

**Affirming the Intersectional Identities of Adolescent Women through Young Adult  
Literature: A Set of Five Reading Ladders for 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Students**

By

Sydney Redigan

A Project

Submitted to the Office for Graduate Studies  
Graduate Division of Wayne State University

In partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts in Teaching

2015

Major: English Education

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this project to current and future generations of young women, with the hope that they may experience equality and the opportunity to fully embrace their true selves.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Jacqueline Tilles for her enthusiasm, expertise, and encouragement throughout this process.

Secondly, I would like to thank the many women who have inspired and taught me as sisters, friends, educators, mentors, and peers. Their influence and spirit are present in every aspect of this project.

Lastly, I would like to thank my fiancé, Steve, for his patience and love throughout my journey into teaching.

# CHAPTER 1

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This Review of the Literature is divided into six sections. They are: Identity and Adolescent Women, Identity Types and Intersectionality, Inclusive Classrooms through Identity Affirmation, Young Adult Literature, Identity and Young Adult Literature, and Reading Ladders.

### **Identity and Adolescent Women**

**Identity and Adolescence.** Adolescence, the period of human development between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, is a time of great physical, psychological, social, and emotional transition (Hall, 2011, p. 1). One of the most important transitions during adolescence is the formation of identity (Bean & Moni, 2003; Hall, 2011; Klimstra, 2013; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). According to Hall (2011), “Adolescence is considered to be the dawning of a conscious and unconscious search for the self... Youth begin intensely questioning who they are” (p. 1). This questioning and subsequent affirmation of identity is thought to be a key developmental task of adolescence” (Klimstra, 2013, p. 80).

**Gender and Identity.** Hall (2011) asserts that the adolescent search for self “becomes further complicated by a burgeoning sexual identity” (p. 2). He continues:

By the time the sexes enter adolescence, gender socialization is considered complete... Regardless of one’s cultural lens, the adolescent world is far more expansive for boys than for girls... Norms and expectations, across cultures, send girls ingraining, restrictive messages as to who they are and what their duty as a woman should be. (Hall, 2011, pp. 2-3).

Heilman (1998) adds to this idea, noting that gendered expectations “profoundly affect our sense of who we are and who we can become. Though the struggles for identity can be challenging to both young men and women, girls are particularly vulnerable to negative messages” (pp. 182-183).

Psychologist Mary Pipher has written extensively about young women’s struggles with identity formation. In *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (2005), Pipher describes how the confidence and spirit exhibited by preadolescent girls is often lost in adolescence, as young women reject their true selves (Pipher, 2005). According to Pipher (2005), young women feel pressured by society “to split into true and false selves” (p. 22). She writes, “Early adolescence is when many of the battles for the self are won and lost. These are hard fights, and the losses and victories determine to a great extent the quality of women’s future lives” (Pipher, 2005, p. 264). According to Pipher (2005), young women who reject their true selves exhibit behaviors such as a fear of holding strong opinions, self-criticism, and a tendency to downplay or hide their intelligence (p. 264).

In her book, *The Difference: Growing Up Female in America* (1994), Judy Mann, former *Washington Post* correspondent, also discusses the ways in which adolescence differs for boys and girls and the effect this has on young women’s identities. She recalls:

When I talked to adult women about this book, many of them described their adolescence with painful recollections that invariably had to do with a sense of lost self, a silencing of their voice, a loss of self-confidence and identity. (Mann, 1994, p. 191).

To prevent this trend from happening to current and future generations of adolescent women, Mann calls on parents, educators, and school administrators to find ways to support young women during this time and provide them with the tools to protect their voices and their identity



(Mann, 1994). This project shares a similar purpose: to find a way to foster, acknowledge, and affirm the identities of adolescent women within an English language arts curriculum.

In her study of adolescent girls, Heilman (1998) further highlights the importance of identity formation for young women. She writes:

Each girl is responding to the need to have an identity, a self in a highly demanding environment. Having an identity establishes her way of fighting through the world. It provides a set of rules for how transactions will take place. Identity is much more complex than the simple labels we use that refer to life stage, class, and gender. Identity for adolescent girls is also much more complex in contemporary society than many theorizers acknowledge. (Heilman, 1998, p. 188).

The next section of the Review of the Literature will elaborate on the complexity of adolescent women's identity.

### **Identity Types and Intersectionality**

Wakefield and Hudley (2007) note that there are many aspects to identity. They write, "Adolescents begin a process of discovering who they are across many facets of their lives, including their occupational or career identity, their religious identity, their gender identity, and for many adolescents, their ethnic or racial identity" (p. 148). Bean and Moni (2003) suggest that for modern adolescents, the concept of identity is even more "complex and multifaceted" (p. 639). This section will briefly discuss each of the facets of identity addressed in this project's reading ladders and explain the intersectional approach of this project.

**Racial and Ethnic Identity.** Wakefield and Hudley (2007) define racial and ethnic identity as "an ascribed or self-identified affiliation typically based on aspects of one's family heritage, shared language, culture, or nationality" (p. 148). They continue:

Race and ethnicity often have particular significance for minority group members since these terms also interact with concepts of power and privilege in society. Although these two categories may not be mutually exclusive, they are certainly distinct for adolescents' developing identities. (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007, p. 148).

Banks (1991) notes that most people who identify with a nonwhite racial or ethnic identity (such as Mexican Americans, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and American Indians) are often grouped under the term "people of color" (p. xix). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), people of color comprise 39% of the nation's population, the two largest groups identifying as Hispanic or Latino and African American.

Many people who have a distinct ethnic or racial identity in the United States are immigrants. According to Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen (2013), "Today's immigrants are primarily Asian or Hispanic, with increasing numbers coming from the Middle East" (p. 130). Lee (2012) discusses the diversity of these immigrant students in American schools:

Students from immigrant families, including foreign-born children and those born in the United States to immigrant parents, are a large and growing segment of the student population. In 2005, the U.S. had about 11 million school-aged students of immigrants, making them about one-fifth of the school-aged population. Students from immigrant families are diverse in terms of ethnicity, race, religion, language background, English proficiency, immigration status, and social class. (p. 117).

As Lee's quote demonstrates, the identities of immigrant adolescents can be quite complex.

Indeed, for all adolescents belonging to racial and ethnic groups, identity is a complex issue (Hughes-Hassell, 2013; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). According to Hughes-Hassell (2013):

For teens of color and for indigenous teens, coming of age is integrally tied to the process of racial and ethnic identity formation. Although identity formation is a critical task for all, adolescence researchers have found that adolescents of color and indigenous teens are more likely to be actively engaged in exploring their racial and ethnic identity than are white adolescents... On a daily basis, they must navigate a world where other people are making assumptions about who they are and what they can achieve based on their skin color. (p. 218).

Wakefield and Hudley (2007) also examine the importance of racial and ethnic identity for adolescents of color. They write, “There is a strong belief that ethnic minority adolescents must develop a strong, positive ethnic or racial identity to protect themselves from the prejudice, racism, and discrimination that remain common in American society” (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007, p. 150). Not only can this strong and positive identity help adolescents of color cope with the outside world, but, as Wakefield and Hudley assert, a strong identity can also support adolescents’ mental health and self-esteem (p. 152).

Research shows that for Black or African American adolescents, the importance of a strong and positive racial identity is even more imperative (Collins, 1994; Peterson & Hittie, 2010). Collins (1994) writes:

To have an identity is to have a specific place and status in the world in relation to others. For African American children and young adults, this process by which the self is literally created has tremendous significance. Within the social context of American society, the very nature of the black youth’s everyday face-to-face encounters is fraught with danger. If the social construction of the self is reflective, what is all too often

reflected to black youth are negative images, the rhetoric of failure, and the discourse of racism and inferiority. (p. 6).

Collins' words, written twenty years ago, still resonate in today's world. As Peterson and Hittie (2010) note, "Racial and cultural segregation...and the racism upon which they are based, are still very much with us" (p. 11). And so, the need for educators to help adolescents of color foster strong and positive identities is abundantly clear.

**Disability and Illness Identity.** Disability and illness are another facet of identity that many adolescents possess. Peterson and Hittie (2010) assert that disability is not a simple concept and it often carries negative connotations (p. 16). According to the authors, "Disability incorporates a wide range of conditions that affect cognitive, social-emotional, and sensory-physical functioning in complex ways" (Peterson & Hittie, 2010, p. 16). Peterson and Hittie (2010) explain that disability includes people with learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities and behavioral and emotional challenges (such as Autism Spectrum Disorder) (pp. 83-96). Additionally, many people possess disabilities based on physical functioning, such as communication, hearing, seeing, physical movement, and health and well-being" (Peterson & Hittie, 2010, p. 96).

According to Hazlett, Sweeney and Reins (2011), "Adolescents with intellectual and/or physical disabilities are victims of negativism," due to "society's harsh long-standing stereotypes, images, and labels associated with them"(Hazlett, Sweeney, & Reins, 2011, p. 207). As with adolescents who face negative racial or ethnic images, it is important to support positive identity images for adolescents with disabilities.

In addition to disability identities, many adolescents may possess illness identities, often in the form of chronic health problems. Chronic health problems may include both physical

health and mental or psychological health. According to Knopf, Park and Mulye (2008) of the National Adolescent Health Information Center, common psychological disorders include mood disorders such as depression; anxiety disorders; behavioral problems such as oppositional defiant disorder or conduct disorder; eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia; addictive disorders; and other disorders commonly seen in childhood and adolescence such as autism, learning disorders and attention-deficit/-hyperactivity disorder (p. 1). The authors note that in their 2008 study of American adolescents, “Over 1 in 10 adolescents ages 12-17 had serious behavioral or mental health difficulties” (Knopf, Park, & Mulye, 2008, p. 4).

In addition to psychological disorders, some adolescents’ identities are shaped by chronic illness. According to Yeo and Sawyer (2005), “National, population based studies from Western countries show that 20-30% of teenagers have a chronic illness, defined as one that lasts longer than six months (p. 721). Examples of chronic illnesses include epilepsy, diabetes, asthma, cancer, HIV, and heart disease (Yeo & Sawyer, 2005, p. 721). The authors note that chronic illness in adolescence can affect physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development” (Yeo & Sawyer, 2005, p. 721).

Supporting those students with disability and illness identities is considered crucial to creating inclusive schools (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 403). Cushner, McClelland and Safford (2012) write:

From its inception, a fundamental characteristic of American schooling has been its intended inclusiveness, across social boundaries of gender, class, and – belatedly – race. Today, the term inclusion refers to the practice of including another group of students in regular classrooms: students with physical, developmental, or social-emotional disabilities, and those with chronic health problems. (p. 403).

Just as with racial and ethnic identities, it is imperative that students with disability and illness identities receive affirmation and inclusion from educators.

**Class Identity.** According to Peterson and Hittie (2010), “Every community has children who are poor” (p.12). They continue, “In recent years, childhood poverty is again growing...In 2004, more than 35.9 million, or 12% of Americans including 12.1 million children, were considered to be living in poverty with an average growth of almost 1 million per year” (Peterson & Hittie, 2010, p. 12). Cushner, McClelland and Safford (2012) note that while social class is not wholly determined by income, income disparity has grown so that the top 10 percent of income earners own 70 percent of the nation’s wealth.

Cushner, McClelland and Safford (2012) identify five social classes in the United States: the upper class, or social elite; the upper-middle class; middle class; working class; and the lower class, which includes the working poor and the underclass, or those who have been in poverty for a considerable amount of time (p. 443). They comment that prospects of moving up the social ladder have diminished due to globalization, loss of manufacturing jobs, and the consequent growth of minimum wage jobs (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 443).

As bell hooks (1994) points out, class identity may be the most overlooked facet of adolescent identity (p. 177). She writes:

Class is rarely talked about in the United States; nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class differences than in educational settings. Significantly, class differences are particularly ignored in classrooms. From grade school on, we are all encouraged to cross the threshold of the classroom believing we are entering a democratic space — a free zone where the desire to study and learn makes us all equal. (hooks, 1994, p. 177).

She states that by continuing to not address class disparity, the classroom remains an undemocratic space in which some students are not represented and are not provided with the emotional support or educational tools to succeed (hooks, 1994, p. 177).

As with racial and ethnic and disability identity, there are often negative connotations attached to the poor and working class, making these adolescents even more vulnerable to deficient self-image. Like race, ethnicity, and disability, class is an important aspect of adolescent identity that deserves acknowledgement in educational spaces.

**Sexual Identity.** Another facet of adolescent identity is sexual identity. Moje and MuQaribu (2003) describe sexual identity as “the range of ways one might be identified, including...straight, gay, bisexual, lesbian, or transgender” (p. 204). The acronym LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning) will be used to identify those who fall into this identity category.

As with race, ethnicity, disability, illness, and class identities, sexual identity can often lead to the marginalization of adolescents (Young, 2011). Young (2011) states:

In a school of 1,000 students, up to 100 will be gay, lesbian, or bisexual; 10 will be transgender; and one will be inter-sex (biologically neither male nor female). If their lives are average, 87 of them will be verbally harassed, 40 of them will be physically harassed, and 19 will be physically assaulted in the next year because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. (p. 198).

Peterson and Hittie (2010) elaborate on this idea, noting, “Gay students in schools are an invisible minority, a direct result of the ridicule, prejudice, and abuse that such students both fear and experience. Given that research indicates that around 10% of the population is gay, this presents a major challenge” (p. 15).

Like adolescents from poor or working class backgrounds, LGBTQ students are often considered invisible in schools. Like adolescents of color, disabled adolescents, and adolescents from poor or working class backgrounds, LGBTQ students are also often negatively stigmatized (Peterson & Hittie, 2010, p. 15). Because of this invisibility and negativism, the sexual identity of LGBTQ adolescents should be affirmed and acknowledged by educators.

**Intersectionality.** While the brief discussion of the identities that will be addressed in this project focuses on each aspect of identity individually, in reality, this is not how identity functions. According to Berger and Guidroz (2010), “Race, class, and gender were once seen as separate issues for members of both dominant and subordinate groups. Now, scholars generally agree that these issues (as well as ethnicity, nation, age, and sexuality) – and how they intersect – are integral to individuals’ positions in the social world.” (p. 2). Thus, this project will present an intersectional view of identity; one in which the racial, ethnic, disability, illness, class, and sexual identities of adolescent women are viewed as inextricably connected.

Berger and Guidroz (2010) outline the history of intersectionality, tracing it back to “women-of-color-theorists trying to create relevant theory about the concept of multiple oppressions” (p. 4). The term “intersectionality” first appeared in the early 1990s and is credited to both legal theorist Kimberle Crenshaw and philosopher Patricia Hill Collins. However, the idea of intersectional analysis was being developed at the same time by many, including philosopher Elizabeth Spelman, gender and women’s studies professor Evelyn Nakano Glenn, sociology professor Esther Ngan-ling Chow, and feminist studies professor Eileen Boris (Berger & Guidroz, 2010; Doetsch-Kidder, 2010). According to Berger and Guidroz (2010), “Throughout the 1990s, researchers began to build on the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality were dominant factors that shape people’s experiences and complex social relations.



Scholars suggested that these intersections are hierarchical, mutually reinforcing, and simultaneous” (p. 6).

