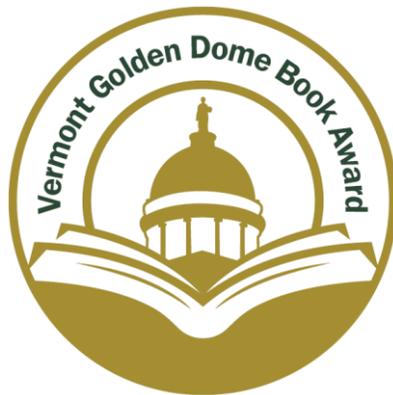


Vermont Golden Dome Book Award



**2022 - 2023
RESOURCE
GUIDE**

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About This Guide

This guide was compiled by members of the [Vermont Golden Dome Book Award \(VTGDBA\)](#) Reading Committee. Our intent is to provide a booklet that will support the use of the VTGDBA program in schools and libraries.

For the guide to be most effective, we strongly suggest that the librarian or teacher supervising the program read all the books on the list. Many public libraries will have the new list by the summer, which means you can get a head start before the school year begins. No synopsis can possibly take the place of reading a book; however, we recognize that reading and *remembering* the details of 25 books can be a challenge. It is hoped that the reviews will jog your memory!

Since many VTGDBA readers choose and read books on their own, the intent of the questions is to promote discussion among readers of VTGDBA books. This dialogue can take place between student/adult, student/student or in small groups of readers. Most, but not all, of the questions were written to promote critical thinking and to seek opinions, not “right” answers. None of the questions was designed for purposes of assessment.

The generic questions at the end of the handbook can be used in discussions in which readers have read different books. They are taken from Susan Zimmerman's book, *7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read It and Get It!* (Three Rivers Press, 2003. ISBN 0-7615-1549-6).

Author websites, if available, are found at the end of the reviews. Some reviews include additional relevant websites. If the author does not have a website, check the website of the publisher of the book. Their author biographies are usually easy to access and often quite informative.

Compiled by:

- Kate Belluche, *Fletcher Free Library (Burlington)*
- Katie Bosley, *Pierson Library (Shelburne)*
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- Sacha Krawczyk, *Fletcher Memorial Library (Ludlow)*
- Nicole Westbom, *Kellogg-Hubbard Library (Montpelier)*
- Laurie Williams, *Newbury Elementary School*

Alston, B.B.

Amari and the Night Brothers

Balzer & Bray

ISBN: 978-0062975164

\$17.99, 408 pages

When 13-year-old Amari gets an invitation to attend a summer camp run by the Bureau of Supernatural Affairs, she's sure that this holds the key to finding her missing brother, Quinton – whom, she soon discovers, was one of the Bureau's best agents. Amari herself proves to be a rare natural-born magician and, as her powers grow, she finds evil, corruption, and danger within the organization. Can she find her brother and save herself at the same time? Grade 4 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

History/Technology

- The Bureau has some spectacular advanced technology! Research spy technology from the past and present. (A good starting point might be the [Spy Museum](#).) After you have learned about existing tools for spies, use your imagination to come up with ideas for new spy-related gadgets.

History

- Research the history of magic. When and where did it originate? (See the British Library's [History of Magic](#) collection.)

Creative Writing

- Imagine you're the director of a brand-new department at the Bureau of Supernatural Affairs. What will you name it and what will be its purpose? Write a job listing for your department for the *One Thousand and One Careers* book. Include a job title (junior agent, researcher, etc.), a description of the chief responsibilities, and a minimum badge level required for the job. Who are some of the fictional characters or supernatural creatures who would be members of your department?

Art

- Create your own illusion. What if you had Amari's magical ability to create illusions? What would you want to create? Describe your fantasy scene and then create a visual image using art materials.

Discussion Questions:

See Balzar & Bray's [Educator's Guide](#) for *Amari and the Night Brothers*.

- The book's most powerful theme is prejudice. Explore the prejudice Amari faces both at Jefferson Academy and at the Bureau. Are they for the same reason? How does Amari react to the injustices? Are her reactions reasonable in your opinion? How would you react in similar situations? Have you ever faced any situations similar to Amari's?
- As she's in the process of losing her scholarship, Amari notes that people with money "can do whatever they want with no consequences while the rest of us have to watch our every step" (p. 3). How is this true even in the supernatural world? How about in our world? Can you think of any examples of how wealth relates to fewer consequences or less risk?

- If you were going to join the Bureau of Supernatural Affairs, which department would you choose? How would your choice use your talent and abilities?
- Who are the heroes in *Amari and the Night Brothers*? What makes someone a hero? Who are some modern-day heroes? Are all heroes famous?
- Fantasy books must contain one or more elements not found in the real world. Notice and name the elements that make Amari a fantasy novel.

Author Online:

<https://www.bbalston.com/>

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Armendariz, Luisana Duarte. *Julieta and the Diamond Enigma*. Tu Books, 2020.

Baptiste, Tracy. *The Jumbies*. Algonquin, 2015.

Chokski, Roshani. *Aru Shah and the End of Time*. Rick Riordan Presents, 2019.

Magoon, Kekla. *Shadows of Sherwood*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

Applegate, Katherine
Willodeen
Feiwel and Friends, 2021
ISBN: 978-1250147400
\$16.99, 260 pages

Eleven-year-old Willodeen learned to love nature from her father. Then tragically a wildfire killed her family and she barely escaped the deadly flames. However, Willodeen still loved the natural world - especially the “screechers,” animals which the villagers of Perchance believe to be smelly, scary pests and have done their best to eliminate. The villagers, however, adore the hummingbears, whose annual migration has traditionally been celebrated with a lucrative festival that once attracted tourists from far and wide. Now the hummingbears are disappearing – and Willodeen believes there is a link between the extermination of the screechers and the loss of the hummingbears. Together with friend Connor, she sets out to solve this ecological mystery and to convince the villagers of her surprising findings. Grade 4 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Science

- Define the following ecological terms: Environmental niche, biome, symbiotic relationship, biodiversity, community ecology, ecosystem, endangered species, flagship species, human ecology, migration, range, umbrella species, and food chain.
As a group, discuss how the terms relate to the book.
- Research animals indigenous to Vermont that are endangered or extinct. Why did the species decline or die out? Sample extinct species include the mountain lion, wolf, and caribou. Sample endangered species include the little brown bat, timber rattlesnake, rusty-patched bumblebee, spiny softshell turtle, and the lake sturgeon.

Art

- In *Willodeen*, Connor weaves together natural materials to create a rendition of a screecher and it magically comes to life! Create an art piece depicting one of the animals from *Willodeen*. Draw or paint the animal or for a real challenge create a three-dimensional depiction of the beastie. (Try using natural materials!)

Social Studies

- You have a voice! In *Willodeen*, the main character realizes that there is a problem with the environment. She researches the problem and publicly shares her concerns and the results of her research with her fellow villagers. Eventually she succeeds in changing human behavior to help the environment. In real life, Greta Thunberg has been passionately vocal about her environmental concerns. She is a teenager from Sweden who has met with world leaders and has spoken to the United Nations General Assembly. Find out more about Greta Thunberg. Identify a problem that you find concerning and actively work to solve it!

Discussion Questions:

- Why did the village of Perchance want to kill off all the screechers? Were the townspeople justified?
- Why did Willodeen feel more connected to nature than to the villagers of Perchance?

- What lessons did Willodeen learn from her father that motivated her to protect the screechers?
- What could you do to protect Vermont's environment?
- The environment of Perchance was changing. How is Vermont's environment changing?

Author Online:

For more information about the book and author, see: <https://katherineapplegate.com>

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Appelt, Kathi. *The True Blue Scouts of Sugar Man Swamp*. Atheneum, 2014.

Gidwitz, Adam. *The Unicorn Rescue Society* series. Puffin, 2019.

Gold, Hannah. *The Last Bear*. HarperCollins, 2021.

Hiassen, Carl. *Hoot*. Yearling, 2005.

Oliver, Lauren. *The Magnificent Monsters of Cedar Street*. Quill Tree Books, 2021.

Torday, Piers. *The Last Wild*. Puffin, 2015.

Bailar, Schuyler
Obie is Man Enough
Crown Books For Young Readers
ISBN: 9780593379462
\$16.99, 352 pages

Obie, a competitive swimmer, has always relied on the support of his swim coach - but when his coach decides that transgender swimmers have no place on the team, Obie has to find the courage to join a new team, get back in the pool, and face the former friends and mentors who are determined to shame him for simply being himself. Grade 6 and up.

Curricular Connections:

Literature

- Over the course of the story, Obie is invited to write from several introspective essay prompts. Take a cue from Obie and compose an essay based on one of the themes offered in the book.
- “Think about a time when you felt a conflict due to your identity and explain what you did to resolve it” (p. 26).
- “Write about a memorable experience in which your identity was questioned, challenged, or rejected. What did you learn about yourself through this experience? How has this experience influenced your view on the world and how you walk through it?” (pp. 229/230)
- “Write about how your identity does or does not conflict with your ancestry and culture. How does your identity connect you or disconnect you from your ancestry or history?” (pp. 229/230)
- Obie faced prejudice and bullying, but also had a community of supportive family, friends, and mentors around him. Rewrite a chapter from *Obie is Man Enough* from the point of view of one of Obie’s supporters. Remember in your writing to take Mrs. Salmani’s advice and “show, don’t tell.”

History/Sports

- There’s a long history in sports of denying athletes the right to compete based on their gender or race. Looking back, how do we see America’s political climate reflected in sports? Choose and research an influential athlete (someone who took on sexism, racism, or ableism) and broke barriers, advocated for equal rights, and helped change the rules of who could play a sport. How were they compensated or represented?

Social Studies

- Read *Obie is Man Enough* in tandem with Jason Reynold’s *All American Boys*. Discuss where you see the themes in Jason Reynold’s book reflected in *Obie*.
- How does Desmond Tutu’s quote “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor” resonate in each story?

History

- Obie’s halmoni (grandmother) lived through the trauma of the Korean War. Though she talks very little about it, her family walked a tremendous distance to escape and lost beloved family members along the way. Research North Korea during the Korean war. Discover what led to so many people to take desperate measures to escape.
- See National Geographic’s [The Korean War](#) for grades 5-8 and [Korean War](#) from Britannica Kids.

Discussion Questions:

- When Obie joins Coach Larkin’s team, she tells Obie that he needs to trust her coaching style. Still, he has a hard time getting used to a style of coaching that differs so much from Coach Bolton’s. When does Obie start to trust Coach Larkin’s methods? Can you point out differences between Obie’s old and current swimming teams that have to do with their coach’s expectations?
- Obie is surprised to find that he enjoys the anonymity of attending a large school where he doesn’t know everyone. What are the pros and cons of attending a school where you’ve known everyone since kindergarten vs. a school so big that you don’t know all of your classmates? Which would you prefer and why?
- While discussing the book *All American Boys* in class (p. 38), Mrs. Salmani introduces the word “refractory.” She says that the term is usually used negatively to mean “resistant to control or authority,” but that sometimes being refractory can be an act of bravery. Can you point out characters in *Obie* that could be described as refractory for both good and bad reasons?
- What does Mrs. Salmani mean (p. 27) when she says “Tall and confident Obie-jaan, he can never take you from yourself”?
- Coach Larkin introduces Obie to Tommy, a collegiate competitive swimmer who is also transgender. Tommy tells Obie that he considers being transgender his superpower, giving him unique insight both because not many people have the chance to walk the world perceived as both a boy and a girl, and because he had to fight for himself and find out what he was made of in the process. What do you consider to be your superpower?
- Lucy befriends girls who were mean to her as a kid, and Obie’s biggest bully was once his best friend. Thinking about similar experiences in your own life, what are some good guidelines for deciding whether to give a friendship a second chance or to let it go?
- On page 137, Obie’s therapist says that sometimes anger is an act of self-compassion - a way of saying to yourself, “I do not deserve this!” Can you point out moments when this was true in the book? Can you point out instances where characters showed anger that may have masked jealousy, shame, or insecurity?
- How are hands used as a metaphor throughout *Obie is Man Enough*? Look for instances where hands are mentioned, and why you think they’re important in Obie’s description of the people in his life. Obie also mentions that his hands are the only part of his body he’s aware of while swimming. Is this significant?
- Obie wants to learn the tradition of making kimchi from his halmoni. Can you think of a tradition you hope to take on or learn from a family member? Why is this tradition important to you? (Try some kimchi!)

