

Middle Grade Conversation Starters: Race and Racism

We hope this list provides our families and their readers a common starting ground for conversations on race and racism. It is by no means exhaustive, as the body of literature published from the diaspora of Black voices continues to grow, but has been curated from award winners and experts in the field of reading. Our list centers on Black authors, and their stories about growing up. We have added, where possible, discussion questions and educator's guides to assist with starting these conversations with our community's families.

An important note: If you're new to #OwnVoices or the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement, or looking for a place to start incorporating more diverse reads into your shelves, there are some awards you should know about to help guide your reading in the beginning. Some of the books in this list crossover multiple awardships, that's how you know they're really *really* good. If you're looking for more reading beyond this, we suggest looking at:

[Coretta Scott King Award Winners](#)

"The Coretta Scott King Book Awards are given annually to outstanding African American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults that demonstrate an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values. The award commemorates the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and honors his wife, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, for her courage and determination to continue the work for peace and world brotherhood." - ALA

Another award to look at is the:

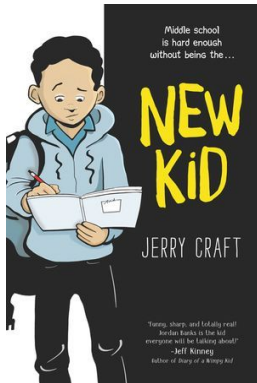
[National Book Award for Young People's Literature.](#)

"The National Book Foundation is guided by the following core beliefs:

- Books are essential to a thriving cultural landscape
- Books and literature provide a depth of engagement that helps to protect, stimulate, and promote discourse in American society
- Books and literature are for everyone, no matter where the reader is situated geographically, economically, racially, or otherwise" - National Book Awards Mission & History

While these two awards are by no means exhaustive of the dearth of Youth Literature Awards out there, they reflect the best of the best in their fields. Our librarians are happy to recommend other awards archives for you to dive into while on the hunt for more diverse reads! For now, please consider adding the following books to the top of your family's "To Be Read" Pile.

Award Winners

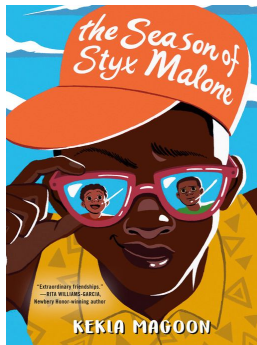


New Kid ([Hoopla](#))

Jerry Craft

[\[Discussion Guide\]](#) | [\[Educator Guide\]](#)

“New Kid, tells the story of Jordan Banks, an artistic Black middle school student who has transferred from public school to an elite, predominantly White private school and must contend not only with typical middle school challenges but also with microaggressions and code-switching. Told in a graphic novel format, Jordan’s experiences are rendered highly accessible to young people and include his own doodles, journal entries and handbooks for middle school students.”



The Season of Styx Malone ([Overdrive](#))

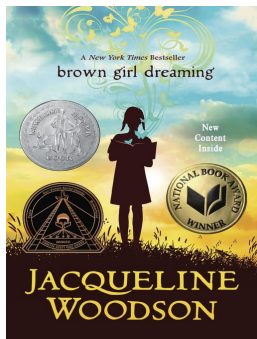
Kekla Magoon

[\[Discussion Guide 1 2\]](#)

“Caleb Franklin and his big brother Bobby Gene are excited to have adventures in the woods behind their house. But Caleb dreams of venturing beyond their ordinary small town.

Then Caleb and Bobby Gene meet new neighbor Styx Malone. Styx is sixteen and oozes cool. Styx promises the brothers that together, the three of them can pull off the Great Escalator Trade—exchanging one small thing for something better until they achieve their wildest dream. But

as the trades get bigger, the brothers soon find themselves in over their heads. Styx has secrets—secrets so big they could ruin everything.”



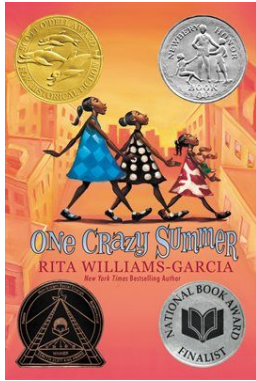
Brown Girl Dreaming ([Overdrive](#))

Jacqueline Woodson

[\[Discussion Guide\]](#) | [\[Educator's Guide\]](#)

“Raised in South Carolina and New York, Woodson always felt halfway home in each place. In vivid poems, she shares what it was like to grow up as an African American in the 1960s and 1970s, living with the remnants of Jim Crow and her growing awareness of the Civil Rights movement. Touching and powerful, each poem is both accessible and emotionally charged, each line a glimpse into a child’s soul as she searches for her place in the world. Woodson’s eloquent poetry also

reflects the joy of finding her voice through writing stories, despite the fact that she struggled with reading as a child. Her love of stories inspired her and stayed with her, creating the first sparks of the gifted writer she was to become.”



