

Taking Action: Inviting Diversity into Our Classrooms through Literature

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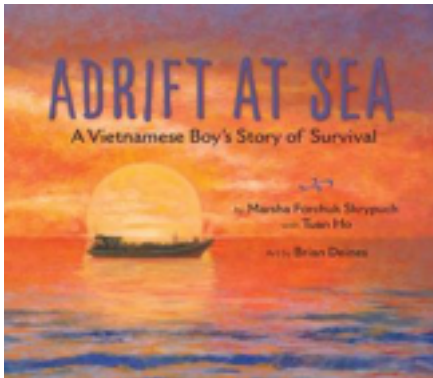
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So much recent attention has been focused on the need for quality books featuring diverse characters, themes and settings. While parents and teachers may look to annual book lists selected for the International Literacy Association's Notable Books for a Global Society, the United States Board on Books for Young People's Outstanding International Books, and the Jane Addams Peace Association's Children's Book Awards, there are several new trade books for young readers that seem perfectly poised to help readers explore the meaning of diversity as well as learn more about the wide world around them. Here are some recent favorites that explore some territory previously untrammelled.

Grades K-3



Adrift at Sea: A Vietnamese Boy's Story of Survival. (2016). Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch with Tuan Ho. Illus. by Brian Deines. Toronto, ON: Pajama Press.

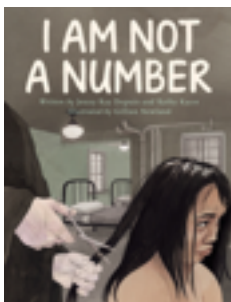
The end of the war in Vietnam brought peace to the once-divided country, but also new worries for those South Vietnamese who had supported the Americans. The first picture book of its kind, this one tells the story of six-year-old Tuan Ho and his family's desperate flight to freedom in 1981. The family slips away during the night, first by land and then by sea. But the overcrowded fishing boat on which they are traveling has short rations, they grow hungry and thirsty in the relentless heat as the boat leaks, and then its engine stalls as they drift for days before being rescued. Certain to touch the hearts of anyone who has sought sanctuary in another country even while missing their homeland, the book provides some context to readers unfamiliar with what happened at the end of the Vietnam War. The illustrations, created with oil paint on canvas, alternate pages filled with bright colors splashed with the sun's brutal heat with those covered with dark tones that highlight the family's fears as they try to outrun bullets at the start of their journey.

The book also contains family photographs, showing them during the period of their escape and now as well as historical notes explaining what led to the family's flight from Vietnam to Canada. This well-written account of bravery at a young age takes readers inside the hearts and minds of Tuan's family.



As a Boy. Plan International. (2016). Toronto, ON: Second Story Press.

Being a boy means different things according to what part of the world in which one lives. But in some places, not only do boys have certain life choices and enjoy some freedoms that girls do not have, but they also must make difficult decisions and sometimes shoulder certain responsibilities. Written and photographed by members of Plan International, a charity whose work focuses on improving children's lives, this photo essay is filled with large, colorful images of boys from various countries as they go about their daily lives. The text describes how a thoughtful boy would want the same freedoms he has for his mother, his sister, and his daughter. After all, as the text reminds readers, self-determination and having choices in life should be basic rights for everyone. Small captions indicate what country is represented in the photos. This brief book gently highlights some of the inequities that still exist in our world, while undoubtedly sparking discussion about the different lives of boys and girls and the impact an education might have on these youngsters' possible futures.



I Am Not a Number. (2016). Jenny Kay Dupuis & Kathy Kacer. Illus. Gillian Newland. Toronto, ON: Second Story Press.

Boarding schools in the United States and Canada often existed to erase their residents' cultural identity, including their language, names, and ties to family traditions. At

the tender age of eight, Irene Couchie and her two brothers are forced to leave their Northern Ontario home to attend a boarding school. The author refers to it as “kidnapping,” and in many respects it is. At the school the Anishinaabe girl endures all manner of cruel treatment at the hands of the nuns who run the school. Not only is she assigned a number instead of a name, thus attempting to erase her individuality, she is punished for using her own language, has her hair cut, and is burned with hot coals to teach her a lesson. To make matters worse, she is not allowed to communicate with her parents during the time she is at the school. Somehow, she and her brothers survive, but not without scars. Once they return home for the summer, her halting use of her own language, and revelation of what life at school was like prompt her parents to find a way to avoid sending her back to school. The text is heartfelt and moving, and the watercolor illustrations show the family’s affection for one another and the determination with which their father, a chief of the community, faces down the agent when he arrives. Back matter includes photographs of the family, including the author’s grandmother, and additional information on the Canadian residential schools that existed for more than a century, going about the cruel business of systematically separating youngsters from their own culture with little regard for the consequences and long-term effects.



Mama the Alien/Mama la Extraterrestre. Rene Colato Lainez. (2016). Illus. Laura Lacamara. New York, NY: Children’s Book Press/Lee & Low Books.

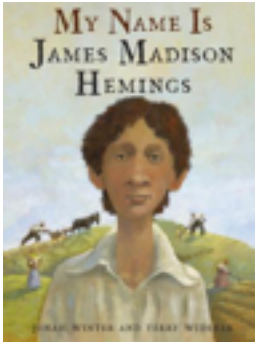
Although this picture’s book title and cover may lead readers to think it’s about aliens or extraterrestrials, it examines a different type of aliens than those featured in science fiction titles. In fact, the story functions as a clever and humorous way to introduce the ideas of immigration and citizenship to young readers while reminding them that words often have more than one meaning. In this particular bilingual story, after Sofia sees her mother’s alien card when it falls out of her purse, she wonders if she, too, might be part alien. After all, her father doesn’t have an alien card. Like any good student, Sophia heads to the library where her library research leads her to conclude that her mother must be hiding the parts that make her an alien, a notion that seems even more likely

after she overhears a conversation between her parents and sees what she thinks is her mother's alien form in the dark. As it turns out, she's completely off base, and her mother is actually preparing for her citizenship ceremony. The acrylic and collage illustrations feature scenes that show Sophia's imagination at work while the text serves up an easy-to-digest story about an assumption many children might make about the word "alien." Containing additional information about Resident Alien cards, often called green cards, this book offers an excellent but amusing introduction to the topic.



The Three Lucys. Hayan Charara. (2016). Illus. Sara Kahn. New York, NY: Lee & Lowe.

The destruction of war and the conflict between two different sides can be especially confusing for youngsters. When Luli, a young Lebanese boy, and his family are unable to return from a visit to Beirut to their home on the border between Lebanon and Israel due to violence in the area, the boy is especially worried about the three cats that live with his family--Lucy the Fat, Lucy the Skinny, and Lucy Lucy. Returning to the area after seeking refuge with other family members for a month, Luli is heartbroken to find that only two of his cats have survived. Appropriately, the author describes his feelings about the loss of Lucy Lucy in this way: "My heart feels as heavy as an apple falling from a tree" (unpaged). Even while mourning his lost cat and watching his town being rebuilt, Luli finds solace in his memories and his dreams of a world no longer at war. The text and watercolor illustrations beautifully capture his feelings and this experience. Drawing from his own family's experiences, the author includes a note providing background on the July War of 2006 that is at the story's heart. Although the book is filled with sadness, it also contains elements of hope and shows the resilience of Luli and those around him.



My Name is James Madison Hemings. Jonah Winter. (2016). Illus. Terry Widener. New York, NY: Schwartz & Wade.

Although the architect of the Declaration of Independence, President Thomas Jefferson, was a firm advocate of fairness, it is clear that there was a conflict between his written words and his own actions. Told from the point of view of James Madison Hemings, his son with his slave, Sally Hemings, this picture book describes his life as one of his younger children who were not freed until his father's death. Although he knew who his father was and was treated differently than the other slaves, that somewhat easier treatment did not make up for not being free. Even receiving some form of education and training as a carpenter did little to atone for his father's neglect. Afterward, Madison makes his living as a carpenter, never taking his father's name, and continuing to wonder about his own father's complexity and unfathomable ways. The handsome acrylic illustrations effectively evoke the confusion of Madison as he grew up living in the shadow of a great man whose greatness seems never to have been extended to this, his second family. In the book's images, Madison is often depicted as peering around corners or looking through windows, on the edge of Jefferson's life. The topic is handled gracefully and appropriately here, clearly an important part of this nation's complex and conflicting history concerning race. In some respects, Madison's story is every bit as important as his progenitor's.



Save Me a Seat. Sarah Weeks & Gita Varadarajan. (2016). New York, NY: Scholastic Press

The alternating voices of two fifth grade boys from very different backgrounds tell a story in which they realize they have more in common than might be noticed at first. A recent transplant to New Jersey from Bangalore where he was popular and at the head of his class, Ravi Suryanarayanan now must contend with various misunderstandings, including those of his teacher, Mrs. Beam, who thinks he needs help with English. His classmate, Joe Sylvester, has watched Ravi's struggles, and even though he has always lived in the same place all his life, he struggles with school because various noises cause him to lose focus. At first, Ravi is sure that Dillon Samreen, the only other Indian in his class, will be his friend. But Dillon is a bully desperate for attention. His offer of friendship turns out to be sly trickery with Ravi even being labeled a "curryhead" by his would-be friend. Interestingly, Ravi assumes that all of his misfortunes are due to Joe. The book is organized according to the school's lunch offerings, which in and of itself, offers much to consider since Ravi brings his lovingly-prepared meals from home even while being tricked into eating meat by Dillon. The title clues readers to the inevitable ending in which these most unlikely friends just may end up saving each other a seat at lunch and watching each other's backs from now on. Perfect for raising questions about the assumptions we make about others and heightening cultural awareness, this is a great read aloud that vividly describes some of the silly reasons youngsters have for teasing one another; for instance, Dillon's calling Joe "Puddy Cat" because of his last name after the cartoon cat Sylvester who lisped.



Book Uncle and Me. Uma Krishnaswami. (2016). Toronto, ON: Groundwood Books.

Nine-year-old Yasmin loves nothing more than to read, and she ambitiously determines to read a new book every day. A free lending library operated by Book Uncle, a retired teacher, offers her many choices until its existence is threatened by the town's mayor. Despite her youth and inability to vote, Yasmin refuses to let this injustice continue, and mounts a campaign involving her friends, family, and neighbors as well as some unlikely politicians, to make things right again. Readers will enjoy watching the campaign gain momentum, and while they may be just as confused as Yasmin at the start of the story when Book Uncle recommends a folk tale to his young patron, its significance and relevance will be readily apparent as the story picks up speed. This Canadian import, originally published in India, offers some insight into the culture and daily life of Yasmin's world. Readers should prepare to fall in love with this bibliophile who refuses to let the system get her down and chooses to make a difference in the world. Filled with humor, many offbeat characters and situations, and true heart, the book is a tribute to the power of reading and someone's desire to make books accessible to all. Having illustrations sprinkled throughout the book enables readers to connect readily with the characters and the setting.

Grades 7-8



Every Falling Star: The True Story of How I Survived and Escaped North Korea. SungjuLi & Susan McClelland. (2016). New York, NY: Amulet Books.

Eleven-year-old Sungju's idyllic life in Pyongyang, Korea is interrupted in 1994 when his family is forced to move to the small town of Gyeong-Seong. Conditions are bleak there, and both parents disappear while foraging for food in the woods and streets. In order to survive, Sungju bands with seven other homeless boys who steal whatever they can and hone their fighting skills in order to intimidate others. Eventually, they roam from town to town since the local merchants have become too leery of them, and the pickings are slim even for skilled thieves like they have become. The story of how a sheltered, innocent boy must harden himself in order to survive is well told, describing vividly the desperate straits to which hunger will force someone. Readers are sure to examine their own hearts and wonder what they might do in order to survive. While the account is gritty, honest, and incredibly detailed on many levels, it is also inspiring because of the loyalty and bonds shared by the author's unlikely created family and because Sungju always remained hopeful that things would change. This glimpse into life in North Korea two decades ago is powerful, compelling, and eye-opening, and will surely encourage readers to learn more about the political and economic situations in that country. Many passages are so vivid that readers will feel as though they, too, are shivering on the town's street alongside Sungju, facing loss, deprivation, and incredible loneliness but also finding moments of joy in the simplest pleasures, and determined to survive, come what may.