Dill (1983) provides insight into the need for intersectionality, stating, “Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American women of all classes, as well as many working-class women, have not readily identified themselves as sisters of the white middle-class women who have been in the forefront of the [feminist or women’s liberation] movement” (p. 25). Dill continues, “historically, as well as currently, black women have felt called upon to choose between their commitments to feminism and to the struggle against racial injustice” (Dill, 1983, p. 30). Intersectionality offers an alternative; one in which race and gender, among other aspects of identity, can be simultaneously acknowledged.

hooks (1994) provides some examples of how she has observed intersectionality among her college students of color from poor and working-class backgrounds. She writes, “They express frustration, anger, and sadness about the tensions and stress they experience trying to conform to acceptable white, middle-class behaviors in university settings while retaining the ability to ‘deal’ at home” (hooks, 1994, p. 182). In response to their struggles, hooks urges her students to embrace their intersecting identities. She writes, “I encourage my students to reject the notion that they must choose between experiences. They must believe they can inhabit comfortably two different worlds, but they must make each space one of comfort. They must creatively invent ways to cross borders” (hooks, 1994, p. 183). It is hoped that the intersectional approach to identity in this project will similarly encourage the students for whom this project is intended to “cross borders.”

Hazlett, Sweeney, and Reins (2011) discuss another intersection: the identity of LGBTQ adolescents with disabilities. They write, “Adolescence is chaotic for all individuals, but LGBTQ

adolescents with intellectual and/or physical disabilities struggle with what it means to be furthest from the majority. These teens experience varying exclusions and harassments from peers, educators, and family members” (p. 206).

According to Doetsch-Kidder (2012), intersectionality “theorizes multiple identities and argues for the necessity of coalitions that cross lines of class, race, sexuality, gender, and disability” (p. 2). It also maintains “a view of different types of oppression as connected and a commitment to complexity that often accompanies experiences of multiple identities” (Doetsch-Kidder, 2012, pp. 3). It is hoped that by taking an intersectional approach to identity, this project can affirm the *whole* identities and address the full needs of adolescent women.

### **Inclusive Classrooms through Identity Affirmation**

Activist, author and professor bell hooks writes passionately about the necessity of teaching the whole student. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) hooks writes, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13). By addressing the intersectional identities of students, educators can do just this. Perrotti and Westheimer (2001) write:

Our identities provide a filter through which we view the world and through which the world often views us. If we are allowed to express only limited aspects of ourselves, or if certain identities are valued more than others, the world can feel incongruous. (p. 47).

Kissen (2002) asserts that the hiding of identity can be even more perilous. She writes, “Teachers must take responsibility for their students’ safety as well as their academic achievement. When fundamental parts of a child’s life are overlooked, the child suffers” (Kissen, 2002, p. 229).

The importance of affirming students' whole identities is perhaps even greater when dealing with young women (Heilman, 1998). Heilman (1998) writes:

Girls need most of all to have an environment in which a healthy identity can be fostered...Girls fall behind most dramatically when they lose their sense of themselves as powerful human beings at a time when, developmentally, their feelings of power should be expanding. This cannot occur until educators consider the multiple factors that affect girls' sense of identity and the multiple ways in which schools can help foster power and confidence in their female students. (p. 202).

Heilman (1998) states that in order to do this, educators must consider "both representation and a critical focus on the experience of girls and women within the curriculum" (p. 202). She continues, "Schools can potentially help to provide a critical distance among the family, the economy, and corporate-drive mass media in which girls can understand, deconstruct, and reconstruct their emerging identities" (Heilman, 1998, p. 202).

For students of color — and particularly young women of color — the need for identity affirmation is equally paramount (Day, 1994; Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012; hooks, 1994). hooks (1994) discusses how many of her own brilliant students of color spent entire semesters not speaking in class, noting, "Some express the feeling that they are less likely to suffer any kind of assault if they simply do not assert their subjectivity. They have told me that many professors never showed any interest in hearing their voices" (p. 40). To prevent this self-silencing, hooks states that students should be encouraged to bring their identities with them in class. She writes, "Accepting the decentering of the West globally, embracing multiculturalism, compels educators to focus attention on the issue of voice. Who speaks? Who listens? And why?" (hooks, 1994, p. 40). hooks notes that the importance of encouraging students' unique

voices extends to students from all marginalized identities, such as LGBTQ students, students from poor or working class backgrounds, and students with disabilities (hooks, 1994, pp. 83-84).

One way to address intersectional identities and encourage students' voices in the classroom is through multicultural education (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012; Day, 1994; hooks, 1994). Multicultural education is "the process of educational reform that assures that students from all groups (racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, ability, gender, etc.) experience educational quality, success, and social mobility" (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 22). hooks (1994) elaborates on how multicultural education can create more inclusive classrooms. She states, "When we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve" (hooks, 1994, p. 44). Additionally, Cushner, McClelland and Safford (2012) address the profound effects multicultural education can have on students' self-image:

Children can develop confidence in themselves when they are in educational environments in which they feel secure and accepted, in which their participation is valued... Involving children in lessons in which they can see themselves or their culture reflected in a variety of ways helps to create a solid sense of self as well as a classroom that is respectful and understanding of others. Creating such an environment should be of prime concern to educators. (p. 194).

The necessity of creating culturally and identity inclusive educational settings is evident.

Not only can multicultural education help affirm the identities of marginalized students, it can also foster empathy in students from dominant or privileged groups (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012; Day, 1994; Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001). Cushner, McClelland and Safford (2012) write, "Activities designed to help students see the world from another's perspective and

thus develop empathy, or an understanding of the thoughts and feelings of another, are effective in reducing prejudice and improving intergroup relations” (p. 194). Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2012) recommend several ways to reduce prejudice in the classroom, including improving self-confidence and self-esteem of students (p. 193). They write:

The more confident a person is in his or her own sense of identity and competence, the lower is that person’s degree of prejudice, and vice versa...there is strong evidence that self-acceptance is critical to mental, physical, and emotional health. Children with high self-esteem tend to be open and respectful of other people and maintain their sense of self without having to denigrate others” (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, pp. 193-194).

Thus, by increasing the self-image of all students, educators can help develop empathy in students from dominant or privileged groups. Perrotti and Westheimer (2001) assert that multicultural classrooms can benefit all students as they lead to greater understanding of the intersectional nature of identity, whether it be racial, ethnic, disability, illness, class or sexual identity. They write, “Just as barriers increase when connections among various forms of oppression are not examined, understanding grows when those connections are made” (Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001, p. 54). One such way to promote multicultural education and to help students make these connections is through the use of young adult literature.

### **Young Adult Literature**

Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson and Nilsen (2013) define young adult (or YA) fiction as “anything that readers between the approximate ages of twelve and eighteen choose to read either for leisure reading or to fill school assignments” (p. 3). In her *Horn Book* column “The Sand in the Oyster: Middle Muddle,” Patty Campbell writes:

The central theme of most YA fiction is becoming an adult, finding the answer to the question “Who am I and what am I going to do about it?” No matter what events are going on in the book, accomplishing that task is really what the book is about, and in the climactic moment the resolution of the external conflict is linked to a realization for the protagonist that helps shape an adult identity” (as cited in Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013, p. 3).

Bean and Moni (2003) also comment on the focus of identity within young adult literature, stating that it “offers a unique window on societal conflicts and dilemmas...Much of its appeal rests on the immediacy of first-person narration and the unique point of view offered by an adolescent main character” (p. 638).

Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen (2013) identify seven characteristics of young adult literature:

- 1) Young adult authors write from the viewpoint of young people.
- 2) Young characters in young adult novels are the ones to solve problems or to play the hero.
- 3) Young adult literature is basically optimistic and characters make worthy accomplishments.
- 4) Young adult literature is fast paced, containing narrative hooks, secrecy surprise, and tension.
- 5) Young adult literature includes a variety of genre, subjects, and levels of sophistication.
- 6) Young adult literature includes stories about characters from many different ethnic and cultural groups not often found in the literary canon.

7) Series books are an increasingly important part of young adult literature. (pp. 28-37).

In addition to these characteristics, Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen (2013) briefly outline the history of young adult literature, tracing its roots back to 1800 (p. 20). They note that young adult literature has come along way since its beginnings, during which the books mostly focused on white, middle-class characters (Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen p. 20). They write:

As books became more sophisticated and writers became more aware of matters related to inclusion, books became less segregated along racial lines. Also, authors began writing about other kinds of personal identity related to social class, politics, religion, and sexual orientations. Some psychologists say that the overwhelming job for all teenagers is the establishment of their own identity, separate from that of their parents, and so of course there are many novels relating to this concept. (Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013, pp. 20-22).

This quote illuminates the potential for young adult literature to promote multicultural education by addressing and affirming the intersectional identities of all students, which will be further explored in the next section.

### **Identity and Young Adult Literature**

One of the ways that English Language Arts educators can address the intersectional identities of all students is through the use of young adult literature (Bean & Moni, 2003; Logan, Lasswell, Hood, & Watson, 2014; Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013). This is because much of young adult literature focuses on issues of identity (Bean & Moni, 2003; Logan, Lasswell, Hood, & Watson, 2014; Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen, 2013). According to Bean and Moni (2003), “Adolescent readers view characters in young adult novels

as living and wrestling with real problems close to their own life experiences as teens. At the center of all of these themes are questions of character identity and values” (p. 638). Moje and MuQaribu (2003) expand on this idea:

In recent years, literacy teachers and researchers have begun to understand the important links between reading and writing practices and how people develop and enact identities in the world. As a consequence of our understanding that “identity matters” in the development of one’s reading and writing practices and, conversely, that reading and writing matter for how one identifies and is identified, literacy educators have looked closely at aspects of identity such as race and ethnicity, social class, gender, and religious affiliation. (p. 204).

Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen (2013) discuss how particular qualities of young adult literature address identity:

Some psychologists gather all developmental tasks under the umbrella heading of “achieving an identity,” which they describe as *the* task of adolescence. Some aspect of this is in practically any piece of fiction, poetry, drama, informative nonfiction, biographies, and self-help books that are written and published specifically for teenagers. (p. 38).

Because young adult literature focuses so prominently on identity, it is an excellent tool for English language arts educators to use to create multicultural classrooms that address all students’ identities.

**Adolescent Women and Young Adult Literature.** Adolescent women in particular can benefit from young adult literature in educational settings (Pipher, 2005; Tighe, 2005). Pipher’s (2005) research shows “girls are exposed to almost three times as many boy-centered stories as



girls-centered stories” (p. 62). Pipher recommends young women “read more books by and about women, thereby allowing them to identify with protagonists who are struggling with and overcoming the same problems they are confronting in their own lives” (Tighe, 2005, pp. 56-57). Writing about Pipher’s work, Tighe (2005) notes, “Young adult literature offers an abundance of literature...that describes the lives of young girls struggling with society’s expectations while striving to be true to themselves. And, most importantly, this literature portrays them as survivors” (p. 57).

**Adolescents of Color and Young Adult Literature.** Similarly, young adult literature can benefit students of color, especially female students of color (Collins, 1994; Hughes-Hassell, 2013; Smith, 1994). Hughes-Hassell (2013) writes:

“We cannot overestimate the power of seeing (or not seeing) oneself in literature. Culturally relevant literature allows teens to establish personal connections with characters, increasing the likelihood that reading will become an appealing activity. It helps them identify with their own culture, and it engenders an appreciation for the diversity that occurs both within and across racial and cultural groups” (p. 214).

Discussing African American biographies for young adults, Carol Jones Collins (1994) writes, “They can help black youth find a place to stand emotionally and psychologically. They can help black young people develop a sense of kinship with their black forebears, letting them know that they do not stand alone” (p. 1). Some researchers have noted that young adult literature that focuses on identities of people of color can also help dismiss the idea that any racial or ethnic group has a “single story” or single point of view (Hughes-Hassell, 2013; Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013). Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen write:

One of the most important concepts that needs to be taught is that there are large differences among people typically identified as a group... Teachers, librarians, and reviewers should not present and discuss any single book as if it represents the African American point of view of the Asian American point of view. Adults need to help young readers realize that there are many points of view. (p. 133).

**LGBTQ Adolescents and Young Adult Literature.** Similarly, young adult literature that features LGBTQ characters can also provide multiple points of view. Perrotti and Westheimer (2001) discuss how deserved focus on the “violence, harassment, and suicidal thoughts that gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people” face often provides an unbalanced picture of the lived experience of LGBTQ adolescents (p. 31). They write, “Young people have coping skills; not all gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth attempt suicide, and many who initially had difficulties are now thriving... The picture must be balanced with examples of resilient young people who have found internal strength and external support” (Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001, p. 32). Research indicates that like adolescents of color, LGBTQ adolescents can also benefit from young adult literature that addresses their identities (Hazlett, Sweeney, & Reins, 2011; Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013; Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001). Perrotti and Westheimer (2001) provide an example of a lesbian high school student who discovered in a library *Annie on My Mind*, Nancy Garden’s story about two girls who fall in love (p. 43). They recall:

This was the first book she’s read that reflected her own experiences. She was thrilled. Ever since we heard her story, we have recommended that schools get multiple copies of books with gay, lesbian, and bisexual content and make them readily available to students. (Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001, p. 43).

The authors borrow the term “scanning for safety” from a colleague to “describe the way gay and lesbian people look for reflections of themselves and cues to determine supportive resources” (Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001, pp. 44-45). They conclude, “Books can make a powerful difference in a young person’s life. Many gay and lesbian adults can remember a particular book they read when they were younger that helped them feel less alone and more connected to the world, or at least to themselves” (Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001, p. 163).

**Intersectional Identity and Young Adult Literature.** Hazlett, Sweeney, and Reins (2011) note that young adult literature can also have a positive effect on adolescents with disabilities (p. 211). They write:

The struggles and successes of the intellectually disabled convey their desire and achievement of full lives. Focusing upon the characters and their diverse situations further humanizes this group, as readers can view them as individual peers rather than a single, dissimilar set that should be avoided. (Hazlett, Sweeney, & Reins, 2011, p. 211).

The effect of young adult literature on adolescents’ identity also extends to adolescents from poor or working class backgrounds, as well as adolescents from all marginalized identity groups. According to Michael Cart, *Booklist* columnist and reviewer, there is a need for books that will help “kids who are living outside of the mainstream in radically nontraditional families deal with their circumstances – circumstances that often result in their being marginalized, rendered invisible, regarded as unacceptably different, or even being persecuted by peers” (as cited in Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013, p. 129).

**Fostering Empathy with Young Adult Literature.** Young adult literature that focuses on marginalized identities can also benefit adolescents from dominant or privileged groups (Lesesne, 2010; Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013). According to Nilsen,

Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen (2013), two reasons that young adults read are to find themselves in a story and to venture beyond themselves (pp. 12-13). They explain that not only do young adults read to “find out about themselves,” they also read to go beyond themselves (p. 12). “Students respond to the way these books raise questions about conformity, social pressures, justice, and other aspects of human frailties and strengths” (Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013, p. 13). Logan, Lasswell, Hood, and Watson (2014) refer to these two purposes for reading as “window and mirror opportunities” (p. 34). They write:

Educators should select literature that provides students window and mirror opportunities. Window opportunities expose students to aspects of the literature that offer new insights and perspectives to their existing notions. A mirror opportunity occurs when readers get to relate to what is read through reflective interactions with the characters...Mirror opportunities take place when the literature focuses on geographical locations, cultural traditions, developmental stages, sexual orientations, and gender expressions that are akin to those of adolescent students. (Logan, Lasswell, Hood, & Watson, 2014, p. 34).

