

Recommended Books about Racial Equity

Ages 0-2

- *Antiracist Baby* by Ibram Kendi. National Book Award winner Kendi addresses youngest readers in this board book introduction to combatting racism, which outlines nine steps for rearing accountable kids. Each spread begins with a numbered rule, then follows with a rhyming explanation. Starting with “Open your eyes to all skin colors” and ending with “Believe we shall overcome racism,” Kendi provides broadly actionable pointers to dispel societal misconceptions: “Point at policies as the problem, not people./ Some people get more, while others get less.../ because policies don’t always grant equal access.” Boldly outlined, inclusive illustrations by Lukashevsky complement the text by showing a world populated by people of various skin tones, sizes, identities and orientations, religions, and abilities. Though the advanced diction (“there’s no neutrality”) gears the volume more toward caretakers than infants themselves, the book will nonetheless serve as a mindful companion for families striving together toward a more equitable future.
- *Shades of Black: A Celebration of Our Children* by Sandra Pinkney. Pinkney thoughtfully addresses some sensitive issues in her first book, illustrated with color photographs of children, taken by her husband. (Their own three children are included among the models.) In a simple, patterned text full of rich vocabulary, Pinkney describes the different skin tones, hair textures, and eye colors of the African American children shown in the photographs, with each child holding the object discussed in the text on that page. Skin colors are described with food metaphors (“the milky smooth brown in a chocolate bar”); hair textures are compared to items with texture (“the stiff ringlets in lambs wool”); and eye colors are related to polished stones (“the shimmering glow of ebony in an onyx”). This metaphoric structure succeeds both poetically and educationally, providing a subtle lesson in racial awareness and tolerance that will be welcomed by both parents and teachers. Our society has come a long way since *Black Is Brown Is Tan* (Arnold Adoff, 1973) shook up the staid world of children's books, and this new collaboration by still more members of the talented Pinkney family forges ahead in a similar way with a calmly accepting view of all African-American children, whatever their skin or eye color, as equal members of the black community.

Ages 2-4

- *Don't Touch My Hair* by Sharee Miller. Miller tells it like it is while giving children of color permission to set boundaries when people reach out to touch their curly, kinky, or nappy hair. Aria, a brown-skinned protagonist, opens this picture book by introducing herself with a double-page, gutter-spanning image of her smiling face and her full head of hair that takes up three-quarters of the spread: "I'm Aria, and this is my hair." Aria loves her hair, but others do too—so much so that they want to touch it even without permission. Aria decidedly does not like this. To demonstrate how she avoids touching hands, she appears eight times on one page—in full aerial split, karate-style airborne kick, curled into a fetal position, tentative headstand, and more—hemmed in almost all the way around by groping, outstretched hands. Even when she attempts to escape underwater, an octopus and a mermaid chase her, tentacles and arms extended. Wherever she travels, she can't get away from this threat...until she learns a strategy that works. Miller's variegated watercolor, pencil, and ink illustrations effectively portray Aria's verve as well as her frustrations. The cover image and several others depict disembodied hands and arms in many skin tones reaching for Aria's hair, suggesting that this intrusive behavior can come from anyone. Miller's lighthearted touch effectively delivers a serious, necessary message about respecting boundaries.
- *You Matter* by Christian Robinson. Simple and heartfelt, the refrain of Caldecott Honoree Robinson's poem speaks directly to readers: "You matter." In a neat rhetorical twist, the line also refers to the Earth itself, whose evolutionary history flashes by in gently comic collages made with blocky forms and bold paint strokes. Early sea life darts beneath a blue wave, small quadrupeds emerge from the ocean, dinosaurs appear. Under Robinson's broad gaze, everything in the cosmos has a part to play: whether a massive asteroid blazing Earthward ("If you fall down") or the planet, revived, spinning serenely in space ("If you have to start all over again"), "You matter." Human concerns recede in geological time, then come into focus as a brown-skinned astronaut orbits Earth while holding a photo of a child. A page turn shows the child back on Earth looking wistfully out an apartment window: "Sometimes, someone you love says goodbye." Scenes shift; the view from the child's apartment window moves in, from a busy city street to ants dining on park pigeons' crumbs, and then pulls back to a child gazing out an airplane window at an antlike cityscape below. By seeing all life as intertwined—ancient and new, minuscule and gargantuan, "The first to go and the last. The small stuff too small to see"—Robinson represents life as both interconnected and precious. It's a profound thought expressed with singular focus and eloquence.