One Crazy Summer ([Hoopla](#))

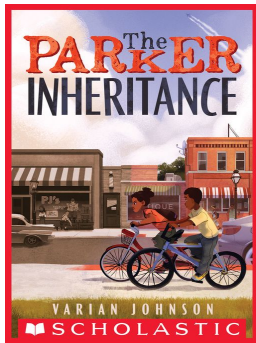
Rita Williams-Garcia

[\[Discussion Guide\]](#) | [\[Educator's Guide\]](#)

“Eleven-year-old Delphine is like a mother to her two younger sisters, Vonetta and Fern. She's had to be, ever since their mother, Cecile, left them seven years ago for a radical new life in California. But when the sisters arrive from Brooklyn to spend the summer with their mother, Cecile is nothing like they imagined.

While the girls hope to go to Disneyland and meet Tinker Bell, their mother sends them to a day camp run by the Black Panthers.

Unexpectedly, Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern learn much about their family, their country, and themselves during one truly crazy summer.”



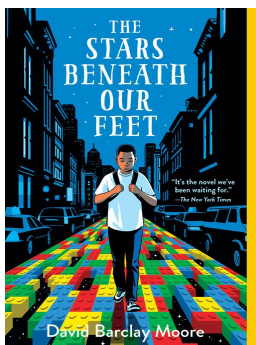
The Parker Inheritance ([Overdrive](#))

Varian Johnson

[\[Discussion Guide\]](#)

“When Candice finds a letter in an old attic in Lambert, South Carolina, she isn't sure she should read it. It's addressed to her grandmother, who left the town in shame. But the letter describes a young woman. An injustice that happened decades ago. A mystery enfolding its writer. And the fortune that awaits the person who solves the puzzle.

So with the help of Brandon, the quiet boy across the street, she begins to decipher the clues. The challenge will lead them deep into Lambert's history, full of ugly deeds, forgotten heroes, and one great love; and deeper into their own families, with their own unspoken secrets. Can they find the fortune and fulfill the letter's promise before the answers slip into the past yet again?”



The Stars Beneath Our Feet ([Overdrive](#))

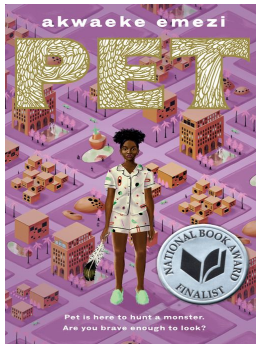
David Barclay Moore

[\[Discussion Questions\]](#) | [\[Educator's Guide\]](#)

“It's Christmas Eve in Harlem, but twelve-year-old Lolly Rachpaul and his mom aren't celebrating. They're still reeling from his older brother's death in a gang-related shooting just a few months earlier. Then Lolly's mother's girlfriend brings him a gift that will change everything: two enormous bags filled with Legos. Lolly's always loved Legos, and he prides himself on following the kit instructions exactly. Now, faced with a pile of building blocks and no instructions, Lolly must find his own way forward.

His path isn't clear—and the pressure to join a "crew," as his brother did, is always there. When Lolly and his friend are beaten up and robbed, joining a crew almost seems like the safe choice.

But building a fantastical Lego city at the community center provides Lolly with an escape—and an unexpected bridge back to the world.”

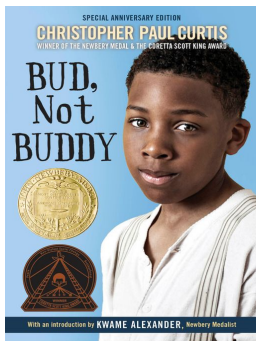


Pet ([Overdrive](#))

Akwaeke Emezi

[\[Discussion Guide\]](#)

“There are no monsters anymore, or so the children in the city of Lucille are taught. Jam and her best friend, Redemption, have grown up with this lesson all their life. But when Jam meets Pet, a creature made of horns and colors and claws, who emerges from one of her mother’s paintings and a drop of Jam’s blood, she must reconsider what she’s been told. Pet has come to hunt a monster, and the shadow of something grim lurks in Redemption’s house. Jam must fight not only to protect her best friend, but also to uncover the truth, and the answer to the question—*How do you save the world from monsters if no one will admit they exist?*”



Bud, Not Buddy ([Overdrive](#))