Thus, young adult literature can benefit students of all intersecting identities.

Hazlett, Sweeney, and Reins (2011) reiterate the importance of incorporating diverse young adult literature in the classroom: “Fully integrated, young adult literature that assists adolescents’ perception, awareness, and inclusion of others and themselves is a vital precondition to their leading meaningful, productive adult lives” (p. 212). Moje and MuQaribu (2003) mention that educators must support not only all student identities, but also all student literacy skills (p. 208). The next section will discuss the use of reading ladders to do just this.

## Reading Ladders

**What are Reading Ladders?** Author, professor, and former teacher Teri Lesesne (2010) acknowledges the many obligations teachers have to students: “It is up to us to help them taste a wide variety of books. But beyond showing students a wide variety of genre, forms, and formats, there is another part to our task: helping them grow as readers” (Lesesne, 2010, p. 47). To do this, Lesesne proposes the use of reading ladders. She explains:

Reading ladders take students from one level of reading to the next logical level. If students like certain types of books, certain genres, or certain qualities in a book, we can help them stretch as readers by showing them books that mirror what they already like but that perhaps are a little longer, are a bit more abstract, or will challenge them more. (Lesesne, 2010, pp. 47-48).

In other words, a reading ladder is a series or set of books that are related (by theme, genre, etc...) and provide readers a way to develop from simple to more complex texts (Lesesne, 2010, p. 48). Lesesne (2010) explains that the first rung is a book that students can easily connect with and the top rung is the most complex book; one that educators believe students can achieve once they have read the books preceding it (p. 48). Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson and Nilsen (2013) provide an example of how a reading ladder might work (p. 343). They write, “Good teachers employ the concept of reading ladders; for example, helping a girl move from a frivolous romance to a Laurie Halse Anderson book and on to *Gone With the Wind* and *Jane Eyre*” (Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013, p. 343).

Lesesne (2010) points out the importance of reading ladders to provide guidance for students as they develop as readers (p. 46). She says that readers “need an adequate foundation, they need to know how to build upon that foundation, and they need our assistance when things

get so frustrating that they are tempted to simply surrender” (Lesesne, 2010, p. 19). “Reading ladders provide that wonderful scaffolding that emerging lifetime readers need by helping them find other books that offer satisfying reading experiences” (Lesesne, 2010, p. 48)

**Why Reading Ladders are Used in this Project.** Lesesne (2010) advises educators to begin creating reading ladders based on students’ own interests and preferences (p. 49). Lesesne (2010) states, “we can make connections between the themes and topics of books and the lives of our students” (p. 7). The many facets of students’ intersectional identities would likely be an interest and would certainly relate to the lives of students. As the previous section on identity and young adult literature demonstrated, it is imperative that students read literature that reflects their own identities.

Lesesne also notes that books that create empathy in students can make excellent reading ladders. She writes:

Reading ladders based on books through which this kind of theme runs can help students deal with the realities of their own or others’ lives. As the books delve more deeply into the themes and the characters who experience them, students’ capacity to internalize someone else’s feelings or to recognize and deal with their own feelings expands, pushing them towards a broader and more humane understanding of their world”.

(Lesesne, 2010, p. 73).

Thus, reading ladders can be used to present students with literature about their own identities and to expose students to other identities, all the while helping students develop into stronger readers. It is hoped that the reading ladders used in this project will provide a challenging and intriguing way to introduce adolescent women to literature that acknowledges and affirms their intersectional identities.

## CHAPTER 2

### DESCRIPTION OF STUDENTS AND OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

#### Description of Students

**Academically.** This project is designed for a class of freshmen at an all girls private school in a first-ring suburb of Detroit. The school has approximately 900 students, with a little over 200 students in each grade level.

Academically, these students are moderately motivated to excel in the classes they find most interesting, primarily arts and humanities. While the students make decent grades in science and mathematics courses, they prefer reading and creative classes. Many of the students are avid readers who engage in recreational reading. Others must be encouraged by teachers to read, but nevertheless have good reading skills. The quality of literature that students read, both in terms of reading level and maturity, could be improved upon. Most students read books that are below their reading ability.

The English language arts curriculum for Grade 9 requires each student to take one yearlong course in American literature. The curriculum requires students to study many modern American classics, such as *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, and *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. In addition to the literature studied by the entire class, students are required to choose ten young adult books from a designated list to read throughout the year. Students have the option to reflect on this reading through an essay or a book talk.

Most of the students plan to pursue higher education, mostly at community colleges or four-year universities. The majority of students plan to stay in state for school, but a few have expressed desire to move out of state after high school.

**Economically.** Economically, these students are middle to lower middle class and working class. Some of the students attend school on scholarship, while others have parents or relatives who pay their tuition. Some of the students have single parents and all of the students who live in a two-parent household have parents who work outside of the home. Many of the students have their own part-time jobs in retail or food service or work as babysitters and tutors.

**Socially.** Socially, these students are moderately involved in extracurricular activities. Many play sports, such as basketball, volleyball, softball, or track and field. Others are involved in the school newspaper, honor society, language clubs, theater, and volunteer organizations. Because of the number of students who have part-time employment, many are not able to be as involved in extracurricular activities as they wish. The students live in both Detroit and some of its neighboring suburbs, so many have school friends from different areas and neighborhood friends whom they socialize with.

The school contains some cliques, but because the students come from many areas in metro-Detroit, most of the students started off their high school careers with a blank slate, not knowing anyone else in the school. This seems to have helped prevent an environment of bullying or a “mean girl” environment. An additional factor in the generally positive and welcoming environment of the school is that there are no male students and, thus, a lack of relationship drama among heterosexual students.

**Racially/Ethnically.** Racially or ethnically, this group of students is moderately diverse. Approximately 40% of the students identify as white or Caucasian. Approximately 40% of the



students identify as Black or African American. Approximately 10% of the students identify as Arab and approximately 10% identify as Latina.

**Interests.** These students have a wide range of interests. Most are interested in music, primarily pop artists such as Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, and Taylor Swift and popular rock music, such as Maroon 5 and One Direction. Most are also interested in popular films, especially those based on book series, like the *Twilight* films and *Hunger Games* films, and romantic comedies. The students are interested in book series such as *Twilight* and *Hunger Games*, as well as many other popular fantasy books and young adult novels. The students primarily watch television on Netflix and online and many are interested in popular shows such as *The Vampire Diaries*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

As mentioned, many of the students are involved in sports and are interested in modern dance and fitness activities. Many of the students are interested in beauty and fashion and enjoy learning how to apply makeup, style hair and follow fashion trends. The majority of students enjoy taking part in social media, such as Tumblr and Twitter, as well as photo and video sharing apps, such as Vine and Instagram.

**Concerns.** These students are concerned primarily with doing well in school and with fitting in with their peers. Many of the students hope to be the first in their families to attend college, so grades are important. For students on scholarship, grades are even more important and can be extremely stressful. Balancing school, work and social lives proves to be challenging to many of the students. These students are also concerned with fitting in with their peers and maintaining friendships with both school friends and neighborhood friends. Several of the students are in romantic relationships, which can often distract them from school, work, and

friendships. Many of the students are concerned with appearances and can be heard discussing at length various diets, beauty trends, and fitness programs that they are trying or would like to try.

Many students have begun to express concern over social issues, such as institutionalized racism, homophobia, and sexism. For many students, particularly students of color and lesbian students, these are extremely personal issues. Many of the white and heterosexual students see themselves as allies for those who are targets of racism and homophobia.

### **Overview of the Project**

This project consists of five five-book reading ladders for use in a Grade 9 English language arts classroom. This project is guided by the idea discussed in Chapter 1 that all students deserve to have their intersectional identities acknowledged and affirmed by educational curricula. The reading ladder format of this project will take advantage of the varied skill, ability, and interests of the students. As mentioned in the previous section, in addition to the literature studied in Grade 9 English language arts, each student must choose ten young adult books from a designated list to read throughout the year. The books in these reading ladders constitute the designated list. Each student is required to select two of the five-book reading ladders to read throughout the year.

Each reading ladder contains five books on at least three readability levels. Two readability formulas were used to determine the readability level of each book: the New Dale-Chall Readability Formula and the Fry Graph Readability Formula. The New Dale-Chall Readability Formula determines reading level by calculating the grade level of a text sample based on sentence length and the number of difficult words. The difficult words are words that do not appear on a specific list of common words familiar to most grade 4 students. The Fry Graph Readability Formula determines sophistication by calculating the average number of

sentences and syllables per hundred words. These averages are plotted onto a specific graph and the intersection of the average number of sentences and the average number of syllables determines the reading level of the book by grade. The books included in this project were measured using the free calculators provided by readabilityformulas.com for both formulas. For each book, a random 300-word sample was entered into the respective formula calculators to determine each book's reading level and sophistication.

Each of the five reading ladders focuses on a different aspect of identity that were selected to best fit the students this project was designed for. Each reading ladder also contains at least seven additional sub-topics or sub-themes. The sub-topics and sub-themes highlight the intersectional nature of identity, as discussed in Chapter 1. A brief rationale of each of the five Reading Ladders follows.

### **READING LADDER 1: AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY**

The first reading ladder focuses on **AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY**. Because 40% of the students for whom this project is designed identify as African American or Black, it was considered appropriate to create an entire reading ladder for this identity. As noted in Chapter 1, for the students who identify as Black or African American, this reading ladder will affirm their identity by exposing them to fictional characters that share their identity. For students who do not identify with this identity, this reading ladder will offer a “window” opportunity to learn more about the lives of those who do identify as African American or Black. This reading ladder contains the sub-topics and sub-themes of:

Class Identity

Discrimination

Friendship

Illness Identity

Love

Resilience

Self Esteem

Sexual Identity.

Contained within this reading ladder are:

*The Skin I'm In* by Sharon G. Flake

*32 Candles* by Ernessa T. Carter

*Coffee Will Make You Black* by April Sinclair

*Life Is Fine* b Allison Whittenberg

*Pointe* by Brandy Colbert.

## **READING LADDER 2: ETHNIC IDENTITY**

The second reading ladder focuses on **ETHNIC IDENTITY**. Because 10% of the students for whom this project is designed identify as Arab and 10% identify as Latina, the five books in this reading ladder focus on characters that identify as Arab or Latina. As with the first reading ladder, this reading ladder will affirm the identities of students who identify as Arab or Latina and will offer other students an opportunity to better understand the lives of their Arab and Latina peers. This reading ladder contains the sub-topics and sub-themes of:

Change

Class Identity

Dreams

Family

Home

Independence

Love

Tradition

War and Peace.

Contained within this reading ladder are:

*Chasing the Jaguar* by Michelle Dominiguez Greene

*Habibi* by Naomi Shihab Nye

*The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

*Flowers in the Sky* by Lynn Joseph

*The Girl Who Fell to Earth* by Sophia Al-Maria.

### **READING LADDER 3: ABILITY AND ILLNESS IDENTITY**

The third reading ladder focuses on **ABILITY AND ILLNESS IDENTITY**. Of the approximately 200 students in Grade 9 for whom this project is designed, two are partially blind, three are partially deaf, and two use wheelchairs. Several students have learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. Two students have an Autism Spectrum Disorder, such as Asperger Syndrome. Many students have some kind of chronic illness, both physical and psychological. Some of these illnesses include asthma, Crohn's disease, epilepsy, diabetes, anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Because there is such a wide variety of ability and illness identities in this group of students, this reading ladder contains a diverse group of books that will affirm the identities of many of these students and help students who do not share these identities to better understand their peers. This reading ladder contains the sub-topics and sub-themes of:

Alienation

Class Identity

Empathy

Ethnic Identity

Family

Friendship

Grief

Love

Racial Identity

Resilience

Self Esteem.

Contained within this reading ladder are:

*Girls Like Us* by Gail Giles

*The Nature of Jade* by Deb Caletti

*Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper

*The Way We Bared Our Souls* by Willa Strayhorn

*Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson.

#### **READING LADDER 4: CLASS IDENTITY**

The fourth reading ladder focuses on **CLASS IDENTITY**. The students for whom this reading ladder is designed are middle to lower middle class and working class. Some of the students attend school on scholarship, while others have parents or relatives who pay their tuition. This reading ladder will address the identities of those students who are lower middle class and also allow students from both middle class and lower middle class backgrounds to

learn more about adolescents from poor or working class backgrounds. This reading ladder contains the sub-topics and sub-themes of:

Appearances

Betrayal

Family

Friendship

Grief

Illness Identity

Love

Power

Racial Identity

Sacrifice

Self Esteem

Strength.

Contained within this reading ladder are:

*Story of a Girl* by Sara Zarr

*Such a Rush* by Jennifer Echols

*The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins

*Eleanor and Park* by Rainbow Rowell

*We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart.

## **READING LADDER 5: SEXUAL IDENTITY**

The fifth and last reading ladder focuses on **SEXUAL IDENTITY**. As discussed in Chapter 1, statistically 10% of any group of students will identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and

1% will identify as transgender (Young, 2011, p. 198). Some of the students for whom this project is designed vocally identify as lesbian or bisexual, but it can be assumed that others are still questioning their sexual identities. With these statistics in mind, this reading ladder is designed to affirm the identities of these students and provide heterosexual or non-questioning students with insight into the lives of their peers. This reading ladder contains the sub-topics and sub-themes of:

Alienation

Class Identity

Family

Hope

Loss

Love

Racial Identity

Resilience.

Contained within this reading ladder are:

*Annie On My Mind* by Nancy Garden

*Ask the Passengers* by A.S. King

*Everything Leads To You* by Nina LaCour

*Nevada* by Imogen Binnie

*The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily M. Danforth.

By addressing five different identities and various sub-topics and sub-themes, it is hoped that the five reading ladders will affirm the intersectional identities of the students for whom this



project was created. Immediately following are detailed outlines of each reading ladder. The five five-book reading ladders can be found in their entirety in Chapter 3.

