

The Colored Car by Jean Alicia Elster

This book is a rich description of a family in Depression-era Detroit. In the hot summer of 1937, twelve-year-old Patsy takes care of her three younger sisters and helps her mother put up fresh fruits and vegetables in the family's summer kitchen, adjacent to the wood yard that her father owns. The recipes listed in the book were so enticing, you may be tempted to try them yourselves. The creative way simple games were developed with simple things was heartwarming. Patsy's mother, May Ford, helps neighborhood families by sharing the food that she preserves. When May becomes worried about how her own mother may have survived a flood, she decides to take her daughters for a visit to their grandmother's home in Clarksville, Tennessee. The girls are then exposed to racist policies governing travel. The family is led from the first-class seats they had purchased and were placed in the dirty, cramped "colored car." The book helps you watch as Patsy works to learn how to understand her experience in the colored car and deal with the more subtle injustices that her family faces in Detroit.

How it Happens by Jean Alicia Elster

This story line follows the lives of three generations of black women, one of whom is the author's maternal grandmother, Dorothy May Jackson. The setting begins in the South at the turn of the century. Addie Jackson, while married to a black man and through no choice of her own, bears three biracial daughters, the father being a white attorney from a prominent family. One of those daughters, Dorothy May, becomes a teacher, but never completes her formal degree as she is swept into marrying and bearing her own children while living in the industrial northern city of Detroit. One of Dorothy's daughters, Jean, confronts her mother and grandmother regarding her biracial ancestry and its complex ramifications. Jean finds her way to become a college educated black woman in the midst of challenging race relations and class divisions both in her country and within her own family. This book is appropriate for middle school aged readers and older.

The 1619 Project Born on the Water by Nikole Hannah-Jones and Renee Watson

This book for young readers is written in poetic verse and gives black Americans a framework to recount their family's' histories and lineage. The storyline begins with a young African American girl who is given the school assignment to outline her family tree and ancestry. The girl is perplexed and ashamed as she is unable to trace her family's background. She reluctantly asks her grandmother who responds by sharing rich stories of her family's culture and traditions in West Central Africa. The grandmother then moves on to the harsh reality of being kidnapped, stolen, and enslaved in America. She also shares the stoic and inspiring hopes, dreams, and ultimate resilient paths to freedom and greatness. The authors strike a fine balance in sharing factual reality while being considerate of young readers. Both the main character as well as readers of all races and backgrounds come to the knowledge that African Americans descended from a beautiful life, land, culture of their own before becoming Americans. Although their story differs from those of other immigrants, it is one of which they can be proud. They were "born" on the water in the middle passage.

The Year We Learned to Fly by Jacqueline Woodson and Rafael Lopez

This work is based on an American Black folktale. On a dreary, stuck-inside kind of day, a brother and sister heed their grandmother's advice: "Use those beautiful and brilliant minds of yours. Lift your arms, close your eyes, take a deep breath, and believe in a thing. Somebody somewhere at some point was just as bored you are now." And before they know it, their imaginations lift them up and out of their boredom. Then, on a day full of quarrels, it's time for a trip outside their minds again, and they are able to leave their anger behind. This precious skill, their grandmother tells them, harkens back to the days long before they were born, when their ancestors showed the world the strength and resilience of their beautiful and brilliant minds. It illuminates the power in each of us to face challenges with confidence.

Dinosaur Brains by Tabitha Renee Mann and illustrated by Susan Robinson

Although dinosaurs themselves no longer exist, dinosaur brains may continue to live in us and sabotage our goals and achievements by devouring our dreams and ambitions! Such is how the grandfather character in this book explains to his granddaughter why she does not feel she can pursue her dream of being an Olympic swimmer. The author's inspiration comes from the Bible, (2 Peter 1:7) which she interprets as God giving us the spirit of power, love, and self-control rather than the spirit of fear. Readers of all ages and backgrounds would benefit from the lessons in this children's book, especially those who have consciously or unconsciously had their dreams diminished by society's limitations, stereotypes, and other limiting factors - and that may include each of us!

Antiracist Baby by Ibram X. Kendi and illustrated by Ashley Lukashesky

What appears to be primarily a picture book for young children, is in fact a guide for parents of young children. While children will most certainly be drawn to the bold and brightly colored illustrations depicting parents and children with a rainbow of skin colors, the book explicitly lists 9 steps for parents to use to increase awareness for how to disrupt the unconscious biases and systemic racism that are embedded in our society. The book closes with a short but more detailed narrative to parents on how to engage in frank and informative conversations with their children. As the author asserts, "Antiracist Baby is bred not born".

A Pig is Moving in by Claudia Fries

This delightful fairy tale centers on a cast of animals who live in a shared apartment building. Concerns and worries arise as the news spreads of a pig who is moving into the building. Assumptions are made based on stereotyped characteristics about pigs, including being "messy, dirty, and sloppy". As the animal residents catch site of the newly arrived pig, they are quick to gather evidence to support their assumptions. It is only when they confront the pig that they are surprised to learn he is nothing that they had assumed. He is in fact tidy, clean, and capable, and most significantly a gracious and accepting neighbor as he invites the animals in

for tea and cookies. He is quickly accepted and welcomed into their community. Without ever explicitly mentioning any racial, ethnic, or social implications, the readers, both young and old, can't help but absorb the message of non-judgmental inclusion and acceptance.

Can I Touch Your Hair by Irene Latham and Charles Waters and illustrated by Sean Qualls and Selina Alko

In this collection of poems, the two author-poets have collaborated to portray their own childhood experiences growing up as a white girl and a black boy but are placed in the context of a contemporary classroom, facing present day racial complexities. The sequenced collection of poems begins with a 5th grade classroom assignment in which both children are paired to be poetry writing partners. The two are challenged by feeling no shared connections and the seemingly impossible divide of disparate backgrounds. As the assignment demands back and forth communication and sharing, the two slowly become aware of each other's shared feelings and experiences, as well as an emergent understanding of differing sensitivities and unconscious biases. Experiences of race are explored in a way that children can concretely relate to, e.g., hair, playground play, and family time at home. At the same time, the authors take on serious and deep themes in a straightforward and transparent way. Although this book is written for children, it may well be best read alongside adults and parents to guide and process discussion and reactions. The themes and messages in these wonderfully written and illustrated works of poetry most certainly speak to all ages, and the reality of shared humanity shines through.