

The African American Experience: Books to Help Understand Current Events

The purpose of this list is to provide suggested books for students, parents and EC staff to help us better understand the experiences of people of color and the impacts of racism in our country, and serve as a starting point for conversations to help us move forward for positive change.

The list is organized by grade level, but every student's reading and maturity level varies so some Middle School students may be comfortable reading titles from the High School list. Several of these books are reviewed on the Common Sense Media website (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/book-lists>) which includes recommended age levels, educational value, language, violence, positive role models, etc. Commonsense Media reviews also include discussion questions for the book.

If you have questions about any of these titles please contact the Eastside Catholic Librarian, Mr. Ammons, dammons@eastsidecatholic.org

Middle School

New Kid, by Jerry Craft

6th and up

New Kid is a graphic novel that won the 2020 Newbery Medal and the 2020 Coretta Scott King Author Award. Jordan Banks takes readers down the rabbit hole and into his mostly white prep school in this heartbreakingly accurate middle-grade tale of race, class, microaggressions, and the quest for self-identity.

He may be the new kid, but as an African-American boy from Washington Heights, that stigma entails so much more than getting lost on the way to homeroom. Riverdale Academy Day School, located at the opposite end of Manhattan, is a world away, and Jordan finds himself a stranger in a foreign land, where pink clothing is called salmon, white administrators mistake a veteran African-American teacher for the football coach, and white classmates ape African-American Vernacular English to make themselves sound cool. Jordan's a gifted artist, and his drawings blend with the narrative to give readers a full sense of his two worlds and his methods of coping with existing in between. Craft skillfully employs the graphic-novel format to its full advantage, giving his readers a delightful and authentic cast of characters who, along with New York itself, pop off the page with vibrancy and nuance. – From Kirkus Reviews

Clean Getaway, by Nic Stone.

6th and up

Tells the story of 11-year-old William ("Scoob"), who is Black, and his elderly White grandmother ("G'ma"), who run away from home in an RV. Scoob's strict single dad, Jimmy, grounded him after Scoob was suspended from school, so he's grateful to be invited on a road trip. The pair follow the route G'ma once traveled with Scoob's grandfather, Jimmy Sr., a Black man who died in prison. They set off through the southern United States, often consulting

G'ma's store of old maps and the *Green Book*, a guide African Americans used during the Jim Crow era to find lodging and eating places that would serve them. Scoob learns that they are following the route of an unfinished trip G'ma took with his grandfather back in the 1960s. (Common Sense Media) The complex role race plays in their family and on this trip—Scoob is mixed-race and presents black, and G'ma is white—is explored in a meaningful way that provides details about a period in time as well as present-day realities. Rich in history, Stone's middle-grade debut entertains and informs young readers. (Kirkus Reviews)

Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You, by Jason Reynolds. (non-fiction) (Description of the Ibram X. Kendi book *Stamped From the Beginning* in the High School section below)

7th and up

Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You, by Jason Reynolds is the middle-grade version of Ibram X. Kendi's National Book Award-winning *Stamped from the Beginning*, which was written for adults. Told in a casual, conversational, relatable, and sometimes humorous tone, it frames African American history as a history of competing ideas: "Haters" (segregationists) believe Black people are different from and inferior to White people and preach separation of the races. "Cowards" (assimilationists) believe Black people are damaged, whether through external or internal causes, and focus on how they can win the approval of Whites. Antiracists believe there's nothing wrong with Black people, and focus on dismantling systems of racism. Key figures and events in Black history are discussed, including the religious argument that sought to justify slavery, the racial bias in the "war on drugs," and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. It charts historical and contemporary events involving violence, including lynching, police brutality, assassinations, rape, and the killing of Emmett Till. - From Common Sense Media

Dear Martin, by Nic Stone

8th and up

In *Dear Martin*, Justyce McAllister attends an exclusive private school with mostly white students. He's on the debate team, has some of the best grades in his class, and is certain he's headed to Yale. Then one night changes his life and puts him on a path that has him questioning why things happen and what he can do to change them. His *Dear Martin* project, in which he tries to live like Martin Luther King Jr., is put in jeopardy from the moment he's put in handcuffs. Tested by racist classmates, skeptical friends from his former neighborhood, and a rain of bullets, Justyce finds himself a target in the battle over police brutality and race. What would Martin do?