Five-Book Reading Ladder  
 Topic/Theme: African American Identity  
 Grade 9

<u>Author</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s)</u>	<u>Reading Level</u>	<u>Soph. Level</u>
Brandy Colbert	<i>Pointe</i>	Illness Identity, Love Self Esteem	9-10	10
Allison Whittenberg	<i>Life Is Fine</i>	Friendship, Resilience	8-9	8
April Sinclair	<i>Coffee Will Make You Black</i>	Discrimination, Self Esteem Sexual Identity	7-8	8
Ernessa T. Carter	<i>32 Candles</i>	Class Identity, Love, Resilience	7-8	7
Sharon G. Flake	<i>The Skin I'm In</i>	Class Identity, Resilience, Self Esteem	7-8	7

Five-Book Reading Ladder  
 Topic/Theme: Ethnic Identity  
 Grade 9

<u>Author</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s)</u>	<u>Reading Level</u>	<u>Soph. Level</u>
Sophia Al-Maria	<i>The Girl Who Fell to Earth</i>	Family, Independence, Tradition	9-10	9
Lynn Joseph	<i>Flowers in the Sky</i>	Family, Home, Independence	8-9	8
Sandra Cisneros	<i>The House on Mango Street</i>	Class Identity, Family, Home	7-8	8
Naomi Shihab Nye	<i>Habibi</i>	Family, Love, War and Peace	7-8	7
Michelle Dominiguez Greene	<i>Chasing the Jaguar</i>	Change, Dreams, Independence, Tradition	7-8	7

Five-Book Reading Ladder  
 Topic/Theme: Ability and Illness Identity  
 Grade 9

<u>Author</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s)</u>	<u>Reading Level</u>	<u>Soph. Level</u>
Laurie Halse Anderson	<i>Wintergirls</i>	Friendship, Grief, Self Esteem	9-10	10
Willa Strayhorn	<i>The Way We Bared Our Souls</i>	Empathy, Ethnic Identity, Friendship	8-9	9
Sharon Draper	<i>Out of My Mind</i>	Alienation, Friendship, Resilience	8-9	8
Deb Caletti	<i>The Nature of Jade</i>	Family, Love, Resilience	7-8	8-9
Gail Giles	<i>Girls Like Us</i>	Class Identity, Friendship, Racial Identity, Resilience	7-8	7

Five-Book Reading Ladder  
 Topic/Theme: Class Identity  
 Grade 9

<u>Author</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s)</u>	<u>Reading Level</u>	<u>Soph. Level</u>
E. Lockhart	<i>We Were Liars</i>	Family, Illness Identity Love, Racial Identity	9-10	10
Rainbow Rowell	<i>Eleanor and Park</i>	Love, Racial Identity, Self Esteem	8-9	9
Suzanne Collins	<i>The Hunger Games</i>	Appearances, Power, Racial Identity, Sacrifice, Strength	7-8	8
Jennifer Echols	<i>Such a Rush</i>	Betrayal, Friendship, Grief	7-8	8-9
Sara Zarr	<i>Story of a Girl</i>	Family, Friendship Self Esteem	6-7	7

Five-Book Reading Ladder  
 Topic/Theme: Sexual Identity  
 Grade 9

<u>Author</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s)</u>	<u>Reading Level</u>	<u>Soph. Level</u>
Emily M. Danforth	<i>The Miseducation of Cameron Post</i>	Family, Loss, Resilience	9-10	10
Imogen Binnie	<i>Nevada</i>	Hope, Loss, Love, Resilience	8-9	9
Nina LaCour	<i>Everything Leads to You</i>	Class Identity, Loss, Love, Racial Identity	8-9	9
A.S. King	<i>Ask the Passengers</i>	Alienation, Family, Love	7-8	8
Nancy Garden	<i>Annie On My Mind</i>	Class Identity, Love, Resilience	7-8	7

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **FIVE-BOOK READING LADDERS**

The reading ladders referred to in Chapter 2 are presented in their entirety in this chapter. This project is guided by the idea discussed in Chapter 1 that all students deserve to have their intersectional identities acknowledged and affirmed by educational curricula. Accordingly, each of the five reading ladders in this project focuses on a specific facet of adolescent female identity. The first reading ladder focuses on the topic of African American Identity and features characters that identify as African American or Black and represent various backgrounds and lifestyles. The second reading ladder focuses on Ethnic Identity and features characters that identify as Arab and Latina and represent various backgrounds and lifestyles. The third reading ladder focuses on Ability and Illness Identity and features characters with learning disabilities, psychological disorders, eating disorders, and chronic illnesses. The fourth reading ladder focuses on Class Identity and features characters from working or lower class backgrounds. The fifth and last reading ladder focuses on Sexual Identity and features characters that are lesbian, bisexual and transgender.

**READING LADDER 1:  
AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY**



## **RATIONALE FOR READING LADDER: AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY**

### **I. Why this topic? What is the significance for human beings in general? What is the significance for students in ninth grade?**

The topic of **AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY** was chosen for this reading ladder because it holds significance for this specific group of students, as well as for all human beings. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) reports that over 13% of United States citizens, or over 42 million citizens, identify as Black or African American. Traditionally, the term African American has applied to the descendents of African slaves, but individuals and their descendents from the Caribbean, Central America, and South America may also identify with the term. This is a notable portion of the population and, thus, a significant topic.

The history of African Americans in the United States began with brutality and contemporary African Americans still regularly face prejudice, discrimination, and racism, both on systemic and individual levels. These topics are often taught in American and non-American classrooms and most human beings have a general idea of the history of African Americans. However, while it is imperative to understand the many hardships African Americans have endured, the topic of African American or Black history should not focus solely on the negative aspects, as this would overlook the complete identity and experience of Black or African American individuals. A complete look at African American or Black history should encompass both positive and negative; it must acknowledge the historical struggle while also celebrating the strengths, achievements, and traditions of African American and Black individuals and communities.

While African American history may be familiar to most people, Black or African American Identity, let alone adolescent Black or African American Identity, might not be such a familiar topic. As noted in Chapter 1, for adolescents belonging to non-white racial and ethnic

groups, identity can be a complex issue (Hughes-Hassell, 2013; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). For African American or Black adolescents, identity can be especially complex. Wakefield and Hudley (2007) discuss how forging a positive identity can help Black or African American adolescents combat the prejudice, racism and discrimination they are likely to face throughout their lives. Learning about this identity can affirm those individuals who identify as Black or African American and can help others better understand the unique facets of Black or African American Identity.

The idea that better understanding of Black or African American Identity can lead to empathy is an important one, especially at this point in history. The recent murders of Black or African American children and adults by both police and racially-motivated individuals has resulted in a movement to condemn these acts and to assert that “Black Lives Matter.” While the idea that Black lives do not matter may seem absurd, these recent events have shown that this is what some individuals in our society believe. If knowledge and understanding are a step toward empathy, then perhaps greater knowledge of topics such as Black or African American Identity can contribute to the eradication of racism. This could be particularly effective among young people who are still forming their worldviews and opinions.

As noted in Chapter 2, the topic of this reading ladder is significant for this particular group of students. Because 40% of the students for whom this project is designed identify as African American or Black, it was considered appropriate to create an entire reading ladder for this identity to act as a “mirror” opportunity for these students. As noted in Chapter 1, for the students who identify as Black or African American, this reading ladder will affirm their identity by exposing them to fictional characters that share their identity. Hughes-Hassell (2013) writes about the power of seeing oneself in literature (p. 214). Collins (1994) also writes about how

books that feature Black or African American protagonists can help adolescents of color connect with their ancestors and find strength in themselves and other adolescents of color (p. 6). As previously noted, we live in a time where Black or African American youth need all of the strength and support they can get.

For students who do not identify with this identity, this reading ladder will offer a “window” opportunity to learn more about the lives of those who do identify as African American or Black. As discussed in Chapter 1, reading about the experiences of different people helps develop empathy. Additionally, reading multiple stories about people who share one identity can help prevent the idea that any group has a “single story” or single point of view. While 40% of the students for whom this project is intended identify as African American or Black, 60% do not identify this way. This topic will allow this 60% to better understand many facets of Black or African American identity and to develop empathy for their peers.

## II. WHY EACH INDIVIDUAL SELECTION HAS BEEN INCLUDED IN THIS READING LADDER

### **The Skin I'm In** by Sharon G. Flake

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

The first book or lowest rung in this reading ladder is about a 7<sup>th</sup> grade student named Maleeka who is bullied by her peers for numerous reasons, such as her intelligence and homemade clothing, but primarily because she has dark skin. Maleeka's life begins to change the day a new teacher, Miss Saunders, begins working at her school. Miss Saunders has vitiligo, a disorder that causes the loss of skin color in blotches, and, noticing Maleeka's outcast status, takes an interest in her. Throughout the book, Maleeka learns about trust and self-confidence. This book has a low enough reading level that it will be an easy read for the students this project is designed for. The content however, should hold these students' interest. Because Maleeka's dark skin color is a prominent part of this book, it is an appropriate contribution to the topic of African American Identity.

### **32 Candles** by Ernessa T. Carter

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

The second book in this reading ladder has the same reading and sophistication level of the first book, but is a little more mature in content. This book follows Davie Jones, an "ugly duckling" from rural Mississippi through high school as she is bullied and yearns to escape from her alcoholic mother's home. After seeing the film *Sixteen Candles*, Davie becomes inspired to reinvent herself and runs away to Hollywood to become a singer. When her high school crush appears in her nightclub, Davie is forced to deal with her difficult past. Like *The Skin I'm In*, this book also focuses on skin color and the desire to be accepted for one's true self.

### **Coffee Will Make You Black** by April Sinclair

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8

The third book in this reading ladder is about Jean "Stevie" Stevenson, a young woman growing up through the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in Chicago. Stevie struggles with ordinary teenage issues, such as how to reconcile her academic ambitions with her desire to fit in with the "cool" crowd. Additionally, as Stevie comes of age she struggles to better understand her African American and sexual identities. While this book takes place in the 1960s and early 1970s, Stevie's experiences of growing up, facing discrimination, and finding herself are relevant to contemporary teenagers.

**Life is Fine** by Allison Whittenberg

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 8

The fourth book in this reading ladder is about Samara, a loner who feels alienated from her overworked mother and her mother's lazy boyfriend. When her English teacher falls ill Samara finally begins to make a personal connection with the 70-something substitute teacher, Mr. Halbrook, over their mutual love of poetry. Eventually, their friendship allows Samara to open up to other people in her life and to come to terms with past trauma she has suffered. While Samara's and Mr. Halbrook's African American identities are not at the forefront of this book, they are significant and provide different representations of this identity.

**Pointe** by Brandy Colbert

Reading Level: 9-10

Sophistication Level: 10

The final book in this reading ladder is about Theo, a seventeen-year-old who aspires to become one of the few professional African American ballet dancers. As the book begins, Theo is recovering from an eating disorder, preparing for a big audition, and secretly dating a mysterious pianist. When her best friend Donovan, who went missing four years earlier, returns, Theo learns some shocking information that puts her ballet career and budding relationship on hold. This book has higher reading and sophistication levels than the four preceding books and also has some mature content, including rape, drug use and eating disorders. However, it is an appropriate book to include in this reading ladder as it portrays the experience of an outsider in the white-dominated world of ballet, as well as the coming of age of a young woman.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Sharon G. Flake

Title: *The Skin I'm In*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

Topic: African American Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Class Identity, Resilience, Self Esteem

### Plot Summary:

Three years ago Maleeka Madison's father died and, without his love, she no longer believed that she was beautiful. When this book begins, Maleeka is in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and is bullied by her peers primarily for her dark skin color, but also because she is smart and her grief-stricken mother makes her clothing. In order to stop some of the bullying, Maleeka befriends Charlese ("Char"), the most intimidating and popular girl in 7th grade, who has told Maleeka that if she does Char's homework, she will defend Maleeka and let her borrow Char's trendy clothes.

When the book begins, a new English teacher, Miss Saunders begins working at the school. Miss Saunders has vitiligo, a disorder that has caused the skin on her face to lose its brown pigmentation in patches, and begins to take an interest in Maleeka, as she too is often seen as an outcast. The students are just as cruel to Miss Saunders as they are to Maleeka, calling her names such as "two face." Miss Saunders tries to get Maleeka to see that she is beautiful just the way she is, but this proves to be difficult. Miss Saunders left a high-paying corporate job to teach and her expensive clothing and jewelry leaves Maleeka distrustful of the new teacher.

One day Miss Saunders catches Maleeka, Char and the other popular girls with a lit cigarette in the bathroom. Maleeka takes the blame and is grounded by her mother and sentenced to volunteer in the principal's office. Maleeka continues to act out in class as she tries to fit in with the popular crowd. She also begins to warm up to Miss Saunders after she is praised for a creative writing assignment.

However, when Char finds out she is failing Miss Saunders' class, Char convinces Maleeka to help her vandalize Miss Saunders' classroom. The prank gets out of hand and Maleeka accidentally sets the classroom on fire. After Char runs away, Maleeka solely takes the blame for the fire. While Maleeka is expelled, she finds out has won a young writers contest. She and her mother have a long discussion about standing up for oneself. With Miss Saunders' encouragement, Maleeka confronts Char and tells the truth about what happened with the classroom fire.

Maleeka is allowed to return to school and Char is gone. Caleb, a boy she has had a crush on, has written her a poem praising her inner and outer beauty. By the end of the book, Maleeka has gained new friendships with Ms. Saunders and Caleb and discovered her own self worth.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: This book has received several young adult literature awards for good reason. It realistically portrays the life of a young teenager as she struggles with who she is and who her true friends are. Flake tells this important story with convincing dialogue and heartfelt emotion.

Weaknesses of book: Some of the characters' actions and the plot resolution are predictable, especially for older adolescent readers.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as the acceptance of self, overcoming peer pressure, and staying true to oneself.

Pace: The pace of this book is quick and the frequent dialogue helps move along the story.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the thirteen-year-old protagonist. The style is conversational and there is frequent use of dialogue.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Acceptance, Integrity, and Peer Pressure.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a great book to capture the interest of reluctant readers. Because it is a relatively short book (171 pages) with a great deal of dialogue and a conversational tone, it is a perfect fit for the first rung of a reading ladder. Flake takes the time to paint a complex picture and reveal the motivations of each of the characters in this book, making it more sophisticated than its readability levels may suggest.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Ernessa T. Carter

Title: *32 Candles*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

Topic: African American Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Class Identity, Love, Resilience

### Plot Summary:

This book is told from the perspective of 30-something Davidia “Davie” Jones, with alternating flashbacks to earlier parts of her life. The book begins when Davie is five years old, living in Glass, Mississippi. She is poor and her alcoholic mother frequently sleeps with men in exchange for money. One day Davie’s mother abuses her so badly that she stops speaking and retreats within, finding hope in movies with happy endings, such as *Sixteen Candles*.

Once Davie gets to high school, her reality is vastly different from what the movies promised her it would be like. Davie is bullied by her peers for her dark skin and is given the nickname “Monkey Night.” She dreams of a better future, one in which she is a successful singer. She also dreams about her own romantic movie ending, especially one with James Farrell, her new handsome and rich classmate. James is kind and a good person, but his mean sisters are particularly cruel to Davie. When Davie is fifteen, James’s sister, Veronica, invites Davie to a fancy party and signs the invitation from James. Ecstatic, Davie buys an expensive dress with her savings. When she arrives at the party everyone is wearing jeans and Davie realizes it has been a cruel joke. Davie decides it is time for her to leave Glass, so she packs up a few belongings and walks to the nearest truck stop. A lesbian trucker named Mama Jane who is on her way to California agrees to give Davie a ride. Davie travels with Mama Jane all the way to Los Angeles, where Davie stays put.

Davie creates a new identity for herself in Los Angeles, thanks to her new surrogate mother Mama Jane. Davie convinces Nicky, a neurotic nightclub owner to take a chance on her and soon she has made a career for herself as a 1940s-style singer. Davie gets a degree in psychology and is finally able to lead a happy life until James Farrell shows up in the club one day and doesn’t recognize Davie. James becomes enamored with Davie and continues to pursue her despite Davie’s rudeness to him. Eventually, Davie allows James into her life but with difficulty. They clash over their beliefs on class, as they come from very different backgrounds. James proposes to Davie, but she says she is not ready. Dejected, James disappears.

At this point, Davie reveals that a few years ago when James was in a high profile relationship with an actress, she had sabotaged their engagement by submitting a story about the actress to a tabloid. She had also gotten revenge on Veronica and the other popular kids from Glass. Davie decides it is time to atone for what she did, so she sets out to make everything right.