Author Online:

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Bunker, Lisa. *Zenobia July*. Viking Books for Young Children, 2019.
Christmas, Johnnie. *Swim Team*. HarperAlley, 2022.
Higuera, Donna Barba. *Lupe Wong Won't Dance*. Levine Querido, 2020.
Jung, Mike. *The Boys in the Back Row*. Levine Querido, 2020.
Lukoff, Kyle. *Different Kinds of Fruit*. Dial Books, 2022.
Reynolds, Jason. *Ghost*. Atheneum, 2016.
Rhodes, Jewell Parker. *Black Brother, Black Brother*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2020.
Stoddard, Lindsey. *B is For Blended*. Harper Collins, 2021.
Yang, Gene Luen. *Dragon Hoops*. First Second, 2020.

Barone, Rebecca E.F.

Race to the Bottom of the Earth: Surviving Antarctica

Henry Holt and Company, 2021

ISBN: 978-1-250-25780-2

\$19.99, 262 pages

Throughout history, humans have always wanted to explore the unknown and seemingly unconquerable, to be the first to achieve a goal. In *Race to the Bottom of the Earth: Surviving Antarctica*, author Rebecca E.F. Barone tells the dual stories of the 1910 race to reach the South Pole between Robert Scott and Roald Amundsen and the 2018 race of Louis Rudd and Colin O’Brady to be the first to cross Antarctica solo. In this nonfiction book, their four journeys are brought to life and the readers are shown the dangers, challenges, obstacles, losses, and triumphs faced by these men as they cross the unforgiving landscape. Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Science

- Visit the [United States Antarctic Program](#) for resources, educational tools and a live webcam at McMurdo Station.
- Research common ailments that afflicted polar explorers like snow blindness, altitude sickness, and scurvy. What were the symptoms? How do people prevent these afflictions?
- Research how to survive in the winter. What are things you should do and things you should not do? Make a winter survival kit.
- Roald Amundsen learned how to survive in the extreme cold from living with the Netsilik. One of the things he learned was how to build “snow houses.” Got snow? Go outside and try building a snow house.

Social Studies

- Navigation was (and is) important to explorations past and present. Have students learn about navigation skills, latitude and longitude, and the use of navigation tools such as the compass and sextant. From National Geographic, [Map Skills for Elementary Students](#) has lessons and activities for preK – grade 6.
- One of the foods that Amundsen and his crew ate was pemmican. Research and make pemmican.

Language Arts

- Write a journal entry from the point of view of one of the explorers or a member of their crew. Where are you? What are you experiencing? How are you feeling?

Discussion Questions:

- Compare and contrast the four explorers. What traits do they share? How are they different? What qualities helped them with their journey?
- Colin O’Brady is said to have “found the key to success: what counts is the voice you choose to listen to, which mantras you take as your own.” What is your mantra? What was Colin’s?

- On page 123, Colin O’Brady says, “We are the stories we tell ourselves.” What does this mean to you? What are some of the stories you tell yourself?
- What do you think the letters that Amundson left to the King of Norway and Captain Scott said (p. 141)?
- Captain Lou Rudd described the finish as an “anti-climax.” What did he mean? Have you ever felt this way after you have completed a goal or finished something hard?
- On pages 219 - 223, Barone talks about the questions surrounding O’Brady’s and Rudd’s unsupported journeys. What do you think? Did O’Brady and, subsequently, Rudd really travel across Antarctica unsupported?

Author Online:

<https://rebeccaefbarone.com/>

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Armstrong, Jennifer. *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World: The Extraordinary True Story of Shackleton and the Endurance*. Random House Children’s Books, 2000.

Hameister, Jade. *Polar Explorer*. Feiwel & Friends, 2019.

Sandler, Martin. *The Impossible Rescue: The True Story of an Amazing Arctic Adventure*. Candlewick, 2014.

Soontornvat, Christina. *All Thirteen: The Incredible Cave Rescue of the Thai Boys’ Soccer Team*. Candlewick, 2020.

Wallace, Sandra Neil & Rich. *Race Against Time: The Untold Story of Scipio Jones and the Battle to Save Twelve Innocent Men*. Calkins Creek, 2021.

Braden, Ann
Flight of the Puffin
Nancy Paulsen Books
ISBN: 978-1984816061
\$17.99, 240 pages

How far can a simple act of kindness travel? When Libby sends a postcard from her home in Vermont to a stranger on the other side of the country, she has no idea what effects it will have and how ripples will bounce back to positively impact her own community. This uplifting tale about empathy tells of four young people: Libby, Jack, Vincent, and T. Each will be a part of a chain of communication that will change minds and lives. Grade 5 and up.

Curricular Activities:

Social Studies

- The postcards in this book travel all the way across the country. Look at a map and think of a place that you would like to know more about. Pick a city and write a postcard to an elementary school. You can make your own postcard or send one that is reflective of Vermont. Share your favorite thing about Vermont and ask what the students like about their home state. Make sure to include the name of your school, so they can write back!

Science

- Vincent learns about puffins from the back of a cereal box. For example, he learns (p. 60) that they spend months floating in the ocean. “Totally chill.” You can learn more about puffins from online resources or books such *Project Puffin* (Pete Salmansohn and Stephen W. Kress, Tilbury House, 2003). Create a drawing showing where the puffins spend their time. Where do they lay their eggs? How do they get their food? Where do they go to mate?

Math

- Vincent is fascinated with mathematician Katherine Johnson. You can read about her and the other NASA “human computers” in the Young Reader’s edition of *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly (HarperCollins, 2013).

Language Arts

- Make a postcard to send to one of the main characters. Think about what you would say if you could ask them anything or give them encouragement. Keep in mind that postcards are very short by nature.
- Can you change someone’s mind? Try writing a persuasive letter to share your opinion with someone who might have a different opinion from yours. Some topics that you could write about:
 - Graphic novels-- Some people think that they are not as educational or enriching as chapter books? Do you agree with this or disagree?
 - Video games-- Do video games negatively impact youth behavior?
 - Cell Phones-- When should a kid have their own cell phone?

You may not change another person’s mind, but it’s a valuable exercise to think about both sides of an argument and practice organizing your thoughts.

Art

- Make (and send) your own postcards! Download this template from [Tinkerlab](#).

Discussion Questions:

- What are the advantages of having gender-neutral single-stall restrooms? What are the reasons that people might give to argue against this type of arrangement?
- How did the postcards impact the characters actions and opinions? Did this book or another book ever change your opinion or give you a new perspective?
- How would you describe each of the main characters? Do you think your impressions line up with what others think of them? For example, Libby is considered a troublemaker. Do you think that's really who she is?
- How do Jack's opinions of gender expectations change throughout the book? Do you think his mother and father will rethink their understanding of gender? Why or why not?
- Do you think the endings were happy, sad, or a mixture of both?
- Visit the author's [website](#) for a week-by-week read-aloud discussion guide.

Author Online:

<https://annbradenbooks.com/>

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Braden, Ann. *The Benefits of Being an Octopus*. Sky Pony Press, 2018.

Levithan, David. *The Mysterious Disappearance of Aidan S. (as told to his brother)*. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2021.

Lukoff, Kyle. *Too Bright to See*. Dial Books, 2021.

Nuanez, J.M.M. *Birdie and me*. Kathy Dawson Books, 2020.

Ramée, Lisa Moore. *A Good Kind of Trouble*. Balzer + Bray, 2019

Stead, Rebecca. *The List of Things That Will Not Change*. Wendy Lamb Books, 2020.

Burke, Cliff

An Occasionally Happy Family

Clarion Books, 2021

ISBN: 978-03583256

\$16.99, 224 pages

Theo Ripley – an indoor kid who would rather spend his days playing video games and drawing comics than exploring the Texas wilderness - hates the idea of a family camping trip to Big Bend National Park during the hottest month of the year. Even so, Theo and his well-organized older sister Laura reluctantly embark with their science-teacher dad on a road trip that they won't soon forget. The wild bears, naked French tourists, and other surprises seem tame in comparison to the surprise their dad eventually springs on them - he has a girlfriend and the real purpose of the trip is for her to meet his family. The trip couldn't possibly get any worse, could it? Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Themes: Family, grief, siblings, humor

Geography

- The destination for Theo and his family's vacation is Big Bend National Park in Texas. Students in Vermont can go on a [virtual field trip](#) to Big Bend and even participate in a live discussion with Big Bend Park Rangers. All programs are free of charge.

Graphic Arts

- Theo is not happy to be going to Big Bend National Park and tends to dwell on its negative aspects. Create a promotional tool to attract tourists to this park. This could be a brochure, a short TV commercial, a highway billboard (poster-sized), etc. Think outside the box and create a unique way to show all that is great about Big Bend. (Convince Theo!)

Science

- Theo's family meet Leonard and Leo - a father-son duo who are also vacationing at Big Bend. Leonard considers himself an ornithologist and is constantly looking for birds. Vermont's state bird is the [hermit thrush](#). Research the species and find out why it was chosen to represent the state. Also see the Audubon Society's fantastic [website](#) for educators and students.

Social Studies

- Congratulations! Your family just won the lottery and is planning an epic, once-in-a-lifetime vacation. The best part: they are letting YOU choose the destination! The trip will be two weeks long and it must be feasible (no rocket ship trips to Mars). You now have some serious thinking to do.
 - Where will you go?
 - Who will travel with you (in addition to your immediate family)?
 - Where are you going to stay?
 - How are you going to get there?
 - What will you do in the course of your two weeks?

This activity can be adapted to meet the needs of a wide range of students. It could simply be a writing prompt or could expand into a cross-curricular project that would challenge students to research and plan a trip.

Discussion Questions:

- Theo and Laura’s dad is not very organized and doesn’t plan ahead. Do you prefer to have a plan or would you rather be spontaneous? Why?
- Do you think how Theo and Laura’s dad introduced Lucrecia was fair? What might have been a better way to let his family know that he was dating?
- Leo has a YouTube vlog and is very concerned about having fans, getting a lot of engagement, and taking “SP’s.” What are SP’s? How do you feel about his vlog? Is it something you would want to watch? Why or why not?
- On page 123, after Theo’s dad confronts French tourists Sylvie and Bernard as to why they are naked and drinking alcohol in the hot springs, Sylvie responds that she saw the rules posted, “But I think these, the rules here are silly. Silly, yes. We come here to nature to be free. To enjoy. These rules, to us, are not good.” What do you think? Should Sylvie and Bernard follow the rules? Should rules always be followed or are there times when they could be ignored?
- If you could ask the author of this book one question, what would it be?

Author Online:

Webpage: <https://www.cliffburke.com/>

Instagram: cliffburkeauthor

See [Cliff Burke on Goodreads](#).

Also see this [interview](#) with Cliff Burke about the book and check out this book-related [Road Trip Playlist](#).

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Clements, Andrew. *A Week In the Woods*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2002.

Cheng, Jack. *See You in the Cosmos*. Puffin, 2018.