Piecing Me Together, by Renee Watson

8th and up

Jade Butler, an African-American artist-in-the-making, lives with her mother in Portland, Ore., and travels by bus to private school, where she is both grateful for and resentful of the opportunities presented to her. In short, poetic chapters, Jade ponders her family, school, and neighborhood relationships, wondering where she fits in: "How I am someone's answered

prayer but also someone's deferred dream." Watson (*This Side of Home*) weaves collage imagery throughout the story as Jade ruminates over historical figures such as York, the slave who traveled with Lewis and Clark, and distressing current events, including police violence against a neighborhood girl: "I am ripping and cutting. Gluing and pasting. Rearranging reality, redefining, covering, disguising. Tonight I am taking ugly and making beautiful." Jade's narrative voice offers compelling reflections on the complexities of race and gender, class and privilege, and fear and courage, while conveying the conflicted emotions of an ambitious, loyal girl. Teeming with compassion and insight, Watson's story trumpets the power of artistic expression to re-envision and change the world. - From Publishers Weekly

The 57 Bus, by Dashka Slater. (non-fiction)

8th and up

This is an account of an incident that occurred on an Oakland bus in 2013 in which an African American teen (Richard), egged on by his friends, set fire to the skirt worn by a white transgender teen (Shasha). Shasha has 2nd and 3rd degree burns over 20 percent of his body and Richard is charged with two hate crimes and faces life in prison at the age of 16. At first it seems like a simple case of right and wrong but as the author explores the history of the teens and other issues involved it becomes much more complex and thought provoking. The book looks at the juvenile justice system in American, race, gender identity, how broadcast and social media impacts our perceptions of events. There's a lot going on here, a very gripping story.

Undeclared, by Kadir Nelson and Kawmi Alexander

All ages

The Undeclared, a picture book by poet and author Kwame Alexander and illustrated by Kadir Nelson, won the 2020 Caldecott Medal, the 2020 Coretta Scott King (Illustrator) Book Award, and a 2020 Newbery Honor. It's a tribute to African American heroes and regular folks who faced struggles, prejudice, and oppression and survived -- as well those who didn't. A list at the back of the book identifies the historical figures and events featured in the art, including Jesse Owens, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, John Lewis, the civil rights movement, black soldiers in the U.S. Civil War, Duke Ellington, Serena Williams, LeBron James, Trayvon Martin, and many more. In an Afterword, Alexander explains why he wrote the poem that serves as the text for this book, and why he did not shy away from acknowledging the pain and suffering, because so much of American history "has been forgotten, left out of the textbooks, and to truly know who we are as a country, we have to accept and embrace all of our woes and wonders." – From Common Sense Media

High School

The Hate U Give, by Angie Thomas

Sixteen-year-old Starr Carter moves between two worlds: the poor neighborhood where she lives and the fancy suburban prep school she attends. The uneasy balance between these worlds is shattered when Starr witnesses the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend Khalil at the hands of a police officer. Khalil was unarmed.

Soon afterward, his death is a national headline. Some are calling him a thug, maybe even a drug dealer and a gangbanger. Protesters are taking to the streets in Khalil's name. Some cops and the local drug lord try to intimidate Starr and her family. What everyone wants to know is: what really went down that night? And the only person alive who can answer that is Starr.

But what Starr does—or does not—say could upend her community. It could also endanger her life.

Black Enough: Stories of being young & Black in America, edited by Izi Zoboi

What is it like to be young and black, and yet not black enough at the same time? That's the question explored in this poignant collection of stunning short stories by black rock-star authors, including Justina Ireland, Jason Reynolds, Nic Stone, and Brandy Colbert. The stories center on the experience of black teens, while driving home the fact that they are not a monolith; one person's experiences, reality, and personal identity can be completely different from another's. Family, friends, belonging, isolation, classism, and romance are among the topics that take center stage, and the stories' teens come from a diverse array of backgrounds (e.g., economic, neighborhood, country of origin). Readers glimpse the struggles, achievements, heartaches, and joys of a host of black teens who are authentically and lovingly portrayed. From the kid with two black parents to the mixed-race kid with one black parent, all of the characters grapple with the heart-wrenching question most real-life black teens struggle with (and never should need to): Am I black enough? The additional magic of this collection is that it shirks off the literary world's tired obsession with only depicting the struggles of black teens. With this, readers see everyday struggles as well as the ordinary yet remarkable joys of black teens that have nothing to do with the trauma of their history. *Starred Review* - From *Booklist*

So, You Want to Talk about Race, By Ijeoma Oluo (nonfiction)

In this New York Times bestseller, Ijeoma Oluo offers a hard-hitting but user-friendly examination of race in America

Widespread reporting on aspects of white supremacy--from police brutality to the mass incarceration of Black Americans--has put a media spotlight on racism in our society. Still, it is a difficult subject to talk about. How do you tell your roommate her jokes are racist? Why did your sister-in-law take umbrage when you asked to touch her hair--and how do you make it right? How do you explain white privilege to your white, privileged friend?

