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## Rationale

Young Adult Literature is often mischaracterized as shallow fodder meant for immature readers. The prevailing thought is that narratives centered around teenage protagonists or subject matter that is more palatable to younger audiences cannot offer meaningful insight or commentary- it's meant for kids. This could not be further from the truth. YA lit, like any other great genre, offers a mirror through which we can examine the world around us. Readers are given the opportunity to question, criticize, and challenge both their worldview and the status quo. But most of all, and possibly the most needed in times of divisive rhetoric and harmful perspectives, YA Lit offers its audiences a chance to empathize with a perspective they otherwise would have never been exposed to.

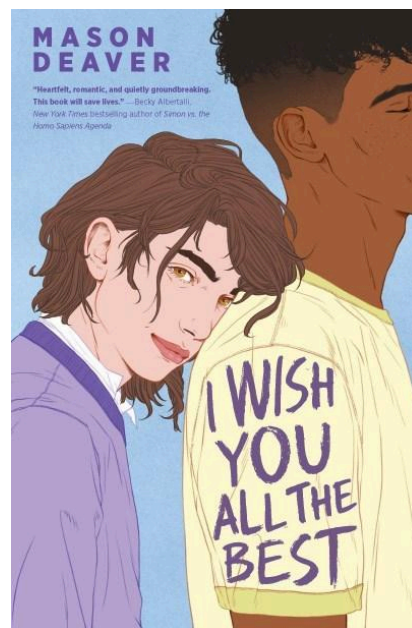
To empathize is to understand and share in a person's feelings or emotions. When we lack empathy, it becomes second nature to dehumanize other foreign identities and experiences, placing our own as a single standard of moral goodness. This is the state of our society as it stands. New perspectives and experiences are seen as threats to our own, and as a result, we champion leaders who push policies that seek to eradicate those we have othered. Immigrants become invaders, members of the LGBTQ+ community become predators, and minorities are criminals abusing the system. Teens are susceptible to this messaging now more than ever. This will be the theme at the center of this work.

The teen years are some of the most formative in a person's life. YA Literature is uniquely positioned to expose young readers to perspectives far different from their own. By giving young readers these opportunities to see other cultures, identities, and ways of life, we

give them a chance to see their fellow human beings as just that—human beings worthy of respect and dignity.

The novels in this piece will focus on unique perspectives that are often overlooked by the public at large. They will mostly align with chapters 4, 6, and 7 of *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*. These chapters cover books about real-life experiences, identity, discrimination, struggles with decisions, and courage and survival, respectively. We live in such isolating times, teens more than anyone. Giving them these stories and perspectives not only broadens their world but lets them know their story is also worthy of being heard and respected.

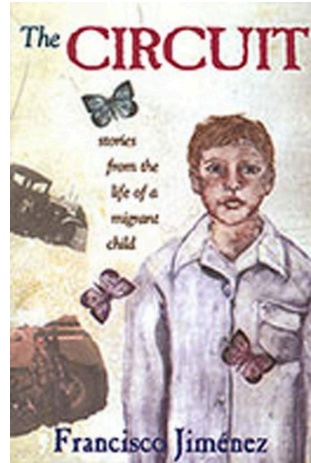
### Annotated Bibliography Unity Through Empathy



1. *I Wish You All The Best* by Mason Deaver (currently reading)

Before their senior year of high school, Ben comes out as non-binary to their parents. Horrified and enraged by this revelation, Ben is forced to go live with their sister, whom they have been estranged from for several years. These changes force a feeling of total isolation on Ben as they try to navigate and make sense of the world now that they are out. By chance, Ben meets Nathan, and the two begin to form a genuine bond free of judgment. As the school year progresses, their relationship deepens and begins to take on romantic implications. Despite early struggles, Ben is able to find support in both Nathan and their sister and comes to terms with their identity.