Gemeinhart, Dad. *The Remarkable Journey of Coyote Sunrise*. Square Fish, 2020.

Lang, Heidi. *Wrong Way Summer*. Amulet, 2020.

Pla, Sally J. *The Someday Birds*. HarperCollins, 2018.

Preller, James. *The Courage Test*. Square Fish, 2017.

Faruqi, Saadia
Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero
Quill Tree Books, 2021
ISBN: 978-0-06-294325-5
\$16.99, 357 pages

2021 is going to be Yusuf Azeem's year. He is entering middle school and has a shot at competing in the Texas Robotics Competition. However, the beginning of the school year also coincides with the twentieth anniversary of 9/11. Divisions and mistrust rise to the surface when a small group called the Patriot Sons begins to stir up anti-Muslim feelings in the small Texas town of Frey where Yusuf lives. When Yusuf sees and experiences bullying, he has a choice of staying quiet and keeping his head down or standing up to the bullies and injustices. Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

From Saadia Faruqi, see a [teaching guide](#) for *Yusuf Azeem is Not a Hero*.

Social Studies

- Uncle Rahman tells Yusuf that “History informs the present, my dear nephew, and so it affects the future” (p. 23). Look into ways to teach about 9/11. How did it affect Americans and the world then and how does it still affect us now? One good resource (including videos) is [Teaching About 9/11](#).

STEAM

- Yusuf uses a computer program, Scratch, to make games for his sister. Go to the [Scratch](#) website and program your own game.
- Start a robotics club. There are free resources out there using minimal supplies if you are unable to buy robotic kits. Useful sources include Science Buddies' [Teach About Robotics](#), Edutopia's [Incorporating Robots Across the Curriculum](#), and the many robot courses and activities from [EngageK12](#).

Social/Emotional

- Research what it takes to be an ally in your community. What are things you can do to make your school/community a welcoming place for all? See [10 Things Allies Can Do](#).

Culinary Arts

- There is a lot of food mentioned in the book, some of which may not be familiar to students. If possible, make some of the foods mentioned in the book. Also consider having students bring in or describe dishes/recipes that are important to their family.

Discussion Questions:

- Yusuf is told that he “can also be a hero like your father” (p. 44). What makes someone a hero? Is Yusuf a hero? Is Cameron a hero? What other characters in the book could be considered heroes?
- Mr. Khan feels the need to participate in the different town activities as a citizen of Frey. Yusuf's mother has a different view of participating, saying, “We've been proving ourselves for the last twenty years.” Why does Mr. Khan feel the way he does? What does Amma mean by her statement? What does it mean to belong to a community?

- How does Uncle Rahman’s journal add to the story?
- Cameron tells Yusuf to “just keep your head down and don’t make waves. Like your parents and my parents, and everyone else around here” (p. 182) when Yusuf confronts Ethan in the locker room. Is this good advice? What would you have done if you were Yusuf?
- Jared’s grandma says “you can only make enemies with strangers” (p. 230). What does this mean? Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

Author Online:

For more information about the book and author, see: <https://saadiafaruqi.com/>

If you liked this book, you might like:

Alexander, Kwame & Patterson, James. *Becoming Muhammad Ali*. Jimmy Patterson, 2020.
 Baskin, Nora Raleigh. *Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story*. Athenaeum Books, 2016.
 Brown, Don. *In the Shadow of the Fallen Towers*. Etch/Clarion Books, 2021.
 Gratz, Alan. *Ground Zero*. Scholastic Press, 2021.
 Parker Rhodes, Jewell. *Towers Falling*. Little Brown, 2016.
 Senzai, N.H. *Shooting Kabul*. Simon & Schuster, 2010.

Fipps, Lisa

Starfish

Scholastic Press

ISBN: 978-198414500

\$17.99, 244 pages

Eleven-year-old Ellie has always been the fat kid. In this novel in verse, Ellie confronts bullies at school and at home while coming to terms with her big, beautiful body. She finds allies along the way - a new neighborhood friend, a therapist, and a supportive parent - but in a fat-obsessed world, will she be able to let go of her Fat Girl Rules? How will Ellie stand up to the world and show them her fabulous self? Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Art

- Gather some popular magazines and/or catalogs with images of people in them. Is there a diversity of shapes and sizes? Make a collage celebrating the diversity of bodies.

Language Arts

- There are people in the story that really see Ellie - her father, Catalina, Viv, Dr. Wood, the school librarian. Who are the people in your life that see and understand you? Is there some way you could share this with one or more of those people? A note? An image? A song? Other creative expression? Share a piece of yourself in a creative way.
- Ellie has a hard time describing herself without talking about her appearance. Write about yourself leaving out all mention of your physical appearance. Consider sharing these descriptions around your book group in an anonymous way to see if members recognize one another.

Language Arts/Social Studies

- Consider the *New York Times* article "[Leave Fat Kids Alone.](#)" What pressures bear down on overweight children?
- Most families along our Southern border have immigrated legally from Mexico and Central and South American countries. Catalina's family is often pre-judged as being "illegals." Can you draw any connections between the discrimination Catalina's family faces for their Mexican heritage and Ellie's for her size?

Discussion Questions:

- See questions from Penguin [Teacher's Guide](#) for *Starfish*.
- Ellie says, "A friend hears what you say with silence" (p. 50). What do you think this means?
- Ellie tells us she went on her first diet when she was four years old (p. 65). Do you think four-year-olds should be on diets? Why or why not? How did this change Ellie's life?
- Why doesn't Ellie feel better when she does things that can be seen as ways of standing up for herself, like insult her classmates back (p. 81) or steal a photo card from the tourists (p. 110)?

- How did you feel when Ellie finally confronted her mom? What events in the book made Ellie ready to do this?
- Use evidence from the text to compare and contrast the relationships Ellie has with her father and mother.
- In what ways in your life do you “starfish”? What does it mean and look like for you?

Author Online:

<https://authorlisafipps.com/about/>

If you liked this book, you might like:

Baron, Chris. *All of Me*. Square Fish, 2021.
 Conner, Leslie. *The Truth as Told by Mason Buttle*. Katherine Tegen Books, 2020.
 Cotterill, Jo. *Jelly*. Yellow Jacket, 2020.
 Dee, Barbara. *Everything I Know About You*. Aladdin, 2019.
 Gerber, Alyson, *Taking up Space*. Scholastic, 2021.
 Grimes, Nikki. *Garvey’s Choice*. Wordsong, 2021.
 Petro-Roy, Jen. *Good Enough*. Square Fish, 2020.
 Wientge, Kristi. *Karma Khullar’s Mustache*. Simon & Schuster, 2018.

Freeman, Megan E.

Alone

Aladdin, 2021

ISBN: 978-1-5344-6756-9

\$17.99, 401 pages

Twelve-year-old Maddie and two friends concoct a plan to have a secret sleepover - but when the two friends can't make it, Maddie decides to have her sleepover alone. Then, while staying at her empty grandparents' apartment, the entire town's population disappears and Maddie wakes up to find herself truly alone with no clue as to where everyone went or why. With the companionship of her neighbor's dog, George, Maddie must learn to survive with no power, internet, or access to phones. She faces many obstacles along the way, from wild animals to looters and tornadoes - but maybe the toughest one of all is loneliness. Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Language Arts

- Maddie discovers a love of poetry during her time alone. Read some of the poems written by the poets mentioned in the book: e.e. cummings, Billy Collins, T.S. Elliott, Emily Dickinson, Mary Oliver.
- What would you do if you found yourself all alone in your community like Maddie does? Try writing what a day in your life would be like in verse.
- A *robinsonade* is a form of literature that takes its name from Daniel Defoe's classic novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, about a man struggling to survive alone on a desert island after a shipwreck. Research other robinsonades. How is Maddie's story a robinsonade?

Science

- Maddie had to survive several natural disasters. Pick a natural disaster to research and learn how best to survive it.
- Maddie had to rely on her previous knowledge and research at the library to provide her with survival skills, like gardening, making a fire, and finding sources of fuel. What survival skills would you need to be able to live alone? Pick a topic you would like to learn more about and make a presentation on how to use that survival skill.
- The book includes a section titled "Novacula Occami" or [Occam's Razor](#). Learn more about this philosophy and how it applies to science.

Social Studies

- Maddie had to use her first-aid knowledge to help her during her years alone. Take a first aid course or research how to treat cuts, burns, etc. See the [Red Cross website](#) for information about training classes.

Culinary Arts

- Maddie had to survive on canned goods she scavenged from houses and stores. Have a canned food challenge. With random/donated canned food, have students come up with a meal that uses only the canned food.

Discussion Questions:

- Maddie had many difficult decisions to make while surviving on her own. One was whether to stay put in town or to leave and try to find help. What would you have done? Maddie also decided not to interact with the looters. Would you have made the same decision?
- After Maddie’s first birthday alone in the section “Rite of Passage” (p. 132), Maddie chops off her braids and decides it’s “Time to get serious.” What do you think is the cause of this change?
- In the section “To Pass the Time” (p. 160), Maddie talks about how she passes the time alone. What would you do to pass the time if you found yourself in Maddie’s situation?
- George is Maddie’s only companion during the book. Why do you think Maddie took him in when it means extra work to get George food? What does this say about the relationship between humans and animals?
- Maddie finds her stepbrother’s book report about *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. Elliott believes that the biggest challenge the Challenge Girl faces is to be alone for 18 years. Do you agree with Elliott? What would be your biggest challenge?
- How does Maddie change in the course of the book? Give specific examples of where we can see Maddie change.
- What did you think about the ending of the book? Would there have been anything you would have changed?
- Why do you think the author chose to write this book in verse? How would it be different if she wrote it in prose?

Author Online:

For more information about the book and author, see: <https://www.meganefreeman.com/>.

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Bowling, Dusti. *The Canyon’s Edge*. Little Brown Books, 2021.

Esplin, J.L. *96 Miles*. Tor Teen, 2021.

Gemeinhart, Dan. *Scar Island*. Scholastic Press, 2018.

Johnson, Terry Lynn. *Ice Dogs*. Clarion Books, 2015.

Paulsen, Gary. *Hatchet*. Simon & Schuster, 2006.

Philbrick, Rodman. *Zane and the Hurricane: A Story of Katrina*. Blue Sky Press, 2015.

Higuera, Donna Barba
The Last Cuentista
Levine Querido
ISBN: 978-1-64614-089-3
\$17.99, 336 pages

Storytelling changes a new world in this enthralling mix of Mexican folklore and science-fiction adventure. Halley's Comet is about to destroy the Earth, so 13-year-old Petra and family have embarked on one of three spaceships on a 300+-year journey to the distant planet Sagan. When Petra awakes from stasis, however, she finds that the ship has been taken over by the sinister Collective, her family has been purged, and the remaining survivors have had their memories expunged and reprogrammed. Petra, unbeknownst to the Collective, has resisted reprogramming – and eventually, through her retellings of her grandmother's *cuentos*, she not only retains her independence but helps other young passengers in a plan to escape. Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Science and Technology

- Earth has a long history of traumatic collisions – perhaps most famously the six-mile-wide asteroid or comet fragment that struck the planet 66 million years ago, killing about 75% of Earth's animals, including the dinosaurs. Research past impact events.
- Today scientists track asteroid-like objects – called Apollo Objects – whose orbits cross that of Earth and may be a threat to the planet. There are over 15,000 Apollo Objects known – check them out [here](#).
- What would you do to prevent an asteroid collision? See what [NASA proposes](#).
- Halley's Comet is the only short-period comet regularly visible by the naked eye from Earth – and the only naked-eye comet that you've got a chance of seeing twice in a lifetime. It shows up about every 76 years. See what you can find out about Halley's Comet.