Davie, who has now befriended Veronica, finds out that James is back in town and plans to win him back. She finds out he is back with the actress and realizes she needs to let him go



and work on herself. Davie realizes that, despite her drastic transformation after leaving Glass, she still had never learned to love herself until she began to atone for her revenge on the popular kids. A few months later, James shows up at Davie's house and, in romantic movie style, asks her to marry him.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: This book is a humorous, entertaining, yet dark story of an extremely loveable and not quite reliable narrator. The story moves quickly, keeps its momentum, and offers a satisfying ending.

Weaknesses of book: Some aspects of the plot seem implausible, but as the book draws inspiration from romantic comedies, this may be intentional.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book such as self acceptance, discovering one's true self, as well as problems such as racial and class prejudice, allowing oneself to love, and finding inner strength.

Pace: This book moves quickly. Because it alternates between the present and the past, there is a lot of momentum in the story.

Style: This book is written in the first person point of view of the protagonist when she is in her early thirties. It is very clear which parts of the book take place in the protagonist's present and which take place in the past.

Other Uses: This book could be also be used to explore topics and themes such as Abuse, Relationships, Cultural Influence, and Transformation.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a fun and entertaining book with a serious side. Carter has written a smart, funny, and likable protagonist whose story is at turns heartbreaking and comical. Even though the protagonist is in her thirties, much of the book takes place while she is a teenager, so the book is quite relatable for adolescent readers.

## Critical Annotation

Author: April Sinclair

Title: *Coffee Will Make You Black*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8

Topic: African American Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Discrimination, Self Esteem, Sexual Identity

### Plot Summary:

This book takes place in the South Side of Chicago between 1965 and 1970 and is told from the perspective of Jean “Stevie” Stevenson. The book begins when Stevie is in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She is starting to become interested in boys, but her conservative mother and alcoholic father refuse to talk to Stevie about puberty or sex. Stevie also begins to think about how she might become more popular while still focusing on her academics. When two of her friends trick Stevie into fighting with Carla, a girl from a working class family, Stevie and Carla realize the trick and become best friends. As they progress through middle school, Stevie and Carla get into trouble at school, get their first boyfriends and experience peer pressure.

The second part of the book takes place from the fall of 1967 to the fall of 1968. Stevie begins high school and her awareness of the civil rights movement begins to grow. Stevie admires the courage of her peers, particularly her friend Roland, who are vocal about racism and segregation, but fears that if she were to do the same she might ruin her academic future. However, after the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy at the end of Stevie’s freshman year of high school, Stevie becomes more convinced that joining the movement is important.

Stevie still struggles as her snobby friend Terri invites her to a social club that looks down on girls with natural hair and Stevie’s mother encourages her to use skin bleaching creams. Stevie’s mother encourages her to spend more time with Terri than with Carla, who she considers to be trashy. In an act of defiance, Stevie gets her hair styled into an Afro and immediately becomes more confident and reassured that she has done the right thing.

The third part of the book takes place from the fall of 1969 to the spring of 1970 and begins with Stevie’s sixteenth birthday. Stevie wishes for a boyfriend and soon gets asked out by a new senior, Sean. They begin to date and make plans to attend prom together. However, Stevie befriends and finds herself attracted to the school’s young, white school nurse, Nurse Horn. Carla makes fun of Stevie for befriendng a white woman, which makes Stevie question whether she could have a true friendship with a white woman. Stevie discovers that Nurse Horn is a lesbian and, confused, decides she should lose her virginity with Sean. She realizes she is not ready, which causes Sean to break up with her. Stevie discusses her dilemma with Carla, who says she couldn’t be Stevie’s friend if she were a lesbian. Stevie tells Carla she wouldn’t want a friend who can’t accept other people anyway. Stevie confides in Nurse Horn about Sean, Carla, and her crush. Nurse Horn lets Stevie know that she may just be looking for a mother figure,

since Stevie's own mother has been distant. She tells Stevie that she will become who she is meant to become, but at sixteen, there is no rush to figure it out.

Critique:

Strengths of book: This is a great coming of age story set in a historical time period. The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements serve as a backdrop and certainly influence the story, but the main focus is on a young protagonist as she discovers who she is in a changing world.

Weaknesses of book: Some of the dialogue seems forced and unnatural at times. There are a few scenes with one of Stevie's teachers that could be removed without losing any of the impact or momentum of the book.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as overcoming peer pressure, staying true to oneself, and standing up for one's beliefs. There are also problems specific to the protagonist's identity such as racism and racial identity.

Pace: The pace of this book is quick, as it covers five years in 238 pages. There is a lot of dialogue and the division into three parts helps keep the story moving.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist. The protagonist's voice is conversational and natural sounding.

Other Uses: This book could be used to explore topics and themes such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, Acceptance, Peer Pressure, and Stereotypes.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a great book as it provides a decent amount of historical information as well as a compelling and relatable coming of age narrative. Even though the students for whom this project is intended are growing up in a very different time than the one in which this book is set, many of the experiences and emotions that the protagonist goes through are still relevant today.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Allison Whittenberg

Title: *Life Is Fine*

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 8

Topic: African American Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Friendship, Resilience

### Plot Summary:

This book begins with fifteen-year-old loner Samara Tuttle explaining how her closest relationship is with Dru, an orangutan at the local zoo in Philadelphia. Her mother works long hours as a nurse while her mother's boyfriend, Q, stays at home watching television. Samara yearns for a traditional family or something that will make the next fifteen years of her life better than the first fifteen.

The next day a substitute teacher takes over Samara's English class. Mr. Halbrook is well dressed, handsome, and energetic despite his age. He distributes Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" to the class and Samara immediately connects with the poem. Samara skips class the next day, but then goes to a bookstore to read more Marvell. She runs into Mr. Halbrook there and he invites her to lunch. They discuss literature and life and, afterward, Samara is actually excited for school the next day.

Samara discovers that Q is cheating on her mother and goes to tell her. But before she can, Samara's mother reminds her that she made huge sacrifices to raise Samara. Frustrated and feeling lonely, Samara decides that she will seduce Mr. Halbrook. The next day at school, Samara's guidance counselor reveals that Mr. Halbrook has reported his concern over Samara's unstable home life. Samara confronts Mr. Halbrook and ends up trying to kiss him. He pushes her away and tells Samara her heart is confused.

Mr. Halbrook is assigned as Samara's long-term substitute teacher and her reading of poetry in class helps spark a friendship with Steph' Annie, a punk girl. She goes out with Steph' Annie and her two friends and gets asked out by Jeff, a waiter. Samara and Mr. Halbrook become friends again, but when he doesn't show up for school, it is revealed that he has been diagnosed with brain cancer and his brain is hemorrhaging. Samara and Stephanie abruptly leave school and visit Mr. Halbrook in the ICU at the hospital where Samara's mother works. Her mother catches them skipping school and a fight ensues at home. Samara reveals that Q has been cheating, Q punches Samara, and her mother kicks him out.

Mr. Halbrook's brain stops hemorrhaging and he tells Samara to start attending school again and to leave him alone. Jeff finds Samara at home and they talk about everything that has been going on. Jeff gets Samara a job at the restaurant he works at and their relationship blossoms. Samara returns to the hospital to see Mr. Halbrook again, but he is gone. She frantically tries to find him at home and discovers that he is planning to move back to South

Carolina and then travel to Greece. He encourages her to keep reading poetry and tells her he will miss her.

Critique:

Strengths of book: This is a quick story about how friendship and the willingness to let people into one's life can make a big difference. Adolescents who have ever felt lonely or alone will likely find much to relate to in this story.

Weaknesses of book: Some of the characters are not as fully developed as they could be.

Problems of book: There are some traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as loneliness, finding friendship, and finding one's purpose in life. Abuse and neglect are also significant problems in this book.

Pace: This is a very quick moving and short book. The plot takes place over a number of weeks.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist. The protagonist's voice is conversational and often darkly humorous.

Other Uses: This book could be used to explore topics and themes such as the Power of Art and Literature, Abuse, Alienation, and Friendship.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This book is a good addition to this reading ladder as it is a short and realistic look at the life of a lonely teenager. While dark at times, there is ultimately optimism at many points in the book and a positive message of friendship and hope. An additional bonus to this book is the collection of poems referenced in the book that is included at the end.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Brandy Colbert

Title: *Pointe*

Reading Level: 9-10

Sophistication Level: 10

Topic: African American Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Illness Identity, Love, Self Esteem

### Plot Summary:

This book is told from the perspective of Theo, a seventeen-year-old who has recently recovered from an eating disorder and hopes to become one of the few famous professional African American ballet dancers. Although she practices intensely, Theo otherwise leads a normal life in suburban Chicago with loving, upper middle class parents and two best friends, Phil and Sara-Kate. One day Hosea, a mysterious boy from school takes over as the pianist at Theo's ballet studio and their attraction to each other becomes apparent, despite the fact that Hosea has a girlfriend. They begin a secret relationship.

Theo's life changes one day when the news reports that Theo's oldest friend, Donovan, has been recovered from a kidnapping that occurred four years earlier. As the only Black students at their school, Donovan and Theo had formed a close bond early on. As Theo's community and school reacts to the breaking news over the next few days, Theo goes through a variety of emotions. First, the news station shows a video of Donovan at a birthday party that took place while he was kidnapped. Donovan is shown smiling and having fun, which confuses and angers Theo. Secondly, when the photo of Donovan's alleged kidnapper appears, Theo realizes a horrible truth. Chris, the man who kidnapped Donovan, is Theo's ex-boyfriend, whom she knew as "Trent." Chris had told Theo that he was eighteen when they were dating but he was actually twenty-six. Donovan was the only one who knew about their secret relationship and he had been friends with Chris. Theo's mind races about what happened: did Chris kidnap Donovan? Did Donovan willingly leave? Was there sexual abuse involved? As she struggles with these questions, she gradually slips back into unhealthy eating habits.

As Theo grapples with this information, she finds out that she has been selected as one of the three top students in her class and can now audition for a prestigious summer dance institute. Soon after she learns that Chris is pleading not guilty in Donovan's abduction and, as Theo was the last person to see Donovan before he went missing, she must testify. Weeks before the trial, Theo confesses to Ruthie, a fellow dancer, that she had dated Chris. Ruthie tells Theo that she was raped, but Theo refuses to believe this as she thought they were in love.

At the school's winter dance, Theo and Hosea sneak off together. Ellie, Hosea's girlfriend, discovers them and Theo realizes that Hosea is still in love with Ellie and won't leave her. Theo realizes how destructive secrecy is in relationships. At the trial, Theo finally sees Donovan and as they encounter each other she realizes that Donovan willingly left with Chris. Theo realizes she must tell the prosecutor that she had had a sexual relationship with Chris. Theo testifies and, as she does, she feels empowered that she can help prevent Chris from abusing

others. After the trial, Theo tells her parents that she thinks she needs to go back into treatment for her eating disorder. While she is at the treatment facility, Theo receives a phone call from Donovan in which he thanks her and Theo feels as if a great weight has been lifted. Chris is found guilty. Theo's dance teacher sends her a heartfelt letter praising her bravery and telling her that any professional dance company would be lucky to have her. Included in the letter is a CD from Hosea of his own music. Theo listens to the CD and realizes that she is special, not because Hosea thinks so, but because she knows it. She throws the CD in the trash.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is a great book as it deals with a lot of serious issues in a way that is realistic yet positive. The protagonist is a flawed character who nevertheless resonates with readers because of her honesty and resiliency. The plot is intriguing and provides a good balance of the various elements of the story.

Weaknesses of book: Some aspects of the book, such as Donovan's abduction and sudden return, seem implausible or overly coincidental. However, these aspects are secondary to the main plot of this book: Theo's coming of age.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as staying true to oneself, finding inner strength, and balancing ambition with self-care.

Pace: The pace of this book is quick. The chapters are short and many feature flashbacks, which help provide needed information in a quick and interesting way.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist. The protagonist's voice is conversational and often humorous.

Other Uses: This book could be used to explore topics and themes such as Abuse, Inner Strength, Ambition, and Trust.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a great book as it deals with some heavy issues in a complex way that does not glorify them. Colbert has created a story about a resilient young woman who is ambitious, yet vulnerable. While the protagonist deals with some very serious problems, the main concept of finding inner strength should be relevant to adolescents experiencing a number of different issues.

**READING LADDER 2:  
ETHNIC IDENTITY**



## **RATIONALE FOR READING LADDER: ETHNIC IDENTITY**

### **I. Why this topic? What is the significance for human beings in general? What is the significance for students in ninth grade?**

The topic of **ETHNIC IDENTITY** was chosen for this reading ladder because it holds significance for this specific group of students, as well as for all human beings. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) reports that over 32% of United States citizens identify with a non-white ethnicity. Hispanic or Latino Americans make up 17.1% of the United States population and, according to the 2012 U.S. Census, there are approximately 1,697,570 Arab Americans living in the United States. This is a notable portion of the population and, thus, a significant topic.

As noted in Chapter 1, many people who have distinct ethnic identities in the United States are immigrants. According to Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen (2013), “Today’s immigrants are primarily Asian or Hispanic, with increasing numbers coming from the Middle East” (p. 130). Lee (2012) discusses the diversity of these immigrant students in American schools, stating that in 2005, the U.S. had about 11 million school-aged students of immigrants, making them about one-fifth of the school-aged population (p. 117). Within metro Detroit, ethnicity and immigration are also important issues. According to the 2012 U.S. Census, the metro Detroit area has the largest Arab population in the United States, with over 200,000 residents identifying as Arab. The metro Detroit area also has a significant Latino population of over 400,000.

Because immigration and ethnic diversity have been so central to the history of the United States, it is essential that the experiences of both immigrants and Americans with ethnic identities be included in curricula. Traditionally, immigrant and ethnic experiences are explored in social studies classes. However, Ethnic Identity should also be incorporated into English Language Arts curricula so that, as noted in Chapter 1, students who maintain an Ethnic Identity

will have their identity affirmed and students who do not maintain an Ethnic Identity will develop understanding and empathy for their peers.

The idea that better understanding of Ethnic Identity can lead to empathy is an important one, especially at this point in history. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) projects that the nation will steadily become more ethnically diverse over the next fifty years. In order to ensure that the United States also becomes more tolerant toward all ethnic groups, it is important to foster empathy and understanding for people who identify with a non-white ethnicity. If knowledge and understanding are a step toward empathy, then perhaps greater knowledge of topics such as Arab and Latina identities can help reduce prejudice and discrimination. This could be particularly effective among young people who are still forming their worldviews and opinions.

As noted in Chapter 2, the topic of this reading ladder is significant for this particular group of students. Because 10% of the students for whom this project is designed identify as Arab and another 10% identify as Latina, it was considered appropriate to create a reading ladder for this ethnic identity to act as a “mirror” opportunity for these students. As noted in Chapter 1, for the students who identify as Arab or Latina, this reading ladder will affirm their identity by exposing them to fictional characters that share their identity. Hughes-Hassell (2013) writes about the power of seeing oneself in literature (p. 214). In “Hispanic Representation in Literature for Children and Young Adults,” Arlene L. Barry (1998) also notes that the curricula teachers and schools choose to use can have a strong impact on how students from various cultures perceive themselves. She writes, “The knowledge passed on through the curriculum determines which groups are valued or devalued. Valuing one’s ethnicity allows one to value oneself, an important step in success anywhere” (p. 630). In other words, if students do not see themselves and their cultures represented in school in a positive way, they will not only suffer academically,

but personally. The books in this Reading Ladder will allow students from a diverse group of cultures to see that their identities and experiences are valued by both the teacher assigning the reading material and the literary community that has made the publication of the books possible.