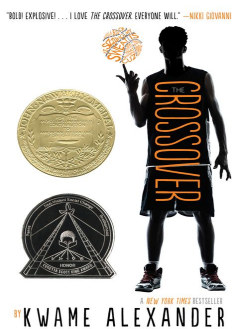
Christopher Paul Curtis

[\[Discussion Guide\]](#) | [\[Educator’s Guide\]](#)

“It’s 1936, in Flint Michigan. Times may be hard, and ten-year-old Bud may be a motherless boy on the run, but Bud’s got a few things going for him:

1. He has his own suitcase full of special things.
2. He’s the author of Bud Caldwell’s Rules and Things for Having a Funner Life and Making a Better Liar Out of Yourself.
3. His momma never told him who his father was, but she left a clue: flyers advertising Herman E. Calloway and his famous band, the Dusky Devastators of the Depression!!!!!!

Bud’s got an idea that those flyers will lead him to his father. Once he decides to hit the road to find this mystery man, nothing can stop him—not hunger, not fear, not vampires, not even Herman E. Calloway himself.”



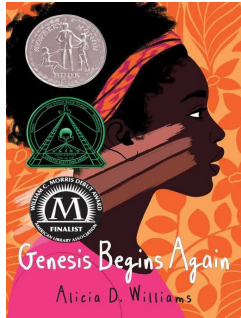
The Crossover ([Overdrive](#))

Kwame Alexander

[\[Discussion Questions\]](#)

“*With a bolt of lightning on my kicks . . . The court is SIZZLING. My sweat is DRIZZLING. Stop all that quivering. Cuz tonight I’m delivering,*’ announces dread-locked, 12-year old Josh Bell. He and his twin brother Jordan are awesome on the court. But Josh has more than basketball in his blood, he’s got mad beats, too, that tell his family’s story in verse, in this fast and furious middle grade novel of family and brotherhood from Kwame Alexander.

Josh and Jordan must come to grips with growing up on and off the court to realize breaking the rules comes at a terrible price, as their story's heart-stopping climax proves a game-changer for the entire family.”



Genesis Begins Again ([Overdrive](#))

Alicia D. Williams

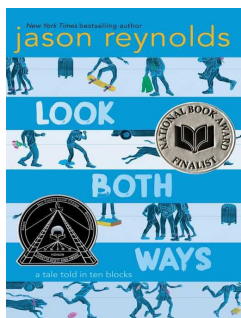
[\[Discussion Guide\]](#)

“This deeply sensitive and powerful debut novel tells the story of a thirteen-year-old who must overcome internalized racism and a verbally abusive family to finally learn to love herself.

There are ninety-six things Genesis hates about herself. She knows the exact number because she keeps a list. Like #95: Because her skin is so dark, people call her charcoal and eggplant—even her own family. And #61: Because her family is always being put out of their house, belongings laid out on the sidewalk for the world to see. When your dad is a gambling addict and loses the rent money every month, eviction is a regular occurrence.

What's not so regular is that this time they all don't have a place to crash, so Genesis and her mom have to stay with her grandma. It's not that Genesis doesn't like her grandma, but she and Mom always fight—Grandma haranguing Mom to leave Dad, that she should have gone back to school, that if she'd married a lighter skinned man none of this would be happening, and on and on and on. But things aren't all bad. Genesis actually likes her new school; she's made a couple friends, her choir teacher says she has real talent, and she even encourages Genesis to join the talent show.

But how can Genesis believe anything her teacher says when her dad tells her the exact opposite? How can she stand up in front of all those people with her dark, dark skin knowing even her own family thinks lesser of her because of it? Why, why, why won't the lemon or yogurt or fancy creams lighten her skin like they're supposed to? And when Genesis reaches #100 on the list of things she hates about herself, will she continue on, or can she find the strength to begin again?”



Look Both Ways ([Overdrive](#))

Jason Reynolds

[\[Discussion Guide\]](#)

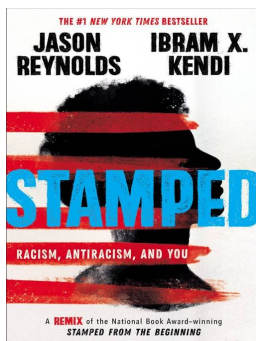
“This story was going to begin like all the best stories. With a school bus falling from the sky. But no one saw it happen. They were all too busy—

Talking about boogers.
Stealing pocket change.
Skateboarding.

Wiping out.
Braving up.
Executing complicated handshakes.
Planning an escape.
Making jokes.
Lotioning up.
Finding comfort.
But mostly, too busy walking home.