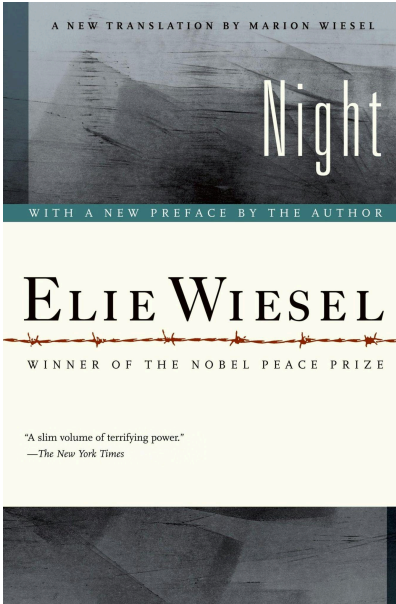
The LGBTQ+ community has come under fire for seemingly existing. Every teen is finding themselves, and Ben's story, at its core, is a coming-of-age story. This story lets readers know that the LGBTQ+ community also faces these tumultuous times of coming to terms with one's own identity. It also sheds light on the reality of many in this community. Ben's parents react from a place of ignorance and fear and effectively abandon him. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon for people like Ben. This novel reflects ideas from chapters 4, 6, and 7 of *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*. There are numerous real-life examples of families abandoning their children or other family members after coming out. People like Ben's existence scares many people, and because of this, they are discriminated against heavily. Of all this most importantly, Ben is able to overcome all of it, finding the love and support they are more than worthy of.



2. *The Circuit: Stories From the Life of a Migrant Child* by Francisco Jimenez (read)

The story follows Panchito, who immigrated to the US with his parents and older brother, Roberto. The circuit refers to the various farm labor jobs his family constantly has to travel to throughout the growing seasons. After a few years of this, Panchito is afforded the opportunity to attend school and, despite early barriers, becomes a good student. As the years go on and their family grows, Panchito is faced with the choice to either continue to work the fields with his father or go to college. Ultimately, he chooses education but acknowledges the work and sacrifice his family made to put him in this position.

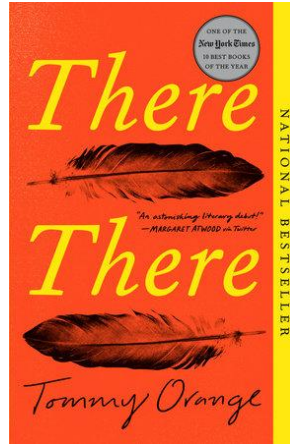
Immigrants are being demonized as freeloaders or invaders when, in reality, the overwhelming majority are here seeking a better life and opportunities. Many teens are simply unaware of this if they are not directly involved or influenced by this lifestyle. *The Circuit* sets the record straight. It describes in detail the strenuous labor conditions and hard life migrant workers deal with for a chance. This falls in with chapters 4 and 7 of *Adolescents*. These are very real experiences had by hundreds of thousands of migrant workers. It dispels the rumors immigrants are coming to mooch off of social services and steal jobs. Teens can read this and may have a better understanding of a classmate from a similar background as Panchito.



### 3. *Night* by Elie Wiesel (Read)

Wiesel's *Night* is a gut-wrenching memoir recounting his capture and imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps. Over the course of the novel, Wiesel recounts his loss of self and the mindsets he adapted to survive the harsh realities of the Nazi regime that, includes the death of his father he is imprisoned with.

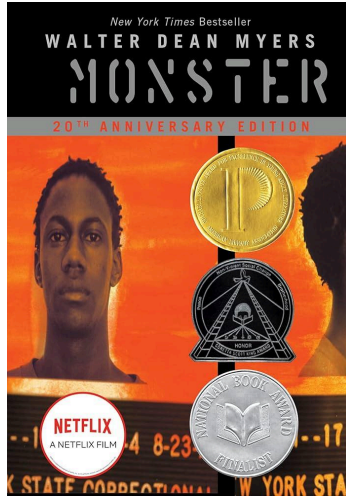
This is a hard read at any age. But it is necessary to understand that stories like these are caused by the types of divisive and harmful rhetoric that the Nazi party pushed. Falling perfectly in line with chapters 4, 6, and 7 of *Adolescents*. Wiesel survives the worst conditions a human being can suffer through all because of his heritage. Teens reading this get an unflinching look at the types of evils that are achievable when we decide to other our fellow human beings. After reading, teens can go on to identify other systems or governments that are moving in similar directions and confront them head-on, knowing what's at stake.