A few cool facts about Halley's Comet:

- Halley's Comet appears in the [Bayeux Tapestry](#), showing that it was in the sky in 1066, shortly before William the Conqueror invaded England. (William thought it was a sign predicting his success in battle.)
- Author Mark Twain claimed that he came in with the comet when he was born in 1835 – and he expected to go out with it, when it returned in 1910. In fact, Twain died in 1910, just as the comet reappeared from its orbit around the sun.
- There are a lot of superstitions about comets. When Halley's Comet reappeared in 1910, some people were convinced that gas from the comet's tail would kill all life on the planet.
- Halley's Comet has several tails, perhaps as many as seven, according to a study in 1986.
- Halley's Comet is expected to return again in 2061.
- The planet Sagan is a “Goldilocks world.” What does that mean? How many known planets are Goldilocks worlds?
- While the planet Sagan is suitable for human life, it has differences from Earth. Its red-dwarf sun is smaller and dimmer than our sun – and Sagan is tidally locked, which means that the same face of the planet always faces the sun. Sagan has a permanent light side and dark side, much like our Moon. What would you predict for differences in life on Sagan?

Math

- On Petra’s first mission to the surface of Sagan, she discovers a fearsomely poisonous plant. Toxicity is measured in a quantity called LD50 – that is, Lethal Dose 50% - the amount of a given poison or toxin that would kill off 50% (half) of an exposed population. The tinier the LD50, the more deadly the poison.

Botulinum toxin – produced by the bacterium that causes botulism – is generally thought to be the deadliest poison on our planet, with an LD50 of 1 nanogram/kilogram. Just a few nanograms – that is, an amount just one-billionth the weight of a paperclip – can kill an average-sized human being. Petra’s poisonous leaves, with an LD50 of .001 nanograms/kilogram, are a thousand times more toxic than that.

- Compare LD50s on some common poisons. (How dangerous are poison-dart frogs?)

Literature

- Stories fulfill many functions. They can explain natural phenomena, bring facts to life, help us understand ourselves and others, teach moral lessons, transfer knowledge from one generation to another, and provide a means of escape from the real world. Find some examples of classic stories and discuss their purposes. What about the stories that Petra and her grandmother tell?
- Research ethnic folklore. Read some examples of stories from Mexican and other cultural traditions. How are they alike or different?

Discussion Questions:

- Petra’s father says that “equality and sameness are two different things.” What did he mean? What do you think?
- Petra suffers from a genetic eye defect that should have prevented her from boarding the spaceship. However, by falsifying medical records, her parents have secured her a place on board. Should they have done this? Was this a fair rule? Why or why not?
- An initial aim of the spaceships was to transfer all the best of human culture to the new planet. Petra’s mother, a botanist, has brought on board a sprout of Hyperion, a California redwood, the world’s tallest living tree. What things would you have wanted to include to represent the best of Earth?
- See what images of Earth Carl Sagan and co-workers chose to include on the [Golden Record](#), a digital time capsule sent into space with the Voyager spacecraft, launched in 1977.
- People boarding the spaceship could take very few personal items with them. If you could take just one or two things with you on a long space journey, what would they be?
- A goal of the Collective is to erase the past, eliminating all memories of conflict, starvation, and war, in hopes of creating a new and better future. Petra’s grandmother, on the other hand, explains that it’s important to remember what we got wrong. Who do you think is right and why?
- In order to attain their goals, the Collective has purged all people who stand in their way. What kind of acts are justified in order to reach what you believe is a greater good?

- Which is more important: individual free will or social consensus?
- Nyla, the Collective’s Chancellor, claims that human possessions led to greed and selfishness. So why does she preserve a hidden room full of “relics?”
- Nyla plans to use the toxin extracted from Sagan’s poisonous leaves to eradicate the “First Arrivers” – thus ensuring peace by eliminating the chance of future war. What do you think about this form of preventive war? Is this a defensible policy?

Author Online:

For more information on the book and its author, see <https://www.dbhiguera.com/>.

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Christopher, John. *The White Mountains*. Aladdin, 2014.
Emerson, Kevin. *Last Day on Mars*. Walden Pond Press, 2018.
Ford, Patricia. *The List*. Sourcebooks Young Readers, 2018.
Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. Clarion, 1993.
McAnulty, Stacy. *The World Ends in April*. Yearling, 2021.
Rodkey, Geoff. *We’re Not from Here*. Crown, 2019.

Khor, Shing Yin
The Legend of Auntie Po
Koklia
ISBN: 978-0525554882
\$22.99, 304 pages

It's 1885 and 13-year old Mei is the pie-baking, storytelling daughter of the head cook in a Sierra Nevada logging camp. As Chinese immigrants, she and her father find their lives clouded by racism and the ramifications of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Even the respect of the camp foreman and Mei's close relationship with his daughter, Bee, can't change their difficult and painful reality. However, as Mei entertains the camp children by reimagining the myth of Paul Bunyan in the form of a feisty larger-than-life Chinese matriarch named Auntie Po, she begins to imagine rewriting her own story too. A brave and hopeful graphic novel. Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Writing

- In true tall-tale fashion, many stories of Paul Bunyan feature Paul and Babe the Blue Ox literally reshaping the terrain of the United States. Tales have them digging the Great Lakes, carving the Grand Canyon, and even making the 10,000 lakes of Minnesota. Research the Bunyan tales. Then choose a natural landmark of Vermont and write a tale about how a larger-than-life legend like Auntie Po or Paul Bunyan could have "made" it.

Social Studies

- In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act became the first United States law to significantly limit immigration. Research the history of Chinese immigrants at that time to discover why they came to the United States as well as the events and/or economic circumstances that led to the passage of such a law. Think about connections to the status of immigrants today.
- By the late 1880's, the logging industry had clear cut most of Vermont: 80% of the state was devoid of trees. Today, Vermont is once again 80% forested. Research Vermont's logging history and compare that to how Vermont's forests are managed today.

Math

- Mei's father, Mr. Hao, is an incredibly skilled cook. But he also had to be a skilled manager of resources: a typical logging camp could have 75-100 men who needed to eat around 8,000 calories a day given the physical exertion required by logging. Have students bring in some favorite family recipes from home and convert the recipes to serve 75 men. Have them figure out the caloric value of their recipe and then look to a group of recipes to draw up a menu plan for a day that ensures that the men get enough calories.

Baking/Cooking

- Mei is famous for her pies. Would you be for yours? Learn how to make a homemade pie crust (it isn't easy!) and bake some classroom pies for a taste test or a Great Classroom Bake Off!

Physical Education

- Look up the World Lumberjack/jill Championships online. Work with the PE teacher to create stations for a class or field day modeled after some of the events in the competition. Safety first, but then get creative! Log roll becomes pool noodle roll? Have fun!

Health & Wellness

- Lumberjacks burned up to 8000 calories per day. That’s a huge number of calories to replenish in your daily diet. Review the menu items discussed in *The Legend of Auntie Po* and determine what amount of those items you would need to eat to hit 8000 calories. How many potatoes? How much pie? What were some others? What would a well-balanced 8000 calorie meal look like?

Discussion Questions:

- Why does Mei create Auntie Po and Pei Pei? How do they help her? How does she try to use them to help others?
- Early in the story, Pauly tells Bee that Mei is “not like us...Mei doesn't have a future.” Why does Pauly say this? What does he mean? How do you think Mei feels?
- After Ah Sam is attacked, Mei’s dad tells Mr. Anderson, the camp foreman, that if “he cannot keep us safe, he cannot call us family.” Do you agree or disagree with that statement? Why?
- In her Author’s Note, Shing Yin Khor writes of the challenges of researching the history of working-class Chinese in 1800’s logging camps. Why do you suppose this was the case?
- Someday Mei and Bee want to open a store that is a combination of bookshop and pie store. If you were going to open a shop or own a business, what would it be? Why?

Author Online:

You can listen to Shing Yin Khor talk about her Paul Bunyan research [here](#) and the making of *The Legend of Auntie Po* [here](#). Visit her website [here](#).

If you liked this book, you might like:

Lai, Thanhha. *Inside Out and Back Again*. HarperCollins, 2011.
 Park, Linda Sue. *Prairie Lotus*. Clarion, 2020.
 Takei, George. *They Called Us Enemy*. Top Shelf Productions, 2019.
 Yang, Kelly. *Front Desk*. Scholastic, 2019.
 Yep, Laurence. *Dragonwings*. HarperCollins, 2001.

LaRocca, Rajani
Red, White and Whole
Quill Tree Books
ISBN: 978-0063047426
\$12.99, 256 pages

Reha, a first-generation American, performs a balancing act between school and home, trying to fit in with her American peers while adhering to her Indian parents' values and high expectations. When her mother is diagnosed with leukemia, Reha's world is turned upside down and it becomes even more important to be the daughter her mother expects and deserves. Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Literature/Writing Prompts

- Think of a story, fable, book, or family legend that you believe has had the biggest impact on you. Why is it important to you? What have you taken away from it?
- Writing in verse, describe an instance when you felt yourself pulled in different directions.

History

- Create a soundtrack for your favorite book! Choose a novel you've been moved by. Research the music popular at the time and place in which the book was set and choose songs that best transport you to that world!
- Press play at [Red, White and Whole Playlist](#), to be musically transported back to 1983.
- Connect with the adults in your life! Are there keepsakes from important events or heirlooms that hold stories? Do these items help you feel more connected to the person they were before you met them?

Science

- Despite feeling squeamish around blood, Reha thinks she might like to go into medicine. Author Rajani LaRocca felt the same way! Her interest was sparked after reading the book *Ouch! All About Cuts and Other Hurts* as a kid and learning how the circulatory system worked and repaired itself. Explore the circulatory system [here](#).

From Science Sparks, see [How to Make a Stethoscope](#).

Look for extensive curricular connections and a full set of discussion questions in the [Red, White and Whole Educator's Guide](#).

Discussion Questions:

- Think about the title of this book, *Red, White, and Whole*. Why do you think the author chose this title? Does it have more than one meaning?
- Reha loves mythology, and holds a particular hero, Savitri, in high esteem. Are there parts of the story where you hear mythology seeping into Reha's telling of her own life?
- Were you surprised to hear the contents of the letter that Reha's mother leaves for her? Why or why not?
- Why is music important to Reha? What songs mentioned in the story do you think will remind her most of her mother and why?

- What's your definition of what it means to be a hero? Can you point out moments when characters in *Red, White and Whole* behaved heroically?

Author Online:

Find Author Rajani Larocca at <https://www.rajaniarocca.com/>.

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Bowman, Akemi Dawn. *Generation Misfits*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021.

Brown, Waka T. *While I Was Away*. Quill Tree Books, 2021.

Hamza, Nina. *Ahmed Aziz's Epic Year*. Quill Tree Books 2021.

Kadohata, Cynthia. *Kira-Kira*. Atheneum, 2004.

Keller, Tae. *When You Catch a Tiger*. Random House Books for Young Readers, 2020.

Kelly, Erin Entrada. *Blackbird Fly*. Greenwillow Books, 2015.

Khan, Henna. *Amina's Voice*. Salaam Reads, 2017.

Thanhà Lai, *Inside Out and Back Again*. HarperCollins, 2013.

Yang, Gene Luen. *American Born Chinese*. First Second, 2007.

Little Badger, Darcie.
A Snake Falls to Earth
Levine Querido
ISBN: 978-1646140923
\$18.99, 352 pages

Oli is a cottonmouth (yes, the snake) who lives in the Reflecting World, an alternative world still connected to our own where people can shift between their animal and human forms. When his friend Ami, an ancient toad, falls ill, Oli must travel to Earth to find a cure. Fortunately, he's not alone - he has the help of twin coyotes, a mischievous mockingbird, and a human girl named Nina. It's a race against time in this magical, mythical story about environmental stewardship. Grade 7 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Social Studies

- Learn about the [Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas](#). This website includes a creation story, of which there are many in Native American traditions. Research these and write a short illustrated version of a creation story that you like. Share the story and what you learned about Native American culture.

