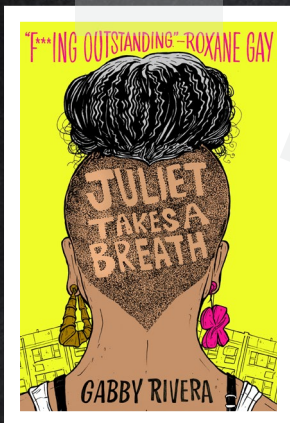
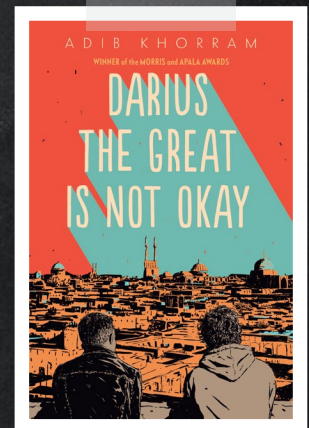
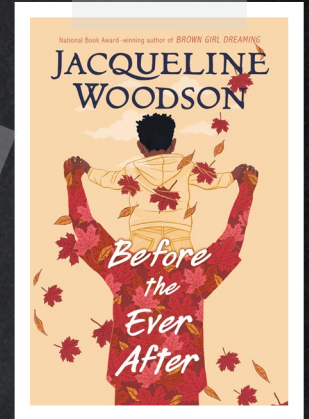


#DISRUPTTEXTS

# IN YOUR CLASSROOM WITH THESE 8 TEXTS!



In partnership with #DisruptTexts, learning guides for eight individual texts and how they align to the #DisruptTexts pillars!



**DEAR EDUCATOR,**

We are honored to partner up with #DisruptTexts to bring you this resource to help you bring equity to your classroom or library! These are, by no means, the only eight texts to use; but we hope they provide a scaffolding to bring change and choice for your students.

**SINCERELY,**

*Penguin Young Readers School + Library Marketing*



## WHAT IS #DISRUPTTEXTS?

Disrupt Texts is a crowdsourced, grass roots effort by teachers for teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve. Co-founded by Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Dr. Kimberly N. Parker, and Julia Torres, #DisruptTexts's mission to aid and develop teachers committed to antiracist/anti-bias teaching pedagogy and practices.

There are four core principles to #DisruptTexts:

1. **Continuously interrogate our own biases and how they inform our thinking.**

As teachers, we have been socialized in certain values, attitudes, and beliefs that inform the way we read, interpret, and teach texts, and the way we interact with our students. Ask: How are my own biases affecting the way I'm teaching this text and engaging with my students?

2. **Center Black, Indigenous, and voices of color in literature.**

Literature study in U.S. classrooms has largely focused on the experiences of white- (and male-) dominated society, as perpetuated through a traditional, Euro-centric canon. Ask: What voices—authors or characters—are marginalized or missing in our study? How are these perspectives authentic to the lived experiences of communities of color?

### 3. Apply a critical literacy lens to our teaching practices.

While text-dependent analysis and close reading are important skills for students to develop, teachers should also support students in asking questions about the way that such texts are constructed. Ask: How does this text support or challenge issues of representation, fairness, or justice? How does this text perpetuate or subvert dominant power dynamics and ideologies? And how can we ask students to wrestle with these tensions?

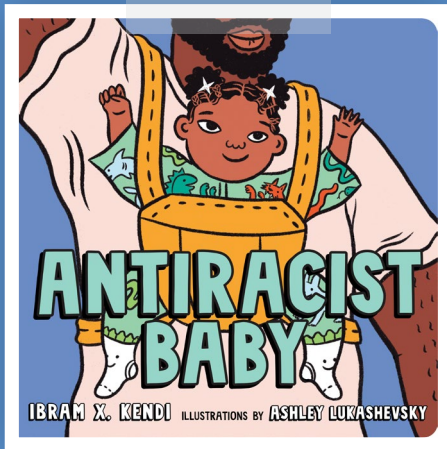
### 4. Work in community with other antiracist educators, especially Black, Indigenous, and other educators of color.

To disrupt and transform curriculum and instruction requires working with other educators who can challenge and work with us as antiracist educators. Ask: How can we collaborate to identify, revise, or create instructional resources (like this guide) that can center and do justice to the experiences of historically marginalized communities?

Each principle stands for actions that are culturally sustaining and antiracist. Through each principle, teachers aim to offer a curriculum that is restorative, inclusive, and therefore works toward healing identities and communities. As you read this guide, you'll see how each of these principles informs the approach recommended to teach the following:



**CLICK ON A COVER TO JUMP TO THE GUIDE!**



# ANTIRACIST BABY

by Ibram X. Kendi and Ashley Lukashevsky

## ABOUT THE BOOK

From the National Book Award-winning author of *Stamped from the Beginning* and *How to Be an Antiracist* comes a 9×9 picture book that empowers parents and children to uproot racism in our society and in ourselves, now with added discussion prompts to help readers recognize and

reflect on bias in their daily lives.

Take your first steps with *Antiracist Baby*! Or rather, follow *Antiracist Baby*'s nine easy steps for building a more equitable world. With bold art and thoughtful yet playful text, *Antiracist Baby* introduces the youngest readers and the grown-ups in their lives to the concept and power of antiracism. Providing the language necessary to begin critical conversations at the earliest age, *Antiracist Baby* is the perfect gift for readers of all ages dedicated to forming a just society.

## Considerations for Teachers

Before starting *Antiracist Baby* we encourage educators to interrogate their own biases. We know, both from current events and from long-standing social injustices, that racism has not gone away. It has only evolved. It's the water we all swim in. Thus, we must do personal, internal work so that we stop perpetuating this system.

In his adult book *How to Be an Antiracist*, Dr. Kendi argues that we are either racist or antiracist; there is no in-between. Because research has shown that babies as young as six months old show racial preferences, learning to be antiracist is work that even our youngest of children can and must do. Antiracism goes beyond universal platitudes to "be kind." Being kind does not mean we avoid seeing race, but that we celebrate racial differences. Furthermore, although we might teach our children that "anyone can do anything," we must also teach them that racist barriers exist that stop us all from being truly free—and that we have the power to change this.

We believe that with *Antiracist Baby*, teachers and children together can begin the process of understanding racial identity. The only way to remove the stigma and shame around talking about race is to normalize these conversations.

## Considerations for Teachers (cont.)

If you want to be successful, however, you have to do the work on yourself, first. Below are some ideas to consider:

- How we've been socialized to understand our own racial identity
- How we've been socialized to understand the racial identity of others
- Our understanding of racist practices & policies' function in our own lives
- Developing language around race, racism, and antiracism

Additionally, considering that the second principle in *Antiracist Baby* is about using your words when talking about race, be sure you have a range of descriptive, positive words to identify race, starting with your own. It is critical for teachers to model this language and behavior. Students will observe how you describe yourself and how normalizing difference is common and good. They will see your comfort and boldness in addressing race and sharing your identity, and hopefully, that will invite them to explore their own and become comfortable with sharing as well.

Lastly, we have been socialized to believe that BIPOC are not as populous as white people, a fact that is untrue. There are rich legacies of knowledge, wisdom, art, and literacy that belong to BIPOC but are often missing in white dominant culture. In your own experiences, how have you been socialized to see knowledge and wisdom belonging mostly (or only) to Western European society? How can you broaden your appreciation of the contributions of BIPOC to include writing, science, art, etc. so you can share them with your family? These are questions we invite you to think about and prepare yourself for before you start a class study of this book.

Using this text in the classroom is an important step in addressing racism with your students. It is a book that deals with the issue directly and offers you, the teacher, an opportunity to engage students meaningfully.

### Key Concepts and Vocabulary

These are words all featured in the book or present in ideas. Depending on the grade and ability level of your students, you may want to consider one of the following approaches to exploring vocabulary with them.

- |                          |               |              |               |
|--------------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| 1. Race                  | 5. Neutrality | 9. Access    | 13. Confess   |
| 2. Racism                | 6. Equity     | 10. Proclaim | 14. Disrupt   |
| 3. Antiracist/antiracism | 7. Equality   | 11. Diverse  | 15. Curious   |
| 4. Transform             | 8. Policies   | 12. Culture  | 16. Overcome  |
|                          |               |              | 17. Transcend |

## CONCEPTS

The words “race”, “racism”, and “antiracism” are critical for understanding this book. They, alone, require time and discussion. Students need to have a clear understanding of what these ideas are so they can fully appreciate the book and its message. Here are some questions to guide your preparation:

- What does “race” mean?
- What is racism?
- What does “racist” mean?
- What is culture?

The book also offers a great opportunity to discuss and understand the idea of justice. Your goal is not to instill in them what your notions of justice are, but to help them understand what the concept of justice is. Your classroom should be a place where they get to explore what actions need to be taken in order to reach that justice. Here are some questions to guide your preparation:

- How will you help them understand the definition of fair and unfair?
- How will you define “neutrality” for them?
- What is “access” and how is that limited for some?

## VOCABULARY

### PRE-READING

Spend time discussing and explaining the selected words before you begin. You can do so by having students work in pairs and guess meanings, then through discussion with you, determine a definition. They can share their learning with peers, and together, you add them to your word wall. Make sure to point them out when you encounter them as you read.

### DURING READING

As you read the pages, you pause and have students take notes or jot down the words they don't know. Make sure you also point them to the words from the list above if some are unknown to them. This strategy helps them notice words as they're reading and you can offer them lessons in using context clues to make meaning.

### POST READING

After completing the book, you can gather with students and, in partners, they can go back into the book and either select words they want to learn more about, or you can assign words from the list above. Students can then use the book as well as research in a dictionary to learn what the words mean. Together they can present their learning to the class and add the words to the word wall, if you have one.

## Themes

The following are possible themes to consider when teaching this book. You can explore the essential questions below with students as you walk through those themes.

### BEING ANTIRACIST REQUIRES ACTION.

Explore the difference between thoughts, feelings, and action. Help students understand that having positive thoughts about others isn't enough and doesn't equal action. Having positive or even loving feelings toward others also does not equal action. Only when one takes measured steps that lead to the palpable support of others is when action has been practiced.

### ACCEPTING AND VALUING DIFFERENCE IS IMPORTANT.

This is a great opportunity to teach about melanin and normalize differences among us. Use this book to answer commonly asked questions by students about skin colors, cultures, race, and ethnicities. You can also spend time researching these ideas with students and embedding geography discussions by studying maps to learn the sun, equator, and melanin.



Illustrations by Ashley Lukashovsky

## Key Concepts and Vocabulary

Rarely do picture books used in classrooms embrace the conversation about race and racism so openly as *Antiracist Baby*. Therefore, this book presents a great opportunity for teachers to boldly discuss with students. The book carries so many critical ideas and launching points for discussion. It can be used to explore the following ideas:

Use this text to explore the idea of action. Below is a list of questions you can use to discuss with students.

- What does kindness look like in action?
- What does respect look like in action?
- What does antiracism look like in action?
- What does it mean to demonstrate care for others?
- What is advocacy?
- What is the difference between kindness and antiracism?

Through these questions you nurture critical thinking and get students to think about their actions. One goal includes making sure that they understand that just because one is kind doesn't automatically mean they're antiracist.

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Use this text to explore the idea of policies. Through the book you can study what policies are, how rules are formed in our society, and how our government functions. Below is a list of questions you can use to discuss with students.

- What do you think a law is?
- What do you think a bill is?
- What laws and bills have been passed that either support or get rid of racist ideas?

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Use this text to explore the idea of humanity. One underlying idea of racism is that it requires a racist to dehumanize others and see them as less than the human they inherently are (Kendi). Therefore, part of antiracist pedagogy is to help young people admire and nurture the humanity in all of us. Below is a list of questions you can use to discuss with students.

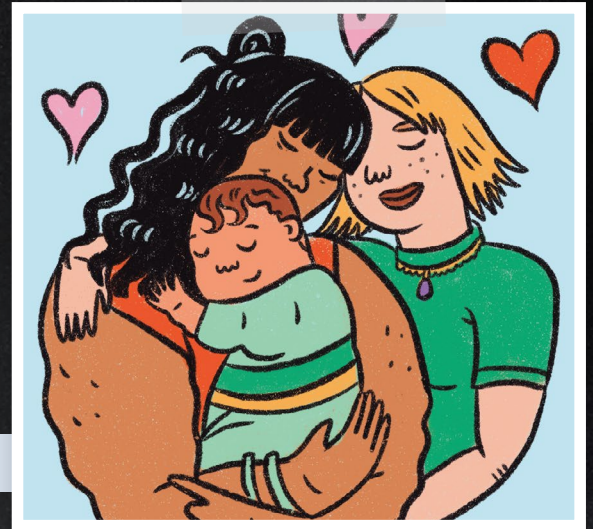
- How many skin tones do you notice in the room/in our class?
- How do you think we get different skin tones?
- What do you think about the differences we notice among us?

This is one way to begin normalizing differences and treating others with dignity and respect.



## Lesson Ideas

While the book is concise, particularly in comparison to the adult version, there is much to study and elicit from the reading of this picture book. There are many ideas present in each page both in the words used and the images drawn. The following are ideas present in the book that could drive lessons for critical study.



Illustrations by Ashley Lukashovsky

### MARCHES & PROTESTS

In the first page of the book we see a character at a protest. Show students pictures of young people and children at marches and protests from U.S. history and in other parts of the world. This study can inspire them to know that they are not too young to have beliefs and can be a part of historical movements.



Illustrations by Ashley Lukashovsky

### DIFFERENCES

Use this book to explore and normalize the differences in the room. Invite students to count how many languages are spoken, types of hair, heights, shoe sizes, colors of clothing, skin tones, etc. and celebrate the diversity in the room. Additionally, you can print blank characters or coloring pages for students and, using Bellen Woodard's colors from [More Than Peach Project](#), offer students the chance to practice coloring each character in different colors. This normalizes diversity of skin tone in their drawings and in their imagination.

### FAMILIES

Throughout the book we see babies and young children with their families. Talk to students about what they and their families have defined as some of their beliefs. Maybe send students home with one to two questions they can ask parents in order to come back and share what some of their family beliefs are. Have students share in class and create a chart outlining what all of these values are. Charting and visualizing this can help students to see the differences in values and consider other points of view.

## Lesson Ideas (cont.)

### UNFAIRNESS

Use this book to launch students into a correct and nuanced understanding of what fairness is. Help them understand when something is unfair versus when someone is simply mean to another. Invite them to role-play and think about what they would do if they witnessed unfairness in their presence. Offer students sentence stems for speaking up in the moment and then have those sentence stems up on the wall.

### TRUTH TELLING

Value #7 in the book is about confessing our racist beliefs and ideas. Invite students to understand the value of telling the truth and being honest. Help them understand why sharing when something is wrong is important and how adults can be of help to them in such cases. This could be another opportunity for role-play and practicing with sentence stems.

Picture books are often considered to be appropriate only for early childhood students. While this Teaching Guide focuses on lessons for the kindergarten through second-grade classroom, there are many ways to use this picture book with older students.

### UPPER ELEMENTARY

This group includes third through fifth grades, and one way to use this book with that age group is to treat it as a core text that you build a unit around with supplementary texts. For example, in this unit you might invite students to think about important historical figures who fought against racism in the United States and around the globe. Using excerpts from nonfiction, research, video clips, and speeches, students can learn about the history of this struggle against injustice.



Illustrations by Ashley Lukashovsky

## Lesson Ideas (cont.)

### MIDDLE SCHOOL

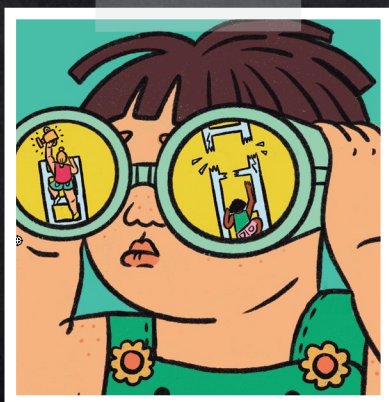
This group includes sixth through eighth grades, and one way to use this book is to invite students into a deep study of racist policies. Use this book to help students understand what makes a policy race-based and how many have been defeated. You can focus on large-scale Supreme Court cases as well as smaller, local cases, where racist laws and bills were challenged and defeated. Work in community with antiracist lawyers or advocates and welcome their stories into the unit or discussion.

### HIGH SCHOOL

This group includes ninth through twelfth grades, and similarly to the other groups, the book can be a tool for learning about antiracist movements against harmfully biased policies and laws. You can use this to build a similar unit as the one mentioned for middle school, but also engage in a rhetorical study of the book. Invite these students to think:

- What specific language changes did Kendi make from *How to Be an Antiracist* to *Antiracist Baby*?
- How did his audience determine his format, content, and structure?
- How true to his original message is Kendi in *Antiracist Baby*?

We encourage you to work in community by inviting a colleague or community member who is a local activist and can speak to antiracist work in that specific community. This book can be a powerful entry point into helping students understand the historical context of antiracist work as well as foundational concepts of language and literacy.



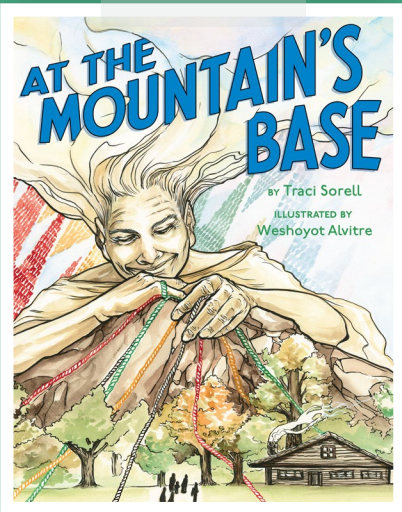
Illustrations by Ashley Lukashevsky

## Journal Prompts

Teaching Tolerance is an organization whose mission is to help teachers and schools educate children and youth to be active participants in a diverse democracy. They've outlined Social Justice Standards that we believe would be a great tool for studying this text. The Standards are divided into four domains: Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action. Each domain has a series of Anchor Standards that are excellent guides for teachers for how to embed this work into the curriculum and classroom community. Below are journal prompts all tied to the standards. Invite students to write and process what they're reading.

Ask students to answer the following prompts in their notebooks:

- What does it mean to be antiracist? How do you know if you're being antiracist? (*Action Anchor Standard, #17*)
- What are some rules you think might benefit some people over others? Why do you think that is? How should they change? (*Justice Anchor Standard, #12*)
- How would you define the word "stereotype"? What are some stereotypes you've heard of? How do you think stereotypes make people feel? (*Justice Anchor Standard, #11*)
- What are some fun and important differences you have from your classmates? What makes this diversity special? (*Diversity Anchor Standard, #6*)
- What are some cultural differences you've observed about another group? What was interesting to you and what was different from your own traditions or culture? What else would you like to learn about them? (*Diversity Anchor Standard, #7 and 8*)
- What are some racist or biased ideas you think you might have about others? Where do you think that came from? Why might those ideas be wrong? (*Justice Anchor Standard, #11*)
- What steps would you like to take to be more antiracist? What do you think you need to learn or do? (*Action Anchor Standard, #16 and 17*)
- How might our society be different if all babies were raised to be antiracist? What do you think is the author's dream for our country? (*Justice Anchor Standard, #12*)



# AT THE MOUNTAIN'S BASE

by Traci Sorell and Weshoyot Alvitre

## ABOUT THE BOOK

A family, separated by duty and distance, waits for a loved one to return home in this lyrical picture book celebrating the bonds of a Cherokee family and the bravery of history-making women pilots.

At the mountain's base sits a cabin under an old hickory tree. And in that cabin lives a family — loving, weaving, cooking, and singing. The strength in their song sustains them through trials on the ground and in the sky, as they wait for their loved one, a pilot, to return from war.

With an author's note that pays homage to the true history of Native American U.S. service members like WWII pilot Ola Mildred "Millie" Rexroat, this is a story that reveals the roots that ground us, the dreams that help us soar, and the people and traditions that hold us up.

## Considerations for Teachers and Students

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND RACIAL IDENTITY

This book by an Indigenous writer and illustrated by an Indigenous artist has a powerful message about family and sacrifice. In order to fully grasp the depth of what Sorell is trying to convey, it is important for educators to have an understanding of Indigenous history in the United States. While there are many Native Nations with different histories, there are many parallels. Most nations' land was stolen by the U.S. government. Most Nations' ancestors were brutally attacked and killed. Historically and systematically their voices have been erased from U.S. curricula and vilified when present. The power of Sorell writing this book from a point of view of grace, sacrifice, and honor is, therefore, an important perspective that must be cherished in classrooms and taught with care.

## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

Teachers should do a study of Indigenous identity, particularly, the Cherokee Nation. Additionally, they should be ready to discuss race and racism, as well as oppression in the case that questions arise or comments are shared by students. Making sure to tell the pain present in the story is important, but also teachers should focus on the strength of the characters, the power of their sacrifices, and the beauty of their unity in spite of their challenges. To present them as defeated and conquered (Tuck) is to represent them through a white gaze (Morrison). Therefore, celebrating the beauty featured in the story is the best way to celebrate the work Sorell has done and the voices she's presented us with.

The U.S. canons are exclusive. Not only do they exclude many voices, including women in general, they are intentionally exclusive of the voices of BIPOC. This reality is especially harmful in books that are themselves racist and present characters in problematic ways. We encourage that those books be replaced with better, more restorative, and truthful books. *At the Mountain's Base* represents a marginalized point of view widely excluded from the U.S. classrooms: Indigenous women. It is imperative that we teach this text on its own merit. There is a rich analysis that can be elicited from Sorell's words and deep conversations that teachers can explore during a study of this book. We encourage educators to consider placing this book as a core text in their curriculum.

Additionally, before starting *At the Mountain's Base* we recommend educators begin by reading for themselves the Author's Note in the back of the book. It will offer some context for comprehension and offer a purpose that will enable deep appreciation. Once read, we then recommend completing exercises with students that unearth some of their biases about pilots. Most students will share about male pilots and not even consider that women can be pilots. Once those conversations are had, it would be a great opening to read this book together.



Illustrations by Westhoyot Alvirre

## Key Concepts and Vocabulary

These are words all featured in the book or present in ideas. Depending on the grade and ability level of your students, you may want to consider one of the following approaches to exploring vocabulary with them.