4. *There There* by Tommy Orange (Read)

This novel is told from multiple perspectives. The characters range in age, and certain parts are told in flashbacks. All the characters are of Indigenous descent and portray life as such leading up to the Big Oakland Powwow. The novel touches on the loss of cultural identity, assimilation, Native American activism, and trauma this community has experienced.

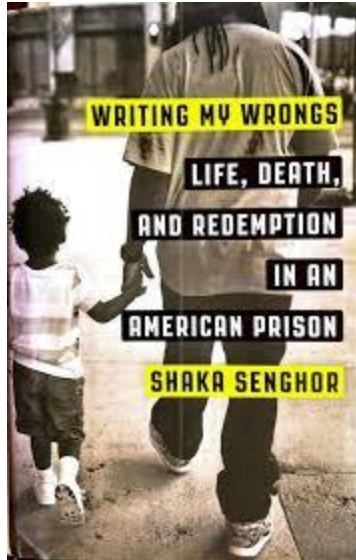
Teens are often given a limited caricature of Indigenous people. They are often outside of the consciousness of many people. They are simply not thought about. Tommy Orange's novel gives us a look at how their lives are more similar to the average person's life than they previously may think. All of this is in the foreground of the generational trauma the Indigenous populations faced by the US Government. They are tales of survival, cultural reclamation, and navigating physical and emotional while maintaining their communities.



5. *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (Read)

Steve Harmon is a 16-year-old African American on trial for murder. He is accused of acting as a lookout in a robbery of a convenience store owner gone wrong. Steve decides to adapt this part of his life into a movie, and the events of the novel are told in the form of a screenplay. The novel goes over instances of racial discrimination and the inherent bias that views all young black men as threats. In the end, though he is found innocent, his defense attorney hesitates to return Steve's embrace, leading him to question what she saw him as.

We are taught to trust the police and the justice system implicitly. They're the good guys. But the truth is that biases and prejudices have disproportionately affected the Black community, and *Monster* exposes the inner workings of that system and the parties that participate in it. Teens can share in the unfair assumptions made about Steve, who is reduced from a good student from a good family to a criminal capable of taking a life. Minorities are often posed as threats, in this case, monsters, without due process. Reading this, they can understand how some of their classmates may feel they are being perceived and even examine their own biases.



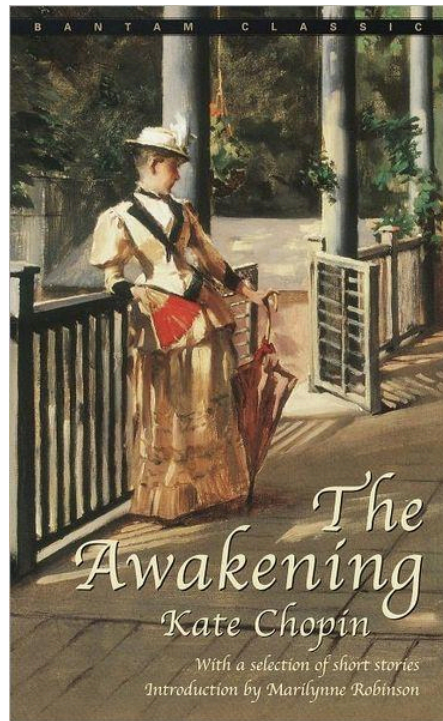
5. *Writing my Wrongs: Life, Death, and Redemption in an American Prison* by Shaka Senghor

This is Senghor's personal memoir that recounts his upbringing during the crack epidemic of the 80's and 90's. A runaway at 14, Senghor turns to a life of crime to sustain himself. Culminating in 1991 when, he shot and killed a man at 19, landing him in prison for the next 20 years. The book is told in flashbacks Senghor reflecting on the choices he made and how he was ill-equipped to face life. Eventually, Senghor realizes he must accept accountability for his actions and begins to improve himself until his eventual release.