For students who do not identify with this identity, this reading ladder will offer a “window” opportunity to learn more about the lives of those who do identify with an ethnic identity, such as Arab or Latina. As discussed in Chapter 1, reading about the experiences of different people helps develop empathy. Additionally, reading multiple stories about people who share one identity can help prevent the idea that any group has a “single story” or single point of view. While 20% of the students for whom this project is intended identify as either Arab or Latina, 80% do not identify this way. This topic will allow the other 80% to better understand many facets of Arab and Latina identities and to develop empathy for their peers.

## II. WHY EACH INDIVIDUAL SELECTION HAS BEEN INCLUDED IN THIS READING LADDER

### **Chasing the Jaguar** by *Michelle Dominiguez Greene*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

The first book, or lowest rung on this reading ladder, focuses on a Latina protagonist. As Mexican American Martika approaches her fifteenth birthday, she learns that she is descended from a long line of Mayan psychics, or curanderas. She begins to have vivid dreams, including one about a wealthy girl who is kidnapped by an art dealer. When Martika realizes the kidnapping really has taken place and the girl's father is Martika's mother's client, she uses her powers to help find the missing girl. Meanwhile, Martika deals with typical teenage issues, such as her dealing with her parents' separation and celebrating her journey into adulthood.

### **Habibi** by *Naomi Shihab Nye*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

The second book in this reading ladder is about an Arab protagonist. When fourteen-year-old Liyana's Palestinian-born father decides to move their contemporary Arab American family back to Jerusalem from St. Louis, Missouri, Liyana is unhappy. Living in a strange country is difficult until Liyana falls in love with Omer and becomes less homesick. However, as soon as Liyana learns that Omer is Jewish and their love is forbidden, she ends up challenging her family, culture, and tradition. As Liyana experiences her first love, violence between Palestinians and Israelis erupts.

### **The House on Mango Street** by *Sandra Cisneros*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8

The third book in this reading ladder features a Latina protagonist. This book is a series of short vignettes told from the perspective of Esperanza Cordero, who is about thirteen when the book begins. Esperanza discusses her hopes, dreams, and fears as she grows up in Chicago and matures physically and emotionally. She tells the reader about her wishes to leave her poor, suffocating neighborhood; her adventures with her girl friends; and her disturbing experiences with puberty and men. While Esperanza hopes to leave Mango Street one day, she promises to come back and help the people she cares for.

### **Flowers in the Sky** by *Lynn Joseph*

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 8

The fourth book in this reading ladder features a Latina protagonist. When the book begins, fifteen-year-old Nina Perez is sent by her mother to leave her home in Samana, Dominican Republic and live in New York with her brother, Darrio, in order to have a better life.

However, Nina soon realizes her brother might be running with the wrong group of people. At the same time, Nina also begins forming relationships with two young men, one a promising young scholar and the other a questionable neighborhood boy. As Nina searches for connection and familiarity in her new home, she reveals her own strength and independence.

**The Girl Who Fell to Earth** by *Sophia Al-Maria*

Reading Level: 9-10

Sophistication Level: 9

The last book in this reading ladder features an Arab protagonist. In this book, which is also a memoir, Sophia describes her experience being raised by her American mother in the American Northwest and her Bedouin father in the Middle East. She struggles to find her place in both cultures, while also facing more universal teen issues such as sexuality and independence. The book follows Sophia from the United States to Qatar, where she finds her first love despite stifling gender norms, to Cairo where she attends university and finally finds peace with her dual identity.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Michelle Dominiguez Greene

Title: *Chasing the Jaguar*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

Topic: Ethnic Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Change, Dreams, Independence, Tradition

### Plot Summary:

Set in modern day Los Angeles, this book begins by describing a vivid and recurring dream of protagonist Martika Galvez, a fourteen-year-old Mexican American and tomboy. Martika's dream is that she is lost on a city street on the edge of a jungle. She hears a large cat screeching and knows that it is meant for her. When Martika awakes it is revealed that she is approaching her quinceañera, or fifteenth birthday. Martika is stressed not only because it is a big celebration and she feels a silly tradition, but her parents are recently separated and the party planning is causing additional stress in her family. Martika's mother, Aurelia, knows about her daughter's dreams and expresses some concern.

As Martika and her stylish best friend Lola wait for the bus, they spot Tía Tellín, an elderly woman who some believe to be a curandera, or shaman. Martika gets the feeling she has seen Tía's house before. In art class that day, each student is assigned an animal to focus on for their final project. Martika receives a jaguar and feels as if that animal has chosen her. She learns that the jaguar is an important symbol in Mayan culture.

On the weekend, Martika helps out her mother, who owns a cleaning business, at the house of wealthy Ted Colton, who has a teenage daughter named Jennifer. Martika has learned from her mother that Ted often has shady business partners, but he pays in cash and has always been generous to her. While cleaning the pool house, Martika discovers a mysterious box with a wrapped figurine of a jaguar in it. Her spine tingles as she approaches the box but she becomes distracted when she overhears Ted discussing another deal. Meanwhile, Eddie Blasi, a wealthy man who collects powerful talismans from all of the world's shamanic cultures, discovers that the jaguar talisman that Ted was going to sell to him has been sold to someone else. Later that night, Jennifer Colton is kidnapped and Martika has another strange dream.

At her quinceañera, Martika swears that she has seen Tía Tellín at the party, and this greatly alarms her mother. The next day, Aurelia and Martika are summoned to Ted's house where he tells them that Jennifer is missing, he knows Eddie Blasi has done it, but that, because of the nature of his business, he cannot go to the authorities. Martika picks up a charm bracelet in Jennifer's room and receives images of being abducted. Martika confides in her mother, who explains that Martika's father, Camiso, descends from a line of Mayan curanderas who have psychic powers. Martika learns that Tía Tellín is her great-great-aunt and they meet for tea. Martika discusses her dreams and decides she will choose to develop her gifts by training with Tía Tellín. Martika trains with Tía Tellín and learns that she has the dangerous gift of a firestarter, but she could harm herself.

Led by her dreams, Martika convinces Ted that she is psychic and they realize they can work together to recover the jaguar and rescue Jennifer. Martika confers with Tía Tellín who explains that the jaguar was stolen from a temple and is very powerful. Working with Ted and his private detectives, Martika helps find the jaguar in a mansion, using her firestarting abilities to evade security. Jennifer is rescued and Tía Tellín magically gets the jaguar back from Jennifer's captors. Jennifer and Martika befriend each other and celebrate with their families and Lola's family. Tía Tellín arrives in Mexico and returns to the jaguar to its rightful place.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is a great book for many reasons. First, Martika is a smart and level-headed heroine who, at the beginning of the book, struggles with many of the issues teenagers face, such as her parents' divorce, living in an unsafe neighborhood, and feeling like an outcast among her wealthy classmates. However, as Martika learns of her inherited powers, the book turns into an intriguing mystery that contains elements of both realism and magic, due to her psychic abilities. The book is also appealing for its accessible integration of Spanish into the text.

Weaknesses of book: Some of the secondary characters were not as fully developed as they could be.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as change, family traditions and expectations, and seeking independence.

Pace: The pace of this book is quick and the frequent dialogue and intriguing plot help move along the story.

Style: This book is written in third person point of view of the protagonist, as well as some other characters. There is frequent use of Spanish, especially in the dialogue. A glossary of all used Spanish words is included at the end of the book, however Green does a good job of providing enough context and translation within the text to make sense of the Spanish. The book combines elements of both magical realism and mystery.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Tradition, Mythology, Mystery, and Independence.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is an excellent choice for this reading ladder as the protagonist's ethnicity plays an important role in her coming of age story. The characters are interesting and the plot is full of intrigue and humor. The book moves quickly and is a great introduction into young adult books with Latina protagonists.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Naomi Shihab Nye

Title: *Habibi*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

Topic: Ethnic Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Family, Love, War and Peace

### Plot Summary:

When this book begins, fourteen-year-old Liyana Abboud has just received her first kiss. She learns the next day that her parents want to move Liyana and her younger brother Rafik from their home in St. Louis, Missouri to Jerusalem. While Liyana, Rafik and her mother are American-born, Liyana's Palestinian father always planned to move back home after he finished medical school. Liyana's family prepares for the move and she notices how happy her father seems.

The Abbouds' extended family meets them in their hotel room in Jerusalem, including Liyana's grandmother, Sitti. Most of the relatives speak limited English and the older women wear robes and hijabs. The relatives reveal that they rarely come into the city, as the Israeli soldiers change rules frequently and give the Arab Palestinians a difficult time.

As the Abbouds move into a home, Liyana continually learns new things about the different culture, including the impropriety of public kissing. She sees that her father has rejected many of the old customs, such as arranged marriages. Liyana begins high school, attending an Armenian school that is trilingual (Arabic, Armenian, and English). She starts spending time with Sitti, her grandmother, who teaches Liyana how to cook and fetch water from the spring. As she adjusts to her new school and new life, Liyana becomes more independent and assertive. After watching the butchering of a chicken she becomes a vegetarian and after seeing a teacher hit a student with a ruler, she writes a letter to the local newspaper condemning the behavior.

Liyana and Rafik make friends with two siblings, Khaled and Nadine, living in a nearby refugee camp and Liyana begins to record stories from Sitti. One day, Liyana meets a boy at a ceramic shop in town and begins to frequently visit it, hoping to see him again. She learns his name is Omer and they make plans to meet for lunch the next day and plan another outing. While they are out, Liyana discovers that Omer is Jewish and that he already knows she is not. Liyana's parents learn about Omer and also have reservations about the budding friendship.

Liyana and Omer learn that neither practice religion, but consider themselves spiritual. The day before Liyana's fifteenth birthday, Sitti's house is ransacked by Israeli soldiers looking for Sitti's grandson, who is an intellectual. Liyana celebrates her birthday and receives a lamp from Omer. She and Rafik meet Omer in the library one day and Omer and Liyana kiss.

One day, Khaled, the friend from the refugee camp, is shot by Israeli soldiers for not leaving his house. Liyana's father was arrested for trying to stop the soldiers. Liyana goes to the



jail to see her father, who says Khaled was shot in the leg and should be fine. Liyana's father is released and has a change of heart toward Omer. He agrees to have Omer accompany them to the family's village. Sitti welcomes Omer, but some of the relatives do not appreciate his presence in their home. Liyana journals about how she no longer dreads growing up, but feels hopeful for the future. At dinner, Sitti tells her that difficult times are coming and she will need to be strong.

Critique:

Strengths of book: This book is a beautifully written story about a girl going through many changes in a new land. The language is descriptive and elegant. The story is often serious, but also light-hearted.

Weaknesses of book: Some aspects of the plot are quite predictable, however this is not really a plot-drive novel. It is more about the emotional and cultural development of the protagonist.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book such as accepting change, overcoming differences, and finding oneself while also remaining part of a family. Additionally, religious conflict is a major problem in this book.

Pace: This book contains very short chapters that are often quite poetic. There are frequent journal entries, school essays, and memories of life back in America that help keep the story interesting.

Style: This book is written in the third person point of view from the perspective of the protagonist. Because the protagonist is a writer, there is a strong and poetic voice throughout the book.

Other Uses: This book could be also be used to explore topics and themes such as Family, Love, and War and Peace.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a wonderful book that deals with a serious and timely issue in a way that is not too bleak for a high school audience. There is an overwhelming positive message of hope in this book that will likely resonate with adolescent readers who have ever felt different. Liyana's Arab identity and her family's Muslim identity are prominent features of the book, making it perfect for this reading ladder.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Sandra Cisneros

Title: *The House on Mango Street*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8

Topic: Ethnic Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Class Identity, Family, Home

### Plot Summary:

This story is told in a series of brief vignettes from the perspective of Esperanza Cordero, a thirteen-year-old Mexican American living in Chicago. Esperanza's family has lived in many different houses and flats and now lives on Mango Street. It's not their ideal house – it is small and a bit dilapidated – but they own it and are happy to no longer be renters. Esperanza lives with her two parents, two younger brothers, and one younger sister.

Esperanza muses on many topics, such as how everyone in her family has different kinds of hair, the different rules for boys and girls, and how she was named after her grandmother. As she adjusts to the new neighborhood, Esperanza also talks about various people she meets, such as Cathy, who is moving away because people like Esperanza's family keep moving into the neighborhood; and Rachel and Lucy, two sisters who become Esperanza's friends. The girls explore their neighborhood and Esperanza observes everything. Marin, a beautiful young woman who sells Avon, fascinates Esperanza, as men are always catcalling her. As she becomes a teenager, Esperanza notices boys beginning to watch her, too. Rafaela, another beautiful woman whose husband forces her to stay home while he goes out, also captures Esperanza's imagination. Sally, a friend from school, is abused by her father because she talks to boys. Esperanza discusses each of these women in short chapters, empathizing with them and hoping for better lives for them.

Esperanza attends a Catholic school with mean nuns and in order to help pay for school, her Aunt Lala Gets her a job at a photo shop. Esperanza discusses some serious issues, such as how racially segregated the neighborhoods are. Her paternal grandfather dies, as well as her Aunt Lupe, who was terminally ill. She begins to like Sire, a boy who already has a girlfriend, and dreams of being with him. While Sally runs off at a carnival with another boy, Esperanza is assaulted and feels abandoned by Sally. Sally gets married young to escape her troubled home life and tells Esperanza how happy she is in her own home.

Lucy and Rachel's infant sister dies and their three aunts arrive in town. The aunts tell Esperanza to make a wish. She wishes to escape Mango Street and the aunts tell Esperanza that she must promise to come back and not forget who she is. Esperanza dreams of one day having a house of her own, not her father's house or husband's house. In the last vignette, Esperanza says that she will leave one day with her books and paper, but she will come back for those who aren't able to leave.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is an unconventional book in that the story is told in short glimpses. It is poetic with a unique voice and interesting format. The protagonist is a dreamy and observant young teenager who yearns for a better life, a character that many adolescent readers will enjoy and identify with. Cisneros paints vivid pictures of the many characters and events on Mango Street.

Weaknesses of book: Some readers may have trouble with the non-linear format of this book.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as overcoming peer pressure, staying true to oneself, standing up for one's beliefs, and finding oneself while also remaining part of a family. There are also problems specific to the protagonist's identity, such as dealing with prejudice and maintaining a religious identity.

Pace: The pace of this book is quick and the chapters are extremely short. Each chapter focuses on a different topic, making the book flow even more quickly.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist. The protagonist's voice is poetic, yet conversational. There is some use of Spanish words, but the author provides enough context clues and translation to make the text readable for non-Spanish speakers.