1. Indigenous	5. Simmers	9. Demanding	13. Pleading
2. Matriarch	6. Savory	10. Battle	14. Beneath
3. Patriarch	7. Tending	11. Soars	15. Huddles
4. Weaving	8. Within	12. Defending	

### CONCEPTS

The first two words, “Indigenous” and “Matriarch,” are going to be very important to define and discuss with readers. The first word will explain and help students understand elements of the culture of the characters in the story. It also opens the door for conversations about Indigeneity to be present in the classroom. You may need to teach the phonics of the word, but most certainly teach the ideas of the word as well. Here are some questions to guide your preparation:

- What does the word “Indigenous” mean?
- What is the difference between citizens of Native Nations and other people born in the United States of America? (Answer: Citizens of Native Nations are dual citizens—of their tribe first and second of the United States since Native Nations preexisted the formation of the United States of America.)
- What are the names of Native Nations from the area where you live? There are over 570 Native Nations within the U.S. borders. How many can you name? Go to <https://native-land.ca/> for more!

The book also offers a great opportunity to discuss and understand the idea of a matriarch. As the word above, it impacts their understanding of cultures and societies. Your goal is not to invite them to choose a patriarchy or a matriarchy, but simply to help them know that these two social structures exist. Here are some questions to guide your preparation:

- What is a matriarchy?
- What is a patriarchy?
- Where in the book do we see that this home may be an example of a matriarchal family?



# VOCABULARY

## PRE-READING:

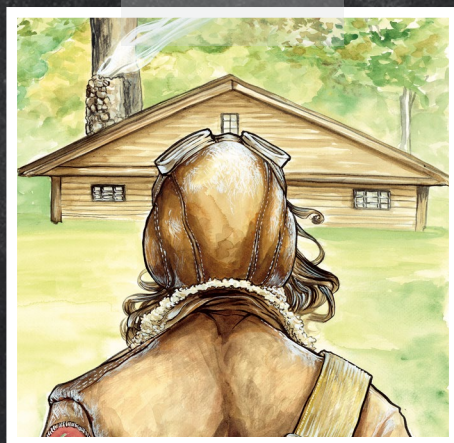
Spend time discussing and explaining the selected words before you begin. You can do so by having students work in pairs and guess meanings, then through discussion with you, determine a definition. They can share their learning with peers and together, you add them to your word wall. Make sure to point them out when you encounter them as you read.

## DURING READING:

As you read the pages, you pause and have students take notes or jot down the words they don't know. Make sure you also point them to the words from the list above if some are unknown to them. This strategy helps them notice words as they're reading and you can offer them lessons in using context clues to make meaning.

## POST READING:

After completing the book, you can gather with students and, in partners, they can go back into the book and either select words they want to learn more about, or you can assign words from the list above. Students can then use the book as well as research in a dictionary to learn what the words mean. Together they can present their learning to the class and add the words to the word wall, if you have one.



Illustrations by Westhoyot Alvirre



## Themes

Although the book is short, there is much that can be elicited from Sorell's work. The following are possible themes to consider when teaching this book.

*Family makes a home.*

- Explore how a home is a home because of the people that live there. Sometimes that consists of blood relatives and other times it's a collection of people who call themselves family. Talk about how the family in this book is bound together.
- Consider why this story focuses on intergenerational relationships between a grandmother and her grandchildren?

*Women pilots are important in society.*

- Spend time studying the Author's Note with students after they've read the story. Learn about Ola Mildred "Millie" Rexroat through research and subsequent discussion. Invite students to share what they've learned and even create crafts about the pilots.

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## Discussion Questions

Building thoughtful discussions around the subject presented by the book is important. Below are discussion questions you can ask students based on big ideas explored in the story.

*Family:* You can use this text to explore all types of families and the ways they interact. You can ask students the questions below.

- What makes families unique?
- How do some families differ from others?
- How does your family differ from the one in the book? How is it similar?

*War:* While this is a heavy and challenging topic, honesty with students goes a long way. They will want to know why the woman pilot is flying the plane and questions about war may come up, especially when you read the Author's Note. Therefore, some questions you can use to guide that conversation are below.

- Why do citizens of the Cherokee Nation and other Native Nations serve at higher rates than other people for their percentage of the United States population?
- What do you notice about the pilot's clothing? Why do you think safety is important?
- Why do countries go to war? What do you think about war?

## Discussion Questions (cont.)

- What are some important historical wars you have heard of? How did the war end?

*Love:* Paired with Matt de la Peña's *LOVE*, this text can be used to explore the way we express love. Invite students to think about how love is expressed in the book, but also in their own lives.

- How does the grandmother express her love for the granddaughter she misses?
- How do the rest of the women, and the young girl, express their love for the grandma?
- How does the pilot use her service to the country as an expression of love?



Illustrations by Wes Hoyot Alvitre

## Lesson Ideas

Finding lessons to teach from short picture books can be challenging, but Sorell has written a rich text that opens the door for much thinking and discussing. The following are ideas present in the book that could drive lessons for interdisciplinary learning and/or critical study.

### PILOTS & PLANES

Use this book to engage in an interdisciplinary study of flying, planes, and pilots. Spend time learning about planes and aerodynamics in a fun way. You can even make paper airplanes. Also, consider learning about how to be a pilot as well as safety precautions pilots must take in order to fly planes.

### MOUNTAINS

Use this book to do a geography study of mountains across the United States. What do the different mountain locations look like? Do some digital research and find pictures of homes, like cabins, in mountainous areas. Invite students to draw mountains and/or mountain settings.

## Lesson Ideas (cont.)

### HOMES

Invite students into a conversation about different types of homes. They can draw the home they live in and explore different types of structures from all around the world. They can also discuss how geography and setting determine the type of home they live in. Consider [this lesson](#) already available online.

### WEAVING

After getting some yarn and learning about some basic weaving techniques, offer students the chance to weave. Use a simple weaving technique to have open conversations about any topic of their choice. Talk about hobbies students have and allow them to see how using their hands can be a source of calm that can lead to focus. Help them understand how the grandma uses weaving to feel peace, stay calm, and focus on the arrival of her pilot daughter.

#### Resources for Cherokee finger weaving:

[OSIYO TV \(Cherokee Nation news program\) feature on Karen Berry, Cherokee Nation finger weaver](#)

[Western Carolina University video of Karen George, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians](#)

[Danielle Culp, Cherokee Nation finger weaver](#)

### CHEROKEE NATION

Traci Sorell is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. Lead students in a research project about Cherokee people, learning about their history and location. Help them identify their land on a map and invite them to trace their lived area as well. Consider teaching students some Cherokee traditions, values, and stories, either through supplementary books/texts or by finding videos online.

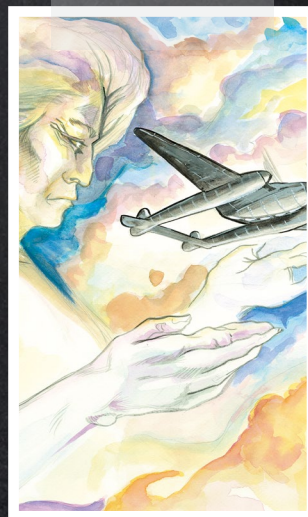
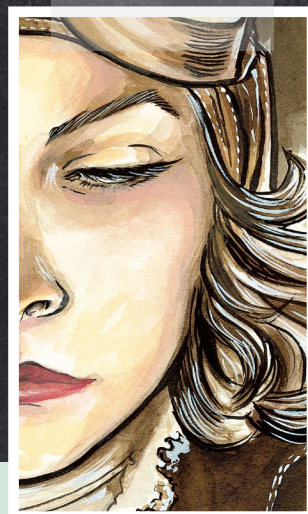
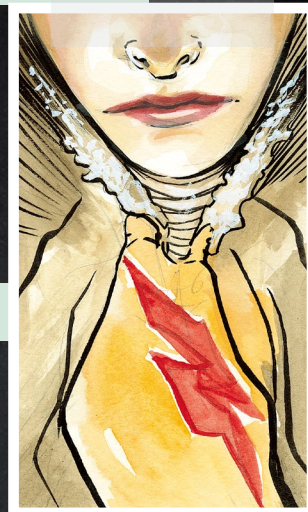
#### Resources:

[Cherokee Nation \(government website\)](#)

[Cherokee Phoenix newspaper \(independent newspaper\):](#)

[OSIYO TV, Voices of the Cherokee People](#)

[Cherokee Nation \(cultural tourism website\)](#)



## Lesson Ideas (cont.)

### CABINS & OVENS

Revisit the page where the book displays the oven in the cabin. While the book is set in World War II (1940s), there are Cherokee and other Indigenous people that still live in cabins and cook on wood stoves today, although not as many as back then. Help students learn about cabins and ovens. Help them understand how they function and keep rooms warm. You can also expand your study to include chimneys and fireplaces.

Picture books are often considered to be appropriate only for early childhood students. While this Teaching Guide focuses on lessons for the early childhood classroom, there are many ways to use this picture book with older students.



Illustrations by Weshoyot Alvitre

### POETRY

*At the Mountain's Base* is a circular poem because the story ends where it begins. Tell a story through your own circular poem. Type up this text, create a mindmap and craft your own poem story next to this one.

### UPPER ELEMENTARY

This group includes second through fifth grades, and one way to use this book with that age group is to treat it as a core text that you build a unit around with supplementary texts. For example, your unit might be around women pilots or women who defied stereotypes. After reading and discussing the book using ideas and lessons described above, students can work on learning about Ola Mildred Rexroat, Amelia Earhart, and Bessie Coleman, as well as other important history makers. All three of those women were pilots (Hazel Ying Lee and Maggie Gee (both Chinese American) as well as Verneda Rodriguez and Frances Dias (Latinx) were also POC WASP pilots. No Black women pilots were allowed to join, although they did try out. Millie was the only Native pilot). No Black women pilots were allowed to join, although they did try out. Millie was the only Native pilot. The goal in such a unit would be to study lesser-known people in history, focus on people who defied stereotypes, and welcome marginalized voices into the classroom. One way to work in community is to welcome a BIPOC and/or antiracist art teacher. They can offer your students an understanding of Indigenous artwork as featured by the weaving in the book. Another idea might be to welcome a BIPOC and/or antiracist pilot who can speak to the dangers experienced by pilots and help students understand the risk the pilot character was making.

## Lesson Ideas (cont.)

### MIDDLE SCHOOL

This group includes sixth through eighth grades, one way to use this book is to invite students into a deep study of gender-based social expectations. You can launch your study by helping them have conversations about what they think society expects of girls/women. They can then talk about the way the pilot in the book might defy those expectations by doing what she believes is right for herself and her country. The rest of the unit can include studying stories of individuals in history that modeled these behaviors. Additionally, students can also learn about how patriarchy is not the only way to organize a society as evidenced by the Cherokee Nation and many other Native Nations including those around them, such as the Muscogee, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chickasaw. A child's clan came through their mother, thus defining their responsibilities to others around them. Women owned the homes and agricultural lands, too. The Cherokee Nation took care to educate both boys and girls, and in these ways, too, they offer students a vision of other ways of thinking about society. This is how we decolonize our lessons and learnings and offer young people a new, more inclusive lens that expands their national and world views. Learners can demonstrate their new understandings by writing their own children's book, narrative essay, or oral presentation where they talk about the skills explored in the unit.

### HIGH SCHOOL

This group includes ninth through twelfth grades, and similarly to the other groups, the book can be a tool for learning about Indigenous women or voices and you can start with this book that might function as an accessible entry point for all students. After reading the book, the group dialogue might include discussion about why Indigenous voices might be widely excluded from U.S. classrooms. You could incorporate research and statistics to show what voices/books are included and how Indigenous ones are not. You can reach out to a social studies or history teacher and welcome them to your study to help students understand from a historical perspective. You can also include excerpts from *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States for Young People* adapted by Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese to demonstrate some of the history experienced by different Indigenous nations, particularly the ones the author and illustrators are citizens of. This book can be a powerful entry point into helping them understand the sacrifices Indigenous people have been making in the US since its inception as well as welcoming an often marginalized perspective.

## Journal Prompts

Students will find moments in the story that catch their attention and/or they can relate to. Welcoming some time for them to reflect as they're reading, or after they've read, is a good metacognitive skill for them to develop. They can think about how the story is impacting them, or it can be a time to make direct connections between themselves and a character. Invite them to journal and process what they're reading.

Ask students to answer the following prompts in their notebooks:

- What does your family at home look like? What people does it include? How is it similar to the family in the book? How is it different?
- As you read, did you notice the emotions of the characters? If so, how do you think they feel and why? How would you feel if you were in their shoes?
- The pilot in this book is probably a hero to her family. Who is your hero? Why are they a hero to you? What makes them special? If you could write a letter to your hero, what would you say?
- The grandmother in the book spends her time weaving. Do you have a family tradition that your grandmother or someone else in your family does? Describe the hobby or tradition and talk about why you think it's important to them.
- There are many people who have dreams, like the woman in the book who was a pilot. What is your dream? What would you like to do when you grow up?
- Do you have a hobby or craft you like to do? If not, what do you like to do with your free time? If so, what is the hobby and can you include a drawing of yourself doing that hobby?
- Image a cabin at the base of a mountain. Tell a story of what's happening in that cabin. Include details about who lives there and why.
- Look at the cover of the book. What do you think it means? Why do you think the illustrator put that image on the cover? How does it relate to the images inside the book?

## Extension Activities

*At the Mountain's Base* presents teachers with an interesting opportunity to incorporate interdisciplinary activities. These can be fun and engaging ways to go beyond the text and dig a bit further into the ideas it presents.

In this book, the grandmother weaves. You can use that interest to explore the presence of weaving in various Indigenous cultures and even spend time learning about weaving and textile industries in early American history. Bring in yarn or other crafts and invite students to get crafty as a way to bring the book's details to life.

Use this book to learn about famous and lesser-known women pilots. This text presents a great opportunity to explore this subject and teach children about important and lesser-known women in history. Lead young students in research about women who have been pilots both in the army and in private companies. Invite them to write about them, make videos, or draw about them.

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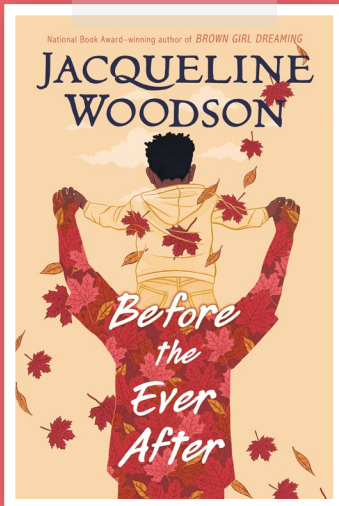
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# BEFORE THE EVER AFTER

by Jacqueline Woodson

## ABOUT THE BOOK

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD WINNER JACQUELINE WOODSON'S STIRRING NOVEL-IN-VERSE EXPLORES HOW A FAMILY MOVES FORWARD WHEN THEIR GLORY DAYS HAVE PASSED AND EXAMINES THE COST OF PROFESSIONAL SPORTS ON BLACK BODIES.

For as long as ZJ can remember, his dad has been everyone's hero. As a charming, talented pro football star, he's as beloved to the neighborhood kids he plays with as he is to his millions of adoring sports fans. But lately life at ZJ's house is anything but charming. His dad is having trouble remembering things and seems to be angry all the time. ZJ's mom explains it's because of all the head injuries his dad sustained during his career. ZJ can understand that—but it doesn't make the sting any less real when his own father forgets his name. As ZJ contemplates his new reality, he has to figure out how to hold on tight to family traditions and recollections of the glory days, all the while wondering what their past amounts to if his father can't remember it. And most importantly, can those happy feelings ever be reclaimed when they are all so busy aching for the past?

## Considerations for Teachers and Students

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND POETRY AND NOVELS IN VERSE

This novel has a unique structure in that it is a story told in vignettes in poetic form. In the same way that we remember events as snippets of time, an image, a scent, song lyrics, or the way someone's voice made us feel, this novel is made of poems that capture these moments. Readers should learn to examine each of the poems as snapshots in time, each with their own distinct elements, e.g. word choice, tone, imagery, rhyme (or the absence of it), and meter. Both individually and collectively they work to tell the story of ZJ's memory coming together as his father's breaks apart. Study the poems thematically, as the study of individual characters, or as a timeline of events. Readers may find it useful to use TP-FASTT—Title (significance pre-reading), Paraphrase, Figurative Devices, Attitude (or Tone), Shift (in tone, subject, diction), Title (revisit significance post-reading), Theme—to analyze each poem, or a series of poems, in order to make



## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

greater meaning. Additionally, some review of [common poetic terms](#) will help readers identify changes in word choice or syntax that may have important significance.

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

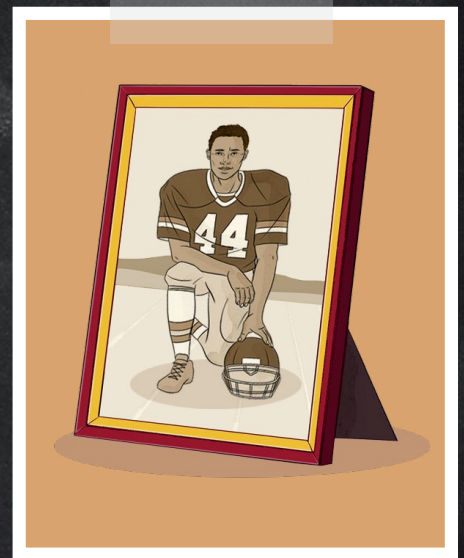
ZJ belongs to an African American family living in Maplewood, New Jersey. Some of the struggles that the family faces are due to the allure of economic mobility and social status associated with a professional sports career. ZJ mentions many times that he expects to have a career just like his father, until he experiences firsthand the cost of choosing to be a professional football player.

Around 70% of the NFL's players are Black. This overrepresentation is troubling because only 9% of league office managers are Black, and of the team CEOs and owners, 0% are Black. So, essentially, all of the risk and physical consequences of professional football fall upon the bodies of the Black players, while white team owners reap the financial and long-term professional rewards.

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND MENTAL HEALTH, ATHLETICISM, AND HEROISM

Some of the mythology constructed around professional sports includes the idea that professional athletes recover from injuries before returning to the game. In *Before the Ever After*, Woodson dismantles this by addressing the disconnect between dreams and reality. The reality is that professional athletes often do not recover from their injuries completely, but instead, they return to the game as soon as possible because the length of professional athletes' careers is often short. In fact, [the average NFL football player's career lasts just 2.5 years](#).

When society builds up and positions professional athletes as heroes, there is a difficult burden that ordinary humans have to carry, that of living an extraordinary life for a short period of time and then figuring out what to do with the rest of their lives.



Illustrations by Stephanie Singleton

## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

In the case of ZJ's father, his football career gets cut short after a series of traumatic brain injuries that change not only his life, but the lives of those he loves, especially the son who worships him. Much of the education that *should* happen around the serious nature of cumulative traumatic brain injuries, also known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), simply does not occur. In a capitalist society, the allure of fame and fortune connected with the pro sports world seduces many into risking their lives or long-term futures for immediate rewards.

If professional athletes are lucky enough to escape CTE or any other serious physical injury, many still retire due to the inevitable limitations of the human body. The facts are that even with helmets or rigorous physical therapy, most professional athletes re-injure themselves eventually; it's only a matter of time. The more severe the injury, the longer it takes to heal, and the greater the likelihood that injury will repeat itself once the player returns to the field. Fear of reinjuring, increased age, chronic pain, and the likelihood of permanent health issues are all factors that encourage athletes to retire early. In *Before the Ever After*, ZJ's father experiences life-altering mental-health issues that are a consequence of CTE. The premature end of his professional football career causes changes in his mental health, family structure, and relationships with those around him. Seeing the impact of professional sports through the eyes of one intimately affected by its long-term consequences offers readers a unique perspective on mental health, heroism, athleticism, and the very personal cost of professional football as a national pastime.

### Additional Resources:

[Mental Illnesses: Terms to Use. Terms to Avoid.](#)

[End of Regulation: Why Are NFL Players Retiring Earlier? – PR News](#)

[What is CTE | Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy](#)

[Racism, pain two constants for NFL players according to Dr. Robert Turner](#)

[Racial & Gender Report Card | TIDES](#)

## Key Concepts and Terms

Depression

Anxiety

PTSD

It is important to create structures in educational environments where students are accustomed to learning about and using these words because the ideas themselves (if not always the explicit vocabulary) do appear in the text. Other words, concepts, and ideas will occur throughout the text as well. Consider building a word wall of familiar and unfamiliar terms, and adding to the list as you read to co-create definitions. Using the list above, invite students to engage in pre-reading research mini projects. Through their research, you can have whole group discussions and talk about these larger social issues. You can use the questions below to guide the discussion:

1. What, in our society, inhibits conversations about these matters?
2. Based on your research, are these common issues in our society? If so, what are some healthy ways to engage in conversation about them?
3. Now that you understand these concepts better, have you ever read a story where characters were dealing with anxiety, depression, or PTSD?
4. Now that you understand these concepts better, can you think of someone in your life possibly dealing with these issues? If so, are you thinking of what you can do to support them?
5. What do you think might happen in this story considering this research and these conversations we are having?

After the discussion, invite students to keep these ideas in mind as they read. These conversations can build a helpful foundation for engaging thoughtfully in the Essential Questions, Journal Prompts, and Lessons we've outlined here.

## Themes and Essential Questions:

*Disillusionment of Dreams:* What do individuals often discover about the relationship between dreams and reality as they grow older? What happens to ZJ and his father as a consequence of his father realizing his dreams of becoming a pro football star?

*Family:* How do families shape character? What relationships exist within ZJ's family? How do they change as the novel's events play out for each character?

*Heroism:* What typically heroic traits does ZJ's father have? Which, if any of the characteristics does ZJ share? How does ZJ's father embody the tragic hero? Does ZJ see his father as a/his hero? How is his view different from society's?

*Love:* How do individuals typically express love in families and friendships? What types of love appear in this story? How does the expression of love change throughout the events in the narrative? What stereotypes are dismantled by the love shared and expressed by characters in this story?

*Loss of Innocence:* What types of events cause individuals to grow up quickly, or move from innocence to experience? What causes ZJ to wake up to the reality of the life consequences caused by his father's injuries?

*Memory:* How do our memories of the past influence perceptions of present reality? How does ZJ remember his father? How does their relationship change as his father's memories begin to fade?

