

Social Justice: Fifteen titles to address inequity, equality, and organizing for young readers | Great Books

by [Taylor Worley](#)

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With leaders like Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai, youth are making themselves heard. These titles elevate the voices of young activists, inspire calls to action, and explain complex issues such as racism, sexism, environmentalism, and immigration. Though the books are all aimed at middle grade readers, they vary widely; the poetry and biography picks are best for younger readers, while the fiction and general nonfiction selections skew older. While far from an exhaustive list, these texts will be a strong foundation for school and public libraries serving budding activists.

We also highly recommend several books that provide further historical context, inspiration, and examples for readers: *Indian No More* by Charlene Willing McManis with Traci Sorell; *An Indigenous People's History of the United States for Young People* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and adapted by Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese; *Kid Activists: True Tales of Childhood from Champions of Change* by Robin Stevenson; *The Night Diary* by Veera Hiranandani; *Zenobia* by Morten Dürr and Lars Horneman; and *You Don't Know Everything, Jilly P!* by Alex Gino.

Fiction



HARRINGTON, Kim. *Revenge of the Red Club*. S. & S./Aladdin. 2019. ISBN 9781534435728.

Gr 4-8— When Riley’s school suspends the students’ newspaper, imposes sexist dress codes, and shuts down the Red Club—a support group for girls dealing with menstruation—Riley and her classmates lead a revolution. Written from a cisgender perspective, this book nevertheless offers strong and inclusive messages about periods and also encourages readers to speak out.

RAMÉE, Lisa Moore. *A Good Kind of Trouble*. HarperCollins/Balzer + Bray. 2019. ISBN 9780062836687.

Gr 4-8 —This brilliant exploration of race and activism is ideal for readers not quite ready for Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give*. When Shayla becomes more involved with the Black Lives Matter movement after a police officer who shoots a Black man is acquitted, she must make difficult decisions about her friends, family, and school. Ramée’s writing is exceptional, and Shayla’s story will resonate.

RHODES, Jewell Parker. *Ghost Boys*. Little, Brown. 2018. ISBN 9780316262286.

Gr 4-8 —When 12-year-old Black tween Jerome is fatally shot by a white officer, he returns as a ghost alongside the spirit of Emmett Till and hundreds of other “ghost boys,” bearing witness to the resounding effects of his killing. Rhodes unpacks privilege, racial injustice, and implicit bias. Jerome closes the book with a thundering call to action: “Only the living can make the world better/.../Don’t let me/(or anyone else)/tell this tale again.”

WOODSON, Jacqueline. *Harbor Me*. Penguin/Nancy Paulsen Bks. 2018. ISBN 9780399252525.

Gr 4-7 —When a sixth grade teacher pulls a group of her students together every Friday to chat without the hovering presence of adults, Holly, Esteban, Amari, Tiago, and Ashton meet and share their experiences. Their stories and evolving relationships touch on timely topics like deportation, racism, and parental incarceration while demonstrating the need for genuine listening, discussion, and justice.

YANG, Kelly. Front Desk. Scholastic/Arthur A. Levine Bks. 2018. ISBN 9781338157796.

Gr 4-7 –When Mia Tang and her family come to the United States from China, they struggle to make ends meet and end up managing a hotel for an exploitative owner. Recognizing that other immigrants face similar difficulties, they offer them a secret safe space in the hotel. Set in the 1990s, this powerful, engaging tale of social justice explores the intersection of race, class, and immigration.

Read: *YA Books Reflect the Activism of Real-Life Teens*



Nonfiction

CAMERINI, Valentina. Greta's Story: The Schoolgirl Who Went on Strike To Save the Planet. tr. from Italian by Moreno Giovanni. illus. by Veronica Carratello. S. & S./Aladdin. 2019. ISBN 9781534468771.

Gr 3-6 –While Greta Thunberg's biography to date may be brief, Camerini's portrait of the climate activist will inspire. The author explores Thunberg's path to activism, the support of her family, her experience with Asperger's syndrome, and the worldwide revolution she is spearheading. Hopeful despite the serious subject matter, this work is an exemplary model for young readers eager to effect change.

GATES, Henry Louis, Jr. with Tonya Bolden. Dark Sky Rising: Reconstruction and the Dawn of Jim Crow. Scholastic Focus. 2019. ISBN 9781338262049.