Science

- A central plot element of the story is the connection between the creatures in the two worlds. When one goes extinct in Nina's world, it dies in Oli's world. From the World Wildlife Foundation learn about [endangered species](#).
- What can you do to prevent species from going extinct?

Try the following activities:

- Learn about the [Endangered Species Act](#).
- Identify a species that you want to protect. Think about practical ways that humans can positively impact that species.
- Once you have determined steps to help protect a species, you can try to involve lawmakers. [Write to a legislator](#).

Discussion Questions:

- What impact do humans have on the natural world? Are these impacts positive, negative, or both?
- How did the author connect characters' personality traits to their animal forms?
- Which character did you like best? Why?
- What kind of a person is Nina? Did you relate to her?
- What is Oli's family like? Does he miss them?
- The characters tried to use a viral video to solve their problems, but it didn't end up as they planned. Are there ways that social media and viral content can bolster a cause? Why or why not? How would you have handled the situation?

- In what ways were the two parallel worlds similar? How were they different? Did the author do an effective job distinguishing between the two settings?

Author Online:

<https://darcielittlebadger.wordpress.com/>

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Castaldo, Nancy. *Back from the Brink*. Clarion Books, 2018.
Roanhorse, Rebecca. *Race to the Sun*. Disney Hyperion, 2020.
Smith, Cynthia Leitich. *Ancestor Approved*. Heartdrum, 2021.
Smith, Cynthia Leitich. *Sisters of the Neversea*. Heartdrum, 2021.
Young, Brian. *Healer of the Water Monster*. Heartdrum, 2022.

Lucas, Chad
Thanks a Lot, Universe
Harry N. Abrams, 2021
ISBN: 978-1419751028
228 pages, \$16.99

Turning 13 is a milestone that traditionally is celebrated with cake and presents – but on Brian’s 13th birthday, he’s greeted with the news that his dad is now on the run from the law and his mom has tried to commit suicide. This leaves Brian and younger brother Richie at the mercy of the foster-care system. Brian grapples with anxiety and panic attacks while trying to navigate family trauma, life as a 7th-grader, and questionable foster parents, though he gets help from a savvy teacher, her son, and her son’s girlfriend, and from basketball teammate Ezra (who secretly has a crush on Brian). A coming-of-age story that deals understandingly with difficult issues. Grade 6 and up.

Themes: suicide, foster care, bullying, LGBTQ+, mental health

Curriculum Connections:

Writing Prompt

- On the cover of *Thanks a Lot, Universe* is the saying “Be brave. Be real. Be weird.” Why do you think the author chose to have those words on the cover? If you had to pick three things to “be” what would they be and why?

Wellness

- Students often come to school feeling stressed and unsettled. From academic worries to social angst or sports woes, it’s important that students recognize methods that can help them relax and feel more at ease. These two sites list a wide range of exercises and activities that help kids (and adults) be more mindful. See [55 Mindfulness Exercises for Kids](#) and [25 Fun Mindfulness Activities for Children and Teens](#).

Geography

- *Thanks a Lot, Universe* takes place in the Canadian Province of Nova Scotia, an area that is rich with culture and history. Research what makes Nova Scotia unique. Some areas to concentrate on might include:
 - First Nations peoples
 - European Exploration and Settlement
 - Economy
 - Language and Ethnicity
 - Culture

Art

- Brian and Erza were both faced with hefty decisions with results that would be life-altering. A tactile way to help with decision making is with a [vision board](#). Create your own vision board! Instead of focusing on all that stresses you in the present, spend some time letting yourself dream of what could be. Where have you always wanted to go? What have you always wanted to do? Check out our guide to [vision boards](#). This is a fun way to get into mindful practices every quarter!

Discussion Questions:

Originally posted [here](#) from Read Across America.

- How would you describe Brian? What strengths does he have? How is he similar or different from Ezra? Do you know anyone with the same qualities as Brian or Ezra? How is that person similar or different?
- Everyone feels anxious at times. Brian struggles with social anxiety. What are some of the things that give you anxiety? How do you deal with anxious feelings? How can you find healthy ways to cope with anxiety?
- Ezra is outgoing and popular with a core group of friends. How does Ezra sort through his feelings as the dynamics in his friend group change? What does Ezra really want out of his friendship with Colby?
- In different ways, Brian and Ezra both wrestle with how they see themselves and how they think others see them. What do they learn about themselves? What kind of impact did they have on each other? How do you feel about embracing the things that make you different?

Author Online:

Webpage: <https://www.chadlucaswrites.com/>

Instagram: chadgalucas

Twitter: @ChadGALucas

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Ehrlich, Esther. *Nest*. Yearling, 2016.

Pancholy, Maluik. *The Best at It*, Balzer + Bray, 2020

Paterson, Katherine. *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. HarperCollins, 1978.

Reynolds, Jason. *Ghosts*. Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books, 2017.

Telgemeier, Raina. *Guts*. Graphix, 2019

Mills, Claudia

The Lost Language

Margaret Ferguson Books

ISBN: 978-0823450381

\$15.49, 304 pages

Can a dying language or a dying friendship be saved? Betsy and Lizard have been inseparable for years but when their quest to save a dying language goes sideways and Betsy experiences family drama, it seems that friendships, like languages, cannot always be saved. Grade 6 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Language Arts

- Explore novels in verse. What characterizes a novel in verse? Is this the first time you have read a novel in verse? What did you like/not like about the format? Explore other middle grade novels that share this format.

Geography

- Locate the island of Guernsey on a map. Look up some basic facts about Guernsey including languages spoken. Is Guernésiais actually a language?

Social Studies

- Read a short article exploring several [languages on the brink of extinction](#) including a map of endangered languages.
- Want to learn an endangered language? Check out [Duolingo](#), which offers classes in Zulu, Hawaiian, Navajo, Haitian Creole, Tagalog, and more.

Discussion Questions:

Some questions from Holiday House [Educator's Guide](#) for *The Lost Language*.

- Discuss Betsy's relationship with her mom and dad. How is life simpler when her mom is away? How does Betsy's mom expect perfection from her? Betsy auditions for the play and gets a part as an "extra flower." Contrast her mom and dad's reactions to the role. Betsy's mom doesn't have the language to communicate with her daughter. How does she make an effort after she comes home from the hospital? Explain what Betsy means by "We couldn't have done our talking, if he (Dad) hadn't been there doing his listening" (p. 256).
- Describe Lizard's family. Why does Lizard tell Betsy that her father is a spy? At what point does Betsy detect that Lizard's father is an alcoholic? Debate whether Lizard's family issues contribute to her controlling nature. What is Lizard searching for? How does she finally find the words to reveal the truth about her father?
- What is the first hint that Betsy's mom suffers from depression? Betsy thinks that her father returned from his trip because her mother needed to go to a conference. How does she learn that her mother is actually in the hospital? Why is Lizard so eager to tell the girls at the lunch table about Betsy's mother? Discuss how the girls turn on Lizard for delivering this information. Debate whether Betsy feels betrayed when she learns that her dad lied to her about her mom's suicide attempt.

- Betsy doesn't know how she feels about her mom coming home from the hospital. Explain the symbolism of the "mixed flowers" that she gives her mother. How does Betsy's mother explain her issues with anxiety and depression? Explain why being honest about mental health conditions is so important.

Author Online:

<https://www.claudiamillsauthor.com/>

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Allen, Sarah. *Breathing Underwater*. Square Fish, 2021.

Bishop, Jen. *Things You Can't Say*. Aladdin, 2020.

Bradley, Kimbrey Brubacker. *Fighting Words*. Dial Books, 2021.

Ehrlich, Esther. *Nest*. Yearling, 2016.

Johnson, Varian. *The Parker Inheritance*. Scholastic Gold, 2018.

Keller, Tae. *The Science of Breakable Things*. Yearling, 2019.

McDunn, Guillian. *The Queen Bee and Me*. Bloomsbury Children's Books, 2020.

O'Conner, Barbara. *Wonderland*. Square Fish, 2019.

Perez, Celia. *Strange Birds*. Kokila, 2019.

Snyder, Laurel. *My Jasper June*. Walden Pond, 2019.

Palacio, R.J.

Pony

Alfred A. Knopf, 2021

ISBN: 978-0553508116

\$17.99, 285 pages

Twelve-year-old Silas and his photographer father live in Boneville, Ohio, in the mid-19th century. One night a trio of armed horsemen arrives and takes his father away, leaving Silas alone with Mittenwool, a ghost who has been his constant companion for years. Shortly thereafter, a pony that one of the horsemen had been leading returns to the cabin. Silas believes that the pony can lead him to his kidnapped father, so he and Mittenwool set off on a dangerous journey filled with ghosts and outlaws and a chance to learn the story of his family's mysterious history. Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Geography

- Based on the context clues found in the book, create a map of Silas's journey. Include a compass rose, towns, and landmarks. For example, include: Boneville (town), the woods, the creek, the cave, the waterfalls, the cliff, the main ravine, the railroad and Rosasharon (town).

History

- Research Ohio in the Civil War era. Does *Pony* offer a realistic portrayal of life at that time?
- Research counterfeiting in the United States. How does the government combat counterfeiting? Examine a new dollar bill and see if you can identify features that were designed to thwart counterfeiters.

Writing

- The book opens with a newspaper article describing how Silas survived a lightning strike. Write a newspaper article reporting the mysterious disappearance of Silas and his father or an article about the shootout at the cave and the arrest of the counterfeiters.

Discussion Questions:

- Why is Martin Bird kidnapped?
- Why does Mittenwool haunt Silas?
- How does Silas develop a bond with the pony?
- How does Silas overcome his fears? In the bog? On the trail? At the cave?
- How does the relationship between Silas and Enoch Farmer change over time? How does the relationship between Silas and Sheriff Chalfont change over time? How does the relationship between Silas and Deputy Beautyman change over time?

Author Online:

For more information about the book and the author, see: <https://wonderthebook.com>.

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Billingsley, Franny. *The Robber Girl*. Candlewick, 2021.

Durham, Paul. *The Last Gargoyle*. Crown, 2018.

Gemeinhart, Dan. *Some Kind of Courage*. Scholastic, 2013.

Ireland, Justina. *Ophie's Ghosts*. Balzer + Bray, 2021.

Oliver, Lauren. *Liesl & Po*. HarperCollins, 2021.

Reynolds, Jason, Ibram X, Kendi, and Sonja Cherry-Paul

Stamped (For Kids)

Little, Brown

ISBN: 978-0-3161-6758-1

\$15.99, 176 pages

What did our government’s founders and other famous historical figures think about race? How do these ideas affect society today? This book, subtitled “Racism, Antiracism, and You,” gives middle-grade readers the means to discuss the ways in which racism is woven into the fabric of our nation, and how our perspective on race has been informed by deeply entrenched societal prejudices. A necessary and inspiring read. Grade 4 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

History

- Choose a historic figure mentioned in *Stamped*. Read some of their speeches, poetry, or written works. Can you identify which of their ideas were segregationist, assimilationist, or antiracist? How did their ideas change over time?

Geography

- Create a map of where changemakers lived while they worked to affect social change and racial equity. What was happening in their own communities when they spoke up? Who were their contemporaries? Did change happen all over the country at once, or in smaller communities little by little?

Science

- Can you be actively antiracist, and still have unconscious biases? How are humans hardwired to process information in a way that reinforces our biases? From the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, see resources for [Talking About Race](#).