*Survival:* What are some traits of survivors? What obstacles or challenges do each of the novel's central characters have to survive? How does their survival shape their character?

*Vulnerability:* What are some societal attitudes toward physical or emotional vulnerability? What happens to ZJ's father, emotionally, once his disease starts to develop? How does he handle this vulnerability? How does ZJ's perception of his father change as a result of these physical and emotional challenges?



# Discussion Questions







## PRE-READING:

- What do you think is the difference between a physical disability and a mental health issue?
- What types of physical and mental challenges do you think athletes who participate in contact sports might develop over time?
- What hints about the plot might the title of the book suggest?
- What attributes and traits make someone a hero?

## DURING READING:

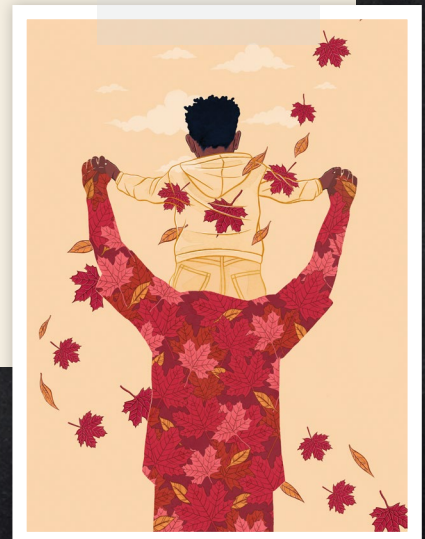
- ZJ is working hard to develop and build his own memory. Why?
- Trace the progression of ZJ's relationship with his father as the disease in his brain progresses.
- What are the ways ZJ is coping with his pain and loss?
- Who are the people in ZJ's life that he is depending on? How are they supporting him? What makes them a good support system?

## POST-READING:

- What new understandings do you have about living with someone dealing with a physical disability?
  - What responsibility, if any, does the NFL have for supporting athletes who are physically suffering from injuries obtained during their NFL careers?
  - By the end of the story, ZJ has quit any form of football playing. What do you think about that decision?
  - When ZJ says "Good luck, bruh." to Everette, what do you think he means by that?
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## Journal Prompts

- Do you know any professional sports players by name? If so, what do you think they are like in-person? Have you or anyone you know ever met them? How do the expectations of what they would be like match their reality?
- Do you play sports? Have you ever wondered what it would be like to play professional sports? What kind of aspirations do you have for the role of athletics in your life? If you aren't athletic, do you know any athletes? What role does playing sports have in their life?
- What is the relationship between ZJ and his father? Describe your relationship with your caregivers. What types of activities do you do to bond or connect?
- Have you ever experienced a time when it was difficult to communicate with your caregivers? If so, how did you overcome it?
- Describe how ZJ sees his father at the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. How does their relationship change? What events can you pinpoint that affect their ability to communicate with each other?
- ZJ loves music, and it's an activity that allows him both to cope with his feelings and connect with his father. Do you have any hobbies or activities you partake in that help you cope with difficult emotions?



# Lesson Ideas

## 1. CONDUCT A COUNTER NARRATIVE STUDY

One of the strengths of this book is that it offers us a counter narrative to common misconceptions and stereotypes about African American men. These stereotypes are built through literary imagery, news, general media, and socialization. Through the power of literature, we can provide students with truth. In this story, Woodson offers us a gentle, loving, vulnerable, and emotional portrayal of Black manhood. Consider the following references:

*“He’s my dad, which means / he’s my every single thing.” (4)*

*Revisit “You Love a Thing?” on pages 12–13*

*Read “Ollie” on pages 16–17 and pay attention to, “Ollie looks at my dad sometimes / with those bright green eyes like he’s deep / in a dream of remembering his own father living.” (17)*

*“I don’t remember how old I was, but / I remember my daddy’s smile.” (22)*

*Read “Tears” on pages 25–26.*

*Read “The Trail” on pages 114–116.*

*“My smile is the whole moon. / That bright. / That big.” (137)*

Whether in groups or in a whole class setting, invite students to discuss or write about the following questions after reading the quotes and passages listed above:

- What imagery is Woodson creating through these quotes and passages?
- What words would you use to describe ZJ, his friends, and his father?
- What experiences do they go through, and how is friendship at the center of this story?
- What stereotypes do certain quotes and passages address?

## 2. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

What are some clues we get about each character based on the conversations they have with one another and the ways ZJ perceives them? It may be helpful to look at each poem and consider what it says explicitly, what readers think about the poem’s title and central message, and then what the poem reveals

## Lesson Ideas (cont.)

about the character. Ex. "Wishes" (72). In this poem, ZJ reflects on the fact that his father got everything he wished for and how that affected his family relationships. What does the poem say explicitly with the phrase "careful what you wish for"? What can readers infer about ZJ as a result of this moment of reflection?

### 3. CONFLICT & TENSION ANALYSIS

Throughout this book, the characters face both external and internal conflicts and there is tension building. After defining these types of conflicts with students, and after explaining tension, revisit the text and find moments of each. Once identified, discuss these conflicts and tensions, and how they push the plot forward and also help develop characterization. Consider the document below for this analysis.

Name	Date			
	<b>Conflict/ Tension quote and page #</b>	<b>Conflict or Tension?</b>	<b>Your summary of the conflict or tension</b>	<b>How it impacts plot or characterization</b>
<b>Example</b>	"She tells me more about the doctor in Philadelphia. / <i>They are studying the connection, she says, / between concussions and what's happening to your dad.</i> " (100)	This moment in the story is an example of tension.	The lack of information and diagnosis from doctors is a tension building for ZJ. He is becoming frustrated at not knowing what is wrong with his father and he feels overwhelmed.	This rising tension develops the plot because it keeps the reader engaged. We want to know what the diagnosis is and what is wrong with his father.



## Lesson Ideas (cont.)

### 4. SYMBOLISM ANALYSIS

Throughout the book there are many objects that symbolize ideas in the text that impact other literary devices. Invite students to explore what the following objects might symbolize.

- Dad's socks (after he is ill): Explain that the socks symbolize the father's deterioration and his inability to physically care for himself. It reveals how he is requiring more and more in-person support for daily activities. It offers the reader a representation of how the father is moving into a space where he will need more permanent and clinical help.
- ZJ's guitar: Explain that this guitar is a symbol for ZJ's peace, relationship to his father, and self-care. It's through this guitar that he continues to connect with his father, and music seems to be the main tool he's using to build his memory of what once was. The guitar is also what affords him peace as he struggles to watch his father's health spiral.

Then, in partners, instruct them to search for more objects and prepare a presentation, with citations included, on what those objects might symbolize and why. Some objects students can select are: a football, the trail, their house, the trees outside, windows, songs, and more.

### 5. PLOT ANALYSIS

Deconstruct the plot by plotting central events on a timeline. Plot the development of their father-son relationship with events before, during, and after the gradual deterioration of ZJ's father's memory. Match poems with events and create a timeline that can be chronological, or use reverse chronology to travel back in time to the earliest memories ZJ has with his father.

### 6. DECONSTRUCTING MEMORIES

One of the interesting things about memory is that it is subjective. Try to look at poems that capture both ZJ's and his father's perspective, such as "Day after the Game" (5) or "You Love a Thing?" (12). What details from plot events can you match to each character? Try to read the poem for details from one character's perspective, then "see" the events from the other character's perspective. What details are the same? What is different? Write short reflections on a few poems detailing how the memory of the event might be different depending on perspective. Use lines from the poems as text evidence to support your ideas.

## Extension Activities

*Study Woodson's Writings:* Consider pairing this book with other books Woodson has published. Engage students in a study of language, poetry, word choice, and a general study of the author's craft. This novel can be paired with *Harbor Me*, *The Day You Begin*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming*.

*Study CTE:* Use this novel to engage students in an interdisciplinary (science-based) study of CTE and other physical disabilities connected to sports. After the research, students can engage in discussions about ways professional organizations can better support athletes. They can also discuss projects around creating awareness campaigns so more people know about these injuries and their potential for long-term debilitating effects. Consider exploring the following resources:

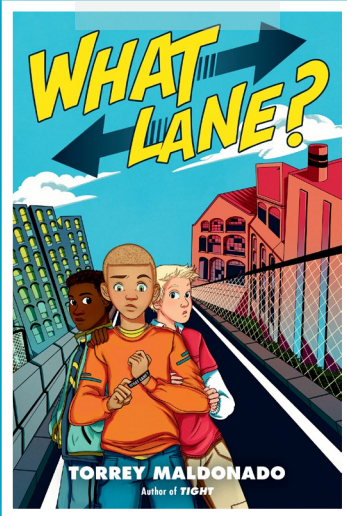
[End of Regulation: Why Are NFL Players Retiring Earlier? – PR News](#)

[What is CTE | Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy](#)

*Art & Music Therapy:* Once ZJ's father begins his decline, it is clear that music is a source of peace, connection, and healing for all members of the family. Welcome students into a study of art and music therapy to learn more about how that happens and why. Their research can include interviewing art and music teachers at the school, visiting websites that explain this topic further, listening to TED Talks on the matter, and reading articles that might explain some of the science and psychology behind art and music therapy. Once the research is finished, maybe they can create what they believe is a healing music playlist or a curation of artwork that is healing or leads to inner peace.



Illustrations by Stephanie Singleton



# WHAT LANE?

by Torrey Maldonado

## ABOUT THE BOOK

“*STAY IN YOUR LANE.*” Stephen doesn’t want to hear that—he wants to have no lane.

Anything his friends can do, Stephen should be able to do too, right? So when they dare each other to sneak into an abandoned building, he doesn’t think it’s his lane, but he goes. Here’s the thing, though: *Can he do everything* his

friends can? Lately, he’s not so sure. As a mixed kid, he feels like he’s living in two worlds with different rules—and he’s been noticing that strangers treat him differently than his white friends . . . So what’ll he do? Hold on tight as Stephen swerves in and out of lanes to find out which are his—and who should be with him. Torrey Maldonado, author of the highly acclaimed *Tight*, does a masterful job showing a young boy coming of age in a racially split world, trying to blaze a way to be his best self.

## Considerations for Teachers and Students

*What Lane?* tells a story of racial identity, and what it means to have society dictate rules for social interaction within different identities. Reading this book with students will open up the opportunity to discuss social movements like Black Lives Matter, the Civil Rights Movement, and de facto segregation. Furthermore, this book will make space for readers and educators working with them to consider the intersections between racial identity and the role individuals have in dismantling systemic, interpersonal, and intercultural racism. As you read, consider the importance of interrogating your own bias, centering BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color) and the roles they play in the narrative as well as what perspectives may be left out. *What Lane?* addresses the often spoken statement that we each do better when we “stay in our own lane.” The book’s title and narrative problematize that idea through unpacking the idea of whether there should be any lanes at all, and the many ways the existence of lanes can be constructive and oppressive. As this book gains an audience in schools, there will be those who don’t think discussions about oppression or racism belong in schools. It will be up to readers and educators engaging with this book to address the inevitable pushback that happens when folks are given the opportunity to leave their comfort zones. In the end, returning again and again to Stephen’s question about whether there should be lanes at all will be crucial for understanding and unpacking the text before, during, and after reading.

## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND RACIAL IDENTITY

Early on in the book, Stephen thinks, “Miles Morales could be me. He’s half African American too, and even though his other side is Puerto Rican and mine is white, most people say we Black.” (3) DisruptTexts Pillar 1 is about interrogating your own bias. Before beginning to read *What Lane?* educators will need to interrogate their own bias and determine preexisting ideas about individual, interpersonal, and community connections with biracial people. Do you know any biracial people personally? Do you have any students identifying as biracial? If so, what steps will you take to safeguard their emotional safety during class conversations about race that can be divisive?

In the United States, there is a long history of marginalization and erasure of people of color. Additionally, there is a long history of governmental and municipal organizations (including the police) deciding who gets to be white adjacent—more proximal to power according to their ability to approximate whiteness in appearance, speech, behavior, etc. Furthermore, each person undergoes a process of racial identity formation that is dependent upon social constructions and one’s experience with privilege and oppression based on one’s identity. Identity formation includes what Allan Johnson refers to as “The Big 8”: race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, religion/spirituality, nationality, and socioeconomic status. (Johnson, 2006)

During the later stages of racial consciousness development, there is a place for investigating critical race theory—understanding the ways systemic oppression is informed and kept in place by inter, and intrapersonal racism. Understanding and examining the intersections of race, law, and power will be key to understanding how to discuss the topics in this book and decreasing the potential for psychological harm. As educators and readers study, *What Lane?* it will be crucial to build classroom structures that allow for meaningful discussion about the formation of racial identity as well as the ways society keeps oppressive structures in place.

#### Additional Resources:

Hawley, W. D., & Nieto, S. (2010). “Another inconvenient truth: Race and ethnicity.” *Educational Leadership*, 68 (3), pp. 66–71.

Johnson, A. G. (2006). “Privilege, oppression, and difference.” In *Power, privilege and difference*, 2nd Edition (pp. 12–40). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND OPPRESSION, RACISM, AND ANTIRACISM

Some of the main ideas the book centers on are: oppression, racism, and antiracism, though they are not always named as such, given the fact that this book is for middle-grade students. Some important groundwork needs to happen to set a foundation for students reading and engaging in conversations about the book, whether there are students present identifying as BIPOC or not.

## Key Concepts and Terms

**Oppression:** prolonged, cruel, or unjust treatment or control.

**Racism:** prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership of a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized.

**Antiracism:** the policy or practice of opposing racism and promoting racial tolerance.

**Bias:** a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment.

**Prejudice:** an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics.

It is important to create structures in educational environments where students are accustomed to using these words and learning how they interact with one another because the ideas themselves (if not always the explicit vocabulary) do appear in the text. Other words, concepts, and ideas will occur throughout the text as well. Consider building a word wall of familiar and unfamiliar terms, such as “guilt” and “innocence” (8), and adding to them to co-create definitions as you read.

## Additional Resources

[All Students Need Anti-racism Education](#)

[Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism Not Light, But Fire](#)

## Themes and Essential Questions:

**Identity:** How do our environments shape our identities? What is unique about Stephen’s environment? How is this similar to, or different from your environment?

**Coming of Age:** What experiences move us from innocence to experience? When does Stephen realize his social position, or “lane”?

**Courage:** What types of encounters demand a display of courage? When does Stephen show courage?

**Racial Justice:** What social systems create racial injustice? How does Stephen confront them?

**Equality:** When do we first begin to recognize that things are unequal in society? Is the time we recognize this different for each of us? When does Stephen realize this? What does he think should be done to change it?

**Friendship:** How do our friendships affect the way we interact with the world? What are some of Stephen’s reflections on friendship?

## Discussion Questions

### PRE-READING:

- What do you know about the history of how the Black Lives Matter movement began?
- What books have you read (or heard about) about race relations in America?
- What events have you witnessed or experienced that have made you unpack your own bias? Ex. [racial profiling](#)

### DURING READING:

- Why might it be hard for people (who are not the majority in any group) to speak up if they feel injustice? (12)
- Have you seen people from minoritized groups use comedy to lighten the mood around the subject of racism? (19) If so, when? What was your reaction?
- Have you ever seen examples in real life or on video of Black people experiencing [racial profiling](#) in stores? If so, what did you do? If not, how does knowing this happens make you feel?
- What does Stephen's dad mean when he says, "A lot of white people see boys with your age and height and they don't see your age. They see what they imagine or what the media teaches them to think about Black men"? (29–30)
- How does Stephen's pledge to himself help him counter the silencing effects of racism? (33) What kind of promises have you made to yourself after experiencing injustice or mistreatment?
- What do you know about [white privilege](#)? What is the difference between how each of Stephen's parents thinks about race, racism, and privilege? (34–35)
- What do you know about [de facto segregation](#)? (41) How do personal thoughts and actions, as well as social structures, keep it going? Think about the neighborhoods in your community. Are there certain parts of town that have historically belonged to certain racial or ethnic groups? What happens to people who choose to cross those lines?



## Discussion Questions (cont.)

- How do older generations perpetuate, or continue, harmful patterns of thought and behavior? (46)
- When Stephen says, “Life should be the same for me as it is for my white friends,” what do you think he means, specifically? (49) From your perspective, why isn’t it the same for white people and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color)?
- Explain why Stephen feels so afraid on page 60. How might the police have different consequences for him than they do for his friends?
- Consider the two posters from page 65. What “lane” does each poster represent? Why might Stephen feel divided when seeing posters from each “lane”? After thinking about this, consider the importance of his bracelet.
- Consider the two different Americas mentioned on pages 66 and 67. According to the book, what are the different perspectives and opinions each side holds? What are some of the actions they take?
- Why would Stephen “End up messed up in Chad’s lane”? (75)
- What are the white students’ reactions to hearing about victims of police brutality? (91) How is this different from their reactions of a few pages before?
- Why don’t you think some people want to believe racism is real? (93)
- What happens when Stephen finds the language to speak his truth to Wes and Dan about the violence he experiences? (120–121)

### POST-READING:

- Where do you think Stephen’s story will take him next?
- Do you have friends in your social circle from different ethnic, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds?
- What is one thing Stephen did that you found brave or admirable?
- Why do you suppose he sees Miles Morales as an icon?



## Journal Prompts

Students will find many entry points throughout the story to connect with. Writing in response to critical moments of tension in the text can help students reflect and process their own emotions and questions as they read.

- Before reading the book, what do you think about when you hear the phrase “Black Lives Matter”? What experiences or conversations have shaped your thinking?
- Before reading the book, how do you identify, racially and/or ethnically? How does your identity affect your daily interactions with people?
- Before reading the book, write about the first time you recognized you were different from others around you. How did you feel about this realization?

Ask students to revisit the following passages from the novel. What stands out? What connections can you make to your own experiences or the experiences of others?

- What ideas does Stephen have about racists and how they might act or look? Throughout the course of the book, several events happen to change his ideas. What are some of them? (77)
- Stephen’s father says he is “young enough to get shot by a bigot cop, [so] he’s young enough to know what’s happening.” (84) What stories have you heard about police brutality? How did it make you feel to hear about these stories?
- What do you think when people bring up the phrase “Black Lives Matter”? What responses have you seen people give when the subject gets brought up? What are your thoughts about statements like “All Lives Matter” and “Blue Lives Matter”? (88–89)
- What do you think it might take for folks who are racist to change their thinking and behavior? (95–96) Consider page 104 as well and how some people have to be taught to “see” racism.
- What have you learned about cycles of violence in society? In your view, does violence ever stop more violence from happening? (120)

After reading the book, ask students to consider their ability to choose “lanes.” Discuss power, privilege, and positionality and which groups in society might hold more power than others, or freedom to choose “lanes,” according to Stephen’s observations in the book.



## Lesson Ideas

Consider using Gholdy Muhammad's *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* (Scholastic, 2020) when undertaking the following activities. The main components of the framework are "The Pursuit of Identity, Skills, Intellect and Criticality." How will you apply these approaches to this text? How can you support students using DisruptText pillar 1, "Interrogating Bias," while reading this text?

1. Research and explore historical and present-day examples (both real and imagined) of Black heroism and empowerment. (20) Direct students to collaborate on presentations to educate peers about these figures. How do the examples they find add to or change their ideas of heroism?
2. Watch the film *Black Panther* (or clips from it), then read the following article: [The Revolutionary Power of Black Panther](#) Respond to the following questions in writing or with video responses: Why was *Black Panther* so important to people identifying as Black, Indigenous, or other People of Color? What other stories of non-white heroes are considered mainstream (if any)? Why is it important for BIPOC people to be depicted as heroes?
3. Who are some of the young Black people Black people who have been murdered by the police? (88) What were their names and ages? Where did they live? Introduce students to the #BLM and #SayHerName hashtags and have them discuss reactions in their community to conversations around the Black Lives Matter movement. Who are local leaders in the movement? Research and discuss counter-movements and why they exist after reading chapter 16. Read [Why Teaching Black Lives Matter Matters | Part I](#) and [Bringing Black Lives Matter Into the Classroom | Part II](#) before entering into conversations with readers.
4. Ask students to create two or three questions for the school community about racial prejudice or discrimination. Then, create a [Flipgrid](#) and invite community members to contribute videos answering the students' questions. Discuss the video reactions as a class. Hold a discussion or do independent writing around the question: Do you believe our responses to questions about race change when we know others are listening/watching? If so, why? If not, why not?

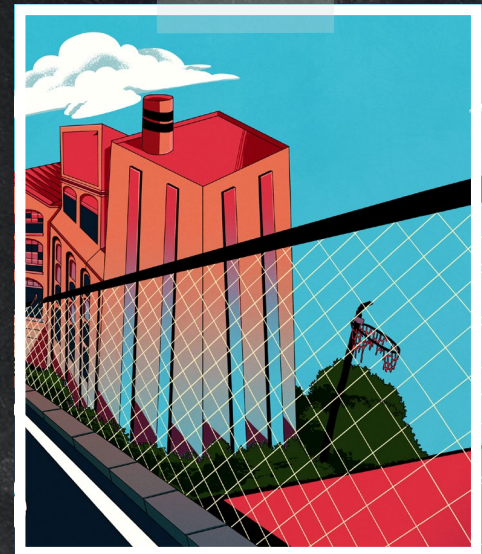


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## Lesson Ideas (cont.)

1. Much of what Stephen deals with is due to living at a crossroads between worlds. He half-Black and half-white, but the world reacts to him as though he is a Black person. Research some of the beginnings of race as a social construct by visiting the website [The Race Project](#) While reviewing the website, have students complete the following organizer with what they already knew, what they learned, or what surprised them, and what questions they still have remaining.

CONFIRMS WHAT I KNEW (.)	SURPRISED ME (!)	QUESTIONS I STILL HAVE (?)

2. Teach about implicit bias, microaggressions, systemic oppression, and the changing demographics of many American cities by having students look at implicit bias as a personal thought pattern, microaggressions as interpersonal actions directed by these biases and systemic oppression as a consequence of when laws are enforced as a result of these actions. Have students create a multimodal presentation about microaggressions, implicit bias, or systemic oppression as they appear in the book and/or in real life.
3. The book is written by and centers a protagonist identifying as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color). What do you know about the author? Hear about him in his own words [This is the Author: Torrey Maldonado and M. Evan Wolkenstein](#). Considered the central themes of *Identity* and *Friendship* he mentions through the podcast as you read the novel. Use the following notecatcher to capture your ideas.

