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## A Closer Look: Children's and Young Adult Literature

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# A Closer Look: Children's and Young Adult Literature

by Kristin McIlhagga, Ph.D.

Empathy and compassion are two concepts that are particularly prevalent across conversations, conference sessions, and professional publications for teachers. One example comes from *The Case for Children's Right to Read* published by the International Literacy Association which states, "Reading builds their [children's] capacity for creative and critical thinking, expands their knowledge base, and develops their ability to respond with empathy and compassion to others" (2018, p. 4). At the 2018 Michigan Reading Association Annual Conference and the more recent National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Conference, I noticed an increased sense of urgency from teachers seeking out resources and support for integrating empathy and compassion into their classrooms.

"Empathy makes it possible to resonate with others' positive and negative feelings alike..." (Singer & Klimecki, 2014, p. R875) and begins developing before children have reached the age of two. At the youngest ages, they begin to recognize that other people have feelings. When children reach preschool age (approx. 3-4 years), they continue to recognize feelings of others that may differ from their own and also begin learning to regulate their responses to others' feelings. As children enter school (approx. 5-6 years), the continued development of their own self-awareness supports their understandings of empathy and other people's feelings (Poole, Miller, & Church, n.d.).

An important distinction between empathy and compassion is that compassion "...does not mean sharing the suffering of the other; rather it is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern, and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other's well-being. Compassion is feeling *for* and not feeling *with* the other" (Singer & Klimecki, 2014, p.R875). When people of any age confuse the feelings of others with their own feelings, it can result in empathetic distress that can lead to stress, withdrawal, and inaction.



**Kristin  
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When we, as educators, help our students to develop and distinguish both empathy and compassion, we are helping them to develop actionable responses.

For this issue of the *Michigan Reading Journal*, reviews are focused on children's literature that invites conversations about empathy and compassion in our classrooms, teachers' lounges, online, and at home. I've limited the format to picturebooks that can be used across ages, grade levels, and development. Picturebooks as a format have much to offer students of all ages, as well as to teachers as readers. The shorter text along with the illustrations allows for multiple readings of each book which in turn support deeper engagement with the concepts of empathy and compassion. For all readers, the illustrations also provide an opportunity to consider the ways that images—particularly faces and body language—support our ability to engage with other people's feelings and emotions.

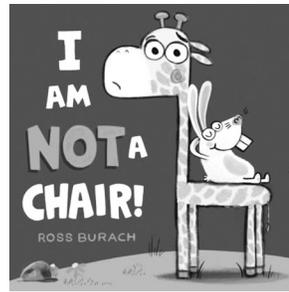
Kristin

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***I Am NOT a Chair***

by Ross Burach  
Harper Collins 2017,  
ISBN: 978-0-062-36016-8  
40 pgs, Grade PK-3



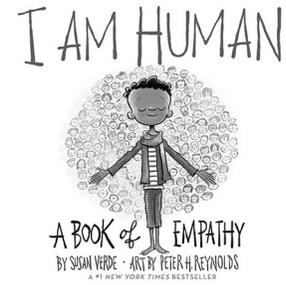
Giraffe is thrilled to arrive in the jungle, but right away something doesn't feel right. He is mistaken as a chair by other animals, and feels frustrated but can't "get the words out" to tell them he, in fact, is a giraffe! He tries a variety of strategies to help the animals see that he isn't a chair. When he finally decides to speak, Lion sits down on Giraffe declaring, "The next animal I see will be my DINNER even if I have to wait all night." Though not stated explicitly, readers can assume that Giraffe is thinking he is glad to be thought of as a chair so that Lion won't eat him. Nature calls and Giraffe finally speaks up out of necessity, scaring Lion when he realizes he is sitting on a talking chair!

The penultimate double-page spread offers a resolution with Giraffe playing in a circle with the other animals and "everything felt right." The final page shows Giraffe sitting on a turtle with a frustrated face saying to another animal, "Me! A chair, can you believe it?" While the knowledge of the reader seeing Giraffe using Turtle as a chair creates a sense of humor (because clearly Giraffe isn't aware), it is also an invitation to engage younger readers in how Giraffe is acting like the other animals did towards him at the beginning of the book.

Continuing the story to suggest ways that Giraffe could use his experience, and newly found voice to help Turtle find and use his own voice is the strength of the book. At one point in the story, Giraffe says he wishes he wasn't so afraid. How might he act differently in the situation with Turtle to help Turtle find his own voice not in response to a threat but to truly own himself? How might Giraffe use his experience to help the other animals understand the ways their actions were unintentionally hurtful towards Giraffe?