We often see things as static. Something will never be any more than what they are at any given moment. At first glance, it would be hard to empathize with Senghor. But, when teens examine the trauma that informed his choices, they can understand how the cycles of poverty and violence crash over communities like waves. Teens can often feel trapped by their choices or circumstances but if they can read Senghor's life, they can understand our past does not define them. Even greater reading could give teens the ability to empathize with people in difficult



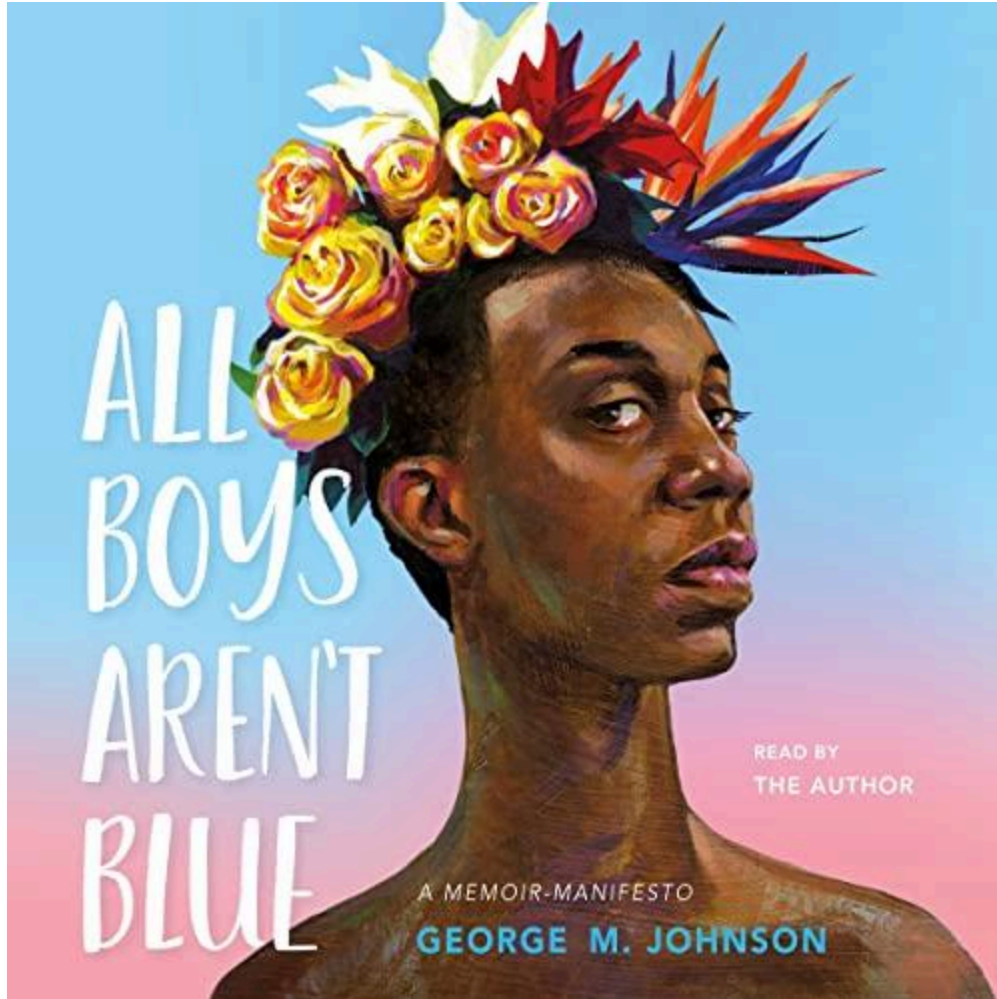
places in life. Addiction, homelessness, and mental health illness are often trivialized and blamed on the victim, but with Senghor's story, teens can understand there are a multitude of factors at play, and everyone deserves a second chance.



6. *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin (read)

Set in New Orleans and centered around Edna Pontellier, *The Awakening* examines Edna's journey as she struggles with her identity as a woman of her time. She never feels fully like the mother of her sons, though she does feel love for them. Edna feels like a bystander in her own life. She is contrasted greatly with her friend Adele, who fully assumes the typical gender role of mother and homemaker. Eventually, Edna takes up an affair with a younger man, though he has misgivings if their relationship can succeed. Wanting to avoid humiliating her, he leaves. Edna is unable to reconcile her identity as her own woman and the constraints placed on her by her time and chooses to end her life.