Other Uses: This book could be used to explore topics and themes such as the Urban Neighborhoods, Storytelling, and Tradition.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a great addition to this reading ladder as it provides a nontraditional narrative while maintaining the same theme as the other books. While the vignettes or chapters are very short, some are quite complex and can require a second reading to fully grasp the content. Nevertheless, Cisneros' writing is beautiful and often humorous, making a second reading worthwhile and enjoyable. Esperanza's identity is central to this book, making it a fitting addition to this reading ladder.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Lynn Joseph

Title: *Flowers in the Sky*

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 8

Topic: Ethnic Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Family, Home, Independence

### Plot Summary:

This book begins with fifteen-year-old Nina Perez, a sensitive bookworm, stating that everyone from her hometown of Samana, Dominican Republic dreams of moving to New York City except for her. Nina loves her home, especially her flower garden, which she is known for. But her mother insists that her future will be brighter and richer if she moved in with her brother Darrío, who left for America when Nina was six. Darrío is now twenty-eight and able to support Nina.

One day while Nina is hanging out with her flirtatious friends Mirabel and Eva, the other girls invite some older, German tourists to sit with them. One of the men gets physical with Nina when Nina's mother suddenly walks by. Nina's mother is infuriated and she makes immediate plans to send Nina to New York.

Nina arrives and reunites with her brother, who she hasn't seen in almost a decade. She is overwhelmed by the new sights and smells in Darrío's neighborhood of Washington Heights. Darrío's apartment is sparse, but he has put a vase of flowers in Nina's room and excitedly shows her the fire escape where she can live in her "own private world." Nina is grateful but let down by New York. She questions who she will be without her flower garden.

Nina enrolls in the academic track at high school and makes plans to attend summer school to catch up. She adjusts to life in New York and becomes intrigued with a green-eyed boy who works at a barbershop. Nina and Darrío plant a garden on the fire escape. Nina befriends Bunny, an outgoing girl from school, and learns that she has caught the eye of Carlos, a friendly Dominican boy who plans to be a doctor. Nina finally meets the green-eyed boy, Luis, but he tells her that Darrío doesn't like him for reasons he can't say. Despite this, Luis and Nina chat every day when she walks by.

Nina becomes suspicious of Darrío's job, as he has many visitors at the apartment each day and takes them to a room down the hall. However, she doesn't want to question him too much. Carlos reveals that Luis is a drug dealer and Nina stops walking by the barbershop to see him. She finds a key to Darrío's mysterious room and discovers boxes of televisions, video game systems, and stereos. Nina is scared for Darrío and wants to help him avoid getting in trouble.

Nina is assaulted by some neighborhood boys and Luis comes to her rescue. He still won't tell her why Darrío doesn't like him. Nina and Carlos go on a date to his cousin's barbecue in Queens. The cousin, Maggie, is a dentist, and her beautiful home and garden inspire Nina.

Nina still feels as though her feelings for Carlos are platonic. Luis shows up at the apartment and talks with Darrio, who agrees to let Nina go out for a drive with Luis. She asks him if he is a drug dealer and he denies it. Nina questions whether she could love someone who is a criminal. Nina's mother is excited about the fact that Luis is wealthy, but Nina begins to feel trapped and not herself. She also begins to feel as if Darrio and Luis are treating her like a child who is not allowed to know the truth.

On a date, Nina learns that Luis' older sister was murdered when he was twelve. Luis also tells Nina that Darrio may be in trouble and that Nina is not safe at home. They arrive at the apartment to see Darrio being arrested. Nina stays with Señora Rivera, a woman from the neighborhood. Luis sends letters to Nina, but she never opens them. Weeks later, Luis comes over with a ticket to the Dominican Republic, but Nina decides she wants to stay in New York and follow her dreams. She learns that Luis was trying to get Darrio to leave the stolen goods business all along. She also finds out that Luis had money not because he was a drug dealer, but because he received life insurance money when his mother died. Nina and Luis tell each other "I love you" and Nina looks forward to the coming changes in her life.

#### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is an intriguing and well-written story about one girl's transition into a new country and into adulthood. The plot is a little mysterious and full of some good twists.

Weaknesses of book: Some of the characters are not as fully developed as they could be.

Problems of book: There are some traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as loneliness, finding friendship, and finding one's place in life. Additionally, cultural assimilation is a significant problem in this book.

Pace: This is a very quick moving book. The plot takes place over a number of weeks and the short chapters help move the reader along quickly.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist. The protagonist's voice is reflective and there is frequent use of dialogue.

Other Uses: This book could be used to explore topics and themes such as Cultural Assimilation, Family, Trust, Home, and Independence.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This book is a good addition to this reading ladder as it is a modern story of a young woman immigrating to the United States and realizing that not everything is as it seems. The protagonist is likeable and many aspects of her journey should be relatable to adolescent readers, such as conflicted romantic feelings and feeling overprotected. Because the protagonists of *Chasing the Jaguar* and *The House on Mango Street* are both Mexican Americans, it is a bonus that the protagonist of this book is a Caribbean Latina.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Sophia Al-Maria

Title: *The Girl Who Fell to Earth*

Reading Level: 9-10

Sophistication Level: 9

Topic: Ethnic Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Family, Independence, Tradition

### Plot Summary:

In this memoir, Sophia Al-Maria begins the book by tracing her family's history. She describes how her father, Matar, grew up in Saudi Arabia watching American television in the 1960s. Matar's people were Bedouin but had begun settling instead of keeping the nomadic tradition. Influenced by television, Matar dreamed of going west to America. Once he was of age, he discovered he could get a scholarship and attend university in the United States. He settled on Seattle, even though there would be larger Arab communities in New York, Los Angeles, and Detroit. Matar arrived in Seattle, lost and speaking little English. Gale, Sophia's mother, befriended him at a diner and they soon began dating. Gale became pregnant with Sophia and she and Matar married. They made a pact that if Matar would learn how to swim, Gale would learn Islamic prayer.

Matar and Gale have another child, Dima, and Matar's father convinces him to come back to the Gulf, where progress is being made and opportunities in the oil industry abound. Matar leaves when Sophia is three with the promise of sending for his wife and two daughters soon. When Sophia is five, they finally travel to Qatar to reunite with her father. Matar rents a luxurious flat for his family, but is gone for weeks at a time while he works on an oilrig. As Matar and Gale drift farther apart, Gale miscarries and Sophia and Dima are sent to stay with their Bedouin relatives in the desert. While there, Sophia learns that her father has a baby with another woman. Gale finds out that Matar actually has another wife, a woman named Flu, who Matar's brother had urged him to marry to help her out financially. Gale packs up Dima and Sophia and takes them to a hotel. She and Matar eventually speak, come to an agreement, and Gale heads back to the United States with her daughters.

Sophia, Dima, and Gale move in with Gale's mother on her farm and Gale becomes paranoid and distrustful of men. Gale begins taking vocational classes and temp jobs, which keeps her busy. Sophia yearns for the feeling of community she had when with her Bedouin family. At this point, Sophia is nine years old and it is the early 1990s. In school, as the Gulf War is discussed, Sophia feels mixed emotions about her current life and her past life in the Gulf. As she enters junior high school, Sophia becomes interested in sexuality, much to the dismay of her mother and Matar, who Gale still speaks with regularly. Sophia also becomes obsessed with the music of David Bowie and the idea of creating an alter ego. She dresses in quirky, thrift store finds, which enrages Gale. After a huge argument, Gale arranges to send Sophia to live with her father for the summer.

Sophia learns that her father is still frequently gone, so she stays with her relatives in the desert. As Sophia turns thirteen, she adjusts again to communal living with a large family. Sophia returns to Seattle in the fall, but feels lost. She moves back with her family in the Gulf and makes her way through high school. She starts dating a boy, Suhail, and becomes the subject of rumors, as she is an American and still an outsider. Sophia applies to colleges and is rejected by New York University, her dream school. She finds out she will be accepted to the American University in Cairo and can then transfer to NYU. She is exhilarated by the city, but finds that her identity as an Arab American puts a great deal of pressure on her to choose between the two cultures. Suhail, who is attending school in Boston, becomes more distant and Sophia confides in Si, an American. She slowly falls out of love with Suhail. Sophia is hired to spend the summer recording the oral history of Kawthar, a woman who lives in the mountains, and they bond as Kawthar gives Sophia advice. While in the mountains, Sophia realizes her life is like the universe, constantly moving, and that it is too precious for her to not take more control of it.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is a wonderful memoir of an Arab American who feels torn between two universes. Al-Maria's writing is lyrical and full of beautiful imagery. Her story of growing up between two worlds will likely resonate not only for Arab Americans, but for anyone who feels has ever felt different or alone.

Weaknesses of book: The plot's timeline can be somewhat unclear, which may frustrate readers who like to know when different events happen in relation to each other.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as staying true to oneself, finding inner strength, and following family or cultural traditions. Additionally, cultural assimilation is a significant problem in this book.

Pace: The pace of this book is not as quick as the other books in this reading ladder. However, the 265 pages of this book are divided into twenty-one chapters, which helps move the reader along.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist. The protagonist's voice is reflective and often humorous. Al-Maria provides a glossary at the end of the book for the Arabic words used.

Other Uses: This book could be used to explore topics and themes such as Family, Independence, Tradition, and Cultural Norms.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a great book to conclude this reading ladder as it has strong symbolism, a more complex plot, and some complicated cultural themes. While it is the most difficult book, it is also quite fun, as Al-Maria makes many pop culture references and includes humorous anecdotes of cultural shock. As the integration of multiple identities is central to this book, it is a fine way to conclude this reading ladder.

**READING LADDER 3:  
ABILITY AND ILLNESS IDENTITY**



## **RATIONALE FOR READING LADDER: ABILITY AND ILLNESS IDENTITY**

### **I. Why this topic? What is the significance for human beings in general? What is the significance for students in ninth grade?**

The topic of **ABILITY AND ILLNESS IDENTITY** was chosen for this reading ladder because it holds significance for this specific group of students, as well as for all human beings. As noted in Chapter 1, disability is a complex concept that includes conditions that affect cognitive, social-emotional, and sensory-physical functioning (Peterson & Hittie, 2010, p. 16). According to Peterson and Hittie (2010), disability includes people with learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities, and behavioral and emotional challenges (pp. 83-96). Additionally, many people possess disabilities based on physical functioning, such as communication, hearing, seeing, physical movement, and health and well-being” (Peterson & Hittie, 2010, p. 96).

Illness is also included in this identity, often in the form of chronic health problems. Chronic health problems may include both physical health and mental or psychological health. Physical chronic health problems include epilepsy, diabetes, asthma, cancer, HIV, and heart disease (Yeo & Sawyer, 2005, p. 721). According to Knopf, Park and Mulye (2008) of the National Adolescent Health Information Center, common psychological disorders include mood disorders such as depression; anxiety disorders; eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia; and addictive disorders (p. 1).

Ability and Illness is a significant topic for all people because it affects such a large portion of the population. The 2012 U.S. Census estimates that 1 in 5 Americans has a disability of some kind, which equates to 56.7 million people or 19 percent of the population. A 2014 report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that 133 million Americans, or 45 percent of the population, have at least one chronic health condition.

According to a 2014 report from The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 1 in 5 Americans experienced some sort of mental illness in 2013.

The statistics for adolescent ability and illness identity, which this project focuses on, are also significant. According to the 2012 U.S. Census, 1 in 20 American adolescents have a severe disability and many more have less severe disabilities. A 2005 study found that 20-30% of teenagers had a chronic illness, defined as one that lasts longer than six months (Yeo & Sawyer, 2005, p. 721). Additionally, a 2008 study found over 1 in 10 American adolescents had serious behavioral or mental health difficulties (Knopf, Park, & Mulye, 2008, p. 4).

The sheer number of both adults and adolescents with a disability or chronic illness makes this a significant topic. However, the topic becomes even more significant when considering how vital inclusion and representation are for students with disabilities and illnesses. According to Hazlett, Sweeney and Reins (2011), “Adolescents with intellectual and/or physical disabilities are victims of negativism,” due to “society’s harsh long-standing stereotypes, images, and labels associated with them”(Hazlett, Sweeney, & Reins, 2011, p. 207). As with adolescents who face negative racial or ethnic images, it is important to support positive identity images for adolescents with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Supporting those students with disability and illness identities is considered crucial to creating inclusive schools.

As noted in Chapter 2, the topic of this reading ladder is significant for this particular group of students. Of the approximately 200 students in Grade 9 for whom this project is designed, two are partially blind, three are partially deaf, and two use wheelchairs. Several students have learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. Two students have an Autism Spectrum Disorder, such as Asperger Syndrome. Many students have some kind of chronic illness, both physical and psychological. Some of these illnesses include asthma, Crohn’s disease, epilepsy,

diabetes, anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Just as with racial and ethnic identities, it is imperative that students with disability and illness identities receive affirmation and inclusion from educators. This means not only ensuring that all students can participate fully in the classroom, but that students see themselves represented in literary texts used in school. This particular reading ladder provides five books that speak to the experiences of adolescents with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Because there is such a wide variety of ability and illness identities in this group of students, this reading ladder contains a diverse group of books that will affirm the identities of many of these students and help students who do not share these identities to better understand their peers.

## II. WHY EACH INDIVIDUAL SELECTION HAS BEEN INCLUDED IN THIS READING LADDER

### **Girls Like Us** by *Gail Giles*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

Quincy and Bidy, graduates of their high school's special education program, are as different as can be. Quincy trusts no one and is always on defense, while Bidy is timid. As they are both wards of the state, they are assigned as roommates in their first apartment after graduation. While they do not initially get along, past and current trauma brings the two together as they realize friendship is necessary for survival.

### **The Nature of Jade** by *Deb Caletti*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8-9

Jade is a stellar high school student who secretly suffers from panic attacks. She escapes her anxiety and her slightly dysfunctional family by watching an online webcam of the elephant house at the local zoo. After a few months of watching the webcam, Jade decides to volunteer at the elephant house where she meets Sebastian, a nineteen-year-old single dad with a secret of his own. As Jade finds herself falling in love with Sebastian, her panic attacks decrease and she discovers an inner strength that allows her to take chances and make decisions based on love instead of fear.

### **Out of My Mind** by *Sharon Draper*

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 8

Melody, a preteen with cerebral palsy cannot walk, talk or write, but she has a photographic memory and can remember every detail of everything she has ever experienced. She is more intelligent than most of the adults who try to diagnose her and more intelligent than her classmates, who consider her to be mentally impaired, because she cannot tell them otherwise. Melody feels as though she is trapped in her own mind until she is able to get a device that allows her to speak. Melody surprises everyone with her newfound voice, including herself.

### **The Way We Bared Our Souls** by *Willa Strayhorn*

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 9

In this book, five teenagers gather around a bonfire in the middle of the New Mexico desert. Each one has a unique burden to bear: Lo is beginning to show symptoms of MS, which run in her family. Kaya has a rare condition called CIP that makes her physically numb. Ellen has a serious drug addiction. Kit is haunted by the fear of dying after losing his girlfriend in a car accident. And Thomas, a former child soldier from Liberia, suffers the trauma of his past. When

they awake the next day they find their burdens are gone and have been replaced with someone else's. They spend the next week learning about each other and their own inner strengths.