***I Am Human:  
A Book of Empathy***

by Susan Verde, illustrated  
by Peter H. Reynolds  
Abrams Young Readers  
2018,  
ISBN: 978-1-4197-3165-5  
32 pgs, Grade K and up



The opening page illustration shows a sleeping newborn baby with light russet brown skin surrounded by a frame made up of lots of small baby faces in a range of covers. The text reads, "I was born. A miracle! One of billions but unique!" (Verde, 2018). I love the way that this beginning acknowledges people as part of a large group as well as individuals; providing an entry point to a conversation about collective thinking and individual thinking.

Using first person narration, the main character states, "I am Human," with a capital H implying that is his name. Human also uses the phrase "being human" with a lowercase h, highlighting the complexity of what the word can mean. In the first half of the book, Human portrays a happy confidence and sense of optimism in both words and color palette. He is playful, has dreams, and explores his world. Ending the section with the declaration, "I am Human;" thus far the book is a celebration of positive aspects of being human.

The tone changes in the second half of the book with Human sharing, "But being human means, I am *not* perfect. I make mistakes. I can hurt others with my words, my actions, and even my silence." Human is now smaller and is placed towards the 'back' of page. He recognizes that he can both hurt other people and be hurt by people. The colors are now darker shades of blue and purple, with Human in shadows. He feels fear and sadness as many of us do when we realize we have hurt someone.

Human then finds solace as he remembers that he is human, which means that he has choices that can help him to move forward. The illustrations now show his

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face out of shadows, followed by a double-page spread with a sequence of Human moving forward to pick a bright rainbow-colored flower. Human ends the book stating actions that he can take such as, “I can act with compassion and lend a helping hand. I can treat others with equality and be fair.”

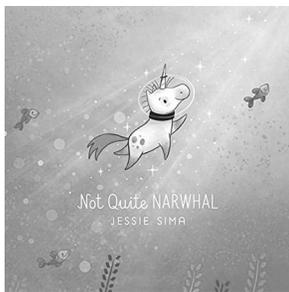
The language—from amazed, curious, and playful to fearful, hurt, and sadness, to thoughtfulness, compassion, and equality—reflects the complexity of being human with a straightforward sensibility. This book offers readers of all ages an opportunity to consider their own spectrum of experiences and feelings and consider not only how they inform the ways we each see the world, but also the ways we hurt and are hurt by others.

### *Not Quite Narwhal*

by Jessie Sima  
Simon and Schuster 2017,  
ISBN: 978-1-481-46909-8  
40 pgs, Grade PK-3

With a pearlescent cover, pastel colors, and charming animal characters; *Not Quite Narwhal* is a visually pleasant picturebook that is more than meets the eye (There are also unicorns!).

Kelp was born in the ocean and though he did not like the same food, swim as fast, or have a tusk quite as long as his narwhal friends, nobody minded, so neither did he. One day quite by accident, he was swept away in a fast-moving current towards land and he saw a creature that looked like him. Kelp was overtaken by curiosity and though he'd never been out of the water, he figured out how to walk and began his search. He finds not just one animal but an entire community of “land narwhals” that are actually called Unicorns! Kelp learns all sorts of things about being a unicorn and though he has loads of fun, he soon realizes how much he misses his ocean friends. He is nervous to tell his friends that he is, in fact, a unicorn, not a narwhal. Turns out that they knew all along! While happy to be home, Kelp



misses his unicorn friends. He is torn between being a land narwhal or a sea unicorn but eventually comes to a compromise.

The theme of identity is evident in multiple aspects of this book. Kelp believes himself to be a narwhal—it is his identity. He then discovers unicorns who tell him that he is, in fact, a unicorn. What does it mean that someone else labeled Kelp's identity instead of himself? How do we know about other people's identities? Is it possible for Kelp to be both? Kelp's story also invites discussions about our own multiple identities and how others view us.

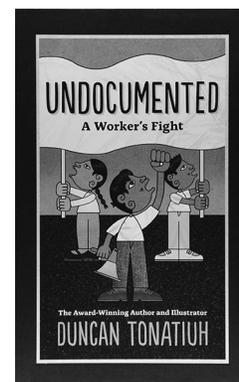
### *Undocumented*

by Duncan Tonatiuh  
Abrams ComicArts 2018,  
ISBN: 978-1-4197-2854-9  
15 pgs, Grade 2 and up

With his unmistakable style, Duncan Tonatiuh eloquently conveys the humanity of people working and living in the United States without official documentation, offering readers of all ages an opportunity to meet Juan and consider his experiences. Though the story is told from the perspective of Juan, Tonatiuh begins and ends the text repeating the pronoun “we” to reiterate that while Juan is telling his story, it is a story shared by many people.

Some people want to kick us out and some act like we don't exist, but we are here, compañeros. We may not have documents, but we all have a story and we all have a name. This is my story. I am Juan. (Tonatiuh, 2018, n.p.)

