

Elisa M. Schroeder

Book Recommendations

These Are the Books We Have Been Waiting For

Elisa M. Schroeder is a doctoral student and graduate teaching assistant with the Phyllis J. Washington College of Education at the University of Montana. She is a former teacher-librarian who taught in Montana schools for four years.

*And who will join this standing up
and the ones who stood without sweet
company
will sing and sing
back into the mountains and
if necessary
even under the sea
we are the ones we have been waiting for.*

June Jordan (1978)
Poem for South African Women

Introduction

In 1956, 40,000 women and children (about twice the seating capacity of Madison Square Garden) marched to protest against systemic racism and unfair migrant laws in apartheid South Africa. They stood together in the face of injustice. Twenty-two years later, June Jordan (1978) commemorated this event with a poem she presented to the United Nations. The words of this poem created a rallying call, then and now, for a continued fight against tyranny.

Inspired by Jordan's poem, Dean Valerie Kinloch, NCTE's program chair and president-elect, focused the 2021 NCTE Annual Conference on equity, justice, and anti-racist teaching. Noting the conviction of the women who marched, Kinloch (2021) encouraged educators to think about what a commitment to justice looks like in their practices. She asked teachers to examine the

texts we share with our students and to think about how to co-create communities that position identity at their center. Kinloch's reflection on the words of Jordan challenged teachers to work toward this vision in their own classrooms.

Children's literature offers an avenue for beginning the work to create classrooms that celebrate all students. In this article, I offer my perspectives as a teacher and learner and reflect on current scholarship centered around culturally-responsive teaching practices (Muhammad, 2020). I provide reviews of five new books for children and young adults. I also provide teaching ideas for how teachers and librarians might use each text. By sharing these books, I hope to bring attention to current authors and recent shifts in children's publishing that feature stories and authors of historically marginalized cultures and communities.

My Commitment to Teaching with Diverse Children's and YA Books

Like many educators today, I wear a variety of hats. I am a school librarian who taught in Montana schools for four years. I am a mother to two children and a doctoral student. I have taught as an adjunct professor and now teach as a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Montana. I am an avid reader.

I also identify as a white female educator navigating the understanding of my own culture and biases. I am inspired by the work of Dr.

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Bettina Love (2019), who invites white educators to define their own identities and also recognize that structural racism still exists in our schools. Love states, “So, the question is not: Do you love all children? The question is: Will you fight for justice for Black and Brown children? And how will you fight?” (p.19).

When I was invited to teach a children’s literature course at the University of Montana, I thought about these questions in relation to my own teaching. I wanted to create a class where future teachers of young readers could listen to the stories of people who might not share their particular identities. My goal was to introduce my students to new voices in the world of children’s literature. Focusing on the newest titles being published, I made diverse texts the cornerstone of my curriculum.

The students and families we serve in our schools in the United States are increasingly diverse. States with robust Indian Education for All (IEFA) requirements, such as Montana, recognize sovereign Indigenous tribes and their unique cultures and histories within the state (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2019). Schools across the country welcome and teach students who live in rural areas, speak multiple languages, and have rich and unique cultures. Educators have a special opportunity to share books that honor the identities of *all* these students.

Children’s Literature and Pedagogy

The texts teachers share with their students can be powerful tools that promote the tenets of Kinloch’s vision. Literature offers reflections of our own selves and also glimpses into the experiences of others (Bishop, 1990). As Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) argued, all children, regardless of where they live or come from, benefit from reading and hearing the experiences of people different from themselves. Educators can begin to create spaces where students feel seen by including books that show various people, cultures, and ways of life. Teachers

can also create opportunities for honest dialogue and conversations about injustice.

In her *Culturally and Historically Responsive Teaching Framework*, Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020) emphasizes that children must first know themselves in order to begin to understand others. Muhammad’s pedagogical theory infuses the concepts of literacies, identities, and histories and offers a teaching model that puts students at the center. Children’s literature can be used to affirm and celebrate students. It can also be an avenue for exploring the critical pursuits of Muhammad’s (2020) framework: identity, skills, intellect, criticality, and joy.