This one is a bit of a stretch, but the female agency has been a hot topic lately, and Chopin's novel perfectly encapsulates that dialogue. Edna herself is critical of her ability as a mother and as the woman her society wants her to be. She has signs of what may be untreated post-partum depression, along with witnessing the traumatic birthing experience her best friend Adele endured. All of this culminates in her "awakening," but she is powerless. This fits nicely in chapters 4 and 6. Edna's struggle with her identity continues today in feminist movements. Women are still largely valued by their potential as mothers and wives and nothing beyond that. Edna has an affinity for the arts that is completely ignored in her home. She is constrained by the conventions of her time. This story allows teens, particularly teen boys, to discuss agency and autonomy and how the female body is discussed without including them. How Edna felt trapped and took control the only way she thought she could. While women of today are not quite as constrained, there are those who look to legislate their autonomy away from them.



7. *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson (I have not read it)

Summary obtained from [Good Reads](#): In a series of personal essays, prominent journalist and LGBTQIA+ activist George M. Johnson explores his childhood, adolescence, and college years in New Jersey and Virginia. From the memories of getting his teeth kicked out by bullies at age five, to flea marketing with his loving grandmother, to his first sexual relationships, this young-adult memoir weaves together the trials and triumphs faced by Black queer boys.

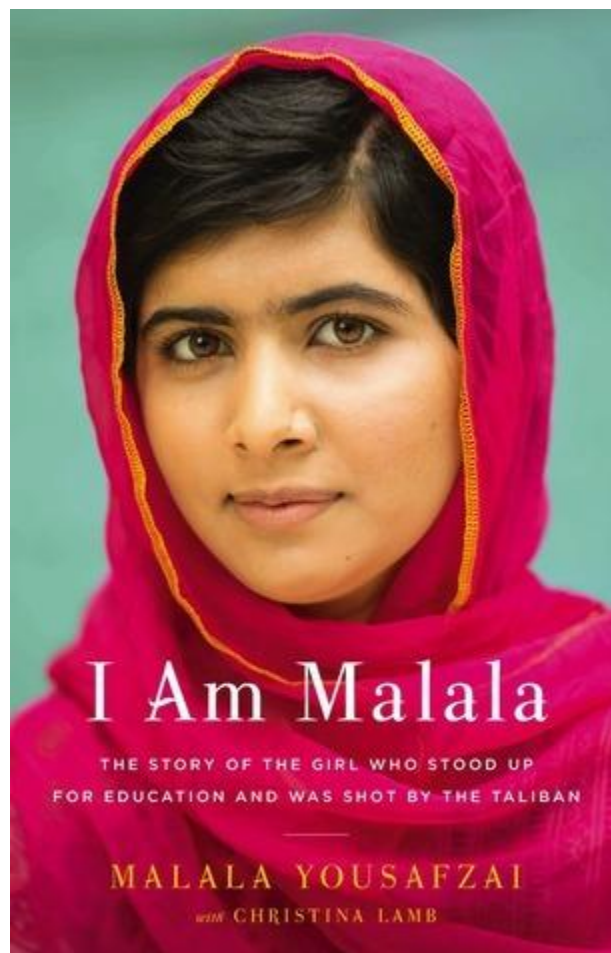
Many are taught that being gay or any other member of the LGBTQ+ community infers something wrong. A malfunction, an abomination. Johnson's memoir covers topics in chapters 4, 6, and 7. He retells his real-life story dealing with racism and homophobia as well as toxic masculinity, all while coming to terms with his identity. I believe much like *I Wish You All the Best* it offers up a perspective often overlooked. Teens are able to understand the hardships Johnson endured because of not just his sexuality but his race. Acknowledging his hardships lets teens see Johnson beyond these identifiers and puts them on the same level.



8. *Love is a Revolution* by Renee Watson

Summary obtained from [Good Reads](#): When Nala Robertson reluctantly agrees to attend an open mic night for her cousin-sister-friend Imani's birthday, she finds herself falling in instant love with Tye Brown, the MC. He's perfect, except . . . Tye is an activist and is spending the summer putting on events for the community when Nala would rather watch movies and try out the new seasonal flavors at the local creamery. In order to impress Tye, Nala tells a few tiny lies to have enough in common with him. As they spend more time together, sharing more of themselves, some of those lies get harder to keep up. As Nala falls deeper into keeping up her lies and into love, she'll learn all the ways love is hard, and how self-love is revolutionary.