For Educators

- Explore further curriculum connections and discussion questions through the [Stamped \(For Kids\) Educator's Guide](#) and the Zinn Education Project’s [What We Don’t Learn About the Black Panther Party – but Should](#).
- *Stamped* touches on the misrepresentation of First Nations people in American history as well. Take a look at SLJ’s [recommended reading guide](#).
- Take a walk through the National Museum of African-American History and Culture through their [Searchable Museum](#).

Discussion Questions:

- Think about the questions Kendi poses on page 3. “How do racist ideas hold us down?” “How do antiracist ideas lift us up?”
- In reading *Stamped*, did you learn something new about a historical figure or event you’d already studied? Were you surprised by this new information? How does it change your understanding of a key event in history, or your perspective on a historical figure?

- Explain the difference between segregationists, assimilationists, and antiracists. (Definitions found pp. 4-5.)
- Kendi asks us to think about our own place in history by considering what led up to the here and now. How does it change your perspective on history to add yourself to the timeline?
- Did Ibram Kendi have a goal for this book? If so, what was it?
- Can you identify other times historically or currently where people have used divisive rhetoric to keep people from uniting against them? Where in society do we still see people encouraging divisive thoughts for their own profit?
- Equality and equity are similar, but different. Can you explain the difference?

Author Online:

See an NPR interview with Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi [here](#).

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Magoon, Kekla. *Revolution In Our Time*. Candlewick Press 2021.

Messner, Kate. *History Smashers* (series). Random House Books For Young Readers.

Rhodes, Jewell Parker. *Ghost Boys*. Little, Brown Books For Young Readers, 2018.

Weatherford, Carole Boston. *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre*. Carolrhoda Books, 2021.

Williams-Garcia, Rita. *One Crazy Summer*. Quill Tree Books, 2010.

Woodson, Jacqueline. *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Nancy Paulsen Books, 2014.

Look for Ibram Kendi's *How to be a (Young) Antiracist*, available February 2023.

Schlitz, Laura Amy
Amber & Clay
Candlewick Press
ISBN: 978-1-5362-0122-2
\$22.99, 544 pages

Set in ancient Greece, this brilliantly crafted, partly-in-verse novel tells the interlinked stories of Rhaskos, a red-headed Thracian slave boy – as common as clay - and Melisto, daughter of a wealthy family in Athens, as precious as amber. The two are bound together through Rhaskos’s mother, Thratta, sold to become Melisto’s nurse. Melisto spends much of the story as a ghost: sent at the age of ten to serve the goddess Artemis as a bear girl, Melisto is killed by a lightning strike. Her shade is then bound by Thratta to find her son and set him free. The story is told not only in the voices of Rhaskos, Thratta, and Melisto, but also in those of various gods – among them a very chatty Hermes – and the philosopher Sokrates. Rich, fascinating, and thought-provoking. Grade 6 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Mythology

- The author uses many of the Greek gods to tell her story, among them Hermes, Artemis, Hephaistos, and Athena. Research the Greek pantheon. Pick a favorite god of your own and try writing a short monologue in his/her voice.
 - See Ingri and Edgar Parin D’Aulaire’s *D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths* (Delacorte Press, 1992).
 - For many more mythological resources, see Mythology [here](#).
- *Amber & Clay* has many references to the hero Achilles and to Homer’s *Iliad*, the epic story of the Trojan War. Learn more about the Trojan War. See, for example, Gillian Cross’s *The Iliad* (Candlewick, 2017), Diego Agrimbau and Marcelo Zamora’s graphic-novel *Iliad* (Capstone Press, 2017), or Rosemary Sutcliff’s *Black Ships Before Troy* (Laurel Leaf, 2005).

History

- Remember how frightened Melisto was of the Spartans? The war between Athens and Sparta – also known as the Peloponnesian War – changed the entire face of ancient Greece. Find out more about it. For example, see [Peloponnesian War](#).
- Were there really bear girls? Research the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron and the festival of Arkteia. See [Artemis and Wild Girls](#).
- Names and words in the ancient Greek alphabet are scattered throughout the book – and we still use many Greek letters today, especially as symbols in science and math. Try learning the Greek alphabet – and write your name in ancient Greek! Learn the Greek alphabet [here](#).
- Learn about slavery in ancient Greece. From Wondrium, see [The Principles of Slavery in Ancient Greece](#).
- Learn more about the famous philosopher Socrates.
 - For resources about Socrates (and other philosophers), see Philosophy [here](#).

- What do you know about ancient Greek clothing? What’s a *peplos*, a *chiton*, or a *himation*? From the Metropolitan Museum of Art, see [Ancient Greek Dress](#).
- Take a [virtual tour of the Acropolis](#).

Art/Archaeology

- If possible, take a trip to a museum to view ancient Greek artworks and artifacts. But if that’s out of your reach, see highlights from the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection [online](#).
- As Phaistos told Rhaskos, making pottery is hard work. See this [video](#) from the J. Paul Getty Museum on the process of making Greek vases.
- Learn more about [ancient Greek pottery](#) from Khan Academy.
- Make your own Greek vases!
 - [Greek Vase Painting Lesson](#)
 - [Make Art Like the Ancient Greeks](#)

Math/Science

- In one of Rhaskos’s first encounters with Socrates, he solves a geometry puzzle. Tackle some of your own!
 - [Geometry Puzzles](#)
 - [Favorite Math Puzzles for Kids](#)
 - [Heart Geometry Puzzle](#)
- Want to make a water clock? See these instructions for making your own [klepsydra](#)!

For Educators

- See [Teacher’s Guide for Amber & Clay](#) from Candlewick Press.

Discussion Questions:

- The moral of the fable about the eagle and the nightingale was “only a fool fights against a stronger force.” Do you think that’s true? How did that affect Rhaskos as a slave?
- Why did Thratta think it was so important to tattoo Rhaskos?
- Why did Melisto have such a link to the bear?
- How were Rhaskos and Phaistos changed after their trip to the Acropolis?
- Rhaskos says that Melisto is more like him than anyone he ever knew. How are they alike? And how are they like Achilles and Penthesilia?
- Socrates claimed that written words can’t be trusted – because when you read, you can’t ask questions. What do you think?
- Perhaps Socrates’s most famous statement is that the unexamined life is not worth living. What does that

mean? What do you think?

More to discuss from Socrates:

- No man ever wades in the same river twice. What do you think that means? Is it true?
- The wisest of people is the one who realizes that he/she knows nothing.
- Is there anything that is everlasting or unchangeable?
- What's excellence?
- How would you define a friend?
- What did Socrates mean when he told his executioners "If you kill me, you will harm yourselves more than you harm me?"

Author Online:

See [Four Questions for Laura Amy Schlitz](#).

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Andrews, Christiane M. *Spindlefish and Stars*. Little, Brown, 2021.

Berry, Erick. *The Winged Girl of Knossos*. Paul Dry Books, 2017.

Farmer, Nancy. *The Sea of Trolls*. Atheneum, 2004.

O'Connor, George. Olympians series. First Second, 2010.

Park, Linda Sue. *A Single Shard*. Clarion, 2001.

Schmidt, Gary D.

Just Like That

Clarion Books

ISBN: 978-0-544-08477-3

\$16.99, 400 pages

Set in 1968, Meryl Lee Kowalski, struggling with grief following the death of her best friend in a car accident, is sent to St. Elene's Preparatory School for Girls in Maine. There she deals with unwelcoming and entitled classmates and disapproving teachers, but is supported by Dr. Nora McKnockater, the school's redoubtable headmistress. Meryl Lee also befriends Matt Coffin, a young teen on the run from pursuing criminals and from trauma of his own, now taken in by Dr. McKnockater, who gives him his first true home. A poignant, warm, heartwrenching – and sometimes funny – story about people recovering from heartbreak and finding themselves and each other. Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

History

- This book is set in the late 1960s, during the Vietnam War, which has a direct or an indirect effect on many of the book's characters. Research the Vietnam War.

Some associated books include:

- Dowell, Frances O'Roark. *Shooting the Moon*. Atheneum, 2008.
- Lai, Thanhha. *Inside Out and Back Again*. HarperCollins, 2013.
- White, Ellen Emerson. *The Journal of Patrick Seamus Flaherty, United States Marine Corps*. Scholastic, 2002.
- White, Ellen Emerson. *Where Have All the Flowers Gone? The Diary of Molly MacKenzie Flaherty*. Scholastic, 2002.
- In Meryl Lee's Famous Women in History class, classmate Ashley sabotages Meryl Lee's reports on Empress Josephine and Mary, Queen of Scots. Try creating an (Ashley-less) report of your own on a famous woman from history. Use panache.
- The St. Elene's Tea and Biscuits Conversations require students to come up with a topic of national or international news interest to discuss. Try holding a group conversation on contemporary news topics of your own. If feeling brave, add tea and biscuits.

Science

- Matt Coffin spends time as a crew member on board Captain Willis Hurd's lobster boat. Research lobsters. For some interesting facts from NOAA, see [Fun Facts About Luscious Lobsters](#).
- How do you feel about dissection? Many classes now, instead of hands-on lab projects, favor virtual dissections online. See these lessons from [The Biology Corner](#).

Literature

- Make a list of the books that Dr. MacKnockater encouraged Matt to read. What books would you have chosen? Create an alternative reading list of your own.

Art

- Check out works by famous female artists. For example, see [12 Famous Female Artists Every Art Lover Should Know](#). Choose one and create an artwork of your own in her style. Helpful hands-on art sites include [Deep Space Sparkle](#) and [Red Ted Art](#).
- Kate Greenaway was a Victorian artist and writer, known for her children’s book illustrations. See examples of her artwork [here](#).

Discussion Questions:

- An unexpected event can change life in an instant, “just like that.” How has that happened to characters in the book? Has this ever happened to you?
- When and why should you protest authority and break the rules? Or shouldn’t you? Was Meryl Lee right to defend Bettye by organizing a school protest – or should she have behaved differently?
- What did Dr. MacKnockater mean when she said that it’s possible to be right at the wrong time and place? Can you think of some examples?
- What do you think are your Resolution and Accomplishment?
- What did Dr. MacKnockater mean when she said that “the greatest journey might be the journey inward”?
- Meryl Lee’s Accomplishment turned out to be a talent for making the world more beautiful. How did she do it? What would you do to make the world more beautiful?

Author Online:

See an interview and a discussion with author Gary D. Schmidt about *Just Like That* [here](#).

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Cushman, Karen. *The Loud Silence of Francine Green*. Clarion, 2006.

Dowell, Frances O’Roark. *Shooting the Moon*. Atheneum, 2009.

Gantos, Jack. *Dead End in Norvelt*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011.

Schmidt, Gary D. *Okay for Now*. Clarion, 2013.

Schmidt, Gary D. *The Wednesday Wars*. Clarion, 2009.

Sheinkin, Steve

Fallout: Spies, Superbombs, and the Ultimate Cold War Showdown

Roaring Brook Press

ISBN: 978-1250149015

\$19.99, 352 pages

The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union has heated up, and the world is the closest it has ever been to nuclear annihilation. Subtitled “Spies, Superbombs, and the Ultimate Cold War Showdown,” this fascinating and gripping non-fiction story details how two superpowers pushed each other to the brink of catastrophe in 1962 and how luck, even more than diplomacy, prevented it from happening. Grade 6 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Science/Technology

- Research and create a timeline of weaponry development. What do you notice about the changes in weaponry throughout human history?
- On page 42, Sheinkin shares some startling facts: The hydrogen bomb tested by the US in 1954 was “750 times the explosive force of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima.” Research the difference between atomic and hydrogen bombs, including the story of Hiroshima and the impact of the atomic bomb dropped there in World War II. Create an infographic or a stop-motion video that shows the differences between the two types of bombs and the devastation that would be expected from each.