Ages 4-6

- *Mae Among the Stars*, by Roda Ahmed. Pioneering African American astronaut Mae Jemison's childhood love of space and supportive parents led to her illustrious career. Little Mae's pastoral childhood home is presented in warm yellows, blues, and greens, visually establishing the atmosphere promoted by her loving parents, who encourage her dreams. When Mae's school assignment asks her to write about what she wants to be when she grows up, Mae responds that she wants to see Earth from space. Her parents tell her she must become an astronaut to do that, and when Mae asks if they think she can, their response weaves its way throughout the narrative: "Of course you can. If you can dream it, if you believe it and work hard for it, anything is possible." Thus begins Mae's obsession with space: reading about space, creating homemade astronaut costumes and spaceships, and drawing spacescapes. But when she shares her dreams in school, her white teacher discourages her, and her mostly white classmates laugh. Mae is crestfallen, her despondency captured with deceptively simple lines and a blue wash. Her dismay is short-lived, as she is buoyed up by her parents' continued support and encouragement. Uplifted, Mae promises to wave to her parents from space one day—and she does just that, as the first African American astronaut. An enchanting, inspirational account of Jemison's early life that illustrates the importance of encouraging and supporting children's dreams.

Ages 6-8

- *Freedom Summer* by Deborah Wiles. Wiles draws on memories of her childhood summers in Mississippi in her first picture book, a slice-of-life story about Joe, a Caucasian boy, and his best friend, John Henry, an African American boy whose mother works as a housekeeper for Joe's family. The setting is the Deep South in the summer of 1964, the period called Freedom Summer for its wide-ranging social changes following passage of the Civil Rights Act. Joe and John Henry have spent all their summers together, working around the rampant prejudice of the era and maintaining their friendship even though they can't swim in the public pool together or walk into the local store to buy a pair of ice pops. When the new law takes effect, the boys race together to the public pool only to find it being filled in with asphalt by city workers. John Henry's hurt and shame ring true in the text, but Joe's precocious understanding of the situation outstrips his age. ("I want to see this town with John Henry's eyes.") An author's note at the beginning of the book describes her experiences and the atmosphere in her own hometown during this era, when some white business owners preferred to close down rather than open their doors to African Americans. Younger children will need this background explanation to understand the story's underlying layers of meaning, or the filling-in of the swimming pool will seem like a mindless bureaucratic blunder rather than concrete prejudice in action. Teachers and parents could use this book as a quiet but powerful introduction to the prejudice experienced by many Americans, and of course the book is a natural to pair with the story of another, more-famous John Henry. Vibrant full-page paintings by talented French-born artist Lagarrigue capture both the palpable heat of southern summer days and the warmth of the boys' friendship.
- *The Proudest Blue* by Muhammad, Ibtihaj. The first day of school is also the first day of hijab for little Faizah's sixth-grade sister, Asiya, who selects a beautiful shade of blue to wear. Faizah sees her sister as a princess, but not everyone shares her perspective. "What's that on your sister's head?" asks a classmate. At recess, someone shouts, "I'm going to pull that tablecloth off your head!" These moments teach Faizah to represent her culture with confidence: her whispered answers grow louder; she and her sister walk away from the bully. Muhammad and Ali's poetic prose has a reminiscent quality, with short sentences setting a thoughtful rhythm ("Mama holds out the pink. Mama loves pink. But Asiya shakes her head. I know why. Behind the counter is the brightest blue") that allows the flourishes to shine ("The color of the ocean, if you squint your eyes and pretend there's no line between the water and the sky"). Aly's ink-wash-and-pencil illustrations settle and soar along with the language, swapping seamlessly between the concrete setting and metaphoric reflections on Asiya's hijab, the scarf's blue tail flowing out into curls of ocean or sky. This story, as both window and mirror, inevitably educates, but more important, it encourages pride in and respect for hijab through a tale of two sisters, their bond strengthened by faith.

Here are older picture books to consider reading aloud to Grades 2 -3

- *Ruth and the Green Book* by Calvin Ramsey. Ruth's father just bought a beautiful new 1952 Buick, making it a big day for this African American family. They are going from Chicago to Alabama to visit Grandma. Ruth is very excited to be traveling, but the family encounters "whites only" restrooms, hotels, and restaurants along the way. It's very discouraging and sometimes scary, but they learn that some friendly faces may be found at local Esso stations, which are among the few franchises open to black businessmen. At a station near the Georgia border, they are introduced to Victor H. Green's *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, an early AAA guidebook of sorts that listed establishments or homes that would serve African Americans—be it for general services, housing, or meals. Ruth eventually becomes the Green Book specialist in the family, helping to guide them to an auto-repair shop or an inn that would welcome them. But, the best part of the trip is finally arriving at Grandma's, as illustrated by the loving expressions on all faces. A one-page concluding summary discusses the importance of *The Green Book*, which was in use from 1936–1964, when the Civil Rights Act was finally signed, banning racial discrimination. The realistic illustrations are done in oil wash on board, a self-described "subtractive process." The picture is painted, then erased to "paint" the final product. Overall, there is a sepia-like quality to the art, giving the impression of gazing at old color photos. This is an important addition to picture book collections, useful as a discussion-starter on Civil Rights or as a stand-alone story.
- *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* by Duncan Tonatiuh. When the Mendezes moved to Westminster, CA, in 1944, third-grader Sylvia tried to enter Westminster School. However, the family was repeatedly told, "Your children have to go to the Mexican school." "But why?" asked Mr. Mendez....."That is how it is done." In response, they formed the Parents' Association of Mexican American Children, distributed petitions, and eventually filed a successful lawsuit that was supported by organizations ranging from the Japanese American Citizens League to the American Jewish Congress. Younger children will be outraged by the injustice of the Mendez family story but pleased by its successful resolution. Older children will understand the importance of the 1947 ruling that desegregated California schools, paving the way for *Brown v. Board of Education* seven years later. Back matter includes a detailed author's note and photographs. The excellent bibliography cites primary sources, including court transcripts and the author's interview with Sylvia Mendez, who did attend Westminster School and grew up to earn the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Tonatiuh's illustrations tell a modern story with figures reminiscent of the pictorial writing of the Mixtec, an indigenous people from Mexico. Here, the author deliberately connects his heritage with the prejudices of mid-20th century America. One jarring illustration of three brown children barred from a pool filled with lighter-skinned children behind a sign that reads, "No Dogs or Mexicans Allowed," will remind readers of photographs from the Jim Crow South. Compare and contrast young Sylvia Mendez's experience with Robert Coles's *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Scholastic, 1995) to broaden a discussion of school desegregation.

- *Teammates* by Peter Golenbock. Once upon a time...when automobiles were black and looked like tanks and laundry was white and hung on clotheslines"--so begins this graceful, lucid account of the pivotal events that began with Branch Rickey's decision to hire Jackie Robinson as the first Negro League star of a major league team. Golenbock is candid about the choice of a man "with the courage not to fight back," as well as about the ugly reception Robinson had from both the public and his new team, until--in the book's moving climax--Pee Wee Reese made a public move to stand by Robinson. Bacon's skillful, realistic illustrations, used in combination with occasional well-chosen photos, are as eloquent as the simple text.

Here are novels to consider reading aloud for Grades 4-6

- *The Other Half of My Heart* by Sundee Tucker Frazier. The idea of being a twin has built-in appeal—a sibling who has almost identical experiences of the world can be an instant BFF. That ideal informs the lives of sisters Minni and Keira, but the differences between the biracial siblings may be vaster than they'd like to think, because Minni's coloring is white like their father's, while Keira's is black like their mother's. During the summer when the girls turn 11, awareness of how they're perceived is driven home when a storekeeper in their home state of Washington has a widely disparate reaction to the girls' browsing through fancy dresses. Later, when the girls visit their prickly maternal grandmother in North Carolina and compete in a beauty contest for African Americans, Minni feels she is the focus of skeptical attention. Not only does Frazier raise questions worth pondering but her ability to round out each character, looking past easy explanations for attitude, is impressive. She also leavens the whole with easy humor and builds suspense over the pageant itself. Will the talented and outgoing Keira win the prize? Will Minni be able to overcome her shyness and shine? A novel with a great deal of heart indeed, from the winner of the John Steptoe New Talent Award for *Brendan Buckley's Universe and Everything in It*.
- *A Good Kind of Trouble* by Lisa Moore Ramee. Twelve-year-old Shayla is just starting middle school. She and her friends, Isabella and Julia, aka "The United Nations" because of their diverse backgrounds, want to stick together just like they did in elementary school. They soon discover that middle school is different and conflicts with friends and crushes ensue. In the midst of the typical middle school angst, a not guilty VERDICT in a legal case concerning a police officer shooting an African American man is announced and Shayla begins to relate to the Black Lives Matter movement in a way she never has before. Shayla, always trouble-averse, ends up challenging her school's administration when black armbands are banned. She grows through the experience and becomes more comfortable in her own skin. The author does a beautiful job illustrating the pain a family goes through in the wake of such a ruling. Reminiscent in writing style to works by Lauren Myracle and Jason Reynolds, this novel starts by showing Shayla having typical middle school problems, then switches to the very specific problems she faces as a young black girl in America. There is also a powerful subplot concerning Shayla's changing perception of her lab partner, Bernard, an African American boy, who she sees as a bully at the beginning of the novel and slowly comes to see as having been boxed into that role by systemic bias. VERDICT Give this to middle grade readers who aren't yet ready for Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*.
- *The Only Black Girls in Town* by Brandy Colbert. A remarkable middle-grade debut from YA powerhouse Colbert, *The Only Black Girls in Town* is a window into the heart and mind of Alberta, the sole African American girl in her small beach town's seventh grade until another Black family moves in across the street. Although she and her new neighbor could not be any more superficially different—Alberta is a California surfer and Edie is a goth girl from Brooklyn—they bond over their racial "otherness" in a realistic

way. Being two of the few Black students in their school (a true-to-life representation of the microaggressions they experience is highlighted by a teacher calling Edie by Alberta's name, although they look nothing alike) brings the girls closer together, while navigating their middle-school dramas and changing family dynamics seems to drive them apart. Fortunately, a desire to uncover the identity of the author of a set of journals they find in Edie's home helps to keep their friendship from completely fracturing, and conflicts are resolved in a reasonable yet satisfying way. Several events central to Black history (the murder of Emmett Till and the Montgomery bus boycott, for example) are introduced without the story becoming didactic, adding depth to a sweet story featuring children of color trying to find their place in a society that tells them they do not fit.