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Great Lakes, Great Books

by Lynette Marten Suckow



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Books about diverse learners come in all genres, fonts, and forms of illustration, just as diversity shows itself in a variety of learning styles, ethnicities, genetics, cultures, and geographic locations. The following books from the Great Lakes Great Books Award list reveal several types of diverse students who are—or could become—part of your classroom. Maybe you recognize some of them.

The Great Lakes Great Books committee selects 40 new books, annually, to introduce K-12 classrooms to some of the best new literature being published. Teachers and librarians provide students with books from their grade-level lists and allow them to vote on their favorites, promoting student participation in the reading process. This year's ballot is closed, but be on the lookout for a new classroom ballot, student certificate, and promotional bookmarks at www.michiganreading.org under the Awards and Grants tab. There's sure to be something on the list for every reading style.

WE DON'T EAT OUR CLASSMATES by Ryan T. Higgins leaves no doubt about how hard it is for young children to behave well when they start school. There are so many new rules to follow. Teachers can be heard repeating, "We don't hit our classmates," or variations of that statement for the first few weeks of class. The author finds it much more fun to exaggerate the issue by introducing Penelope Rex, a T-rex dinosaur, who must be reminded not to eat her delicious classmates. Eating classmates is not tolerated by her teacher, parents, or the other students, who quickly learn to avoid Penelope. Breaking bad habits proves difficult, until the classroom pet goldfish gives Penelope a fright by biting



her, instead. Penelope decides to stick to the rules and make friends with her classmates instead of eating them. The clever text is supported by colorful illustrations that make readers laugh out loud. Don't miss the page showing Penelope in the cafeteria, tapping her plate and telling a classmate "You can sit here," in a speech bubble outside the regular text. This book is pure fun.

ISLANDBORN by Junot Diaz begins with a class assignment to "draw a picture of the country you are originally from," which seems appropriate in Lola's class of first-generation immigrants. Lola was born on "the Island," but soon left in the arms of her mother when a hurricane destroyed their home. Without memories of her birthplace, Lola finds herself at a loss. She decides to talk to her neighbors, who all originate from the same Caribbean region. The local empanada merchant tells Lola about the island's music; her older brother remembers drinking milk straight from coconuts; a classmate's mother recollects the colorful clothing and brightly painted buildings; and her grandmother lovingly recalls the island's sandy beaches. Although the island is not specifically named, the author infers that many other people left because of a repressive political regime. Illustrator, Leo Espinosa, leaves visual clues in

Must Read Texts

the illustrations that could lead to the island's identity, for those readers familiar with the area and its history. Back in class, Lola's teacher hangs all the drawings on the wall and describes them as windows looking at "one another's first homes." Lola's classmates find her drawing missing from the wall because she has learned so much from the project, it takes an entire book to contain her drawings. This strikingly colorful book about social justice received the 2019 Pura Belpre Honor Illustrator Award, and will delight readers from all countries.

HARBOR ME by Jacqueline Woodson features six diverse sixth graders who share the experience of having been the targets of school bullies, while also dealing with social issues at home. They find themselves in a weekly ARTT (a room to talk) session by themselves, without the usual guidance of their teacher. After an uncomfortable first session, Haley comes up with an idea to record the individual stories of the group. Everyone will have a chance to share their personal history and problems at their own pace. Amari is from a caring African-American family who wants to protect him, but knows they must teach him about the dangers of being Black in America—regardless of education or social status. Esteban is under extreme stress because his Dominican father has been detained by ICE and could be sent back to his homeland any day. Ashton is White, but his family is without economic or educational advantages. Tiago and his family of Puerto Rican immigrants is often harassed and belittled because they converse in Spanish as much as they speak English. Holly has always been Haley's best friend because their mothers were friends before them. Since Haley's mom died, Holly's mother has included Haley in family activities and filled a void with stories about her mom. Holly has willingly shared her many economic privileges with Haley, but can't sit still in class and has a hard time learning academic subjects. Haley's story is told in bits and pieces throughout the book, but comes to crisis as the uncle who raised her is ready to move on to a life his own. He is actually making way for Haley's dad, incarcerated for the past decade, to step up to his role as a father. It's time for Haley to accept this change and grow with her new community of friends.

Woodson tackles several social and political issues in this timely story, showing how children are also affected by prejudice and injustice.

ILLEGAL by Eoin Colfer and Andrew Donkin, is a harrowing tale of 12-year-old Ebo's quest to leave his poverty stricken village in Ghana in search of his family. The story flips back and forth between present day and two years ago when Ebo left his village to catch up to his brother, who was looking for their sister, who was on her way to Europe. The flashbacks track the brothers north across the arid terrain of the Sahara Desert in Africa, amid dangerous confrontations with police, soldiers, and criminals. The story taking place in present day is the last leg of the journey across the water, presumably the Mediterranean Sea. Ebo and his brother, Kwame, start out on a raft, get picked up by a freighter, and use their kindness and problem solving skills to stay out of harm's way. Ebo is full of optimism and readily shares his gift of song, despite the hardships he's faced on this arduous trek. As readers share the injustice, heartbreak, and physical challenges faced by Ebo and Kwame, they cannot help but feel empathy for all who are forced from their homes into unfamiliar surroundings and dangerous situations. The graphic-novel style of storytelling by illustrator, Giovanni Rigano, highlights the plight of immigrants with unforgettable images.

DON'T CALL ME CRAZY: 33 Voices Start the Conversation About Mental Health, edited by Kelly Jensen, has an interesting anthology of personal essays from people who experience mental health issues every day of their lives. The book is divided into five chapters that begin with a definition of "What's Crazy?" and then work through "Where Crazy Meets Culture," "The Mind-Body Connection," and "Beyond Stress and Sadness," before reaching equilibrium with "To Be Okay." Adam Silvera and Shawn David Hutchinson, both authors of young adult fiction, suffer from depression and share how they incorporate some of those feelings and experiences into their own writing. The dynamic resources section includes books, films, and websites. Jensen encourages readers to start talking and understanding the myriad ways mental health affects

the lives of our family, our friends, and ourselves. She then reminds readers to “keep the conversation going.”

Author Biography

Lynette Marten Suckow works at the Peter White Public Library’s reference desk in Marquette, MI where she provides assistance with library resources and digital technology. She holds a master’s degree in education from Northern Michigan University, is actively involved with the Marquette-Alger Reading Council, and has been a Great Lakes Great Books Award committee member since 2006. She can be reached at lynette.suckow@gmail.com.