**Wintergirls** by Laurie Halse Anderson

Reading Level: 9-10

Sophistication Level: 10

After her best friend, Cassie, dies from complications of bulimia, Lia begins to lose hold of her own life. Lia doesn't tell anyone that Cassie had called her 33 times the night she died and that Lia never picked up the phone. Saddled with guilt that she couldn't help her friend in her time of need, she struggles to stay alive and out of an institution as she becomes more severely anorexic. Lia becomes haunted by Cassie's ghost, who urges her to join Cassie in death. At the last minute, however, Lia realizes she desires to live and to get better.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Gail Giles

Title: *Girls Like Us*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

Topic: Ability and Illness Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Class Identity, Friendship, Racial Identity, Resilience

### Plot Summary:

This book is alternately narrated by two protagonists: Quincy, who is biracial and suffered a brain injury when her mother's boyfriend hit her in the head with a brick when she was six, and Biddy, who is White and also suffers from cognitive impairment because of a lack of oxygen when she was born. Biddy lives with her Granny after her mother abandoned her and Quincy has lived with foster families since the brick incident. When the book begins both young women are graduating from the same Texas high school where they were enrolled in the special education program. They learn from Ms. Evans, their counselor, that because they are both wards of the state and were accepted into an adult program, they will be living together in an apartment and will begin working. Biddy is excited, but Quincy, who is cynical, thinks Biddy is dumb and dreads living with her.

The girls meet with Ms. Delamino, their new counselor, who takes them to meet "Miss Lizzy," the widowed woman who Biddy will be housekeeping for and whose carriage house the girls will be living in. Biddy thinks the new apartment is wonderful. Quincy thinks it could be nicer, but she is glad to be away from her foster family. Quincy learns she will be working in a bakery in town. Miss Lizzy is kind to the girls and insists they eat their meals, which Quincy expertly makes, with her at the table. Miss Lizzy is only 64 and must use a walker, which frustrates her.

Quincy begins to soften up toward Biddy and both girls continue to record audio journals, as they have done in school. Quincy reveals that Biddy had a reputation at school for being promiscuous and there were rumors that she had a child. She becomes alarmed when Biddy starts screaming in the middle of the night, then waking up relieved that "they" aren't in the house. Biddy reveals that she began overeating because boys would tell her how pretty she was, hinting that she may have been sexually assaulted or raped. The girls also reveal their different insecurities: Quincy hates to be thought of as unintelligent and Biddy hates to be thought of as "white trash."

When Quincy finds out that Miss Lizzy hires a young gardener, Stephen, she breaks the news to Biddy carefully. Biddy hesitantly meets Stephen but still insists she doesn't want to be around boys. She becomes distracted taking care of Mama Duck, a duck who has laid eggs in the garden. The girls receive their first paychecks from Ms. Delamino who says she put them together because they have strengths that complement each other.

Robert, a bagger from Quincy's bakery quits after getting into an argument with Quincy and starts following her in his car. When Quincy doesn't come home from the bakery one evening, Bidy goes to find her. She discovers Quincy crying in an alley, bloody and with her clothes in disarray. She had been raped by Robert and his friend, and they had cut the word "ho" into her stomach with a knife. Bidy helps Quincy clean up and suggests they each tell their stories to their tape players, then switch and listen to each other's stories. After listening to their respective accounts Quincy wants to call the police, but then Bidy tells her the rest of her story. After Bidy was raped, her grandmother blamed her and arranged for Bidy's child to be adopted because she was "too stupid" to raise a child. They agree it's best not to tell anyone.

As Quincy heals, she teaches Bidy how to cook. The girls get in a fight with Miss Lizzy over expectations to meet her friend the next day. The friend ends up being a judge's wife who adopted Bidy's baby. It is revealed that the judge illegally had Bidy's grandmother force Bidy to sign away her rights to the child because he and his wife wanted her. Bidy says that she doesn't want her child back, she's just happy to see her. Quincy tells Miss Lizzy about the rape and realizes she now has a family. She gives Bidy an illustrated cookbook and gives Miss Lizzy a camera. Miss Lizzy, Bidy and Quincy go to the police station to report the rape and Quincy says she eventually feels less scared and like she has found a family.

#### Critique:

Strengths of book: This book features two unique protagonists as they come of age and learn to open themselves up to other people. The plot is simple, yet interesting and with a few twists. Overall, the book is often tragic and realistic, but humor and a happy ending make it ultimately uplifting.

Weaknesses of book: The book does include some stereotypes of people with disabilities, but it also does a lot to dispel stereotypes. Although the two characters are quite unique, their voices and points of view are a little too similar, despite the fact that they each speak with a different dialect.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as learning independence, overcoming fears, accepting love, and discovering inner strength. There also some problems that are specific to the disabilities of the two protagonists, such as stereotyping, sexual abuse, and feeling misunderstood.

Pace: This book moves quite quickly and the chapters are typically only a few pages long. The alternating narration by the two protagonists also helps speed up the pace.

Style: This book is written in alternating first person point of view of the two protagonists. Both protagonists have a conversational tone. Quincy speaks with a mix of African American Vernacular English and Southern American English dialects, which may cause readers who are not familiar with these dialects to read her narration more carefully.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Abuse, Class Identity, Friendship, Racial Identity, and Resilience.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This book is a great selection for the first rung of this reading ladder as it features two protagonists who share the same identity of disability but have very different experiences of living with a disability. The first person point of view really lets the reader experience how often frustrating and different life is for people with cognitive impairments. Despite the mature content of rape and abuse, there is still a strong positive message of both resilience and vulnerability.



## Critical Annotation

Author: Deb Caletti

Title: *The Nature of Jade*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8-9

Topic: Ability and Illness Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Family, Love, Resilience

### Plot Summary:

This book is divided into four parts and is narrated by seventeen-year-old Jade, the protagonist. In Part One, Jade reveals that she lives in Seattle near a zoo and she likes to keep a live video feed of the elephants running on her computer because she finds it calming. She lives with her ten-year-old brother Oliver and well-meaning parents who don't really understand her. Her mother is too involved in her life and her father is distant. One day she sees a boy not much older than herself on the video. He is wearing a red jacket and has a baby with him, who he laughs with. The boy shows up on the live video frequently.

Jade reveals that she has been treated for an anxiety disorder for the past three years. It came on suddenly after her grandmother died and her parents took a vacation together. She takes a medication and sees a psychologist every two or four weeks. Even with treatment, Jade still fears she will have a panic attack at school or somewhere embarrassing. Abe, Jade's psychologist, urges her to apply to some out of state colleges, but she insists her mother would be too upset if she left Washington. Nevertheless, Jade begins to look at other schools and apply for scholarships. She sees the boy on the zoo video again and decides she needs to take some risks and broaden her world. Jade decides to go to the elephant house the next day. The boy doesn't show up, but Damian, the elephant keeper urges Jade to volunteer to clean the elephant house. Jade decides she'll do it.

In Part Two, Jade has taken to her volunteer work at the zoo, which involves cleaning, as well as preparing food and checking on the elephants' vitals. Jade feels exhilarated to be pushing herself outside of her comfort zone so much, but still has reoccurring nightmares and anxieties. After two months the red jacket boy returns with the baby and Jade realizes it is his son. She says nothing, as she is still working on her fear. The next day she works up the courage and meets Sebastian and Bo, who is actually a toddler. Jade learns that Sebastian lives with his grandmother, who helps take care of Bo while Sebastian works. They bond over a few days and Sebastian asks Jade to join him for coffee at the bookstore where he works. Jade feels very comfortable with Sebastian, but when he tells Jade that he is twenty-years-old and Bo's mother died in childbirth, she realizes they have very different lives. Sebastian and Jade become closer, but Jade does not tell her parents about him. While at dinner with Sebastian, his grandmother Tess, and Bo, it is revealed that Bo's mother, Tiffany, is still alive. She didn't want him and refused to see him after giving birth. But after a year or so, with pressure from her parents, Tiffany filed for custody. Panicked, Sebastian left with Bo and Tess and they are now in hiding.

In Part Three, Jade is now eighteen and as she and Sebastian fall in love she notices her anxiety has seemed to dissipate. But then she learns from her friends that her mother is having an affair with Mr. Dutton, the school librarian. She confronts her mother who explains that she has been emotionally abandoned by Jade's father for years. Jade tells her mother about Sebastian and how she has applied to out of state colleges. She also tells her mom the truth about Bo's mother and her mother places an anonymous call to Tiffany. Jade tells Sebastian and he makes plans to run away again. He asks Jade to come with them and she agrees. That night she sees her little brother in the hallway and realizes she can't run away.

In Part Four, Jade reveals that she graduated with her class and attended the University of Washington in the fall. Her mother and father divorce by the spring. Jade receives a call from Sebastian who says that Tiffany has dropped the request for custody. He, Tess and Bo are living in Santa Fe, where Jade also got accepted to school. With her mother's encouragement, she transfers there. Jade realizes she is resilient and that life is a struggle between wishing to remain safe and take risks.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: This book is written beautifully and has a sympathetic and sharp-witted protagonist. The protagonist's anxiety is an important feature to the plot, but it does not consume the entire book. The nontraditional love story provides an interesting twist to the plot.

Weaknesses of book: While Jade and her family are fully fleshed out characters, Sebastian, the love interest, is rather one-note. The story also moves at a rather slow pace during the first two parts, then resolves itself very quickly at the end.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as first love, taking risks, and finding one's true self. These issues are even more pronounced as the protagonist has anxiety and panic disorder and is always more comfortable when not taking risks.

Pace: The first two parts of the book move at a slow pace, but this does help to show how the protagonist mostly lives within her own mind and has a pretty monotonous life. The last two parts of the book move much more quickly and this emphasizes how the risks the protagonist has taken have made her life more interesting.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist and has a lyrical yet witty style.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Animals, Family, Love, Motherhood, Resilience, and Single Parenting.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a good addition to this reading ladder as it features a protagonist with an "invisible" disability or illness that affects every aspect of her life. While her anxiety is not the focus of the book, it is a central part of the protagonist's character and influences her every thought and motive. Some of the content of the book is

mature (such as the custody battle for Bo), but Caletti treats this content sensitively and practically. Adolescents who are making important decisions about their futures or testing the limits of their comfort zones will likely identify with this book.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Sharon Draper

Title: *Out of My Mind*

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 8

Topic: Ability and Illness Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Alienation, Friendship, Resilience

### Plot Summary:

Melody, a preteen with cerebral palsy, has never spoken a word and she can't walk or feed herself. She is tiny for her age and uses a pink wheelchair. At the beginning of the book, she describes what it was like growing up with her two loving parents. Melody is very intelligent with a photographic memory, which has made her inability to speak even more frustrating for her. Melody's experience with condescending doctors was also frustrating. When she was five a doctor diagnosed her as brain-damaged and profoundly cognitively impaired because she her thinking was too abstract for the basic tests he gave her. Melody's mother told off the doctor and enrolled Melody in the local public school.

Melody is now in Grade 5 and she explains that she rarely learns in school because of her placement in a cohort of students with disabilities. One year Melody would have a good aide who gave her more advanced books to listen to and the next year she would be back to listening to books her dad read to her years before. Mrs. Violet Valencia, or Mrs. V, is Melody's neighbor who watched Melody after school for a few hours a day. Mrs. V used to work as a nurse with Melody's mother and she made it her mission to help Melody talk and help her learn how to read.

Melody recalls that when she was eight-years-old her mother became pregnant and she remembers her praying that this child would be born without any serious disabilities. This made Melody feel guilty, as if she were a burden on her parents. The baby, Penny, was born healthy and with no complications, but life was still stressful while Penny was a baby. As Penny begins to walk and then speak, Melody can't help feeling envious.

Once in fifth grade, Melody's school begins "inclusion" classes, which mainstream the students with disabilities. Melody also gets a fancy new electric wheelchair and is ecstatic that she can move herself around. While some of the general education students are rude, Melody makes friend with a girl named Rose. Mrs. Shannon, Melody's inclusion teacher, recognizes her intelligence and praises her. She even manages to get Melody her own aide, Catherine, a university student. As Melody starts research on Stephen Hawking, she realizes a laptop would help her communicate better. Catherine gives Melody's parents information about a Medi-Talker, which has keys big enough for Melody's thumbs so she could use it all her own. She receives the Medi-Talker just before Christmas break and nicknames it Elvira. Melody practices typing in words and pushing a button so Elvira will speak for her.

When Melody tries out Elvira at school it becomes a hit and people's reaction to her changes. Many students realize that Melody has had a lot to say the entire time but was unable. Others are still resentful of her intelligence and think Melody gets special help. Melody makes it onto the school's team for Whiz Kids, an academic competition. The team wins the first round and Melody gets to use Elvira on a news report. Next, they head to Washington, D.C. As Melody and her family arrive at the airport, they learn the flight's been cancelled, but the rest of the team took an alternate flight earlier in the day. Stunned, Melody and her family return home. Her mother tells of Mr. Dimming, the team chaperone, when he calls later to apologize. The next day, Melody insists on going back to school, despite her parents' wishes. Her mother accidentally hits Penny while backing out of the driveway and is luckily only injured. Melody confronts the team at school and learns that Rose was going to call her about the flight, but was easily convinced not to. When she sees how shoddy the trophy is, Melody laughs and rolls out of the classroom. Melody explains that she has begun to write about her life, the result of which is this book.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is an interesting book about the frustrations and longings of a young woman with a disability. It is a bittersweet and realistic story with a smart and humorous protagonist. The book covers issues of difference and acceptance in an honest and positive way.

Weaknesses of book: The protagonist's voice often seems inauthentic and some of the dialogue sounds more like an adult posing as a younger person than as a real young person's voice. This has the effect of pulling the reader out of the story. Additionally, some of the "bad" characters are quite one-dimensional.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as fitting in, dealing with bullies, learning to trust people, and building self-confidence. These problems are all compounded because of the physical limitations of the protagonist and her difficulty in advocating for herself.

Pace: Although the book is almost 300 pages long, it moves quite quickly due to the short chapters and frequent dialogue.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist. Melody speaks in simple language, but it does often sound more like an adult posing as a younger person. When Melody uses Elvira, her Medi-Talker, her dialogue is bolded, which helps distinguish it.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Alienation, Friendship, Resilience, and Trust.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This book is an interesting addition to the reading ladder because it features the youngest protagonist but is just as mature in theme and content as the other books. One of the best aspects of this book is the protagonist's growth as she is able to use her voice to fully articulate what she is thinking. Many parts of this book are heartbreaking, yet there is a strong message of resilience and optimism.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Willa Strayhorn

Title: *The Way We Bared Our Souls*

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 9

Topic: Ability and Illness Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Empathy, Ethnic Identity, Friendship

### Plot Summary:

This book begins in Santa Fe with Lo (Consuelo) describing how a week has passed since a ritual took place and now instead of five friends, there are four. Kaya has died and it is Lo's fault. Gathered with her other three friends, Lo begins to speak and explain what happened.

At a doctor's appointment Lo reveals to her parents and the doctor that she has been showing some early symptoms of multiple sclerosis (MS), which runs in her family. She returns to school that day and finds out that Ellen, an old friend who has grown distant, is no longer abusing prescription pills but has moved on to meth. On her way home from school she almost hits a coyote and when she pulls over, meets Jay. Jay is an American Indian man who lives in a cave nearby. He immediately senses that Lo is in pain. He gives Lo a small horse figurine and says to return it after her journey. He says that he performs rituals to release people from their burdens and pain, but Lo would need to bring four friends who are also suffering. