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# Why Kids and Teens Need Diverse Books and Our Recommended Reads

By The Editorial Team

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Think back to your middle or high school English class and the books you read. *Great Gatsby*? *Lord of the Flies*? Maybe *1984* or *Les Misérables*? While those are all important works, the literary canon has long been dominated by white authors, white perspectives, white characters — and those voices are often male. There are so many other voices we need to hear from.

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In the last several years, the publishing world has seen a surge in diverse authors, characters, and stories. While many are leading the charge to bring diverse literature into our communities, it's time to update the reading material in our classrooms, school libraries, and lesson plans to represent all of our learners at every level. Read on to hear from some amazing youth fiction writers, and to see our picks for books to add to your library this year.

exists, it's widely assumed that classics belong in schools while more modern literature often gets sidelined.

[Equal Read](#) researches the need for more literary diversity and works with schools and libraries to build their collections. According to their organization, "[The Handbook of Research on Literacy and Diversity](#), and others, clearly document that engagement is a key factor in determining literacy success. And, teachers and librarians repeatedly note that representative literature encourages engagement in learning. Indeed, engagement is a key predictor of overall academic success."

Instead of perpetuating the idea that so-called "classics" are the *only* literature belonging in classrooms — and steadily distancing our modern students from the joys of literature — isn't it time we ensure that the fiction we teach matches the world in which we live? In the last decade, the young adult and children's markets have noticeably expanded their offerings of diverse authors, characters, and stories.

"I've been watching the YA landscape since 2006 and publishing since 2014, and it's changed a lot in the last several years," says [Brandy Colbert](#), author of [Finding Yvonne](#). "The industry has been publishing more diverse titles and writers, but I'd like to see more diversity within diversity so that we're not just seeing one type of story from the marginalized communities who are finally getting a voice." Continued efforts to deepen and develop diversity in books will undoubtedly help young readers more deeply connect with literature.

It's logical to argue that students would be more engaged if they saw themselves represented in literature. After all, what is literature but a mirror of human experience? Reading the classics is wonderful, but solely providing stories about unrecognizable characters in time periods long past restricts the interconnection and inspiration our young people can and should feel from reading.

"It's important that more books by authors of color featuring diverse characters make it into schools because all students (no matter their race, ethnicity, or sexual background) should be able to relate to the characters in novels and see that their culture is being represented in literature," says [Tiffany Brownlee](#), author of [Wrong in All the Right Ways](#), a modern YA retelling of Brontë's [Wuthering Heights](#). "As a teacher, I always try to look for ways to include novels by authors of color in my curriculum to expose my students to different lifestyles and cultures that they wouldn't normally be exposed to. And you'd be surprised at how high the level of engagement can rise when a student's race or culture is being taught in class. Let me just say, it soars!"

"Reading engagement is the foundation for building successful readers and a strong literacy environment," says Carrie Kondor, EdD, Associate Professor and Reading Endorsement Chair. "Diverse books are an essential component of increasing reading achievement for all students because of engagement. As humans, we seek out and enjoy connections. Students must have the opportunity to engage in texts that relate to their experiences, their cultures, and their interests."

## Empathy and representation

Studies have shown that reading fiction builds empathy. A 2013 study in the [American Psychological Association's journal \*Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts\*](#) discovered that when readers visualize scenes while reading stories, there is an actual and measurable surge of empathy. Imagine then the impact if schools were full of diverse books — providing a literary peek into the lives of not only students themselves but of those around them.

"A great story featuring diverse characters can change the lives of students yearning to find themselves in a book, and it can help other students learn about experiences outside of their own," said Nicole A. Johnson, Executive Director of [We Need Diverse Books](#), a nonprofit that provides grants to writers and works to change the publishing industry and provide more diverse books for classrooms. "Teachers and librarians are important champions of diversity in children's literature. When they increase the number of diverse books available on their shelves, they signal to children and the adults in their lives that everyone has a story to share and that representation matters."

"I think we need diverse books because we need to reflect the reality of our communities and that reality is a very diverse one," says author [John Green](#) as part of the [We Need Diverse Books Campaign](#). "While it's important to see yourself in stories — and I think lots of people don't see themselves in enough stories — it's also really important to see the *other*. One of the magical things about reading to me is that it helps me to imagine the life outside myself. When you don't see the lives of others in stories, it's difficult to imagine them complexly. I think that contributes to the essentializing of the other."

readers of realistic fiction want to read books where what is going on in the world is reflected back to them, says [Renée Watson](#), author of numerous books including [Piecing Me Together](#), which received a Coretta Scott King Award and a Newbery Honor. “As an author, I want to create work that helps young people face and cope with reality, not escape it. I believe books that center around children who are often underrepresented in literature affirms their experiences and whispers to them, ‘*You are not alone, your story matters.*’”

In an era of technological devices and near-constant stimulation, diversity in literature may be a pathway toward keeping literature relevant. “Relatable topics and topics of personal interest get teens to put down their phones and pick up a book. Anything that appeals to their personal lives and interests (romantic/friend-based/familial relationships/fantastical worlds/the LGBTQ community/etc.) makes a teen want to read,” says author [Tiffany Brownlee](#). “When the teen can relate to what they’re reading through the characters (with an emphasis on characters with diverse backgrounds), settings, or topics discussed in the book, it suddenly becomes so much more engaging for them. They get more out of a text when their diverse backgrounds are represented, and that’s what’s important. Not just getting them to read, but getting them to take something away from that experience, too.”