QUOTES FROM THE PODCAST	MY THOUGHTS AND REACTIONS...

## Extension Activities

For educators preparing to read *What Lane?* with students: interrogate bias and consider the ways bias shapes the experience of reading the story, its events and characters. Consider what (if any) experience(s) you have with others who do not share your worldview, and then what aspects of your everyday life confirm or challenge your perspectives about those who may be racially, culturally, ethnically, linguistically, or in other ways different from you. Read [Teaching to Transgress](#) by bell hooks for an example of how one teacher shifted the way she thought about her students and her role as their educator. Journal to apply sections from the book to your practice.

1. What do you know about the populations of different races in America? What does the [Census](#) tell us?

Visit the following websites:

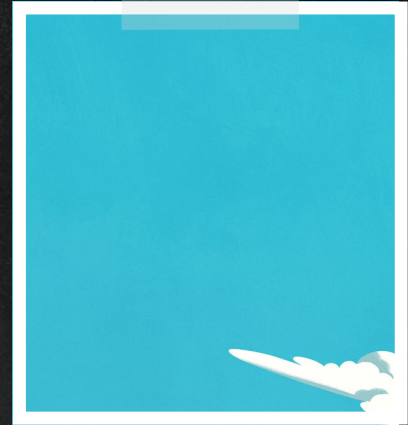
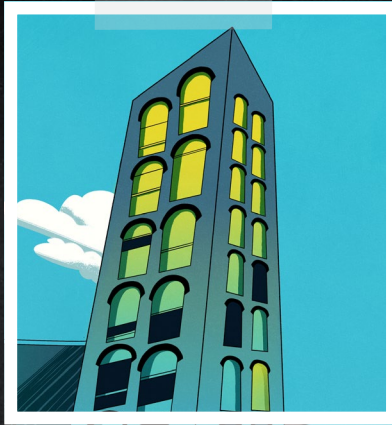
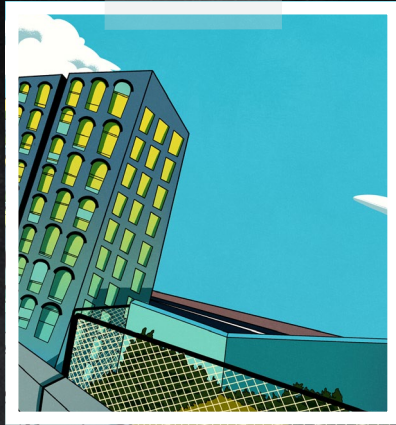
[The Changing Face of America](#)

[The Race Project](#)

Prepare an infographic to share your findings. Consider the following questions: How are demographics shifting over time? What are some of the largest racial groupings in the United States? What can you infer about power and privilege after reviewing the Census data? Which groups might hold more power or privilege? Which groups might hold less?

2. Read this article: [#SayHerName Campaign](#) and research each of the women mentioned. How are reactions to police brutality against Black women different from those against Black men? Why do you think they are different?
3. Visit the website [Intro to The Media Bias Chart](#) and research the terms “Police Brutality” and “Black Lives Matter” on websites for news outlets representing three different areas. How does the news coverage differ? How is it the same? What trends do you notice for reporting about these topics? *Ex. “The Most Extreme Right tends to report about Black Lives Matter as being ... whereas the Most Extreme Left reports it as ...”*





## Extension Activities (cont.)

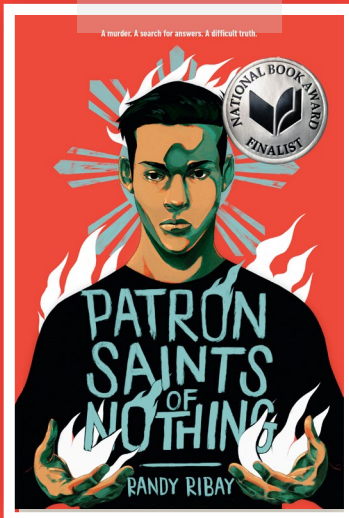
4. Read the following article: [What Is A Microaggression? And What To Do If You Experience One. : Life Kit](#) and watch the YouTube video: [“Because I’m Latino, I can’t have money?” Kids on Race](#) then discuss microaggressions, what they are, and how they affect individuals. Then, work with administrators in your educational environment to create signage and/or policies that instruct students about what to do if they witness a microaggression. If you have the resources, make a PSA (public service announcement) for your school news channel or announcements informing community members about what microaggressions are, how to identify them, and what to do if they see one.
5. Use the [School Reform Initiative framework for Constructivist Listening Dyads](#) to talk about implicit bias after reading the articles:  
[Implicit Bias Explained](#)  
[America’s Long Overdue Awakening on Systemic Racism | Time](#)  
Then, discuss what implicit bias looks like between individuals and in your school, neighborhood, and city *ex. City laws biased against housing insecure populations*. Brainstorm ways to inform people and counteract it.
6. Identify a space in your school community that is public. Research the stages of racial identity development. Read this article about [white antiracism](#). Make a visual display to educate those in your community about the stages to becoming antiracist. Ex. A visual timeline with quotes from [This Book is Anti-Racist](#) by Tiffany Jewell

7. What can you and your students do to lessen systemic and interpersonal racism? Having conversations with those you love can be one of the most powerful ways to impact change. Many people engage in [Courageous Conversations](#) about race, listen to podcasts, and read books. Stephen wears his “What Lane?” bracelet to remind him of his commitment to living outside of the boundaries society places upon him. Challenge your students to come up with a way to communicate to the outside world the feelings they have inside after reading this book.

This could look like:

- Designing a T-shirt
  - Making a YouTube video
  - Writing a letter to a local newspaper
  - Writing a blog post and sharing it with the community
  - Creating a set of questions for family members or close friends
  - Creating a book trailer or library display for their favorite book(s) about Black joy.
8. Define the following terms: hate crime, lynching, police brutality. What connections can you make between the “lanes” described in *What Lane?*, hate crimes, lynching, and police brutality? Discuss the general reluctance to use this language. What are people’s reactions when these words come up? How are the reactions to this language affected by social position, and racial or ethnic group?
  9. Visit the [Southern Poverty Law Center’s website](#) mapping incidences of hate-crimes. Watch [this video about Trayvon Martin’s case](#) from his mother, Sybrina Fulton. Create a timeline of events in the Trayvon Martin case (or any other case involving police brutality) from videos you watch or news stories you listen to. What events led up to Trayvon’s killing? What has happened since? Did the perpetrators get convicted of crimes? If so, what was their punishment?
  10. With your students, look at the website: [Mapping Inequality](#). Check out the areas where redlining occurs in your city. What do you notice? What patterns do you see? Go back in time to check out the history of segregation. Compare and contrast it with your present-day conditions. What patterns of segregation do you see in school systems, housing, or commercial business districts? Students can research these questions in pairs or small groups and compare findings. Prepare a presentation for your community revealing what you have found. Make inferences about how patterns of redlining impact interpersonal relationships, keeping people in separate lanes.

*Further Reading:* [Interactive Redlining Map Zooms In On America’s History Of Discrimination](#)



# PATRON SAINTS OF NOTHING

by Randy Ribay

## ABOUT THE BOOK

When he finds out that his cousin Jun has been killed as part of Philippine president Duterte's campaign of extrajudicial killings, seventeen-year-old Jay Reguero is devastated. However, neither his own family nor Jun's will talk about his cousin's death or answer Jay's questions. But when Jay gets a mysterious message from someone that his cousin was innocent, Jay decides to travel to the Philippines to find out what happened. *Patron Saints of Nothing* will appeal to students as the novel inspires them to consider questions around family, loyalty, identity, truth, and ultimately, that our responsibility is to ourselves and to each other.

## Considerations for Teachers and Students

Consider using *Patron Saints of Nothing* to pair with or replace any coming-of-age text you might have in your curriculum. We believe that Ribay's novel offers students deep possibilities for exploring similar terrain and issues as traditionally canonical texts. For example, consider pairing Ribay's novel with or replacing texts such as *Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and *The Outsiders*, among others. Likewise, *Patron Saints of Nothing* can be paired with Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* or *On the Come Up* to help students unpack issues of justice and social responsibility, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* to explore issues related to grief and familial obligation, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* to examine themes around government corruption and finding one's voice.

Before starting *Patron Saints of Nothing*, we recommend working with students to consider how their identities and experiences may inform their reading experience. For some students, this book may be the first time that they have read about a Filipinx American experience or that takes place in the Philippines.

## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND RACIAL IDENTITY

Early in the text, Jay and his friend Seth stumble into a conversation about race. When Seth tells Jay that he forgot that Jay was Filipino, Jay immediately becomes defensive. When Jay asks Seth, who is white, what he means by that, Seth tells him, “You’re basically white” and adds, “I don’t see color” and “We’re all one race: the human race. That’s all I meant.”

Although this is a passing moment in the text, this presents a key opportunity to invite students into a conversation around identity, particularly around racial identity. For students of color, especially those who navigate predominantly white institutions, this moment may be an all-too-familiar one—one that represents a common *microaggression* that people of color may face. Teachers College professor of psychology and education Derald Wing Sue defines microaggression as “the brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated” (Sue, 2010).

Seth’s explanation that he doesn’t “see color” fits a larger pattern in which the racial, cultural, or ethnic identities of others are rendered invisible. While they seem well-intentioned, comments like Seth’s can have a negative impact on people of color. When white people tell people of color that they don’t see color, what they’re trying to say is that race doesn’t matter. Yet research consistently shows that even though race is a social construct, race does matter—race impacts the opportunities and outcomes that people of color have available to them. Furthermore, to say that “race doesn’t matter” implies that race is inherently negative. While it is true that people of color have been discriminated against because of their race, race—and culture—can also be a source of pride and community. Thus, when a white person says they don’t see race, a person of color might experience this as a microaggression that invalidates the experiences they’ve had—both positive and negative—related to their race and culture. At a systems level, ignoring race does nothing to address the impact of racial discrimination and allows the current status quo of racial inequity to continue.

In *Patron Saints of Nothing*, when Seth tells Jay that he “acts like everyone else at school,” Jay points out that everyone else at their school is white. Except,



## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

as Jay thinks, they are not: “The majority are, for sure, but [Seth’s] generalization—spoken with such confidence, such ease—makes me feel like he’s erasing the rest of us.” Here, in this moment, Jay experiences a microaggression that sends the “hidden message” that Jay’s identity as a person of color isn’t seen or doesn’t matter, and that the only parts of him that are seen or matter are the ways that Jay “acts like everyone else at school.” In other words, the parts of him that seem “white.”

Students of color reading *Patron Saints of Nothing* may have had similar experiences. White students, too, may have been perpetrators of such microaggressions without realizing it. Provide space for students to journal and discuss this scene in the text, how it may or may not connect to the experiences they’ve had. Validating the invisibility that students of color may have felt in moments like this is critical, especially as such moments are often dismissed as being insignificant or unintentional. Students might also discuss the assumptions underneath microaggressions and the implicit and explicit messages society sends around race and culture that fuel these assumptions. For more guidance on how to deal with microaggressions in the classroom, Dr. Tasha Souza’s “Responding to Microaggressions in the Classroom: Taking ACTION” (2018) provides one useful framework.

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND STEREOTYPES ABOUT THE PHILIPPINES

Filipinx people have been in the United States since the 1500s and Filipinx Americans make up the third-largest immigrant population in the country. Yet depending on which area of the United States you and your student live, their experiences with Filipinx people and culture may be limited (nearly half of all Filipinx Americans live in California, for example). Furthermore, although there is a rich literary history of Filipinx American literature, this literature is rarely taught in schools. However, in recent years, more Filipinx writers are being published and recognized for their talent, especially in middle grade and young adult fiction. (See Barbara Jane Reyes’ recommended list of Filipinx American authors in resources.)

Many students may know little to nothing about the Philippines. Even the protagonist Jay admits that he knows little about his own Filipinx culture and history and expresses guilt around this throughout the novel. What little students know about the Philippines may be based on stereotypes they have about many developing countries—that they are poor, uneducated, or even backwards when compared to life in the United States. Such stereotypes are harmful as they paint a “single story” (Adichie) of a country that is diverse and rich in many ways. For some students of color who have roots in countries like the Philippines, hearing that others may not know anything about a country they may have roots in or feel connected to may feel like a form of invisibility.



## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)



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Teachers should consider the background and identities of the students in their classroom and take this potential impact into account.

Ribay addresses some of these stereotypes through Jay's experiences. For example, when Jay and Mia follow Mia's professor through the slums, Jay reflects on the difference between his expectations (which are based on stereotypes) and reality:

*I'm ashamed to admit I expected more misery. Expected it to feel like one of those commercials where they play mournful music and some white actor's compassionate voice-over urges you to sponsor a child because it's the only way they will be saved from their hellish third-world country.*

*But, basically, those here are living their lives. Doing the best they can with what they have, I suppose. Doing the same any of us do—only in smaller spaces with much less privacy. They're finding ways to survive.*

This passage provides a powerful opportunity for students to discuss not just stereotypes, but more importantly, the impact that these stereotypes have on systems of power, including imperialism and colonialism. Likewise, this moment can invite students to reflect on the impact of white saviorism and

how this mindset can lead to harmful outcomes, particularly for communities of color, both abroad and at home in the United States. Ask students to analyze Jay's comment about a "white actor's compassionate voice-over" and how the media might shape their perceptions (and patterns) of which groups of people are often positioned as "saviors" versus those who need "saving."

Furthermore, because the novel deals with the extrajudicial killings of Philippine citizens, students may incorrectly assume government corruption and drug abuse as the single story of the country. To disrupt the potential stereotypes that students may have before and even during reading the novel, teachers can provide students with

## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

additional texts that reflect the Philippines's rich diversity, such as photographs that represent the varied settings in the novel. Students can also be asked to consider the ways in which issues of poverty, government corruption, and drug addiction are not unique to the Philippines and how these issues impact the United States, nationally, and their own communities, locally. Expanding students' perspective in this way can lessen the chance that students dismiss these issues as problems of others and see them as systemic problems that are embedded in many different countries, including their own.

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND DRUG ADDICTION

Drug addiction is a disease that affects millions worldwide. Because of its pervasiveness, it is likely that many students themselves or someone they know has been affected by drug addiction. Thus, teachers should consider the potential impact that discussions around drug addiction may have on students. Specifically, teachers should avoid describing drug addiction as a moral failing or character flaw (Hardee, 2017).

Instead, teachers and students can discuss policies and practices on a systemic level that can lead to drug addiction. For example, in the Philippines, because of the country's issues around poverty, drug use may provide one method for some to deal with hunger and pain. This is what happens to Jun, as the drug shabu was an effective hunger suppressant, especially for those who live in poverty. Students can be invited to consider what policies can address poverty and how the use of extrajudicial killings to address drug addiction, as has been the policy in Philippine President Duterte's administration, does little to address the root of systemic issues involved. Teachers can also discuss how the stigma around drug addiction is counterproductive; such a stigma is not only what leads to the fracture in Jun's relationship with his family, but also what allows illegal extrajudicial killings to continue.

## Themes and Essential Questions

Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards provides useful framework to read and analyze texts, especially a text like *Patron Saints of Nothing*. The Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards focus on four domains: identity, diversity, justice, and action. Themes and essential questions can be developed around these domains to encourage students to respond to the text as individuals but then make connections to larger historical and contemporary systems through a social justice lens. Learn more about the standards and domains at [tolerance.org/frameworks/social-justice-standards](https://tolerance.org/frameworks/social-justice-standards).

## Themes and Essential Questions (cont.)

Some examples of themes and essential questions that teachers can use to frame students' study of *Patron Saints of Nothing* are listed below.

### *Theme: Identity*

- Who am I? What experiences and identities make up who I am? What are my values and beliefs, and how are those reflected in my thoughts and actions? (identity)
- What are the experiences and identities of others? What are the values and beliefs of others, and how are these reflected in group practices? (diversity)
- In what ways can individuals and groups be discriminated against based on their identities? What systems and structures support this discrimination? (justice)
- What can we do to ensure that all people, whatever identities they possess, are treated with dignity and respect? (action)

### *Theme: Family*

- How do I define my family? What makes up my family? How does my family define who I am? (identity)
- What are the different ways that families can be defined? How do families differ and why? How do family dynamics impact interpersonal relationships? (diversity)
- How do systems and structures, policies and practices, affect families in fair and unfair ways? What should be the relationship between government and families? (diversity)
- What can we do to ensure that all individuals and groups, whatever their family background, can be guaranteed equal access, opportunities, and treatment? (justice)

### *Theme: Truth*

- How do I define truth and why? How do my own identities and experiences inform the way I understand or misunderstand truth? (identity)
- How do others define the truth and why? How do the identities and experiences of others inform the way they understand or misunderstand truth? (diversity)
- In what ways can truth be revealed or hidden? What systems and structures, policies and practices, lead to or hide the truth? (justice)
- How can we ensure that truth is protected and told in socially responsible ways? (justice)

## Key Concepts and Vocabulary

Because *Patron Saints of Nothing* explores issues related to identity, race, culture, and history, some understanding of key concepts related to these issues is essential for teachers and students. The following list contains some definitions and their application to the novel.

### HYPHENATED IDENTITY

In a 2006 *Newsweek* piece, Indian American author Jhumpa Lahiri wrote about the duality of having multiple identities: “The traditions on either side of the hyphen dwell in me like siblings, still occasionally sparring, one outshining the other depending on the day.” For Black, Indigenous, and people of color navigating predominantly white spaces, experiencing conflicting dual (or multiple) identities can be challenging. The concept of hyphenated identities complements W. E. B. DuBois’s concept of dual consciousness, of having to see and understand oneself through their own eyes and through the gaze of dominant culture.

Understanding this challenge, Ribay dedicates *Patron Saints of Nothing* “for the hyphenated” and Jay’s struggles to understand his own Filipinx and American identities throughout the novel reflects this duality.

### MICROAGGRESSION

Derald Wing Sue defines microaggression as “the brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated” (2010). Sue also identifies several types of racial microaggressions: microassaults (the use of racial epithets), microinsults (verbal and nonverbal communication that demeans a person’s racial identity or heritage), and microinvalidations (communication that dismisses or nullifies the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of people of color).

In the novel, Jay experiences a microaggression when his friend Seth dismisses Jay’s experiences as a Filipinx American.

### STIGMA

Stigma is a mark of disgrace that renders a topic, idea, or issue socially unacceptable or taboo to acknowledge or discuss. Stigmas are socially constructed and based on the norms, beliefs, and attitudes of a dominant group.

Because they can prevent open discussion about serious issues, stigmas can be harmful. In the novel, stigma around drug addiction results in victim-blaming, preventing those affected, like Jun, from getting the support they need.

## Themes and Essential Questions (cont.)

### PATRIARCHY AND TOXIC MASCULINITY

Patriarchy is a system in which men and the characteristics associated with traditional manhood dominate power structures. Patriarchal power can be seen in the overrepresentation of men in positions of power in society but also in the acceptance and sometimes glorification of competition, physical power, violence, and other masculine-associated traits and behaviors. When such traits become the only way to define manhood, this leads to toxic masculinity. The Good Men Project defines toxic masculinity as a “narrow and repressive description of manhood, designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression” (O’Malley, 2016). Accordingly, character traits outside these—especially those associated with emotional vulnerability and sensitivity—are excluded and dismissed.

In the novel, toxic masculinity can be seen in Tito Maning’s disappointment when Jun doesn’t fit his idea of what it means to be a strong man, his dismissiveness of Jun’s emotional sensitivity when it comes to the less fortunate, and his ultimatum in rejecting Jun when he refuses to abide by his standards.

### COLONIALISM

Colonialism occurs when one political state takes over another’s land, people, and resources, creating structure and systems that put themselves in power over others. While students will already be familiar with examples of colonialism in U.S. history, they may be less familiar with the history and implications of U.S. colonization of other countries, like the Philippines. Colonialism may be in the form of physical and political power, but also result in the form of ideas and attitudes. Thus, even after a colonizing power leaves or is ejected, the effects of colonialism on the formerly colonized may remain long after.

Such long-term effects of colonialism can be seen in the Philippines and in *Patron Saints of Nothing*. When Jun tries to defend journalists who seek to find the truth about the extrajudicial killings in the Philippines, his uncle responds, “Our country’s history is full of invading foreigners who thought they knew us better than we knew ourselves.” Tito Maning’s distrust of journalists, especially foreign journalists who try to illuminate the truth about Duterte’s actions, stems from a larger distrust of outsiders due to Philippines and U.S. colonial history. As Ribay pointed out in a November 2019 conference keynote address, the effects of colonialism can be seen in Jay’s character: “The confusion of self he experiences on a daily basis, the loss of language and culture he’s suffered through the pressure immigrants feel to assimilate. The contradictory nature of Tito Maning’s pride in Filipino culture juxtaposed with his colorism.”

## Journal Prompts

Students will find many entry points throughout the story to connect with. Writing in response to critical moments of tension in the text can help students reflect and process their own emotions and questions as they read.

Ask students to revisit these passages from the novel: What stands out? What connections can you make to your own experiences or the experiences of others?

- “We can only handle so much truth at any given moment, I suppose” (xv).
- “Everyone acts like seventeen-year-olds who don’t have their career path mapped out are wasting their lives” (5).
- “How do you mourn someone you already let slip away? Are you even allowed to?” (10).
- “I’m seventeen years old, but I want someone to hold me like how my mom held me when I was a little kid” (17).
- “Truth is a hungry thing” (29).
- “It’s a sad thing when you map the borders of a friendship and find it’s a narrower country than expected” (38).
- “It’s like I only know half of myself” (48).
- “...there are many bad things, things not so easy to see from far away. When you are close, though, they are sometimes all you see” (54).
- “None of his children knows their mother tongue. And if you do not know your mother tongue, you cannot know your mother. And if you do not know your mother, you do not understand who you are” (96).
- “There was a time when I thought getting older meant you’d understand more about the world, but it turns out the exact opposite is true” (296).

## Discussion and Lesson Ideas

### COMING-OF-AGE

Senior year can be an important rite of passage for many young people as they begin taking steps toward greater independence after high school. When Jay learns of Jun's death, the things that seemed so important to him at one point—a new laptop, video games, college admissions—suddenly lose their significance. Indeed, Jun's death and the circumstances around it become a catalyst for Jay to reflect more deeply on himself and how his actions may or may not make a difference in the world.

Ask students to trace Jay's journey throughout the novel and identify the key moments in the text that help Jay develop a deeper understanding of himself. Aside from the larger event of Jun's death, what are the specific catalysts to growth that Jay experiences? Students can create a simple two-column chart, one side summarizing the event or moment, and the other side describing the impact of this event or moment. Some sentence starters—such as “Before this moment, Jay...” or “After this moment, Jay...”—can be helpful for students. Students can then be asked to rank the moments in order of most (causes greatest change in growth) to least significant (causes less change in growth).

As an extension of this activity, have students read Chen Chen's poem “When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities.” Students can study this text for its structure and then can do one or both of the following: 1) write a poem in Chen Chen's style from the perspective of one of the characters in the book, or 2) write a poem that represents their own hopes about growing up.

### HYPHENATED IDENTITY

Many students can identify with the push and pull of multiple identities. For many students, adolescence is a period of development that challenges them to “try on” different identities in the journey to find their authentic self. And while this is a challenge for many adolescents, for students of color, the experience of navigating the dualities of a cultural identity in a predominantly white society presents its own unique difficulties.

Invite students to listen to Randy Ribay talk about the epigraph to his book, “for the hyphenated,” by listening to his 2019 interview on NPR. Students can journal in response, noting what stands out to them: what confirms, challenges, or changes their perspectives.

In addition, students can also consider the following texts around hyphenated identities. What similarities and differences do they see between these texts, Jay's experiences in the novel, and their own lives?

## Themes and Essential Questions (cont.)

- Essays on [MashedupAmericans.com](http://MashedupAmericans.com)
- *The New York Times* video documentary series “Conversations About Race”
- Jhumpa Lahiri’s essay “My Two Lives” in *Newsweek*
- Code Switch podcast episode “What About Our Friends?”
- Independent Lens documentary *The Seed Savers*

### INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

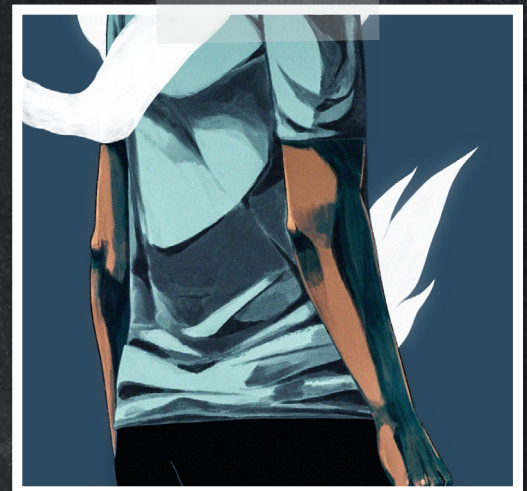
When Jay finds out that Jun is killed, he is warned by his parents not to interfere, that it is a private family matter and not to get involved. Yet Jay’s guilt over not responding to Jun’s letters and his questions around his cousin’s death compel him to find out more.

Ask students to consider what their individual and our collective responsibility is when it comes to issues of injustice: What is our obligation to find out the truth? How far should we go to seek justice? What are we willing to sacrifice to make things right? Such questions can spark a discussion before students begin reading *Patron Saints of Nothing* and can be revisited as students continue reading.

One approach might be to have students reread the following passage from the novel, an excerpt from a letter Jun writes to Jay:

*“I thought of the story of the Good Samaritan. You know the one? I think everyone does. Or, at least everyone has heard it. Every time I do, I think, surely, if I were in that situation I would be like the Samaritan and help the man in need. But how many times have I instead walked past?” (63).*

Ask students to journal about what thoughts, questions, and connections this passage brings up for them. After some discussion, introduce students to





## Themes and Essential Questions (cont.)

the concept of a *universe of obligation*. According to sociologist Helen Fein, our universe of obligation includes those individuals and groups “toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends.” In other words, our universe of obligation includes those we feel a responsibility or even a moral imperative to care for.

Invite students to read more about a universe of obligation by sharing the information provided on the Facing History, Facing Ourselves website. Teachers can then guide students in reflecting on what individuals and groups they would include in their own universe of obligation, by drawing at least three concentric circles and placing individuals and groups in the circle, with those closest to the center being those whom they feel most obligated and responsible for. This exercise can be expanded to ask students to reflect on what individuals and groups they believe their family, schools, and society as a whole feel most responsible for. Ask students to support their ideas: for example, what policies, practices, or traditions say about who is valued and who is not. And most importantly, what is the impact?

Teachers might also ask students to revisit another key scene from the novel to deepen their understanding of the individual and collective responsibility. After arriving in Manila, a beggar approaches the car and Jay rolls down his window to hand money to the girl. His aunt, Tita Ami, however, interjects, “They are like ants. You will never get rid of them all . . . You cannot give money to everyone who asks for it while you are here. There are so many poor in this country . . .” (77). Ask students to what extent they agree or disagree with Tita Ami’s opinion here and why. Students might also make connections to their own experiences by researching attitudes and policies regarding poverty in the U. S.

### PARENT AND CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

*“But adults lie, I guess. That’s what they do. Sure, there are a bunch of reasons they do it, and people would probably say most of them are pretty good. When you’re a kid, they lie and say you did a great job in a game even if you sucked. Then you grow a bit and your mom and dad lie to you about how strong their relationship is and how much they love each other after they have a big fight. Then you grow up a bit more and they tell you the lie that life is as simple as studying hard, getting into a good college, and finding a decent job.” (65)*

Students can deepen their understanding of the novel by analyzing the familial relationships present in the text. Invite students to think about Jay’s relationship with his parents and siblings: Are they close? How open and honest are their relationships, and how do they know? To expand on this, ask students to compare Jay’s

## Themes and Essential Questions (cont.)

relationships with his own family to the family dynamics he observes among his family in the Philippines, specifically with Tito Maning's family and Tita Chato's family.

Teachers can specifically ask students to focus on what they infer about how each family communicates with one another, what values are prioritized, and how they show their love for each other. For example, although students might be tempted to believe that Tito Maning does not care for Jun, a deeper reading of the text might invite students to see that how Tito Maning's values conflicted with his son's, how their understanding of family and parent-child relationships in particular led to their separation.

To deepen their analysis, students could use Thomas Foster's chapter on acts of communion in *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* and apply his framework to *Patron Saints*. Foster, for example, asserts that anytime characters eat a meal together, it's an act of communion. In this act of communion, readers can infer much about how characters relate to one another: How do the characters gather for meals? What is the conversation like at the table? What can readers infer about what the characters' relationships are with one another? Considering the central role that food often plays in culture, analyzing meal scenes to better understand characters and character relationships can be a unique and insightful experience for students to consider in the book (and even in their own lives).

### MEDIA LITERACY AND JUSTICE

Another approach teachers and students can take is to examine the role of the free press in a democratic society, particularly in holding governments accountable to following the law and to being transparent with the public. Ask students to consider Jay's reaction as he researches the drug war in the Philippines and reread that section in the chapter "A Narrower Country Than Expected." Here, Jun is taken aback, in particular, by the photographs he sees, like that of a "woman cradling her husband's dead body." Although Jay wants to turn away, he reminds himself: "I need to know. I need to see it. These photographers didn't want to water it down. They wanted the audience to confront reality, to feel the pain that's been numbed by a headline culture." After searching, Jay realizes how unaware he had been, concluding, "It's crazy and shameful that all of this has been going on for the last three years, and I basically knew nothing about it."

Ask students to consider Jay's position here. In what ways have they, too, been unaware of social issues and injustices that are happening both in the world and in the U.S.? Teachers can ask students to begin by writing down a list of issues they feel like they should know more about but do not—or put another way, a list of issues they feel it is important to know more about. Students can journal and then identify and discuss

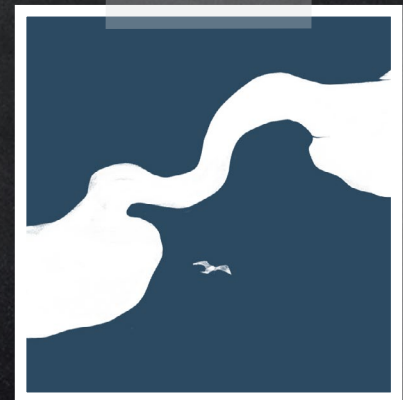
## Themes and Essential Questions (cont.)

what barriers to social awareness might exist—and what they can do about it. Although most students will not be able to travel to the other side of the world as Jay does to investigate an injustice, there are steps that students can take in the context of their own lives. Invite students to brainstorm not only what these steps might be but how they may actually do them.

Furthermore, the role of the free press can be analyzed more closely, both in the book and in students' lives. How does the media report (or not report) news of the drug war? How does this affect Jay's ability to seek justice for his cousin? What is the role of the press in presenting the truth about the drug war?

The last question, in particular, can be explored by asking students to note, like Jay does, the differences between how the press in the Philippines reports on the drug war versus press outside the country. In March 2019, the British public service television network Channel 4 interviewed Filipino journalist Raffy Lerma, who took the photograph that Jay describes in the novel of a woman cradling her dead husband (Miller, 2019). Depending on the age and maturity of students, teachers can share this five-minute news report and interview and ask them to consider what Lerma believes to be the power and role of the photographs he takes in telling the narrative of the drug war and in the pursuit of justice.

Likewise, ask students to consider U.S. media and analyze the bias in major media outlets and publications they might be exposed to. Students can go to [AllSides.com](https://www.allsides.com) to learn more about media bias. By comparing and contrasting the language used in news reports and headlines in left-leaning, right-leaning, and centrist media outlets, students can discuss the importance of seeking and finding multiple perspectives. As an extension, have students choose a social issue they would like to know more about, journal about their initial understanding about this issue, and then compare this initial understanding with how this issue is presented in news outlets from across the political spectrum on [AllSides.com](https://www.allsides.com). Emphasize to students that just as there was



## Themes and Essential Questions (cont.)

more to Jun's death than Jay initially thought, there are often deeper layers and hidden counternarratives that are left out or marginalized. The key here will be to also ask students how their identities and experiences inform their understanding of issues. After all, Jay's anger at Jun's death stems from his belief in due process, but this belief is rooted in his identity as an American:

"The right to due process is so ingrained in me as an American that I've taken it for granted. Up until now, I've never fully understood that such a right is nothing but ink on paper, paper that can be shredded and tossed in the garbage, paper that can be ignored if people don't demand its application. And it doesn't take some great evil to do that. The promise of safety is enough."

Invite students to reflect on this passage and what implications that it might have in the U.S., especially in the context of Black Lives Matter civil rights protests in recent years: In what ways can protest help to guarantee due process to Black Americans regarding police shootings? And what is the media's role in establishing or disrupting narratives around both police shootings and Black Lives Matter protests?

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## Extension Activities

### THE POWER OF LETTERS

In 2020, Teaching Tolerance produced a short film, *Bibi*, which explores issues of identity and intersectionality. Students can watch the film, focusing on the ways in which identity impacts the relationships between the characters in the film, and then applying this same analysis to the characters and events in *Patron Saints of Nothing*. In particular, students can consider the power of letter writing in both *Bibi* and *Patron Saints of Nothing*. Students can consider the ways that letters between a father and son in *Bibi* compare and contrast with the letters exchanged between Jay and Jun.

One of Jay's deepest regrets in the novel is not writing back to Jun. Thus, a potentially powerful writing assignment for students could be to write a letter in the voice of Jay at the end of the novel. Or, students could also choose any letter that Jun writes and respond in Jay's voice.

## Extension Activities (cont.)

### A MEANINGFUL PLACE

Have students reread and annotate the chapter “To Flood,” in which Jay experiences an epiphany about his identity and the connection he feels to the Philippines. Walk students through Ribay’s craft throughout the chapter, particularly noting his use of diction, imagery, and voice. Then ask students to write about a meaningful place in their own experiences, describing it with some of the same techniques Ribay uses and making them their own.

### READING THROUGH CRITICAL LITERARY THEORIES

In a 2019 conference keynote address, Randy Ribay argues for teaching students to use critical literary theory as preparation for the world. Specifically, Ribay recommends using three critical lenses—feminist, Marxist, and post-colonial—to deepen students’ understanding of both the text and the world.

Have students read Ribay’s entire essay. Then, working in groups, students can choose one of the lenses Ribay recommends and find evidence in the text to support reading the text through that lens. Ultimately, students can ask themselves how using this lens helps to complicate and clarify their understanding of the text.

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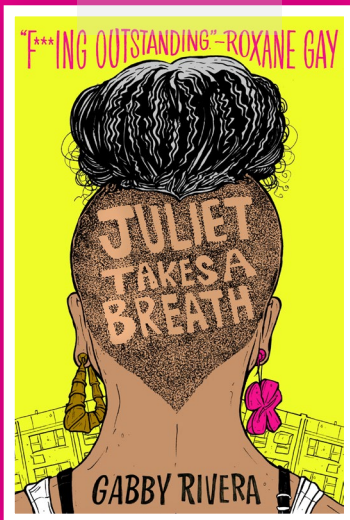
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["Patron Saints of Nothing" Is a Book for "the Hyphenated" \(podcast\)](#)



# JULIET TAKES A BREATH

by Gabby Rivera

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Juliet Milagros Palante is a self-proclaimed closeted Puerto Rican baby dyke from the Bronx. Only, she's not so closeted anymore after coming out to her family the night before flying to Portland, Oregon, to intern with her favorite feminist writer—what's sure to be a life-changing experience. And when Juliet's coming out crashes and burns, she's not sure her mom will ever speak to her again. But Juliet has a plan—sort of. Her internship with legendary author Harlowe Brisbane, the ultimate authority on feminism, women's bodies, and other gay-sounding stuff, is sure to help her figure out this whole "Puerto Rican lesbian" thing. Except Harlowe's white. And not from the Bronx. And she definitely doesn't have all the answers . . . In a summer bursting with queer brown dance parties, a sexy fling with a motorcycling librarian, and intense explorations of race and identity, Juliet learns what it means to come out—to the world, to her family, to herself.

## Considerations for Teachers and Students

It is imperative that we teach this text on its own merit. There is a rich analysis that can be elicited from Rivera's words and deep conversations that teachers can explore during a unit based on this book. We encourage educators to consider placing this book as a core text in their curriculum.

The U.S. English middle and high school literary canons are exclusive. This is especially harmful when problematic books aim to present issues of race or racism, but are themselves racist and present characters in damaging ways. In such cases, we encourage that those books be replaced with better, more restorative, and truthful books. *Juliet Takes a Breath* represents a marginalized voice widely excluded from the U.S. English middle and high school canon: that of a queer Latinx woman. It can be used to replace the following books for its parallels and commonalities.

Replace *Catcher in the Rye* with *Juliet Takes a Breath* because both books explore a coming-of-age story, an exploration of identity, and a widely understood complexity of finding one's own path.

## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

Replace *The Great Gatsby* with *Juliet Takes a Breath* because both books explore finding one's self, the heartbreak of relationships, finding your place in society, and striving for growth and development.

Replace *The Scarlet Letter* with *Juliet Takes a Breath* because both books explore a woman facing social expectations, but in this case, Juliet finds support and community, modeling for students what that looks and feels like.

Before starting *Juliet Takes a Breath*, we recommend working with students to consider how their identities and experiences may inform their reading experience. For some students, this book may be the first time that they have read about a lesbian Latinx character and her exploration of her sexuality and beliefs. This may be the first time they encounter open conversations about menstruation, women's bodies, sexual exploration, and the intersection of various issues including gender, race, and sexuality.

### CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT **SEXUALITY AND BODY**

Ideally, this is an opportunity for you, as the teacher, to create a space that is brave enough for students to feel comfortable knowing they can read about ideas on sexuality, gender, and beliefs associated with both. While it may be challenging as an adult to engage in these conversations with a group of young people, we recommend that these books are present so that young people have access to these stories, information, and voices. Then, you can provide resources for young people to follow up with in order to ask questions and receive healthy answers.

Some of the moments in the text that will foster discussion around these topics include Juliet coming out about her lesbian identity to her family, Juliet getting her period and trying non-medical methods of coping with cramps, a moment of intimacy, memories and descriptions of kissing, and body type descriptions. All of the moments are written about with grace and tenderness. They present educators with honest glimpses of a girl's life that could be great fodder for conversation.

One way to find support for these conversations is by reaching out to a school nurse, for example, to come into class and be available for students. You can also offer time during your class where students can visit the school nurse to seek help or obtain answers to questions. Additionally, you can partner with a local organization to provide resources for students if a school nurse is not available. You may want to do it in addition to a school nurse, if that organization's work goes beyond the limits of what a school nurse can offer. All of these suggestions are so that you, as a teacher, can be proactive about questions and/or issues that may surface as you engage in the reading of this book featuring moments of body and sexual expression.



# Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

## CONSIDERATIONS AROUND RACIAL IDENTITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Throughout the book, Juliet is exploring her identity, particularly on what it means to be both lesbian and Puerto Rican. She is observant of the way others express their identity and is open about her own journey through her reflections and questions. It is critical to understand the questions students may have about Puerto Rico and lesbian identity. Puerto Rican identity is complex due to its history with enslavement and colonization. Many Puerto Ricans speak highly of their Taino ancestors, the Indigenous people of the land. Many also openly acknowledge their African roots, gained through the presence of enslaved people from the continent of Africa. Lastly, the brownness of the Puerto Rican people is also due to the presence of Spaniard colonizers. The Africans and Spaniards have led to the Puerto Rican population we know today. It is important to understand this because it impacts the way Juliet sees her body as well as the way she identifies with others. It will help students understand why she feels a connection to the African American lesbians in the story, as well as why her racial identity feels a bit complex. When considering her lesbian identity, a new name she's openly trying out, her understanding of self is challenged. She begins to explore what it means to be both (lesbian and Puerto Rican) and how she can walk this way in her life.

### Key Concepts and Terms

- Intersectionality
- Feminism
- Gender
- Patriarchy

These are concepts you can explore at the start or before your reading. One way to address these concepts is to have students work in small groups to explore what they mean. They can cite articles, videos, and even podcasts. Together, in their groups, they can present their findings to the rest of the class. Each presentation can include a whole class discussion where definitions and statements can be corrected, interrogated, and clarified if/when needed. This process allows for students to own the learning and for them to be centered as they explore these concepts they'll inevitably encounter both in the text and society. You can consider having these words displayed in the classroom or on a digital space, if teaching virtually. The strength in keeping these words visible is that they are accessible and students learn to use them with ease and comfort when they discuss the book and engage in conversations about these topics. Helping them to own this language is work toward racial and social justice-based fluency. This is how we prepare them to have these conversations outside of our unit and classroom.

## Themes and Essential Questions

The following are possible themes to consider when teaching this book. You can explore the essential questions below with students as you walk through those themes.

### BE TRUE TO WHO YOU ARE.

- Who am I? What are my values and beliefs, and how are those reflected in my thoughts and actions?
- How do we understand and wrestle with being ourselves, especially when who we are might be rejected by others?



Line art ©2019 Ashley Branch

### INTERSECTIONALITY IS COMPLEX

- How do my multiple identities, as well as my group memberships, make me unique and complex? How might that intersectionality influence my decisions and life choices? Consider this quote for discussion: "They're down for Harlowe. They're down for each other. They're not down for you, Juliet Palante from the Bronx, you know?" (89)
- How can a person explore their identity and the diversity of who they are without exposure to many different people and ideas? Consider this quote for discussion: "No, I didn't know my gender pronouns. All the moments where I was made to feel like an outsider in a group that was supposed to have room for me added up and left me feeling so much shame." (69)
- Historically, many women of color have critiqued the feminist movement in the United States because of the racial dynamics they've experienced. How do you think racism may have played a role in feminism in the U.S.? Consider the scene on pages 110 and 111.

### BECOMING YOURSELF IS A JOURNEY

- How might society define what we as individuals see as beautiful? How might that impact how we view ourselves? Consider this quote for discussion: "Reflections of my womanhood rolled over me with its own expectations like all the times I stared in the mirror as a kid wishing I was pretty like Ava." (287)

## Lesson Ideas

The following are literary techniques or devices used in the book that could drive lessons for critical study. It is important to value the way the authors have crafted the stories and voices in these books written by and about BIPOC. Too often when taught, the focus is narrowly about the “newness” or “youthfulness” of the text versus analyzing its literary value. Too often we continue to use these books as a bridge to what teachers consider more rigorous or challenging texts, and those are too often a return to the “classics.” The message this sends is that these books are not rigorous or ones that can be used for critical analysis. This continues to place some books on pedestals and others beneath, with the ones not celebrated being by and about BIPOC.

### MOTIF OF AIR & BREATH

*“You let Harlowe’s narrative be the air people breathed about you.” (284)*

*“Huhmm...” I exhaled, thinking all of that over. Polyamory.” (98)*

*“It’s the sound of damaged good filtering in and out of your chest, past your ears, back into your psyche.” (91)*

*“I kept breathing until the pain subsided all over.” (134)*

Explore the moments where breath and air are mentioned and described. Juliet struggles with her breathing and there’s a direct connection to her emotions and the intensity of the moment. Invite students to notice and observe that. Have them trace the connections between her breathing and her character development and growth. Invite them to observe how her breathing improves as she gains emotional wisdom and strength.

### SYMBOLISM OF BLOOD

*“Blood is literal. Blood is spiritual. Blood connects through birth, through chaos, and through intimacy.” (196)*

*“And as for ceremony, periods should always be celebrated.” (127)*

Explore the moments that blood in literal and familial ways plays a role in Juliet’s life, the plot of the story, and connections between characters. After an in-depth conversation about symbolism in literature and how it’s often intertwined with other literary devices that craft the story’s impact, invite students to an analysis of blood. Help them get started by considering the quotes above, and then, with partners, students can revisit the text and find moments where blood is named and present. Ask: What might blood symbolize in that scene? How might Rivera’s exploration of blood connect to a possible theme?

## Lesson Ideas (cont.)

### MOTIF OF LITERACY

*“You said reading would make me brilliant, but writing would make me infinite.” (272)*

*“Why had I come? I pulled out my notebook and answered Maxine’s last question for myself.” (285)*

*“Libraries had zero tolerance for bullshit. Their walls protected us and kept us safe from all the bastards that never read a book for fun.” (118)*

Discuss how literacy is important for people whose voices have been largely excluded from the literary world. In this conversation, explore the author, her story, and the power literacy has afforded her through the writing of this book. Talk about welcoming the voices of marginalized people into classrooms and the impact the book is having on their learning as students. Then, also talk about the role of reading and writing in the book for Juliet. Starting with the quotes above, invite students to explore the role literacy plays in her life and how it’s embedded in her learning about her own identity.