Geography

- Study Cold War-era maps of Europe and Asia. What countries were behind the Iron Curtain? What countries were part of the Soviet Union? Part of the Eastern bloc? What was the difference? Compare these maps to current ones. What do you notice?

Social Studies

- Compare and contrast communism, socialism, and capitalism. What are the positives and negatives of each system? Look specifically through the lens of wealth distribution. Is wealth distributed fairly in the United States?

History

- West Berlin was an island of democracy in the middle of communist East Germany. How in the world did it get there? Research the end of World War II to find out.

History: Sports

- The Olympic Games were often a “battleground” for the Cold War. Review the history of the Olympic games during the Cold War era through the lens of Cold War politics. There were boycotts, “miracles,” doping scandals...and so much more! Perhaps share your findings through a sports report in front of a green screen.

Art

- The origin stories of Godzilla, Spiderman, and the Incredible Hulk all developed from the very real threat of nuclear weapons and the dangers of radioactivity. Create your own superhero and place them in

the world of the Cold War. What are their powers? How did they get them? How do they contribute to saving the world? Create a comic strip to introduce your Cold War hero.

- Research and design your own bomb shelter. How long do you need to stay in the shelter if the US is under nuclear attack? What are some considerations you need to keep in mind in your design and your choice of supplies?

Writing

- Sheinkin describes the transition of power from President Eisenhower to President Kennedy. Privately, each had issues with the other, but publicly and in the eyes of the world, “the transition for one president to the next was too important for politics or personal feelings. They were on the same side, after all. And there was business to discuss” (p. 95). Throughout US history, the peaceful, respectful transition from one president to the next has demonstrated US stability to the world and strengthened the view of democracy. Unfortunately, the transition after the 2020 election did not live up to those ideals. Pretend you are the outgoing president of the United States. Write a kind, but honest, letter to your successor that outlines your thoughts on the two most critical issues in our world today, while communicating that ultimately we “are on the same side, after all.”

Discussion Questions:

- Sheinkin writes, “of course, a species that is smart enough to pack the power of the stars inside a bomb is also smart enough to avoid fighting a war with such weapons. Right?” How do you feel? Are we as humans smart enough to avoid a nuclear war?
- Reread the chapter “Secret World” that talks about the U-2 program. Would you have signed on? Why or why not?
- General Thomas Power, along with General Curtis LeMay, demanded that Kennedy invade Cuba to knock out Soviet missile capabilities, which would trigger a greater war with millions of lives lost. When Kennedy’s advisors suggested restraint to avoid an all-out war, Power got angry and said, “at the end of the war, if there are two Americans and one Russian, we win!” (p. 247). What do you think about this statement? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- On Wednesday, October 24, 1960, the world was on the brink of WWII. Sheinkin writes that “Americans left for school and work that Wednesday morning not knowing if they would be coming home” (p. 245). How do you think Americans could go about their daily business given the threat? Given your understanding of just how close we were to nuclear war on that day, would you have gone to school? If not, what might you have done instead?
- Find and review some old civil defense videos on how to prepare for a nuclear war. In your opinion, do they make much sense given the power of atomic weapons? Discuss why the government might have made these videos. For whose benefit?
- In the early 60’s, it took 12 hours for a private message to go between Kennedy and Krushchev. How might the Cuban Missile crisis have been different given today’s communication tools?
- Consider current events and discuss: How are the US and Russia still rivals? Do you think the Cold War ended or not? Give reasons to support your answer.

Also see also these [discussion questions](#) from Roaring Brook Press.

Author Online:

For more information on this book and author, visit stevesheinkin.com.

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Meloy, Maile. *The Apothecary*. Puffin, 2013.

Nielsen, Jennifer A. *A Night Divided*. Scholastic, 2018.

Nesbet, Anne. *Cloud and Wallfish*. Candlewick, 2018.

Sheinkin, Steve. *Bomb*. Flash Point, 2012.

Wiles, Deborah. *Countdown*. Scholastic, 2013.

For more books about spies, see this compilation from [A Mighty Girl](#).

Ursu, Anne

The Troubled Girls of Dragomir Academy

Walden Pond Press, 2021

ISBN : 978-0062275127

\$17.99 432 pages

Marya's brother Luka is being tested for magical potential and, if chosen, will become a sorcerer, trained to use magic to help in the war against "The Dread," a mysterious force that wipes out entire villages. When Marya accidentally botches her brother's chances, she puts her family's future in peril, and is remanded to Dragomir Academy, a reform school in the far north, where she must find her own way, build new allegiances, and combat the patriarchal establishment. Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

History

- Explore the ways in which girls and women have historically fought for equality. From the National Museum of American History, see [Girlhood \(It's Complicated\)](#).
- To unravel the truth about the women who came before her at Dragomir, Marya must interpret the symbols she finds in the Academy tapestries. What were some of the real-life symbols of the women's suffrage movement? See [Symbolism in the Women's Suffrage Movement](#) from the American Folklife Center.

Creative Writing

- Write the backstory for either Marya's mother, Madame Bandu, or Madame Rosetti. What formative experiences might have shaped their character or life philosophies? Were they content with their role in life?
- For an extensive list of chapter-by-chapter discussion questions, curriculum extensions, project ideas, and a personal invitation from Anne Ursu to consider the power dynamics in our own society, and create global equity for women, explore the [Troubled Girls of Dragomir Academy Educator's Guide](#)

Discussion Questions:

- Though literate herself, Marya's mother chooses not to teach Marya how to read. Why?
- How would you describe Marya's relationship with her family? Do you think she was surprised by their expectations for her, or by their willingness to send her to Dragomir?
- What instructions does Marya give her brother on how to take care of the goat? How can this same advice be applied in a broader sense? (p. 98)
- Why do you think the plant that surrounds Dragomir for protection had its name changed from Witchbane to Dreadbane?
- Marya has been taught not to feel angry, or worse, to look angry. On arriving at school, she's told that positivity is key to good character. Why do you think this is? Is it good advice?

- Grace, humility, willingness, deference to authority, and positivity are the values instilled in the girls at Dragomir. Do you think these values improve their character? Why or why not?
- On page 139, Dragomir’s Headmaster says he is offering Marya and her peers an education and great opportunity for their future. Is this true? Who will his offer benefit?
- If one girl misbehaves at Dragomir Academy, all of them are punished. Why do you think this is?
- In her letter, Madame Bandu writes “read everything you can there, for me; learn everything you can. That is the best way to keep the monsters away.” What does she mean?
- Marya’s education began while she’s still at home. Madame Bandu tells her to consider who a story benefits. If the people in power say something terrible will happen if their power is taken away, she tells Marya it’s all right to question their story. While studying to impress the Sorcerer, Marya’s brother suggests an easy answer to end a battle, while Marya realizes that the king who claimed to be the victim had broken the treaty and started the war. She decides for herself that the easiest way to avoid war would have been to have been respectful from the start. How do these early lessons benefit Marya’s understanding of circumstances later?
- Knowing how the Dread was truly created, how would you retell the story about its creation on page 32?
- At the end of the story, we learn that in Illyria and beyond, many generations of sorceresses have been robbed of their magic and lives. Their potential was never realized, and the legacy of the lives they did lead was lost because it was not recorded. Looking at our own history, do you see women equally and adequately credited for contributions?
- What will the next steps be for the troubled girls of Dragomir? Will Illyria change for the better? What steps will the girls need to take to effect lasting change?
- Imagine that Marya had become an apprentice to Madame Bandu instead of being sent to Dragomir Academy. What do you think would have happened?

Author Online:

<https://anneursu.com/>

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Alston, B.B. *Amari and the Night Brothers*. Balzer & Bray, 2021.
 Bachmann, Stefan. *Cinders and Sparrows*. Greenwillow Books, 2020.
 Clayton, Dhonielle. *The Marvellers*. Henry Holt & Co, 2022.
 George, Jessica Day. *Dragon Slippers*. Bloomsbury USA, 2007.
 Hale, Shannon. *Princess Academy*. Bloomsbury USA, 2005.
 Levine, Gail Carson. *Ella Enchanted*. HarperCollins, 1997.
 Magoon, Kekla. *Shadows of Sherwood*. Bloomsbury USA, 2015.
 Pierce, Tamora. *Alanna*. Atheneum, 1983.
 Smith, Cynthia Leitich. *Sisters of the Neversea*. Heartdrum, 2021.
 Sutton, Karah. *A Wolf for a Spell*. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2020.

Uss, Christina

Erik vs. Everything

Clarion Books

ISBN: 978-0358126713

\$16.99, 288 pages

In the extended Sheepflattener family, members of which live by such personal mottos as *Pride*, *Conquer*, and *Trounce*, nine-year-old Erik's pick for himself is *Avoid Stuff*. He's not lazy; he's just got some fears (piano lessons) and phobias (ringing phones), plus he hasn't really found something he's good at. But unlike Erik, the rest of the loving, loyal Sheepflattener family embraces (wholeheartedly, and a bit outrageously) their Viking heritage, and despite his protests, Erik's older sister and his cousins – with a little help from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* - soon set out to help him overcome his fears and find his inner Viking. Grade 4 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Art

- Select a word that represents your “word to live by” and design your own rune tattoo.
- Research Viking/Norse mythology. Create a 3-5 panel graphic/cartoon in which you have one of the Norse gods help Erik overcome one of his phobias.

Social Emotional

- Research the difference between fear and phobias. Interview a school guidance counselor for strategies people can use to overcome each.
- The Sheepflattener children engage in what they call “Dragon Breathing.” Research different breathing techniques for calming down and easing anxiety. Create a digital artifact that can be shared with younger students to teach them how to use breathing to relax.
- Before the race at Bonebreaker Hill, Coach Gary reminds his team about the “power of positive visualization: if you think you can clear that rock, you can.” Study real athletes who rely on visualization to reach peak performance. Create some posters or memes with positive messages for your classroom, gym, or library.

Writing

- Each chapter of the book begins with a saying from the Sheepflattener family lore (The Lore). Erik even writes a few of his own, such as “He who can avoid stuff won't be destroyed by stuff.” Try your hand at writing a few sayings that you feel represent smart ways for you to get through life. Start a book of Lore for your classroom or home life.
- Extreme mountain bikers can do amazing things. Watch Danny Macaskill's videos [The Ridge](#) and [Danny's Wee Day Out](#) (be sure to watch the outtakes at the end!). What do you wonder? What might you want to know? Write Danny Macaskill a letter with your questions. Send it! (And just for fun, think about what Erik might say if he watched those videos!)

Social Studies

- Study Viking history and create an interactive timeline, including a map, that shows their history, explorations, and discoveries.

- Brunhilde isn't the only person to be influenced by Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Look into the history of the book and the author to see if you can find 3-4 references to its influence on others.

Farm to School

- Turnips are a Sheepflattener family favorite, and turnips can be grown and stored in Vermont. Contact local vegetable farms and ask them about turnips: Do they grow them? Are they big sellers? Try to find a recipe you can try at home or at school and/or encourage your cafeteria to try it. Organize a schoolwide taste test.
- Check out the Gilfeather turnip! It's Vermont's [official state vegetable](#).

Discussion Questions:

- Describe Brunhilde as a sister. Would you consider her a good sibling? Why or why not?
- What might you find the more valuable resource: *The Lore* or Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*?
- What are your thoughts on keeping wild animals as pets? Do you think Mr. Nubbins was happy as a pet? Why or why not?
- At one point in the story, an exasperated Erik tries to explain that being afraid of blood and pain isn't a phobia. It is "like, a basic survival instinct." Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- What makes Coach Gary such a good coach? Why is the mountain biking club such a good fit for Erik?
- Do you think *Erik versus Everything* would make a good movie? Why or why not? Any suggestions for casting it?