Jason Reynolds conjures ten tales (one per block) about what happens after the dismissal bell rings, and brilliantly weaves them into one wickedly funny, piercingly poignant look at the detours we face on the walk home, and in life.”

New and Noteworthy Reads

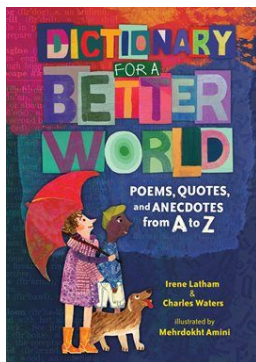


New! Stamped--Racism, Antiracism, and You ([Overdrive](#))

Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi

“The construct of race has always been used to gain and keep power, to create dynamics that separate and silence. This remarkable reimagining of Dr. Ibram X. Kendi’s National Book Award-winning *Stamped from the Beginning* reveals the history of racist ideas in America, and inspires hope for an antiracist future. It takes you on a race journey from then to now, shows you why we feel how we feel, and why the poison of racism lingers. It also proves that while racist ideas have always been easy to fabricate and distribute, they can also be discredited.

Through a gripping, fast-paced, and energizing narrative written by beloved award-winner Jason Reynolds, this book shines a light on the many insidious forms of racist ideas—and on ways readers can identify and stamp out racist thoughts in their daily lives.”

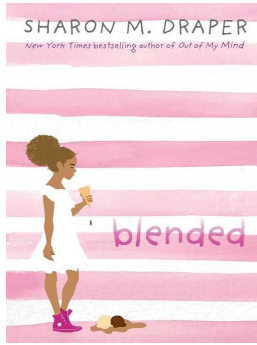


New! Dictionary for a Better World ([Hoopla](#))

Irene Latham, Charles Waters, Mehrdokht Amini

“Poems, Quotes, and Anecdotes from A to Z

How can we make the world a better place? This inspiring resource for middle-grade readers is organized as a dictionary; each entry presents a word related to creating a better world, such as ally, empathy, or respect. For each word, there is a poem, a quote from an inspiring person, a personal anecdote from the authors, and a ‘try it’ prompt for an activity.”



Blended ([Overdrive](#))

Sharon M. Draper

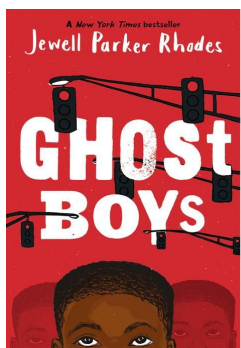
[\[Discussion Guide\]](#) | [\[Educator's Guide\]](#)

“Eleven-year-old Isabella's parents are divorced, so she has to switch lives every week: One week she's Isabella with her dad, his girlfriend Anastasia, and her son Darren living in a fancy house where they are one of the only black families in the neighborhood. The next week she's Izzy with her mom and her boyfriend John-Mark in a small, not-so-fancy house that she loves.

Because of this, Isabella has always felt pulled between two worlds. And now that her parents are divorced, it seems their fights are even worse, and they're always about HER. Isabella feels completely stuck in the middle, split and divided between them more than ever. And she is beginning to realize that being split between Mom and Dad involves more than switching houses, switching nicknames, switching backpacks: it's also about switching identities.

Her dad is black, her mom is white, and strangers are always commenting: "You're so exotic!" "You look so unusual." "But what are you really?" She knows what they're really saying: "You don't look like your parents." "You're different." "What race are you really?" And when her parents, who both get engaged at the same time, get in their biggest fight ever, Isabella doesn't just feel divided, she feels ripped in two. What does it mean to be half white or half black? To belong to half mom and half dad? And if you're only seen as half of this and half of that, how can you ever feel whole?

It seems like nothing can bring Isabella's family together again—until the worst thing happens. Isabella and Darren are stopped by the police. A cell phone is mistaken for a gun. And shots are fired.”



Ghost Boys ([Overdrive](#))

Jewell Parker Rhodes

[\[Discussion Guide\]](#) | [\[Educator's Guide\]](#)

“Only the living can make the world better. Live and make it better. Twelve-year-old Jerome is shot by a police officer who mistakes his toy gun for a real threat. As a ghost, he observes the devastation that's been unleashed on his family and community in the wake of what they see as an unjust and brutal killing.

Soon Jerome meets another ghost: Emmett Till, a boy from a very different time but similar circumstances. Emmett helps Jerome process what has happened, on a journey towards recognizing how historical racism may have led to the events that ended his life. Jerome also meets Sarah, the daughter of the police officer, who grapples with her father's actions.”