### FEMINISM & GENDER IDENTITY

*“Like Ava said: Womanhood was radical enough for anyone who dared claim it.” (287)*

*“Men in public or even in the house should never be able to see the outline of your tetitas or the poke of your nipples. Put your bra on the second you wake up in the morning. Men can’t handle seeing those things.” (65)*

Discuss gender and feminism by exploring some of the pairing suggestions from above as well as online videos and interviews. Walk students through a study of what feminism is, it’s development over time, and the U.S.’s exploration of gender identity over the years. Ask: how does Juliet’s understanding of feminism evolve throughout the story?

### ALLIES & LANGUAGE

*“I didn’t want to experience Portland or obtain a queer education that way, not from some smug dude. His energy drained me. I didn’t like the way he said **dyke**. Maybe he was allowed to say it by association, but he wasn’t an associate of mine.” (72)*

Use this reading as an opportunity to discuss controversial words/language and who is able to use them or not. For example, words like *dyke*, *queer*, *gay*, etc. have a long history in our society and have evolved in what they mean, how they’re used, and who can use them. Talk about connotations and denotations and how words change over time.

## Lesson Ideas (cont.)

### ANALYZING SETTING & METAPHOR

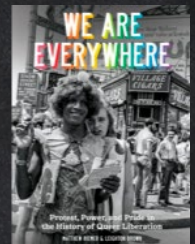
Read pages 12 and 13. Literary devices often work together to create meaning. In this case, Rivera uses setting descriptions as metaphors, often, to reveal characters as well as atmosphere. After an exploration of these literary devices, invite students to revisit those early pages and ask: how does the setting described on pages 12 and 13 speak to her intersectional identity as well as the contradictions she is experiencing? Then, ask: How does each setting that Juliet visits tell a story about her learning, identity, and sexuality? Invite students, in partners, to do a close reading of the setting descriptions and share their analysis with the class.

Supplementing your class's study of *Juliet Takes a Breath* with additional texts and materials is a way to facilitate deep analysis. Often pairing two texts allows for critical thinking and functions as a critical literacy activity. When supplementing, you can explore material that emphasizes or highlights a concept, character, or any other element in the text. In this case, *Juliet Takes a Breath* can be paired with several texts/materials to foster deep critical thinking and analysis.

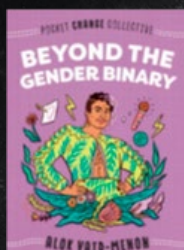


Consider pairing *Juliet Takes a Breath* and *Pocket Change Collective: The New Queer Conscience* by Adam Eli. Invite students to talk about the ways the two books connect by finding commonalities and direct conceptual connections such as terminology shared in both and how Juliet is developing a new conscience. Invite students to explore how Juliet would respond to Eli, the author. Students can cite Rivera's text directly to write from the perspective of Juliet.

Consider pairing *Juliet Takes a Breath* and *We Are Everywhere* by Matthew Riemer and Leighton Brown. Invite students to make oral presentations and reports from their learning in this non-fiction photographic collection. This can parallel the project Juliet takes on in the book during her internship.

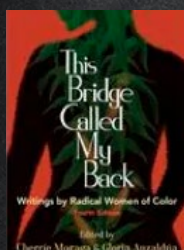
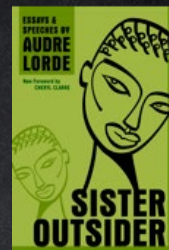


## Lesson Ideas (cont.)



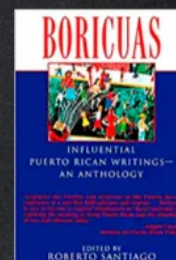
Consider pairing *Juliet Takes a Breath* and *Pocket Change Collective: Beyond the Gender Binary* by Alok Vaid-Menon. Invite students to make connections between this book and the party Juliet attends in Florida. Students can find parallels and direct connections between some of the characters in the story's party and the concepts outlined in this book.

Consider pairing *Juliet Takes a Breath* and *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde. Invite students to use some of the essays in Lorde's book to inform their analysis of Juliet and her experiences. They can use understandings of feminism and womanhood as explained by Lorde to analyze the beliefs of characters and the actions others take.



Consider pairing *Juliet Takes a Breath* and *This Bridge Called My Back* by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. Using this collection from the point of view of women of color about their experiences, students can engage in a conversation about the intersection of race and womanhood across time. Individually, students can write and respond to the readings.

Consider pairing *Juliet Takes a Breath* and *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings—An Anthology* edited by Roberto Santiago. You can use this anthology to invite students into a deep dive about Puerto Rican culture. Juliet's ethnic identity is ever present throughout the text and plays a role in how her internship goes, how she processes her gender identity, and how she understands herself and her family. Spending time exploring this part of who she is can enhance students' understanding of the core text.



Consider pairing *Juliet Takes a Breath* and *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson. Use this book to do a gender-based analysis of what it's like for an LGBTQ boy of color to explore his identity in comparison and contrast for Juliet. Ask students: What's similar? What's powerfully different?

## Journal Prompts

Students will find many entry points throughout the story to connect with. Writing in response to critical moments of tension in the text can help students reflect and process their own emotions and questions as they read.

Ask students to revisit these passages from the novel and invite them to answer the corresponding prompts.

- “My parents raised me to believe that I should be proud to live in the land of the free. But what the heck did any of that mean if it came at the cost of other people’s countries and lives?” (139) Prompt: This is an example of the various contradictions Juliet explores throughout the novel in her search for truth. How would you answer this question? Also, what are some other examples of contradictions throughout the novel?
- “Fresh-faced, I stared hard into the static of the bathroom mirror, trying to imagine her wanting to kiss me. I looked again and saw myself and it was okay. I’d kiss me.” (160) Prompt: When you look in the mirror, what do you see? How does this quote serve as an example of Rivera’s exploration of identity throughout the novel?
- “All of the women in my life were telling me the same thing. My story, my truth, my life, my voice, all of that had to be protected and put out into the world by me.” (285) Prompt: Do you believe this about yourself? How might this be true for you, too, and what do you have to say to the world?
- “Panic always started in my lungs first and then spread to nervous fingers, knuckles that had to be cracked, and a heartbeat that wouldn’t slow.” (52) Prompt: Do you suffer from anxiety, stress, or panic attacks? If so, what does it look like in your body? If not, how do you handle big emotions when they come? Spend time thinking and reflecting on your emotional health.

## Journal Prompts (cont.)

- **“Ask the questions that make you feel like your heart is blasting out of your chest.” (145)** Prompt: What questions do you have in mind and heart? What burning question do you want to ask and what do you think the answer might be? What holds you/us back from asking big and hard questions?
- **On page 17, Juliet tells a brief story about her grandmother.** Prompt: How might her grandmother be an influence in her life?
- **“Why lie? I don’t have a boyfriend. And I think I’m a lesbian,” I said. ‘My words felt like they were being sucked out of me.’” (25)** Prompt: This is the moment where Juliet comes out about her sexual identity to her family. Have you ever shared a deep secret about yourself with someone? How did that feel? Have you ever shared something important about your identity with family? If so, how did they respond and how did you feel?

## Extension Activities

- Juliet carries with her a purple composition notebook where she does research and takes notes. We learn about this notebook at the very beginning. This is a great opportunity to embed journaling into your class, if it doesn’t exist already. It can also be an activity you solely use during the study of this book. Welcome students, if you can, in this unit with a composition notebook of their own. This notebook can be a space where they answer the journal and other prompts offered throughout this guide. Journal writing can be a community builder for the class and sign of caring and connection from you. You can consider days where students select a journal entry to share with you or with each other. There may be journal entries students want to read aloud. Requiring the sharing is not something we recommend, however, because the hope is that students will be honest and thoughtful in their writing, and journal writing may be too personal to share.



## Extension Activities (cont.)

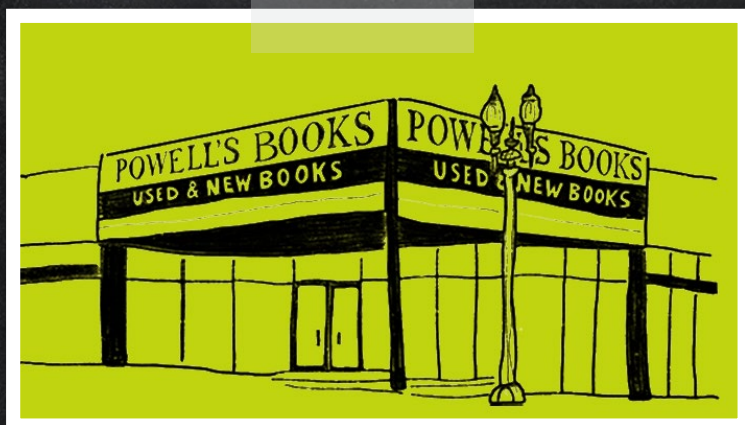
- Invite students to identify a woman in history, from the ones listed in the book and more, and spend time doing research on them. They can learn about their story, their achievements, their strengths, their areas of growth, and make some connections to modern day women and issues. Students can then make presentations, leading the class to collective learning led by students.
  - Invite students to design their dream internship. They can answer questions such as:
    - Who would you intern for?
    - What do you think you would learn from them?
    - Where would your internship be?
    - What task would your supervisor have you undertake?
- Arrange students in small groups so that this can be student-focused and they can learn to manage discussion and productivity. Each group watches one video in this TED Talk series "[On Coming Out](#)" and after discussing, they can share takeaways. You can offer guided listening questions so that their notes help them process the message and prepare for a share out. They can also make connections to the core text, *Juliet Takes a Breath*.
- Invite the class to watch [this TED talk](#) by trans activist Samy Nour. Then, hold a discussion about the history which he describes. Invite students to research LGBTQ activists across a range of time. They can do presentations or reports of their own.
- Invite your class to watch Gabby Rivera's [TED Talk](#). Then hold a discussion about Gabby's story and *Juliet Takes a Breath*.

In order to work in community with other antiracist educators and/or BIPOC you can welcome them to either support you in planning or join your classroom. If they join you by supporting you in planning, then they can offer you critical and thoughtful feedback on the implementation of your ideas and strategies for the book study. They can offer you questions and critique so that you can proactively try to avoid harmful or ineffective practices as you engage students in this discussion. If they are joining you in the classroom, then try to find a way for them to speak on direct issues mentioned in the book. Consider some of the following ideas:

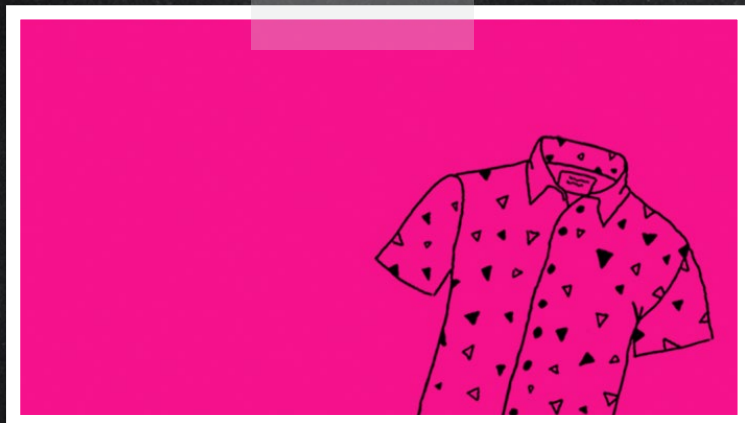
- A Queer person who can share about their story and make direct connections to Juliet's experiences
- A woman who identifies as feminist and can speak to the experiences presented in the story
- An antiracist BIPOC who can explain intersectionality

## Extension Activities (cont.)

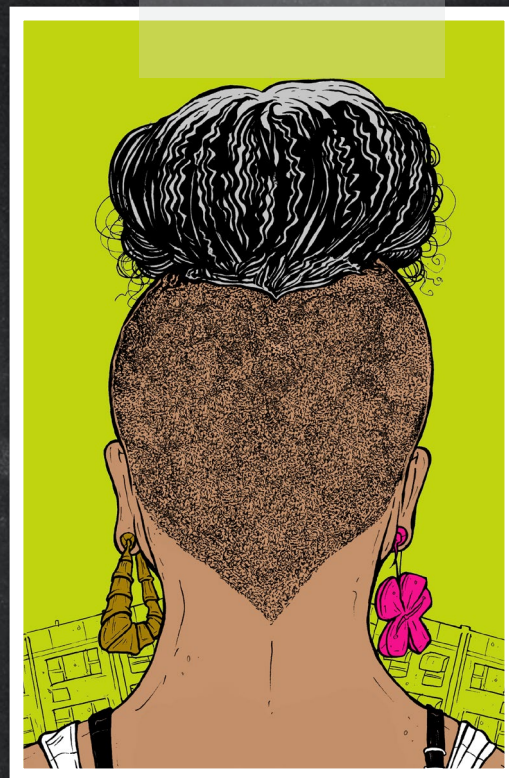
You want to ensure that the guest is fully aware of their role in the conversation and that their story is being centered through this core text. They should be invited to share their point of view as one of many; a complex experience for which there are many perspectives. You don't want to tokenize this person by presenting them as the one voice to answer all the questions and represent an entire group. However, if they understand your goal as a teacher and are aware that you are offering students an opportunity to hear from a person in their lives that can speak to the matters at hand as one story, that's collaboration.



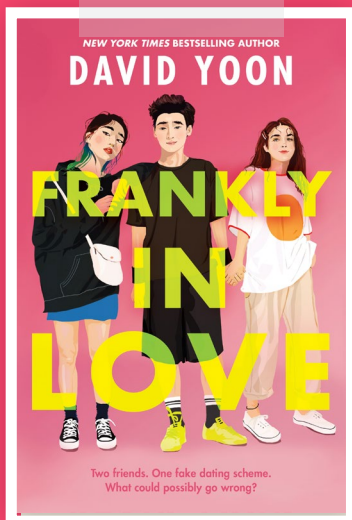
*Line art ©2019 Ashley Branch*



*Line art ©2019 Ashley Branch*



*Art by Cristy C. Road, © Gabby Rivera*



# FRANKLY IN LOVE

by David Yoon

## ABOUT THE BOOK

A WILLIAM C. MORRIS YA DEBUT AWARD FINALIST

AN ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN LIBRARIANS  
ASSOCIATION HONOR BOOK

TWO FRIENDS. ONE FAKE DATING SCHEME.  
WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

Frank Li has two names. There's Frank Li, his American name. Then there's Sung-Min Li, his Korean name. No one uses his Korean name, not even his parents. Frank barely speaks any Korean. He was born and raised in Southern California.

Even so, his parents still expect him to end up with a nice Korean girl—which is a problem, since Frank is finally dating the girl of his dreams: Brit Means. Brit, who is funny and nerdy just like him. Brit, who makes him laugh like no one else. Brit... who is white.

As Frank falls in love for the very first time, he's forced to confront the fact that while his parents sacrificed everything to raise him in the land of opportunity, their traditional expectations don't leave a lot of room for him to be a regular American teen. Desperate to be with Brit without his parents finding out, Frank turns to family friend Joy Song, who is in a similar bind. Together, they come up with a plan to help each other and keep their parents off their backs. Frank thinks he's found the solution to all his problems, but when life throws him a curveball, he's left wondering whether he ever really knew anything about love—or himself—at all.

In this moving debut novel, David Yoon takes on the question of *who am I?* with a result that is humorous, heartfelt, and ultimately unforgettable.

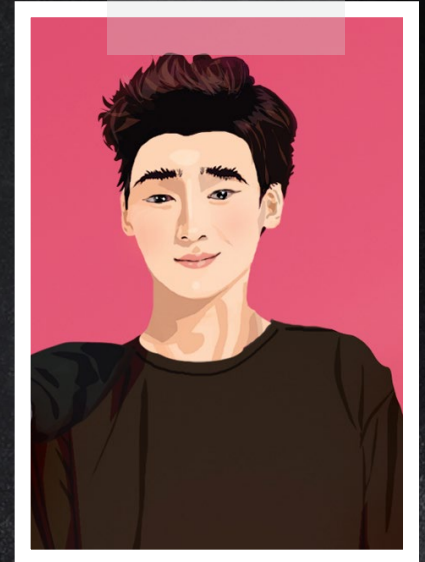
## Considerations for Teachers and Students

Consider using *Frankly In Love* to pair with or replace any coming-of-age text or any text about identity, relationships, and family that you might have in your curriculum. We believe that Yoon's novel offers students deep possibilities for exploring similar terrain and issues as traditionally canonical texts. For example, consider pairing Yoon's novel with or replacing texts such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Great Gatsby* and to study themes of Romanticism and Transcendentalism.

## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

Before starting *Frankly in Love*, we recommend working with students to consider how their identities and experiences may inform their reading experience. For some students, this book may be the first time they read a book focused on Asian-American experiences, particularly the dynamics of inter- and intraracial identity.

Teachers should also interrogate their own biases and stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans before, throughout, and after their teaching of the text. Teaching Tolerance's [article "I Am Asian American"](#) and teacher [toolkit](#) are suitable starting places. Specifically, teachers should develop a working understanding of the Model Minority Myth, its history, and its implications. [Another article](#) from Teaching Tolerance, "What is the Model Minority Myth?" would be helpful here.



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### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

[The National Association of Korean Americans](#) provides information to help readers locate Frank and his family within a broader history. It states: "Korean emigration to the United States can be divided into three major waves. The first, from 1903 to 1905, consisted of about 7,500 Koreans, mostly men, who went to work on Hawaii's sugar plantations as contract laborers. The second, beginning in 1950, consists of women who married American soldiers and children adopted into American families. Nearly 100,000 so-called "internationally married women" or "military brides" entered the United States between 1950 and 1989, while approximately 300,000 Korean adoptees entered the United States beginning in 1953. The third wave, beginning in 1967, consists of Koreans who came under the occupational and family reunification preferences of the 1965 Immigration Act. These waves of emigration followed growing U.S. involvement in Korea during the twentieth century." Take time to help students understand the connections between history and the novel's setting.

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND RACIAL IDENTITY

The Asian population of the United States is diverse and rapidly growing. Frame conversations about ethnicity through first helping students understand how many different ethnicities encompass Asian and Pacific Islanders by using the website AAPI Data: Quick Stats (<http://aapidata.com/stats/national/>). Then, apply that knowledge to thinking about how Frank, his peers, and his parents, relate and name their own racial identities.

## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

- “When Mom-n-Dad say *American*, they mean *white*. When they refer to themselves—or me—they say *hanguksaram*, or *Korean*. I never call myself just Korean. I call myself *Korean-American*, always leading first with *Korean* or *Asian*, then the silent hyphen, then ending with *American*. Never just *American*” (133).

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND INTER- AND INTRARACIAL PREJUDICE

- All people in racial, cultural, and ethnic groups are subject to the modern manifestations of social hierarchies that began with colonization. Intra-racial prejudice can be connected to colorism (such as in the case of darker- or lighter-skinned African Americans receiving privilege or oppression in accordance with white adjacency), or classism (such as in the case of the caste system in India).
- Interracial prejudice, by comparison, occurs between people whom society perceives to be of different races. Often, interracial prejudice is reinforced by systemic racism and prejudicial laws that perpetuate scenarios such as segregated schooling and redlining. Students may want to consider the ways in which anti-Black racism has divided communities of color (for example, the Asian or Latinx communities and Black communities). It’s important for students to understand that interracial prejudice ultimately reinforces a racial hierarchy that keeps white people at the top; communities which are divided have a harder time working together. That said, there is a long documented history of interracial solidarity (see Delano grape strike, for example).

#### Further Reading:

[The Significance of Skin Color in Asian and Asian-American Communities: Initial Reflections](#) by Trina Jones (featuring research by Michelle Huang and Cinthia Flores)

[Asian American Racial Justice Toolkit](#) by J Ishida and Soya Jung (with collaboration from Lucia Lin and Timmy Lu)

[Why We Must Talk About the Asian American Story, Too](#) by Brando Simeo Starkey

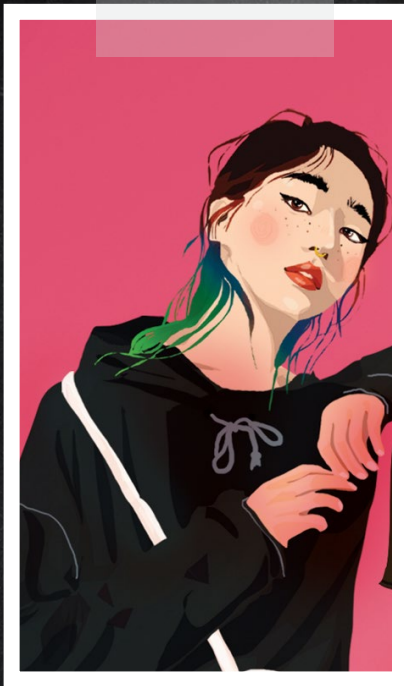
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## Themes and Essential Questions

Teaching Tolerance’s Social Justice Standards provides a useful framework to read and analyze texts, especially a text like *Frankly In Love*. The Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards focus on four domains: identity, diversity, justice, and action. Themes and essential questions can be developed around these domains to encourage students to respond to the text as individuals but then make connections to larger historical and contemporary systems through a social justice lens. Learn more about the standards and domains at [tolerance.org/frameworks/social-justice-standards](https://tolerance.org/frameworks/social-justice-standards).

## Themes and Essential Questions (cont.)

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Some examples of themes and essential questions that teachers can use to frame students' study of *Frankly In Love* are listed below.

*Identity:* Who am I? What experiences and identities make up who I am? How do my race and culture affect the way I see myself, how I relate to others, and how I navigate the world?

*Community:* What makes up a community? How can a community's shared values and beliefs both help and harm members of that community? In what ways are individuals and groups treated differently based on their identities?

*Family:* How do I define my family? What makes up my family? How does my family define who I am? What are the different ways that families can be defined? How do families differ and why? How do family dynamics impact interpersonal relationships? How do systems and structures, policies and practices, affect families in fair and unfair ways? What should be the relationship between government and families? What can we do to ensure that all individuals and groups, whatever their family background, can be guaranteed equal access, opportunities, and treatment?