Gr 6 Up –A much-needed examination of Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era, this should supplement all middle school history textbooks. Gates and Bolden look back at historical perspectives while drawing parallels to current issues of inequity and racism, illustrating how we got where we are, and emphasizing that change is imperative.

JEWELL, Tiffany. This Book Is Anti-Racist: 20 Lessons on How To Wake Up, Take Action, and Do the Work. illus. by Aurelia Durand. Quarto/Frances Lincoln. Jan. 2020. ISBN 9780711245211.

Gr 6 Up –Jewell invites readers to grab a notebook and work their way through four themed sections, with plenty of room for reflection and conversation. With an activity called “Disrupt!” the author offers suggestions for what to do if readers observe two Black men being detained by police. While Jewell acknowledges that the consequences of these actions will depend on readers’ position and privilege, she doesn’t fully explore the risks at stake. Still, there’s no substitute for this interactive guide.

RICH, KaeLyn. Girls Resist! A Guide to Activism, Leadership, and Starting a Revolution. illus. by Giulia Sagramola. Quirk. 2018. ISBN 9781683690597.

Gr 7 Up –Ready to smash the patriarchy? This robust, positive book explains how to generate change. While some of the information is best suited for young adults, there is a wealth of material for upper middle graders. Readers will learn about microaggressions, rape culture, lobbying, social pressure, and even fiduciary agents in this book that perfectly blends concept, context, and action.

YOUSAFZAI, Malala with Patricia McCormick. Malala: My Story of Standing Up for Girls’ Rights. Little, Brown. 2018. ISBN 9780316527149.

Gr 3-5 –Yousafzai’s story has been written and adapted for adults, teens, middle graders, and young children. Though appropriate for middle graders, this text doesn’t shy away from the reality of Yousafzai’s life. After learning about her work with women’s rights, her journey, and the support and education she received from her family, readers will feel that they, too, are capable of making a difference.

Read: *On Being Comfortable with Discomfort: Tiffany Jewell Explains What It Means To Be Anti-Racist*



Poetry

BROWNE, Mahogany L. with others. *Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice*. illus. by Theodore Taylor III. Roaring Brook. Mar. 2020. ISBN 9781250311207.

Gr 3-6 –The poems in this eloquent and instructive glossary of social justice address allyship, privilege, silencing, protest, and more, providing clear definitions and context. This short but robust title is a great classroom resource, though middle graders will also enjoy reading it cover to cover.

HUDSON, Wade & Cheryl Willis Hudson, eds. *We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices*. Crown. 2018. ISBN 9780525580423.

Gr 3-7 –An impressive array of authors and artists share their experiences through letters, short stories, poems, and music. Whether reading one piece at a time or cover to cover, this collection will bolster and inspire readers when the world falls short of their expectations. The topics here are complex, but never overwhelming. Those feeling hurt, confused, and lost in our persistently chaotic world will find respite here.

LATHAM, Irene & Charles Waters. Dictionary for a Better World. illus. by Mehrdokht Amini. Carolrhoda. Feb. 2020.

Gr 4 Up –Authors Latham and Waters (*Can I Touch Your Hair?*) tackle an alphabet's worth of topics in this poetic dictionary: belonging, diversity, freedom, netiquette, tenacity, and zest. A "Try It" section, notes from the authors, and quotes follow each poem. Ideal for both elementary and middle school demographics.

Graphic Novels

COLFER, Eoin & Andrew Donkin. Illegal. illus. by Giovanni Rigano. Sourcebooks. 2018. ISBN 9781492662143.

Gr 5 Up –Colfer, Donkin, and Rigano tell the story of Ebo, a young Ghanaian refugee frantically searching for his brother as both head toward Europe. The subject matter is difficult—murder and survival in horrifying conditions—but conveyed in a way that is appropriate for the target audience. This potent tale will touch readers; use it also to supplement discussions on immigration and refugee experiences.

WILLIAMS, Lily & Karen Schneemann. Go with the Flow. illus. by Lily Williams. First Second. Jan. 2020. ISBN 9781250305725.

Gr 4-8 –When the boys football team gets new uniforms (again) and the school can't even keep the for-purchase pad and tampon dispensers stocked, four friends are roused to action. This beautiful graphic novel explores friendship, periods and the stigma against menstruation, and social justice. While the main characters are high school sophomores, the book will resonate with upper elementary and middle school students. Both the narrative and back matter normalize menstruation, and the authors acknowledge the experiences of trans and nonbinary people, albeit briefly. Amazing, period.

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