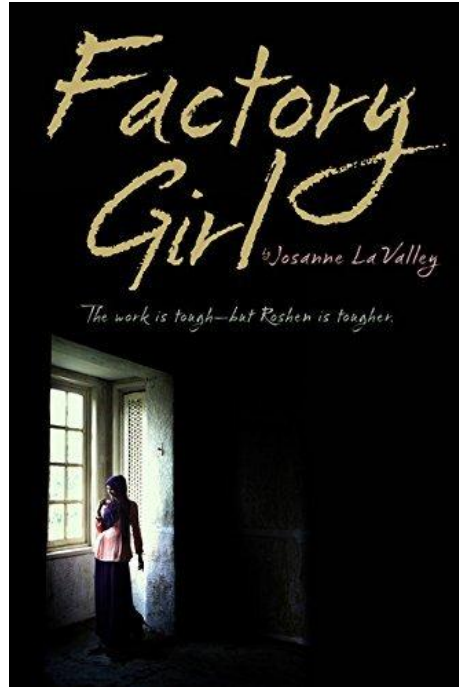
Love is not simply being together. Love is fighting for those you love, protecting them, and nurturing them. Empathy cultivates this phenomenon. When we understand another person on a human level, their pain becomes ours, so we join their fight. Nala is initially hesitant and doesn't understand why Tye cares the way he does. But as she comes to understand that love is not only an intimate connection between two people but a bond that connects us all she joins the movements. As she comes to understand this better she reconciles her own identity and resolves to love herself for all that she is, falling in nicely with chapter 6 of *Adolescents*. Teens reading this can come to understand that empathy and love are not static emotions but dynamic ones that require us to take on others troubles so that all may live better.



9. *I Am Malala: The Story of the Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* By Malala Yousafzai with Christina Limb (I have not read this)

Summary obtained from [Good Reads](#): I come from a country that was created at midnight. When I almost died it was just after midday. When the Taliban took control of the Swat Valley in Pakistan, one girl spoke out. Malala Yousafzai refused to be silenced and fought for her right to an education. On Tuesday, October 9, 2012, when she was fifteen, she almost paid the ultimate price. She was shot in the head at point-blank range while riding the bus home from school, and few expected her to survive. Instead, Malala's miraculous recovery has taken her on an extraordinary journey from a remote valley in northern Pakistan to the halls of the United Nations in New York. At sixteen, she has become a global symbol of peaceful protest and the youngest-ever Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

In the Western world, we take things like basic education for granted. It is also often hard to empathize with a cause halfway around the world. Malala's autobiography gives a face to this ongoing struggle. It is not only her survival of the shooting (chpt 7 of *Adolescents*) but her actions afterward as she continued to advocate for young girls' educations. Teens can see Malala, who was their age, and understand the types of power structures that let this happen, what they would do if they were in that position, and how her advocacy has continued to champion equal opportunities for young girls. They can see themselves and take on her fight.



10. *Factory Girl* by Josanne La Valley (I have not read this)

Summary obtained from [Good Reads](#): In order to save her family's farm, Roshen, sixteen, must leave her rural home to work in a factory in the south of China. There she finds arduous and degrading conditions and contempt for her minority (Uyghur) background. Sustained by her bond with other Uyghur girls, Roshen is resolved to endure all to help her family and ultimately her people. A workplace survival story, this gritty, poignant account focuses on a courageous teen and illuminates the value—and cost—of freedom.

Again, it is hard to empathize with a cause outside our sphere of influence. The Uyghur genocide is something I was completely unaware of until I was in community college. This book might pair well with *Night*, earlier in this list. In the same way, the Nazi party had identified the Jewish people as inferior, the Chinese government is seeking to eradicate this group of citizens simply for being Muslim. The Uyghurs are rounded up and sent to re-education camps to

conform to Chinese society. Teens can see the oppression brought on by the Chinese government draw parallels to the treatment of the Jews and truly understand the danger of othering human beings and how these ideas are not as out of date as we would like them to be.