Finally, he must make the ultimate sacrifice for the people he loves. Harry doesn't have easy answers and often feels unprepared for the tasks set before him. He demonstrates characteristics like loyalty, perseverance, caring, compassion, and bravery. Other characters, like Professor Snape are slowly revealed to be different from Harry's initial perceptions of them. J. K. Rowling created a Victorian-like world that readers can truly live in as they read.

**Activity—Choosing houses.** Each of the houses in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry represents certain characteristics/attributes. Discuss characteristics you would focus on if you could create houses in your school and why. What animals might you select as metaphors for those characteristics?

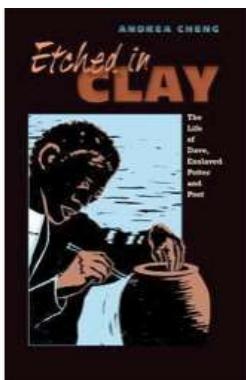
## *The Castle behind Thorns* by Merrie Haskell



Sand wakes up in the abandoned castle he lives near. An earthquake split the castle and an impenetrable wall of thorny brambles surrounds it. There is no way in or out. Sand, an apprentice blacksmith, discovers that everything in the castle was split during the sundering. He sets about mending things, including a young girl in a crypt, who comes back to life. Together, he and the girl, Perrotte, heir to the castle, try to figure out how to free themselves. In the process, both must change.

**Activity—Sundering and mending.** The metaphor of sundering and mending is powerful in this book. Ask students to find passages that explore this metaphor. Discuss how writers use metaphor to show rather than tell. Then, students can apply this to a story of their own.

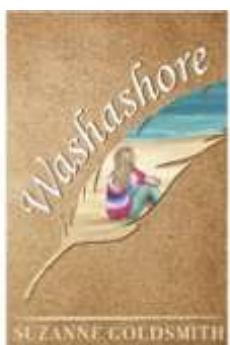
*Etched in Clay: The Life of Dave, Enslaved Potter and Poet* by Andrea Cheng



Sold at auction to Harvey Drake, owner of Pottersville Stoneware Manufactory, Dave showed remarkable aptitude for making pottery. His largest containers could hold 40 gallons or more. Though South Carolina law forbade slaves to be literate, Drake gave Dave a copy of Webster's blue speller. He taught himself to read and began signing his pots and writing little poems on them. The pots that remain today were the inspiration for this novel. Dave would appreciate that Cheng chose to write his story in poetry. She also created lovely woodcuts to illustrate it.

**Activity—Power of poetry.** Discuss why Cheng wrote Dave's story in poetry. How does poetry enhance understanding and raise empathy? What techniques do poets use in their craft? Poems often provide brief glimpses or snippets of story. How do these come together to tell the story of Dave? What does the reader have to fill in that is not in the text?

*Washashore* by Suzanne Goldsmith



Clem, whose parents are ostensibly separated due to work, is temporarily living on Martha's Vineyard in the early 1970's. She struggles to fit in as a washashore, a derogatory name for outsiders. Her desire to find out about a dead osprey leads to friendship with Daniel, a classmate involved in local efforts to bring up the osprey population. As Clem gradually realizes that her own family is unraveling, she finds new purpose. Information about the work and impact of Rachel Carson, as well as about ospreys, is woven seamlessly into the narrative.

**Activity—Dinner party.** Ask students to take on the roles of characters in this book and interact as if they met at a dinner party. This will allow students to explore point of view and its impact on stories.

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