Connected to the teachings of Muhammad, Dr. Debbie Reese (2018) encourages teachers to be critical and careful when selecting texts that they share with their students. Reese offers educators a guide to evaluating texts for authenticity, particularly when selecting Indigenous texts. Central to her scholarship is the idea that teachers should share Native American and Indigenous stories with all students. Careful attention to authors, tribal affiliations, and the time of year help educators infuse Indigenous stories into their classrooms year-round.

Recent Children’s Literature Publishing Data

School library collections look different today from the collection I curated twelve years ago when I taught as a school librarian in a rural Montana school. Despite some gains in the publication of diverse books, in 2022, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) reported that the percentage of books by and about Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) is still low. The CBCC found that of the 3,183 books the CCBC received in 2021, many previously marginalized groups were still grossly underrepresented.

Books for children written by and about Indigenous peoples accounted for 3.4% of the books and those representing Pacific Islanders a mere 0.4% (CCBC, 2022). Though books written by and about Black and Latinx authors have

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increased since 2018, the CCBC's current data shows that there is still a need to advocate for a more inclusive range of voices and authors in children's book publishing today.

My Book Recommendations

The texts featured in this article represent stories with universal themes such as overcoming adversity, staying true to oneself, dismantling stereotypes, and celebrating the uniqueness of individuals. This text set includes five texts: a picture book, a nonfiction picture book, a middle-grade novel, a collection of short stories, and a young adult novel. All the books were published in 2021 and 2022 and represent some of the newest titles written for children. Each book review includes information about the author, a glimpse into what the book is about, and a teaching suggestion for how teachers or librarians might use this text with students.

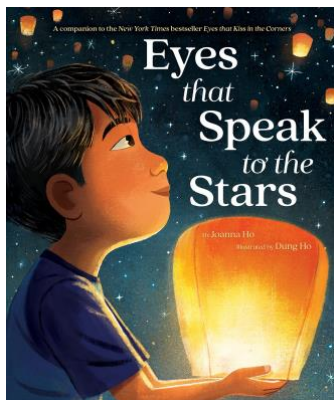
Eyes that Speak to the Stars (2022)

Written by Joanna Ho

Illustrated by Thai Hanh Dung Ho

Cover art by Thi Hanh Dung Ho, 2022.

Picturebook



Joanna Ho is an author, educator, high school vice-principal, and social justice advocate. The daughter of Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants, Ho writes to expand people's understanding of what life may be like for some Asian and Pacific Islander Americans. *Eyes That Speak to the Stars* (2022), a companion book to her New York Times bestseller, *Eyes That Kiss in*

the Corners (2018), is a beautifully illustrated and endearing story about stereotypes and identity.

One day a little boy brings home a picture that one of his classmates drew at school. The picture depicts the boy drawn differently from his classmates, with two lines for eyes that slant toward each other. With help from his father and grandfather, the boy realizes that his eyes connect him to a greater generational story that honors who he is and the power within himself.

Eyes That Speak to the Stars lends itself beautifully to an interactive read-aloud and as a foundation for deep discussion focusing on stereotypes and tokenism. Deeper conversations could center around current issues such as hate crimes in our country and racism toward Asian American/ Pacific Islander communities.

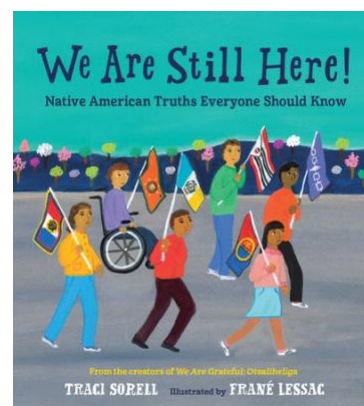
We Are Still Here! Native American Truths Everyone Should Know (2021)

Written by Traci Sorrell

Illustrated by Frané Lessac

Cover art by Frané Lessac, 2021.