In *So You Want to Talk About Race*, Ijeoma Oluo guides readers of all races through subjects ranging from intersectionality and affirmative action to "model minorities" in an attempt to make the seemingly impossible possible: honest conversations about race and racism, and how they infect almost every aspect of American life. The paperback edition includes a discussion guide.

White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism,

by Robin J. DiAngelo (nonfiction)

The New York Times best-selling book exploring the counterproductive reactions white people have when their assumptions about race are challenged, and how these reactions maintain racial inequality.

In this "vital, necessary, and beautiful book" (Michael Eric Dyson), antiracist educator Robin DiAngelo deftly illuminates the phenomenon of white fragility and "allows us to understand racism as a practice not restricted to 'bad people' (Claudia Rankine). Referring to the defensive moves that white people make when challenged racially, white fragility is characterized by emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and by behaviors including argumentation and silence. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium and prevent any meaningful cross-racial dialogue. In this in-depth exploration, DiAngelo examines how white fragility develops, how it protects racial inequality, and what we can do to engage more constructively.

When They Call You A Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir, by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and asha bandele (nonfiction)

A memoir by the co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement explains the movement's position of love, humanity, and justice, challenging perspectives that have negatively labeled the movement's activists while calling for essential political changes.

Raised by a single mother in an impoverished neighborhood in Los Angeles, Patrisse Khan-Cullors experienced firsthand the prejudice and persecution Black Americans endure at the hands of law enforcement. For Patrisse, the most vulnerable people in the country are Black people. Deliberately and ruthlessly targeted by a criminal justice system serving a white privilege agenda, Black people are subjected to unjustifiable racial profiling and police brutality. In 2013, when Trayvon Martin's killer went free, Patrisse's outrage led her to co-found Black Lives Matter with Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi. – From IndieBound.org

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates (nonfiction)

Coates offers this eloquent memoir as a letter to his teenage son, bearing witness to his own experiences and conveying passionate hopes for his son's life. "I am wounded," he writes. "I am marked by old codes, which shielded me in one world and then chained me in the next." Coates grew up in the tough neighborhood of West Baltimore, beaten into obedience by his father. "I was a capable boy, intelligent and well-liked," he remembers, "but powerfully afraid." His life changed dramatically at Howard University, where his father taught and from which several siblings graduated. Howard, he writes, "had always been one of the most critical gathering posts for black people." He calls it The Mecca, and its faculty and his fellow students expanded his horizons,

helping him to understand “that the black world was its own thing, more than a photo-negative of the people who believe they are white.” Coates refers repeatedly to whites’ insistence on their exclusive racial identity; he realizes now “that nothing so essentialist as race” divides people, but rather “the actual injury done by people intent on naming us, intent on believing that what they have named matters more than anything we could ever actually do.” After he married, the author’s world widened again in New York, and later in Paris, where he finally felt extricated from white America’s exploitative, consumerist dreams. He came to understand that “race” does not fully explain “the breach between the world and me,” yet race exerts a crucial force, and young blacks like his son are vulnerable and endangered by “majoritarian bandits.” Coates desperately wants his son to be able to live “apart from fear—even apart from me.” – From *Kirkus Reviews*

Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America
by Ibram X. Kendi. (See the description of the Jason Reynolds young reader version above)

History of racist thought and practice in the United States from the Puritans to the present.

Kendi explores the history of racist ideas—and their connection with racist practices—across American history. The author uses five main individuals as “tour guides” to investigate the development of racist ideas throughout the history of the U.S.: the preacher and intellectual Cotton Mather, Founding Father Thomas Jefferson, ardent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, and activist Angela Davis. Kendi also poses three broad schools of thought regarding racial matters throughout American history: segregationist, assimilationist, and anti-racist. Although this trio can be reductionist, it provides a solid framework for understanding the interplay between racist ideas, anti-racism, and the attempts to synthesize them—“assimilationism,” which the author ultimately identifies as simply another form of racism, even when advocated by African-Americans. The subtitle of the book promises a “definitive history,” but despite the book’s more than 500 pages of text, its structure and its viewing of racial ideas through the lens of five individuals means that it is almost necessarily episodic. Although it is a fine history, the narrative may best be read as an extended, sophisticated, and sometimes (justifiably) angry essay. - From *Kirkus Reviews*