## Key Concepts and Vocabulary

Because *Frankly in Love* explores issues related to identity, race, culture, and history, some understanding of key concepts related to these issues is essential for teachers and students. The following list contains some definitions and their application to the novel.

### Microaggression

According to Derald Wing Sue, microaggressions are the "everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership." When working with students, teachers may want to stop and pause at moments in the text like the one below:

## Key Concepts and Vocabulary (cont.)

*“Brit’s dad opens the menu, flips through it, puts it down. He turns to me. And here it comes: ‘Maybe it’d be easier if you just ordered for us, Frank?’ I smile, but inside I’m irked” (211).*

As a white man, Brit’s dad means well when he asks Frank to order for them at the Korean restaurant, but what he doesn’t recognize is how this bothers Frank. Brit’s dad assumes that because Frank is Korean that he will know what to order; although this seems logical, it is the burden of these assumptions, accumulated over time, that constitute microaggressions.

### Interracial prejudice

*“We’re entering strange, sensitive territory. Q and I have talked about race a million times, but mostly to make fun of it as an abstract, intellectual concept. We’ve never really gotten that personal about it, until now” (196).*

Frank and his best friend, Q, tiptoe around race throughout most of the novel until finally confronting their racial differences. Spend some time talking about the significance of their discussions about race and racism, stereotypes, and what each learns about the other from these interactions. Identify these moments in the text and have students work in small groups to unpack the racial dynamics—and history—playing out in these conversations. How does their friendship deepen as a result of these moments of honest conversation?

In addition to Frank and Q’s conversations, consider what Frank learns about race and racism from his own parents. One particular scene to unpack occurs early in the text, in the chapter entitled, “More Better.” On their ride home from one of the gatherings, Frank becomes angry at his parents’ casual racism, and it’s in this moment that Frank reveals that his parents’ racist attitudes are one reason he and Q never spend time together at Frank’s house. This is also the source of conflict and estrangement between Frank’s sister, Hannah, and Miles. Frank and Hannah’s relationship with their parents also presents an opportunity to have students think about the history of interracial prejudice among communities of color, especially between Asian and Black communities. Teachers and students can unpack the role that Asian Americans, through the Model Minority Myth, have often been used as a wedge to perpetuate anti-Black racism. Deanna Pan’s [article](#) in the *Boston Globe* might be useful here, as well as the [Code Switch episode, “One Korean American’s Reckoning.”](#)

## Key Concepts and Vocabulary (cont.)

### Intraracial Prejudice

Students who are not Asian American (and perhaps some who are) may not be aware of the prejudice that exists among and between various Asian communities in the United States. Readers see the first glimpse of this when Joy tells Frank about how she has had to keep her relationship with her Chinese-American boyfriend a secret from her parents. At the first gathering, Joy tells Frank she doesn't have "boy problems" but that she has "Chinese boy problems." Frank immediately understands, reflecting, "Koreans hating Chinese hating Koreans hating blablabla." This history of intraracial prejudice can break the stereotype that "all Asians are the same" by revealing the diversity of history and culture among different communities.

*Related:* Advanced students might consider the ways in which the author helps to fill in background information about this history of inter and intra racial prejudice in the book. The Code Switch podcast offers a useful [episode](#) about the use of the "explanatory comma" to provide background information about race and culture that predominantly white audiences may not have. Students might ask themselves: Is the use of these "explanatory commas" helpful or distracting? What does the use of these "explanatory commas" indicate about who the audience is for this book?

### Code switching

*"In Language class, Ms. Chit would call this code switching. It's like switching accents, but at a more micro level. The idea is that you don't speak the same way with your friends (California English Casual) that you do with a teacher (California English Formal), or a girl (California English Sing-song), or your immigrant parents (California English Exasperated). You change how you talk to best adapt to whoever you're talking to" (39).*

Code switching has been considered a way for English speakers to demonstrate fluency in "Standard English." However, recent changes facilitated by the National Council of Teachers of English's CCCC have articulated the need to connect language, especially Black language and Black identity. Interrogate why educators have demanded that students learn to code switch, and consider why "teachers [should] stop teaching Black students to code switch! Instead, we must teach Black students about Anti-Black linguistic racism and white linguistic supremacy!" Consider how code switching normalizes white mainstream English and what students asked to code switch lose regarding their identities.



## Journal Prompts

Students will find many entry points throughout the story to connect with. Writing in response to critical moments of tension in the text can help students reflect and process their own emotions and questions as they read.

Ask students to revisit these passages from the novel: What stands out? What connections can you make to your own experiences or the experiences of others?

- “My ideal woman should probably be Korean-American. It’s not strictly necessary. I could care less. But it would make things easier” (9).
- “To think, he earned a bachelor’s degree in Seoul and wound up here. I wonder how many immigrants there are like him, working a blue-collar job while secretly owning a white-collar degree” (13).
- “Dad is *happy*. And I understand why. Mom is taking care of him. Joy is taking care of me. We are all here together. His son has chosen a proper girl. All four of us are keenly aware of the specter of death, and remain defiantly alive. Cozy, even” (179).
- “If that suspect had been black, he’d be too shot-dead to question,’ says Q” (185).
- “‘Girl normally should be smart and quiet and calm,’ says Mom. ‘But Joy so crazy’” (186).
- “We seem so happy and light and open to all the possibilities the world has to offer. How can it be, then, that Mom-n-Dad see Brit as white and nothing else? How can that possibly be, now that the world has just shown us we are all human, and mortal, and fragile?” (188).
- “We barely speak the same language. Literally. You have any idea at all how lucky you are your whole family is fluent in the same freaking language?” (191).
- “We’ve laughed before about the notion of a pure black. There are so many kinds of black. Nerd black, artistic black, old-skool black, super-black (see also: super-Koreans). Black can mean a million things” (195).

## Journal Prompts (cont.)

- “I just know I’ll never be able to do Korean right. You know what I mean?” (198).
- “Brit—wise, awakened, aware Brit—belongs to a white majority whether she wants to or not, and is entitled to all its privileges—also *whether she wants them or not*” (208).
- “...I start to get that classic Limbo feeling that I get whenever I’m surrounded by this much Korean-ness: that I am a failure at being Korean, and not doing so great at being American, so the only thing left to do is run away and hide in my own little private Planet Frank” (232).
- “Me and Joy grew up exposed to this world. We know all of its elements, even if we don’t always know their names in Korean. They’re not weird or exotic to us. They have the feeling of home. If not for the skyline of Los Angeles in the background, I can fool myself into thinking I’m in Korea. Even better: I can fool myself into thinking that *I am Korean*” (266).
- “Say me and Joy had been born in Korea. We’d be Korean. We’d belong to a tribe. But that doesn’t necessarily mean we’d belong to each other. Because there are tribes within tribes, all separated by gaps everywhere” (385).

## Discussion and Lesson Ideas

### AMERICAN DREAM

Teachers can situate a study of *Frankly in Love* within the concept of the “American Dream,” especially as related to ideas about success and prosperity. In what ways does Frank’s family strive to, and challenge, the idea of the “American Dream,” especially as related to race and racial identity? Draw comparisons between the [essay](#) “Asian Americans Are Still Caught in the Trap of the ‘Model Minority’ Stereotype. And It Creates Inequality for All” and Frank, his family, and their friends. Prompt students to draw inferences and connections around the following passages in the novel:

## Discussion and Lesson Ideas (cont.)

- “The poor customers give Mom-n-Dad food stamps, which become money, which becomes college tuition for me. I hope the next version of the American dream doesn’t involve gouging people for food stamps” (12).
- “My parents work too much to carve mermaids for the threshold. But they must be working toward that kind of stuff, right? Toward that time in life when the hustle eases up, the body relaxes, and the mind begins to contemplate the ideal door knocker” (97)
- “The roomful of Limbos suddenly becomes the most precious of life’s achievements: children who will never want for anything, who speak native English, who will go to the best schools in the world and never have to run an office furniture rental service (like Joy’s parents), a dry cleaner (Ella’s), a beauty supply (Andrew’s), a tourist gift shop (John’s), or a grocery store (mine)” (122).
- “I hope he had a fixed finish line that he one day crossed and stopped running because that’s just his kind of happiness. Here’s what I imagine rich people like Joy’s dad to be like: forever chasing a finish line that’s actually the horizon, never to be reached. Is that a kind of happiness too?” (289)

### FIRST- AND SECOND-GENERATION IMMIGRANT DIFFERENCES

One issue that comes up throughout the novel is the difference in immigrant experiences between Frank and his family. His parents are first-generation immigrants, the first generation to live in the United States. Frank and other members of the gathering families, however, are second-generation immigrants, born in the United States to first-generation immigrant parents.

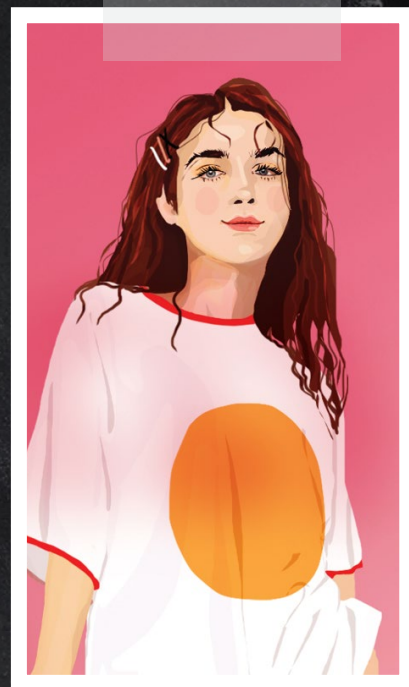
Many children of immigrant parents experience stress related to differences in expectations and mindsets of what it means to be “an American.” Provide students with readings such as [Nicole Clark’s essay, “The Hidden Stress of Growing Up a Child of Immigrants”](#) and ask them to consider how the issues manifest in the novel. Some passages from the novel that can prompt students here include:

- “How long do our parents hold power over us? I wonder. Is it only as long as we let them?” (330).
- “Here’s a conversational opening, and all I want to do is cut it off: *yeah, been there, done that, nuff said*. I can see Dad’s face fall a millimeter. My eyes get hot, like they always do when I realize I’m being stupid” (65).

## Discussion and Lesson Ideas (cont.)

- “I am panicking because I realize I’ve been desperate to know Dad my whole life. I learned a long time ago that such a hope was impossible with an impenetrable statue ruin like him. So I gave up. Moreover, I pretended I *didn’t* care if I never knew him. I pretended I was okay living as a Limbo, belonging nowhere, a son without even the most basic connection to the man who fathered him” (308).

The theme of generational conflict was also explored in Amy Tan’s classic novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. Teachers might ask students to read a story from that novel, such as “Rules of the Game” or “Two Kinds,” to compare with *Frankly in Love*. Tan’s novel was written more than thirty years ago: How much remains the same and how much seems different in how generational conflicts are portrayed in these two pieces of literature?



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### TEEN ROMANCE AS GENRE

“I just want to be carefree, like in those teen movies where all the kids (meaning all the white kids) get to play their guessing games and act out their love dramas and lie tête-à-tête on moonlit lawns to gaze up at the stars. To wonder about all those higher things: the universe, fate, other philosophica. Not mucky-muck bullshit like the racism of their parents” (197).

Is *Frankly in Love* a true teen romance novel? Does it reinforce Asian stereotypes or subvert them? YALSA describes some characteristics of YA romance as: “Beginning with the meeting of the future couple . . . a relationship that’s tested or stressed by some series of events . . . and] eventually, the conflict is resolved and the characters are able to fully acknowledge their love, though this does not always result in a happily ever after.” [The Code Switch article](#) “What’s So Cringeworthy about Long Duk Dong in ‘Sixteen Candles?’” invites a starting place for helping think about *Frankly In Love* as either subverting or reinforcing both the YA genre and stereotypes.

## Discussion and Lesson Ideas (cont.)

### FITTING IN/ASSIMILATION

During one of the gatherings, Frank reflects on his identity and those of his fellow Korean American friends, “I call us the Limbos. Every month I dread going to these awkward reunions with the Limbos, to wait out time between worlds” (17). Ask students to unpack what Frank means by “time between worlds”: what “worlds” is he referring to?

In an [interview with NPR](#), author Randy Ribay speaks of “hyphenated identities” and the concept that no person is ever just one thing. Frank wants to fit in: romantically, with his friends, and with his larger world. While it is true that all adolescents want to feel a sense of belonging, students with “hyphenated identities”—racially and culturally—may experience specific challenges that white students might not. Consider how you might make space for students to process these experiences (for example, through the journal prompts above).

As Frank says to himself, “I feel like I don’t belong anywhere and every day it’s like I live on this weird little planet of my own in exile . . . I’m not Korean enough. I’m not white enough to be fully American” (208). How do Frank’s wishes help to think about the duality of his identity as a Korean American? Teachers might use the [Code Switch episode, “What About Your Friends?”](#) to help students identify the struggles that come with navigating social relationships with dual and multiple identities.

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### Extension Activity

While *Frankly in Love* focuses on the relationships between Frank and his friends and family, one possible extension would be to ask students to take a closer look at Anti-Black racism in Asian communities. Students can begin by looking at the [Time magazine article, “The Asian American Response to Black Lives Matter Is Part of a Long, Complicated History”](#). Students can also research Rodney King and unpack how the history of Black and Asian community relations might inform the events in the novel (consider, for example, Frank’s parents). Likewise, introduce students to examples of coalition and solidarity movements between the two communities, such as the friendship and activism of Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs alongside Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

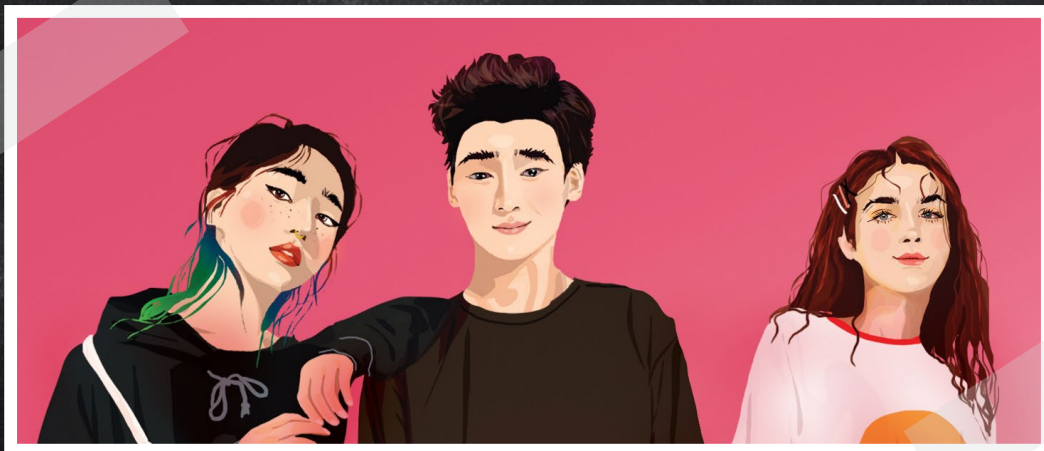
## Supplementary Texts

- Traci Chee, *We Are Not Free*
- Misa Sugiura, *This Time Will Be Different*
- Keshni Kashyap, *Tina's Mouth: An Existential Comic Diary*
- Sung Woo, *Everything Asian*
- Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*
- Nicola Yoon, *The Sun Is Also a Star*
- Mitali Perkins, *You Bring the Distant Near*
- Erica Lee, *The Making of Asian America*
- *All American*, Netflix series
- *On My Block*, Netflix series
- Roy Choi series *Broken Bread*

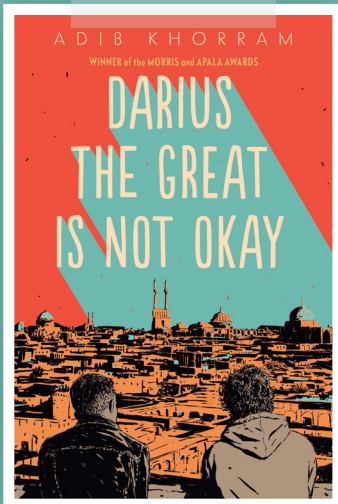
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# DARIUS THE GREAT IS NOT OKAY

by Adib Khorram

## ABOUT THE BOOK

DARIUS DOESN'T THINK HE'LL EVER BE ENOUGH, IN AMERICA OR IN IRAN. HILARIOUS AND HEARTBREAKING, THIS UNFORGETTABLE DEBUT INTRODUCES A BRILLIANT NEW VOICE IN CONTEMPORARY YA.

WINNER OF THE WILLIAM C. MORRIS DEBUT AWARD

"Heartfelt, tender, and so utterly real.

I'd live in this book forever if I could."

—BECKY ALBERTALLI, award-winning author of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*

Darius has never really fit in at home, and he's sure things are going to be the same in Iran. His clinical depression doesn't exactly help matters, and trying to explain his medication to his grandparents only makes things harder. Then Darius meets Sohrab, the boy next door, and everything changes. Soon, they're spending their days together, playing soccer, eating faludeh, and talking for hours on a secret rooftop overlooking the city's skyline. Sohrab calls him Darioush—the original Persian version of his name—and Darius has never felt more like himself than he does now that he's Darioush to Sohrab. Adib Khorram's brilliant debut is for anyone who's ever felt not good enough—then met a friend who makes them feel so much better than okay.

## Considerations for Teachers and Students

*Darius the Great Is Not Okay* is in essence a coming-of-age story with family at the center. Throughout the narrative, readers will encounter Persian customs, traditions, and foods, many of them for the first time, just as Darius does. The book also addresses religious minorities like [Zoroastrians](#) and [Bahá'í](#) co-existing within a predominantly Muslim theocratic state wherein laws, customs, traditions, and religion are all intertwined. Readers engaging with *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* should consider the internal and external pressures that Darius feels, both as a result of historical roles Persian males (and patriarchs within his family) have held, but also because of the inner

## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

thoughts racing through his mind that are part of living with depression. An added layer of importance is the fact that Darius's father is white. Khorram takes great care to make each relationship Darius has equally complex and equally important with regard to the development of his own psyche and sense of belonging—or isolation.

Though *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* is predominantly a coming-of-age tale, it is also a novel about the way society and families talk (or don't talk) about topics like terminal illness, mental health, and masculinity. Some of the story is set in the United States, but Darius is Iranian-American, a second-generation immigrant, and so many of his interactions with others, as well as the views he has of himself, are seasoned with cultural influences from his family in Iran.

Furthermore, unpacking bias and stigma about mental health, specifically depression and anxiety, is a necessary part of developing empathy for Darius. When readers understand where societal and personal bias about mental illness comes from, they can begin to unpack it and understand that though the narrative includes a protagonist living with mental health issues, the story does not revolve around it.

### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

At the beginning of the novel, Darius says that, "As a people group, Persians are genetically predisposed to like tea. And even though I was only half Persian, I had inherited a full-strength tea-loving gene sequence from my mom." (2) DisruptTexts Pillar 1 is about interrogating your own bias. Before beginning to read *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*, educators will need to interrogate their own bias and determine pre-existing ideas about Iranian (Persian) or Southwest Asian people and cultures. What ideas do you and your students have about what anyone is genetically (or ethnically) predisposed to? Though Darius uses dry humor throughout the novel in order to lighten conversation around





## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

potentially heavy topics, in the US, there has historically been much discrimination and prejudice directed toward people and groups from Southwest Asia—and immigrants in general. Do you have any students who are immigrants, bi-or multi-ethnic in your class? If so, what steps will you take to safeguard their emotional safety during class conversations about immigration and people from this part of the world?

In the United States, there is a long history of marginalization and erasure of people of color. Additionally, there is a long history of governmental and municipal organizations deciding who gets to be white adjacent—more proximal to power and privilege according to their ability to approximate whiteness in appearance, speech, behavior etc. Furthermore, each person undergoes a process of racial identity formation that is dependent upon social constructions and one's experience with privilege and oppression based on one's identity. Identity formation includes what Allan Johnson refers to as "The Big 8": race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, religion/spirituality, nationality and socioeconomic status (Johnson, 2006). As you read, consider Darius's experiences before he goes to Iran, and contrast them with what he experiences while he is there, where nobody is Western European and other forms of discrimination come into play. Consider the role that Darius's bi-racial identity plays in his consciousness development with respect to how Persian he feels or how un-Persian he believes other people think he is.

### Additional Resources:

Hawley, W. D., & Nieto, S. (2010). *Another inconvenient truth: Race and ethnicity.*

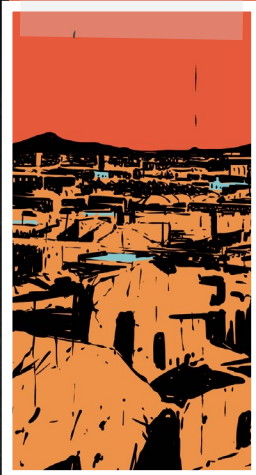
Educational Leadership, 68 (3), 66–71.

Johnson, A. G. (2006). *Privilege, oppression, and difference.* In *Power, privilege and difference*, 2nd Edition (pp. 12–40). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

### [The Changing Face of America](#)

#### CONSIDERATIONS AROUND MENTAL HEALTH AND MASCULINITY

Throughout the novel, Darius refers to his father as an "Übermensch," which Oxford Languages describes as, "the ideal superior man of the future who could rise above conventional Christian morality to create and impose his own values, originally described by Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–85)." According to [Nietzsche](#), the "overman" can impose his will about the way the world should be onto others, thus making the world take the form he desires it to take. Darius's use of this term speaks to the pressure he feels to be like his white father, who appears to have it all together for



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## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

most of the novel, since he lives in a world of his own making which wholly embraces him. In comparison with his father, Darius feels powerless and insecure as a son with mixed heritage and ancestry.

Darius is at an age where he questions a lot about the world, but in *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* he questions his ethnicity, masculinity, and how each of these factors affects his relationships to others in his family more than anything. To understand him better, it is important to recognize that both the Islamic state where his extended family on his mother's side resides and the USA where he lives have historically been patriarchal societies. Darius experiences North American or Western European norms of masculinity and male interaction at home in the USA. He knows something about the way males act in the US feels wrong to him, but cannot quite identify why until he goes to Iran and sees different cultural norms, such as men kissing one another on each cheek as greetings or signs of affection. Darius's journey toward understanding what it means to live with depression and anxiety begins in *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* as he begins to understand that it is not only okay, but actually quite commonplace not to be (or feel) okay.