Nonfiction picturebook



From the creators of the 2018 award-winning book, *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* comes the nonfiction picture book *We Are Still Here! Native American Truths Everyone Should Know*.

The author, Traci Sorrell (Cherokee Nation citizen), states that her goal is to change the narrative that has historically represented Native Americans as either stereotyped or invisible (Sorrell, 2021). Sorrell believes that when Native peoples tell their stories, they are helping the

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world “see Indigenous peoples in our full humanity.”

We Are Still Here! teaches readers about essential parts of history that are missing from standard textbooks through introducing twelve topics about Native Nation peoples and the history of the United States. Topics range from policies for assimilation and the boarding school experience to the tribal activism movement in the 1960s. Also included are current issues many tribes face today.

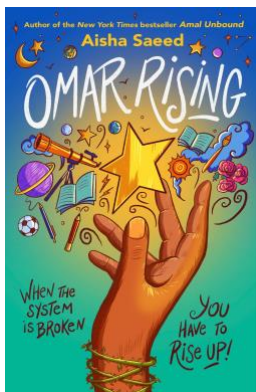
This book encourages readers to think about how Native Nations have fought for their sovereignty and maintained their cultural identities despite tremendous adversity. The book provides additional resources and information, including a timeline and student-friendly definitions. The simple font and colorful illustrations make for an easy-to-understand piece for any classroom library and a welcome addition to an IEFA curriculum. This text could also serve in middle and high school classrooms and in social studies contexts.

Omar Rising (2022)

Written by Aisha Saeed

Cover art by Shehzil Malik, 2022.

Middle grade novel



Aisha Saeed is a Pakistani-American and a founding member of the nonprofit organization We Need Diverse Books. She is a bestselling author of books for children and young adults. A former second-grade teacher and attorney, her goal is to write stories that counteract negative

stereotypes and provide authentic representations of diverse peoples. *Omar Rising* (2022) is the companion book to her New York Times bestseller *Amal Unbound* (2018), selected as a Global Read Aloud in 2018.

Set in modern-day Pakistan, *Omar Rising* tells the story of Omar, the first kid from his village to be accepted into the prestigious boarding school, the Ghalib Academy for Boys. Leaving with his own hopes, dreams, and the expectations of his family and community, Omar is determined to succeed at his new school. However, things are not always as they seem, and Omar and his new friends face a difficult reality during the year simply because they attend school on scholarships. Omar must stand up for his beliefs and rally his classmates to dismantle injustices and classism at his school.

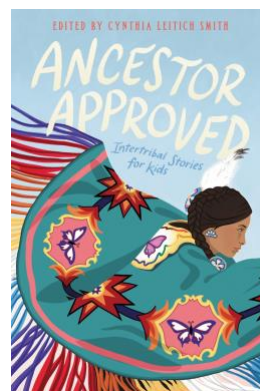
With its profound story, this book is an excellent choice for literature circles or book clubs. Middle-grade students could use this mentor text to create service-learning projects in their community focusing on peaceful protest and how to create and use a community petition.

Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories for Kids (2021)

Edited by Cynthia Leitich Smith

Cover art by Nicole Neidhardt, 2021.

Anthology of short stories



Educators may be familiar with Cynthia Leitich Smith’s classic picture book, *Jingle Dancer* (2000), often taught as part of IEFA curricula. Smith, a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation, is

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the founder of Heartdrum, an imprint of HarperCollins.

Heartdrum's mission is to publish children's books by Native American authors. Smith was named a Neustadt NSK Laureate in 2021, and her books for children and young adults have won numerous awards. *Ancestor Approved* was named an ALA Notable Book for Children in 2022 and is also a 2022 ILA Notable Book for a Global Society.