This collective perspective of workers' rights is woven throughout the book as we meet Li, a Chinese waitress who first brings Juan to the workers' center. Juan and Li begin conversations with their coworkers at the restaurant talking with them about the inequity of their pay. Soon, Juan's boss discovers that Juan is one of the



leaders and decreases his hours. Though his paychecks are dwindling Juan continues to support the worker's movement by handing out flyers and joining picket lines. Juan tells his confused tío, "Mexican, Chinese, Black, or White—what matters is that we face the same problems" (Tonatiuh, 2018, n.p.).

*Undocumented* began as Tonatiuh's senior project for art school and reflects the strong influence of Pre-Columbian artwork on his style. In a February 2018 interview, Tonatiuh stated, "I found images of Mixtec codex from the 15th century. I was struck by the drawings' flatness, geometry and repetition of color. I decided to draw the project in a similar style but I began collaging textures into the drawings with photoshop to try to make them feel more modern" (Liu-Trujillo, 2018).

In addition to the unique fold-out codex format, the variety of perspectives and page layouts contribute to the passage of time and a sense of the complexity of Juan's experiences. For example, the first page of the second half of the book, Tonatiuh has readers looking down at the top of the heads of those attending the meeting, no one person is centered in the illustration. There is a lightbulb at top center, white text comes from bottom of lightbulb and layout is shaped as if the words are the light coming from the lightbulb. "I listened to them talk and I learned a lot" (n.p.). Tonatiuh's use of panels, cutouts, line, and light draw readers' attentions to the end of the illustration, with the text describing the first time that he goes to the workers' center.

Juan's story ends on a positive note with his boss agreeing to pay owed wages, give employees reasonable hours, and fair pay; as well as the birth of his daughter. The book ends with Juan reminding readers, "We need laws that protect ALL workers. You may not know our names, but we are here. We work hard. We pay our bills. We pay taxes. Papers or no papers, we have our dignity and we deserve to be treated fairly" (n.p.).

You also may want to consider pairing this book with another book or books about immigration. For a

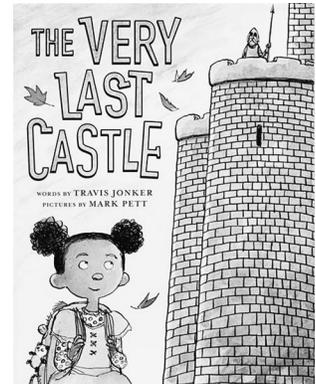
curated list of additional titles visit <https://socialjustice-books.org/booklists/immigration/>

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Liu-Trujillo, R. (2018, February 21). Duncan Tonatiuh: Creative process, migration, pre-Columbian & modern art. Retrieved December 8, 2018, from <https://misformovement.org/2018/02/21/duncan-tonatiuh-creative-process-migration-pre-columbian-modern-art/>

### *The Very Last Castle*

by Travis Jonker,  
illustrated by Mark Pett  
Abrams Books for Young  
Readers 2018,  
ISBN: 978-1-4197-2574  
40 pgs, Grade PK-3



In a town, there is a castle. None of the townspeople have ever seen anyone coming out of the castle; they have ideas about it, but none of them are good, so everyone stays away. In the first three pages, Pett uses watercolor washes over pen and ink drawings visually reinforce the sameness of the town and people, the buildings similar shades of blue and the townspeople shades of purple.

Then we meet Ibb who is confidently walking towards the right side of the page with purpose; one bright yellow boot taking a step, her arm up as if marching. Ibb's individuality is foreshadowed in the illustrations. Her light brown chestnut face is framed by dark curly hair pulled into two afro-puffs on the top of her head. Ibb carries yellow books, a bright green backpack. She walks across green grass wearing a blue dress with polka dots. When she walks by the castle, Ibb notices a lone guard standing at the top of the tower. A beautiful wordless double page spread shows the castle in its entirety with a lone guard standing in the tower while snow falls from a grey sky. The lack of text gives readers a chance to linger and consider what they think might be in the castle.

One day Ibb receives an invitation requesting her presence at the castle. She is cautioned that there may be

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monsters, giants, or snakes inside. *“Maybe it’s something terrible, Ibb thought one day, but maybe it’s something else”* (Jonker, 2018, n.p.). Though cautioned not to go to the castle, Ibb decides to follow her instinct. Jonker’s use of sparse text is delightful, helping to create intrigue and opportunities for readers to engage with Ibb and her story. Pett’s use of changing perspective and vertical lines highlight the enormity of the castle alongside young Ibb.

Ibb does discover who lives in the castle, making a friend and opening the eyes of the townspeople to possibilities they had never considered. This picture

storybook offers opportunities for conversations about the ways that making assumptions can get in the way of being empathetic, and the importance of speaking up to collective fear. Be sure to take the dust jacket off for a different set of illustrations underneath!

## Author Biography

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