### Additional Resources:

[What We Mean When We Say, "Toxic Masculinity"](#)

[Mental Illnesses: Terms to Use. Terms to Avoid.](#)

## CONSIDERATIONS AROUND GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*, Darius is in a stage where he questions his sexuality. Throughout the book, he explores and reflects on physical touch and intimacy between men and how culture impacts the ways that individuals express themselves. Darius reflects

## Considerations for Teachers and Students (cont.)

on Sohrab as not only the first friend he's ever had, but also the first person he feels emotionally safe with and with whom he can express himself. The emotional intimacy the two experience allows Darius to explore feelings of attraction and attachment. The novel hints that these feelings will eventually lead to Darius's self-acceptance as he matures into an adult. Through the many interactions the two have, readers are able to see the important role Sohrab plays in Darius's emotional development and maturity. Readers will also see that the emergence of LGBTQ+ identity doesn't happen the same way or at the same time for everyone. It is important for students to understand the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity.

### Additional Resources:

[How is sexual orientation different from gender identity?](#)

[Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions - HRC](#)

## Key Concepts and Terms

The following are a few terms to aid discussion with students

- **Oppression:** prolonged, cruel or unjust treatment or control.
- **Depression**
- **Anxiety**
- **Patriarchy:** a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it.
- **Theocracy:** a system of government in which religious authorities rule in the name of God or a god.

It is important to create structures in educational environments where students are accustomed to learning about and using these words because the ideas themselves (if not always the explicit vocabulary) do appear in the text. Other words, concepts, and ideas will occur throughout the text as well. Consider building a word wall of familiar and unfamiliar terms, such as "Übermensch" and "Darjeeling," and adding the list as you read to co-create definitions.

## Themes and Essential Questions

*Family* - How do families impact individual personalities? How are individual personalities shaped by the families they are born into? What is Darius's relationship to each person in his family? How is his relationship with his extended family strengthened when he travels to Iran to visit them?

*Ethnic and Cultural Identity* - What are some individual aspects of ethnic and cultural identity? How does Darius feel about his grasp of Iranian language, food, traditions, and customs? How does his perception of himself compare to the way other people in his family see him?

*Masculinity* - What are some traits considered by mainstream American society to be typically "masculine"? What are some considered to be "feminine"? Who is left out or erased by hard social definitions of behavior that conforms to a gender binary?

*Friendship* - How do friendships impact individuals? How does Darius's friendship with Sohrab affect him?

*Love* - How do individuals typically express love in families and friendships? What types of love appear in this story? What types of social stigmas exist in American society that prevent males from showing physical intimacy or public displays of affection? How is this different in Iran? How do the individuals in this story show love for one another?

*Courage* - What types of events cause individuals to have to show courage? What are some events that cause Darius to have to display courage? What are some moments when you think he could be courageous, but chooses not to? Why do you think he doesn't?

*Coming-of-age* - What types of events cause individuals to "grow up"? What are some events that happen in Darius's life that cause him to mature?

*Change vs. Tradition* - What are some elements of society that have changed over time? Ex. Internet information access, cell phones for communication. What traditions or "old" customs in Darius's family does he discover when he travels to Iran?

*Isolationism* - How does being (or feeling) alone or isolated impact individuals? What are some factors that make Darius feel isolated from those around him? How do these factors shape him?

## Discussion Questions

### PRE-READING:

- Do you know anyone identifying as Iranian or Persian? Do you know anyone who lives with mental health issues? Do you know anyone to whom both identifiers apply? What are some experiences you have had with Iranian people or culture?

## Discussion Questions (cont.)

If you don't have any, check out the following website: [Map: Iranian-American communities in the United States](#). What do you notice? What questions do you have?

- Have you ever traveled outside of your home country? If so, where did you go and how long were you there? Describe the experience of visiting another country for the first time.
- Do you speak any languages other than English? If so, how does this shape the way you see the world? Who do you use your non-English language with? Do you use translanguaging as a way to communicate and understand the world?

Educator resources:

[Translanguaging - Why to how Bilingual is better \(and here's why\)](#)

- Are you bi- or multi-cultural/ethnic? If not, do you know anyone who is? If so, how does this impact the way you view the world?

### DURING-READING:

- What does Darius mean when he says, "Persians are genetically predisposed to like tea?" What does he reveal at this point in the book about Iranian culture and his relationship to it? (2)
- How does Darius feel about his physical appearance? Why does he feel this way? (13)
- What Farsi does Darius know? How does this correlate to his feeling more (or less) Persian? (20) Can you or anyone in your learning community relate?
- How does Darius connect with his father? How does Laleh connect with her mother? How does Darius feel about these divisions and connections in his family? (21)
- After reading about how Persians celebrate Persian New Year (25) what themes and festivities stood out to you?
- Have you or anyone you know ever been asked where you are from? How does this make you feel? Why do you think people ask this question? (31)
- What is a "slingshot maneuver"? What causes Darius to experience them? (34)
- When Darius describes "The first time I was called a terrorist," what feelings, memories, or emotions does that bring up for you? (39)



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## Discussion Questions (cont.)

- What does Darius mean when he says, “Stephen Kellner was a Paragon of Teutonic Masculinity”? (42) What feelings does this reveal about how he sees himself?
- Why don’t Darius and Babou know how to talk to one another? (47) \*Consider barriers beyond language. Do you have any communication barriers between yourself and older family members? If so, what are they and why do you think they exist?
- What is a “temporal displacement”? How does this apply in the case of Darius’s journey from America to Iran? (62) Have you ever experienced this?
- When Darius first arrives in Iran, what feelings does he experience? (64) Have you ever traveled to another country? How did your direct experience compare to stereotypes or second-hand information you had about the place and people before traveling there?
- Describe Darius’s reaction to the question, “What are you depressed about?” (68) Read over his conversation with the custom’s officer, then read and discuss [9 Depression Myths](#)
- How does Darius’s first impression of Yazd differ from the ideas he had in his mind about what the city would be like? (76)
- Why do you think people with families in other countries bring items purchased in the US when traveling back to their home countries to visit? (80) If you have family in another country, do you have this custom? What are the items your loved ones typically ask for?
- What does Darius mean when he says, “Farsi is a deeply context-sensitive language”? How is this similar to or different from English (or your home language(s)) (89)
- What does it mean to “taarof”? What can you infer about the custom and what it means from the way people interact with one another?
- What is a “Soulless Minion of Orthodoxy”? (106) Why do you think Darius uses this label to describe people?
- Why is Sohrab singled out among his peers? How do the others treat him based on this difference? (111)
- Why does Ali-Reza make fun of Darius? How do the other boys respond? How does Darius respond in the moment? Compare this with how he describes feeling inside. (115)



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## Discussion Questions (cont.)



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- What does Darius mean when he says, “You can learn things without them being said out loud too”? What does he learn? What observations about your family or friendships have you made that have never been acknowledged out loud? (133)
- How does Darius feel when his family speaks Farsi around him? (134) How do you feel when people around you speak languages you don’t understand? Have you ever traveled somewhere where you don’t speak the language? How does this make you feel? What was your emotional response? What actions did you take? If not, how do you think you would feel and respond? (134)
- How might the serving of “tah dig” be considered a sign of affection or endearment? Do you have any similar customs or traditions? (137)
- How does Darius feel when his father starts watching Star Trek with Laleh? What do you think are some of the reasons for his emotional response? (145)
- What is Persepolis and why does Darius go to visit with his family? What cultural and/or spiritual significance does it have for them? Do you have any ancient ruins or landmarks with similar significance? (155)
- What does Babou mean when he says, “It’s important to know where you come from.” Why is it important for Darius to know his history? Why is it important to know your history? How might trips like the one Darius’s family takes to Persepolis change a person’s view of their place in society?(158)
- What does Darius mean when he says, “This was the most Persian I had ever been in my entire life, and it still wasn’t enough.” (183) What did he do in order to “become Persian”? What about his interactions with others made him feel it “wasn’t enough”?
- Compare Darius’s relationship to his Persian family with Stephen Kellner’s on page 187. What types of emotions do his observations cause him to feel?
- What does Sohrab mean when he says, “Your place was empty before...” (190) Describe what this expression really means. Do you know of any similar expressions in a different language?
- Why is Sohrab being “the first friend [Darius] has ever had” both good and bad? (195) How does overhearing his parents talking about his friendship with Sohrab affect Darius?

## Discussion Questions (cont.)

- What does Darius mean when he describes being a “Fractional Persian”? Do you know anyone who has immigrated to the US and tried to fit in? Are you or anyone you know a first- or second-generation immigrant? What sorts of sacrifices do immigrants make in order to live in American society? What do they need from American society? (201)
- What does it mean to love the idea of someone rather than the reality? How does this relate to Darius’s relationships? (202)
- What is different about the Iranian calendar? (215) Do you know of any other countries that use different systems to measure time? Ex: Some countries measure hours in the day by a 24-hour clock instead of a 12-hour one.
- Explain how Darius shows both courage and vulnerability when he stands up to his father on page 224.
- What does Darius mean when he says, “I wondered if I was a tourist.” (229–230) Discuss the spiritual significance for him of visiting The Towers of Silence. Do you have any places you visit that are similar? Do you feel a sense of isolation or belonging when you visit? What do you suppose makes Darius feel like “a tourist in [his] own past”?
- What do you learn about Sohrab’s father on page 243? What do you know about prison systems in Iran, America, or other countries? How might the experience of growing up without a father affect Sohrab?
- What do Darius’s realizations on pages 244 and 267 reveal about Sohrab and Darius’s relationship? Do you have “safe” people in your life? If so, think about who they are and why you feel emotionally safe with them. If not, what characteristics would you need in order to feel emotionally safe with someone?
- If you could live in any other country in the world, where would it be? Why? How do you imagine your life would be different if you lived there? How might *you* be different?
- What revelation surprises Darius on pages 272 and 273? Think about your relationship as it is now with your parents or caregivers. Has it changed over time? If so, how? What are some defining moments you can remember about your relationship with your caregivers?





## Discussion Questions (cont.)

- Contrast what happens on page 279 with the scene when Sohrab tells Darius “his place was empty.” Have you ever had a falling out with someone you care about? What happened? Were you able to make things right? If not, why not? If so, what types of actions did you take to repair the situation?
- What do you think causes Darius’s changed opinion of himself and Yazd on page 280? Draw connections between what you have learned about characteristics of depression and their manifestation in this moment. How does the situation contribute to his mental state?
- What does Darius’s father admit on page 285? How does this change their relationship? What causes the “harmonic resonance” between them? What is a common social stigma around men crying or showing open displays of vulnerability?
- Sometimes it is said that “Hurt people hurt people.” Connect this saying to Sohrab’s revelations on page 294.
- Identify some similarities and differences between Darius and Sohrab from pages 296–297 or any other parts of the novel. How do these traits draw them together?
- What connection did Cyprian Cusumano, *Soulless Minion of Orthodoxy* (maybe) make between Darius from Portland and Darioush the Great? What changes do you notice in Darius at the novel’s conclusion?

### POST READING:

- Now that you’ve read a coming-of-age story, also known as “Bildungsroman,” which scenes stand out to you as key moments that change Darius’s perspective of himself and others?
- What events in the novel contribute to Darius feeling more or less authentically Persian? Try to isolate specific scenes or conversations.
- The Lord of the Rings is an adventure story and one of heroism. What connections does Darius make between The Lord of the Rings and the world he lives in? Why do you think he superimposes science fiction or fantasy over events, places, and encounters in the real world?
- Compare Darius’s personality at the beginning of the novel with who he becomes by the end. What did he gain by going to Iran? What did he let go of?
- How does Darius’s relationship with Sohrab evolve throughout the course of the novel? How does their relationship change each of them? What does Darius learn about himself (and Sohrab) as they grow closer, experience separation, then reunite again?

## Discussion Questions (cont.)

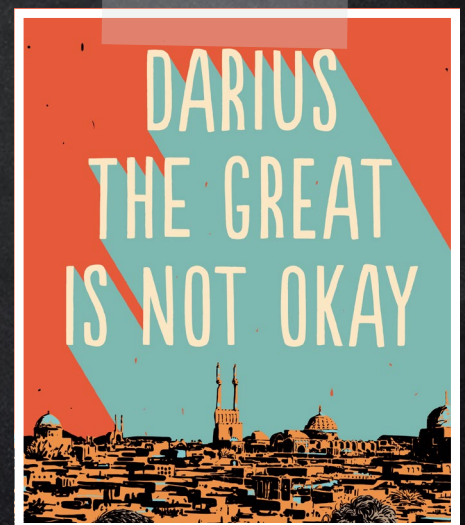
- Throughout the course of the novel, Darius is in a phase where he is questioning his sexual orientation, but hasn't quite developed enough experience or confidence to make that public. What kinds of experiences does Darius have with physical intimacy, gender identity, and gender expression? What does he learn about himself through these experiences?

### Journal Prompts

- How does Darius feel about stereotypically masculine traits? What are some of his reflections for how these apply (or do not apply) to him? What are some of the unspoken rules dictating how males (or females) should act and interact? How might these rules restrict or oppress some and erase others? *Ex. If only females are allowed to cry in public, what does that mean for males who show public displays of emotion?*
- What is Darius's relationship to each of his family members? How does it change when the family travels to Iran? What is your relationship to your siblings (or extended family members)? Has it changed over time? If so, how and why?
- Do you have events that have happened that trigger an intense emotional response and/or change the way you view the world for a time as Darius experiences on pages 280-281? If so, what do you do in those moments? Who do you turn to for support?
- What, in your opinion, is the basis for so much stigma and prejudice around the treatment of mental health issues like depression, and anxiety? Do you or anyone you know live with mental health issues? If so, how do they affect interactions with others? How do they impact self-perception?
- How does Darius change as a result of his relationship with Sohrab? What characteristics do the two have in common? How are they different? How does knowing and getting to connect with people from different places shape individuals?
- How does Darius get to know himself more as a result of traveling to Iran? What experiences have you had that have caused you to get to know different parts of yourself *Ex. Traveling away from home for summer camp, or to a different country to visit relatives.*
- How does the new information Darius learns about his father near the end of the novel change his perspective?

## Lesson Ideas

1. Iranian authors are often marginalized within young people's literature. Read the interview with Adib Khorram at the end of the novel to identify some of the goals he wanted to accomplish through writing the novel. Identify and analyze events in the plot or relationships between the character by looking for clues about what you consider to be universal and which parts of the story are uniquely Persian.
2. As you read, keep track of the items Darius identifies as "Persian traits." Identify whether he identifies with these traits or not by marking each with a (+), (+/-) or (-) then draw a mind-map using [MindMeister](#) with Darius's encounters with Persian culture using quoted evidence to justify your understanding of his connection to his cultural and ethnic identity.
3. There are many allusions to [Star Trek: The Next Generation](#) throughout the book. Watch an episode of the show to familiarize yourself with the characters, then visit the Star Trek Timelines wiki. What is the basic premise of the show? Compare this to Darius's feelings about traveling to Iran before, during, and after his family's time there. What does travel have the potential to do for individuals? Consider how traveling connects to each of the following themes: courage, isolationism, ethnic and cultural identity. Make a word web connecting scenes from the book to these themes and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (if you can). *Ex. In Darius the Great Is Not Okay, Darius shows courage when he plays soccer with Sohrab and the other Persian boys he doesn't know. In Star Trek: The Next Generation, every episode requires some kind of courage when the crew encounters and interacts with alien civilizations—some of which are hostile.*
4. Read Marjane Satrapi's [Persepolis](#), then create a visual timeline of events leading up to, during, and after the Iranian revolution. How did life change for Iranians during this time period? What historical information can you learn from this novel? Make connections between *Persepolis* and *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* by adding to your visual timeline.
5. When reading with criticality, readers and educators consider context, and the way the book is a reflection of the environment in which it was created as well as which voices are centered and which are left out. Identify passages when Darius reflects on masculinity, his relationship to it, and his place in the world. Compare and contrast Persian ideas of socially acceptable behavior for males with what you know of those in your own culture.



## Lesson Ideas (cont.)

6. Readers who read with a critical eye can look for ways Darius learns to dismantle oppressive thought patterns he places on himself, and those he interprets based on interactions with others. Two Iranian religious minorities mentioned throughout the book are Zoroastrians and Bahá'í. Research religious minorities in order to better understand their positionality with respect to *self-expression, oppression, power, and privilege*. What are Darius's family customs with regard to these themes? What are his reflections on Sohrab's family? How are the two families different? How are they the same?
7. The novel also delves into multi-generational families and the complex way that tradition intersects with modernity. What traditions does Darius's family have? How are they different from or similar to your family traditions? Create a shared presentation about family traditions with all class members contributing. Consider food, music, dance, holidays, clothing, language and anything else memorable. If you can, include "insider information" only those belonging to the culture or ethnicity might know. *Tip: Focus on the chapter "Persian Casual" and what actually happens, Darius's observations about what "Persian Casual" actually means.*

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## Extension Activities

1. Darius's name has a Persian origin (Darioush) and connects him with a historical figure (Darius the Great). Research Darioush the Great the historical figure and record the information you find about him. Then research the origins of your own name and share the story. According to the sources you find, are there any personality traits attributed to your name? Do you feel they apply to you?
2. What do you know about suicide prevention? Using your resources, research local and/or national organizations for suicide prevention such as the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#) then create an ad campaign to educate those in your community about what you've learned. This could look like a FlipGrid with personal responses to frequently asked questions, or a YouTube video of you and your peers debunking myths about those who die by suicide or live with depression. Cite your sources and refer to the article: [Mental Illnesses: Terms to Use. Terms to Avoid.](#)
3. Sohrab reveals that his father is in prison in Iran. Using your school's databases, research at least three different political and social figures who have been imprisoned in Iran. What do they have in common? What is different about them? How long were their prison sentences? What were they imprisoned for? How does the Iranian criminal justice system compare to or differ from the criminal justice system in the US (or the country where you reside)?

## Extension Activities (cont.)

- Perhaps an important question to begin with, and one that Darius himself addresses early in the novel is, “What knowledge or misconceptions do people from the US hold about Iranians and people from Southwest Asia (also known as ‘The Middle East’)”? It is imperative for educators to read and familiarize themselves with the history of the region, present political and social conditions, as well as the complicated relationship the US has with countries in this region. Use [Culture Grams](#) or any other database you have access to to research information about countries bordering Iran, and Iran itself. Identify key information about the region, such as language, governmental structure, religion, and common cultural features, such as holidays, foods and clothing. Look for these as they appear throughout the novel and create a dialectical journal to describe your reactions to quotes you find.

### Additional Resources:

[Common Misconceptions and Stereotypes about the Middle East](#)

[Podcast: Ethnically Ambiguous](#)

[Being Iranian In LA.: More Than Just A Stereotype \[Becoming Iranian-American, Pt. 2\] | AJ+](#)

[Fears of increased ‘Iranophobia’ grip Iranian-American community](#)

[Iran and Persia - Are They the Same?](#)

- There are many misconceptions about mental health, mostly because studying mental health and identifying treatments is relatively new. Read [The History & Evolution of Mental Health & Treatment](#). Break it up into sections and create an annotated image that represents your section using [Thinglink](#) to share what you find.
- One of Darius’s family customs and traditions is drinking tea. Take a look at “Darius’s Guide to Tea” in the back of the book. Research the history of tea and the different trade routes used to move tea (and the cultural traditions that center it) around the world. What do you notice? What do you wonder? What teas are you the most familiar with? Choose a tea that is unfamiliar to you, research its history and the process used to make it, any properties or flavor notes, and holistic medicinal properties it might have. Drink some and share the experience with those in your family or learning community.

### Additional Resource

[A History of Tea](#)

#DisruptTexts is not simply about replacing older texts for new ones; rather, it is a more nuanced and holistic approach aimed at offering a restorative and antiracist curriculum. #DisruptTexts requires that we as educators interrogate our own biases, center the voices of BIPOC in literature, help students develop a critical lens, and work in community with other antiracist and BIPOC educators. Together we will bring about change in society.

**JULIA E. TORRES** is a veteran language arts teacher librarian in Denver, Colorado. Julia facilitates teacher development workshops rooted in the areas of antiracist education, equity and access in literacy and librarianship, and education as a practice of liberation. Julia works with students and teachers locally and around the country with the goal of empowering them to use literacy to fuel resistance and positive social transformation. Julia also serves on several local and national boards and committees promoting educational equity and progressivism. She is the current NCTE Secondary Representative-at-large, a Book Love Foundation board member and Educator Collaborative Book Ambassador.

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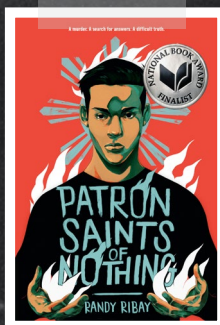
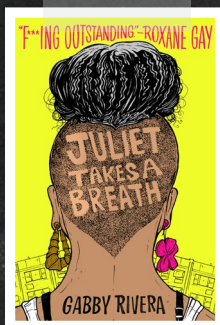
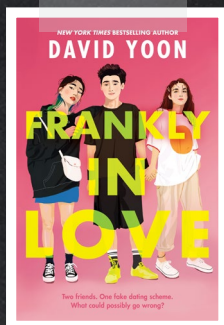
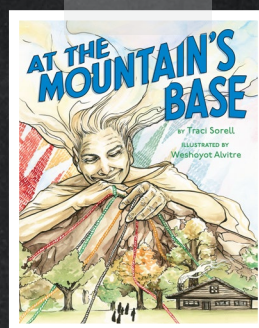
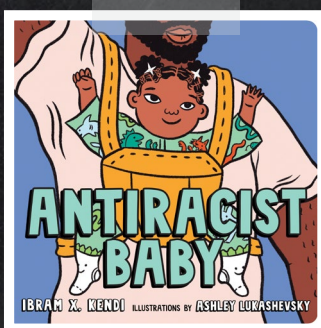
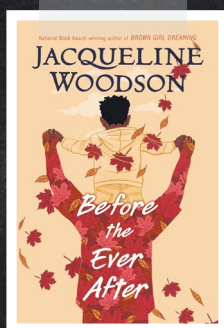
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