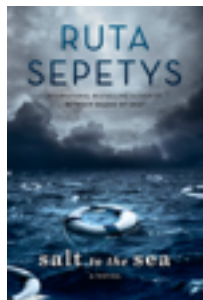
Grades 9-12



The Girl in the Blue Coat. Monica Hesse. (2016). New York, NY: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

Hanneke Bakker keeps her family financially stable in occupied Amsterdam in 1943 through her work in the black market of her city. Although she has a legitimate job, it's the procuring of hard-to-find objects that brings money to her employer, and Hanneke has become quite adept at avoiding the attention of the Germans who fill the city streets. As a favor to one of her customers, she reluctantly agrees to find the whereabouts of a missing Jewish teenager who had been hiding with the elderly woman. At first the mystery seems impossible to solve, but with help from her own contacts and the older brother of her boyfriend, Bas, who died earlier in the war, Hanneke unravels the mystery. However, each time she comes close to the truth, there is even more to be revealed. With the

revelation of missing girl's identity and the reasons for Mirjam and her family's betrayal, readers will be initially surprised, but then realize just how fallible human beings are. The author has created a wonderful, believable character in Hanneke whose evolution from uninvolved outsider to a participant in the resistance is fascinating to watch. Her own guilt over the death of Bas and the estrangement between Hanneke and her lifelong best friend, Elsbeth, add even more interest to this well-written historical fiction whose twists and turns will keep readers guessing almost to its last page as Hanneke tries desperately to save the girl in that distinctive blue coat.



Salt to the Sea. Ruta Sepetys. (2016). New York, NY: Philomel Books.

Following what worked in her earlier *Between Shades of Gray* (2011), Ruta Sepetys unearths a little known event from WWII and creates unforgettable characters whose interwoven fates matter to readers. Drawing inspiration from the largest maritime disaster in history--the torpedo sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*--this incredibly detailed historical fiction title will have readers looking for more information about the tragedy even while their hearts are breaking from what they've read here. Germany is clearly losing the war as WW draws to a close, and many citizens are fleeing the Russians who are marching inexorably through the European countryside. Like others, they are hopeful that a ship will take them to safety and a place where they can begin their lives anew. Four different teenagers, each with a different secret and different fear, are drawn together on the ship. Joana is filled with guilt while Florian, Emilia, and Alfred are concerned with fate, shame, and fear, respectively. The four different points of view allow readers to see the book's events from different perspectives as well as to meet the characters as they encounter one another, sometimes mistrustful and sometimes having to rely on one another. Alfred's own self-delusion about his choices and his role in the war are shown clearly in his imaginary letters to Lore, the girl back home. Even the secondary characters have their stories and particular charms, and readers won't soon forget blind Ingrid, gruff and selfish Eva, the shoe poet, and the wandering boy. This is a remarkable, moving account of an event once lost to history but now unearthed for the current generation to ponder. History teachers should include it as a supplemental text in a unit on WWII or the Holocaust while also pondering why the sinking of this ship and others similar to it received such little attention at the time while others such as the *Titanic* and the *Lusitania* were so widely publicized.



Watched. Marina Budhos. (2016). Wendy Lamb Books. New York, NY: Random House. Immigrant Muslim teen Naeem is sure that he's always being watched when he dashes through his Queens, New York neighborhood. If it isn't his hard-working parents from Bangladesh or their elderly neighbors, it might be someone he's trying to impress. While school is hardly a priority for him, getting ahead is. But when a friend leaves him holding the bag during a shopping expedition, he gets more attention that he ever wanted from the local cops. Determined to turn things around and make the best of a very sticky situation, Naeem ends up spying on those around him and searching websites for clues as to possible terrorist links in exchange for cash. Instead of his being watched, he has now become the watcher, but he is also keenly aware of how closely the police are watching him and expecting results. At first he sees himself as someone heroic, but as the lines between right and wrong seem to blur even more, he wonders about the price he's paying in order to appease these law enforcement officers, and the lies he is telling himself to keep doing the job he's agreed to do. Naeem is so lost at certain points in the book that it is doubtful that he can find his way back to the right path.