Author Online:

Visit Christina Uss online at <http://www.christinauss.com/index.html>.

If you liked this book, you might like:

Cowell, Cressida. *How to Train Your Dragon*. Hachette Childrens Group, 2019.

Jones, Diana Wynne. *Eight Days of Luke*. HarperCollins, 2000.

Riordan, Rick. *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard: The Sword of Summer*. Disney-Hyperion, 2015.

Shaughnessy, Adam. *The Unbelievable FIB: The Trickster's Tale*. Algonquin Young Readers, 2016.

Valenti, Karla Arenas

Loteria

Alfred A. Knopf, 2021

ISBN: 978-0593176962

\$16.99, 291 pages

Unbeknownst to Clara, she's a pawn in a game of Loteria between Life and Death who, as they play, hold a philosophical debate. Is life determined by fate or by free will? With each turn of a Loteria card, Clara faces new and potentially deadly challenges. When her cousin, Esteban, disappears from Oaxaca City, Clara makes many personal sacrifices to try to rescue him. In the mythical city of Las Pozos, Esteban is destined to be a slave to the King, and Clara must battle giant spiders and dark magic to save him. Her journey becomes more desperate with each turn of a Loteria card. If Life wins the game, she will live a long and prosperous life - but if Death wins, Clara will suffer an untimely death. Grade 5 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Art

- On pages 296-297, the 54 images that appear on a deck of Loteria cards are listed. Have the students create their own Loteria playing cards. Each card must have sixteen different pictographs. The pictures should be labeled with either English or Spanish titles as shown on pages 14 and 16 in *Loteria*.

Writing

- In the game of Loteria, a caller or singer flips a card over to reveal a picture. The caller then sings out a riddle associated with the picture on the card. In the book there are many examples of these riddles:
 - “He who stings with his tail will get a beating”- Scorpion card
 - “Fresh and fragrant, beautiful in any season”- Pine Tree card
 - “The blanket of the poor”- Sun card
 - “The one who dies by its mouth, even if it cannot speak”- Fish card

Have students write some of their own riddles to coincide with the cards listed on pages 296-297. For example: “Remove the “D” to reveal his intentions”- Devil card

Students can make their own Loteria cards and riddles or you can purchase a Loteria game or play [online](#).

Geography

- As you read *Loteria*, list the many cultural features mentioned in the book. These cultural features could include references to language, religion, food, customs, etc.

Discussion Questions:

- Life and Death have an ongoing debate through the book. What is the debate? How does the debate relate to Clara?
- Clara makes many choices that have consequences. Describe examples of these choices and their consequences. Theorize on what would have happened if she chose differently?
- How do the illustrations on the Loteria cards represent facets of life and death?

- Describe the relationship between the characters of Life and Death?
- What is your reaction to the end of the book?

Author Online:

For more information about the book and author, see: <https://karlavalenti.com>

If you liked this book, you might also like:

Calejo, Ryan. *Charlie Hernandez and the League of Shadows*. Aladdin, 2019.

Cervantes, J.C. *The Storm Runner*. Rick Riordan Presents, 2019.

Donnelly, Jennifer. *Stepsister*. Scholastic, 2020.

Mejia, Tehlor. *Paola Santiago and the River of Tears*. Rick Riordan Presents, 2021.

Rivera, Kaela. *Cece Rios and the Desert of Souls*. HarperCollins, 2021.

Ryan, Pam Munoz. *Mananaland*. Scholastic, 2020.

Venable, Colleen AF, and Stephanie Yue

Katie the Catsitter

Random House, 2021

ISBN-13 : 978-059330632

\$12.99, 224 pages

Many families have a cat or two, but Katie’s mysterious neighbor Madeline Lang has 217! When Katie is hired as a catsitter, she assumes she will be spending her evenings pouring bowls of kitty crunchies and emptying litter boxes – but these are no ordinary cats. Each has a specialty, from lock-picking to computer-hacking, to say nothing of ordering pizza, shopping for jet engines, and stealing furniture. Little does Katie know that she is about to get involved in one of the biggest superhero vs. villain battles to hit NYC. Who really is the Mousetress and does Katie have what it takes to save the day? Grade 4 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Themes: Friendship, animal rights, teamwork

Language Arts

- Learn about the history of comics and graphic novels by planning a virtual or in-person visit to the [Center for Cartoon Studies](#) in Montpelier, VT.
- Writing Prompt: Invite students to create their own superhero or menacing villain. Invent a name, location and mission. What about a sidekick? Any super powers? Connecting activities could include drawing an illustration of their character, having a superhero dress-up day, creating skits, or creating a comic strip.

Science

- Katie makes a new friend that is into skateboarding. Check out these fun skateboarding STEM projects:
 - From the Kids’ Science Challenge, see [Skateboard Projects](#).
 - From the Resilient Educator, see [Teaching Math and Physics Using Skateboard Design](#).
- Madeline Lang has 217 incredible cats. Cats are cute and mysterious. Find out more in [this episode of “Things You Wanna Know”](#) from NatGeo Kids.

Topics related to cats to investigate include:

- Domestication: How did wild cats become pets?
- Cat breeds: Assign groups to research breeds. How long has the breed been around? Where did it develop? What traits does the breed have? What’s your favorite?
- Amazing cats in history: From hero cats to internet stars there are plenty of [famous felines](#) to find out about.

Community Connections

- Madeline Lang is very concerned about animal welfare and rights. The VINE sanctuary in Springfield, VT, is devoted to providing homes for animals that have experienced abuse in their past. They offer both in-person or virtual education programs to schools and groups. See <https://vinesanctuary.org/>.

- Visit your local Humane Society or animal welfare organization. Students can read to shelter pets or run an animal supply drive to provide much needed food or supplies for animals in need.

Discussion Questions:

- What is a strong work ethic? Would you say that Katie has one? Was there a time in your life that you wanted something and your caregiver said that you would have to earn the money yourself? Did you meet your goal?
- Why does Ms. Lang say it's important to be kind to every living thing? Do you agree with the ways she tries to help animals?
- If you were one of Madeline Lang's cats, what would your special skill be and why?
- What happened to Katie and Bethany's friendship over the course of the summer? Do you think they will ever be as good friends as they once were?
- If you were to write a graphic novel about an animal with superpowers, what animal would you choose? What sort of powers would they have?

Author Online:

Webpage: <http://www.colleenaf.com/>

Instagram: colleenaf

Twitter: @colleenaf

[Five Facts About Katie the Catsitter](#)

[Interview](#) with the author and illustrator

If you liked this book, you might like:

Brockingham, Drew. *Catstronauts: Mission Moon*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers; Illustrated edition, 2017.

Lloyd, Megan Wagner. *Allergic*. Graphix; Illustrated edition, 2021.

Marciano, Johnny, and Emily Chenoweth. *Klawde: Evil Alien Warlord Cat*. Penguin Workshop, 2020.

McGovern, Cammie. *Frankie and Amelia*. HarperCollins, 2021.

Remi, Lai. *Pawcasso*. Henry Holt and Co. BYR Paperbacks, 2021.

Vendable, Colleen AF. *Katie the Catsitter 2: Best Friends for Never*. Random House Books for Young Readers, 2022.

Yelchin, Eugene.

The Genius Under the Table: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain

Candlewick Press, 2021

ISBN: 978-1536215526

\$16.99, 208 pages

What was it like to grow up in the Soviet Union during the Cold War Era? According to Yelchin's memoir, it meant living in a tiny apartment with his parents, his perfect ice-skating brother, and his cantankerous grandmother, all under the critical eye of a KGB spy who shares their kitchen and bathroom. The family has just one sleeping space, so Eugene is housed under the dining table, where he discovers what he loves most - drawing. Unbeknownst to the family, Eugene spends his nights covering the underside of the table with art. Full of irony and wit, this is a compelling and serious look at a very different sort of childhood. Grade 4 and up.

Curriculum Connections:

Art

- The book is full of artwork by the author, as was the underside of the table where he slept. What would you draw if you were up at night, thinking about your life. Create a circle and draw your own table underside. Try to fill it up, as though it is the only space that you get to express yourself in this way.

Language Arts

- How does it feel to write things that are personal? Write a poem that shares the truth. You can write about something that you love to do (like drawing for Yevgeny) or write about something that you think is unfair. How is sharing the truth different for you than it was for Yevgeny's father and other people behind the Iron Curtain?

Social Studies

- You can learn about the Cold War through primary resources [here](#). Create a timeline of important events from the period leading up to the Cold War in 1940 through its end in 1991.
- Yevgeny's brother, Victor, later became a famous skater and defected to the United States. Learn more about the Cold War and the [way it impacted international sports](#) in the years that followed.
- Read and respond: What is happening in Russia and the surrounding countries currently? Read about current events from some sources in different parts of the world. At each of the following websites, search for Russia to see the most recent updates.
 - BBC News: <https://www.bbc.com>
 - The Moscow Times: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/>
 - Al Jazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/>
 - U.S. News and World Report: <https://www.usnews.com/>
- How is the information presented differently by journalists from different parts of the world? What can you learn about bias from what you read? From what you read, what has happened in that region of the world in 2022, and leading into 2023?

Math

- Soviet Union agents, like the KGB agent who lived with the Yelchins, used ciphers or codes to pass messages in secret. Learn about this type of secret message and try your hand at breaking a code. From the Smithsonian, see [How to Cipher Like a Soviet](#).
- Try to write your own cipher. See [Writing Secret Messages Using Ciphers](#).

Discussion Questions:

- Yevgeny is a regular kid. In what ways can you relate to his struggles and joys? In what major ways is his life different from yours?
- Why did the ballet dancer Baryshnikov leave the country and not return? Would you have done the same thing?
- On page 186, Yevgeny’s father says, “To be a poet, you can’t be afraid to tell the truth.” What do you think it feels like to live in a place where telling the truth might be extremely dangerous? Do you think you would be brave enough to write things that are truths that others need to hear, even if it could get you in very big trouble?
- Why is Yevgeny’s mother fixated on her sons becoming famous ballet dancers or ice skaters? How does this impact the way she treats them as a mother? Do you think she was satisfied with Yevgeny’s progress as an artist?
- What does the term Cold War mean? Could there be another Cold War in this century? How would that look different than it did in the last century?
- What do you think it’s like to live with a spy in the house, sharing your bathroom and common spaces?

Author Online:

<https://www.eugeneyelchin.com/>

If you liked this book, you might like:

Gratz, Alan. *Refugee*. Scholastic, 2017.

Kramer, J. Kasper. *The Story That Cannot Be Told*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2019.

Nielsen, Jennifer. *A Night Divided*. Scholastic, 2015.

Palacio, R.J. *White Bird*. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2019.

Shulevitz, Uri. *Chance: Escape from the Holocaust: Memories of a Refugee Childhood*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020.

Adaptable questions/activities that can be used for any book:

- Can you make any connections between this book and events in your own life? (text to self)
- What about connections between this book and other books you've read? (text to text)
- Can you make any connections between this book and experiences that people you know, or know about, have had? (text to world)
- What research do you think the author of this book had to do to write this story? (inferring)
- If this book were turned into a play and you could play any character in the story (without regard to gender) which character would you pick and why?
- Illustrate a scene from this book. (visualization)
- Having read the book, what connections can you make between the book jacket, the title and the story itself. (inferring)
- While reading this book, did you make any predictions? What were they? Were they accurate? (inferring)
- **For non-fiction:** How is the book organized? Why do you think the author organized it that way? (determining importance)
- What are some things from the book that you would like to learn more about? What questions were you left with after reading this book? (questioning)



This publication is supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency, through the Library Services and Technology Act.