## Suggested YA novels

[All American Boys](#) by Jason Reynolds

[American Street](#) by Ibi Zoboi

[Calling My Name](#) by Liara Tamani

[Dear Martin](#) by Nic Stone

[I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter](#) by Erika L. Sánchez

[Little & Lion](#) by Brandy Colbert

[Love, Hate & Other Filters](#) by Samira Ahmed

[Marcelo in the Real World](#) by Francisco X. Stork

[The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime That Changed Their Lives](#) by Dashka Slater

[The Astonishing Color of After](#) by Emily X.R. Pan

[The Education of Margot Sanchez](#) by Lilliam Rivera

[The Hate U Give](#) by Angie Thomas

[The Sun is Also a Star](#) by Nicola Yoon

[Piecing Me Together](#) by Renée Watson

[The Dangerous Art of Blending In](#) by Angelo Surlmelis

[To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before](#) by Jenny Han

[Will Grayson, Will Grayson](#) by John Green and David Levithan

[Wrong in All the Right Ways](#) by Tiffany Brownlee

## Suggested middle-grade novels

[Amal Unbound](#) by Aisha Saeed

[Amina’s Voice](#) by Hena Khan

[Betty Before X](#) by Ilyasah Shabazz and Renée Watson

[Esperanza Rising](#) by Pam Muñoz Ryan

[Fish in a Tree](#) by Lynda Mullaly Hunt

[Front Desk](#) by Kelly Yang

[Habibi](#) by Naomi Shihab Nye

[Harbor Me](#) by Jacqueline Woodson

[Marcus Vega Doesn’t Speak Spanish](#) by Pablo Cartaya

[The Crossover](#) by Kwame Alexander

[The House That Lou Built](#) by Mae Respicio

[The First Rule of Punk](#) by Celia C. Pérez

[The Gauntlet](#) by Karuna Riazi

[The Poet X](#) by Elizabeth Acevedo

[The Stars Beneath Our Feet](#) by David Barclay Moore

## Eye-opening books for children

“All children need to see themselves and their peers in the stories shared and discussed at school. Kids of color need diverse books because so often they do not see themselves in literature and therefore feel marginalized, even invisible,” says [The Center for Collaborative Classroom](#), a nonprofit that provides professional learning for teachers. “White kids need diverse books because they see too much of themselves in literature and this may lead them to feel that they are the center of the world.” Children’s books teach children about humanity, society, culture, and life. Diversity in children’s literature is essential toward building a more compassionate world.

and diversity.”

## Suggested books for young readers

[Alvin Ho: Allergic to Girls, School, and Other Scary Things](#) written by Lenore Look, illustrated by LeUyen Pham

[Get Ready for Gabi](#) written by Marisa Montes, illustrated by Joe Cepeda

[Bobby vs. Girls \(Accidentally\)](#) written by Lisa Yee, illustrated by Dan Santat

[Juana and Lucas](#) written and illustrated by Juana Medina

[Rickshaw Girl](#) written by Mitali Perkins, illustrated by Jamie Hogan

[Shai & Emmie Star in Break an Egg!](#) written by Quvenzhané Wallis and Nancy Ohlin, illustrated by Sharee Miller

[The Great Cake Mystery: Precious Ramotswe's Very First Case](#) written by Alexander McCall Smith

[You Should Meet Katherine Johnson](#) written by Thea Feldman, illustrated by Alyssa Petersen

## Suggested picture books

[All Are Welcome](#) written by Alexandra Penfold, illustrated by Suzanne Kaufman

[Black Girl Magic: A Poem](#) written by Mahogany L. Browne, illustrated by Jess X. Snow

[Don't Call Me Grandma](#) written by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, illustrated by Elizabeth Zunon

[Drawn Together](#) written by Minh Lê, illustrated by Dan Santat

[Hot Hot Roti for Dada-Ji](#) written by F. Zia, illustrated by Ken Min

[I Am Enough](#) written by Grace Byers, illustrated by Keturah A. Bobo

[Last Stop on Market Street](#) written by Matt de la Peña, illustrated by Christian Robinson

[Let the Children March](#) written by Monica Clark-Anderson, illustrated by Frank Morrison

[Looking for Bongo](#) written and illustrated by Eric Velasquez

[Mixed](#) written and illustrated by Arree Chung

[Pink is For Boys](#) written by Robb Pearlman, illustrated by Eda Kaban

[The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq](#) written and illustrated by Jeanette Winter

[The Name Jar](#) written and illustrated by Yangsook Choi

[Dreamers](#) written and illustrated by Yuyi Morales



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