Ancestor Approved tells the stories of sixteen Native American kids getting ready to attend the Dance for Mother Earth Powwow in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The intersecting stories explore themes such as joy, friendship, heritage, and community. One story is even written from the perspective of a dog! This collection features Native American writers including Traci Sorrell (Cherokee Nation), Brian Young (Navajo Nation), and Tim Tingle (Oklahoma Choctaw).

Teachers might use this book as a mentor text to springboard conversations and lessons about narrative writing. Students could also investigate the contributing authors and make text-to-text connections with other Heartdrum titles.

You Truly Assumed (2022)

Written by Laila Sabreen

Cover art by Alex Cabal, 2022.

Young adult fiction



Laila Sabreen is a new young writer of contemporary young adult fiction. She identifies

as a Black Muslim member of Gen Z. Inspired by the hostile political climate following the Trump administration in her home of Washington, D.C., Sabreen wrote a story that counteracted the Islamophobia she witnessed in her community (Yao, 2022). *You Truly Assumed*, which she started writing in high school, became a way for Sabreen to unpack and process her emotions during a time rife with prejudice.

The novel follows the stories of three young Black Muslim women who must navigate their lives after a terrorist attack shakes their communities. The girls find an outlet for their frustrations by writing in a blog. Together, through their writing, they break down what it is like to be young and Muslim and discuss the assumptions people make about others based on religion or appearance.

A teaching idea for this text focuses on character and differing perspectives. Though the protagonists share identities, they are all unique. Teachers could lead students through whole or small group discussions centering around intersectionality and what it means to be a young adult today.

Conclusion

When June Jordan honored South African women with her poem, she also posed an important question: “And who will join this standing up, and the ones who stood without sweet company will sing and sing” (Jordan, 1978). By championing diverse authors and infusing different perspectives into our teaching practices, educators can honor the identities of their students and invite their students into a rich, diverse world of literature.

Novels included in this text set can help set a tone of acceptance and inclusion in the classroom. Texts featuring different experiences and cultures can show students they are valued. Ho's *Eyes That Speak to the Stars* (2022) tells young readers that our differences make us strong. Sabreen's *You Truly Assumed* (2022)

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invites readers to wonder about the value of taking chances and protecting their dreams.

Books such as *Ancestor Approved* (Smith, 2021) have the power to shift perspectives and to inspire lasting change. These texts have value in the classroom and school library because they can open new worlds, help students resist hate, and create a more just world.

For more information about diverse children’s books, additional online resources are included in Table 1. Educators may access these websites to find text sets, book lists, and recommendations for picture, middle grade, and young adult texts. The links also include mission statements and resources for teachers and librarians who wish to showcase diverse texts in their schools.

Table 1.
Additional Resources

<p>The Conscious Kid</p> <p>http://theconsciouskid.org</p> <p>The Conscious Kid website includes book lists, resources, and a collection of video read-alouds that aim to help teachers and parents combat racism.</p>
<p>Heartdrum: A Native Focused Imprint of HarperCollins</p> <p>https://www.harpercollins.com/collections/heartdrum-books-by-native-american-authors</p> <p>An imprint of HarperCollins, Heartdrum focuses on Indigenous voices, authors, and stories. Books are vetted for authenticity and published by Cynthia Leitich Smith.</p>

<p>We Need Diverse Books</p> <p>http://weneeddiversebooks.org</p> <p>This website showcases resources, programs, teaching guides, book lists, and articles that promote diverse authors and honor young people.</p>
<p>#DISRUPTTEXTS</p> <p>http://disrupttexts.org</p> <p>#DisruptTexts started as a platform that supports educators in their endeavors to create anti-racist schools. It has grown to include a variety of helpful resources such as recommended reads and pedagogical publications. The #DISRUPTTEXTS founders are <u>Tricia Ebarvia</u>, <u>Lorena Germán</u>, <u>Dr. Kimberly N. Parker</u>, and <u>Julia E. Torres</u>.</p>

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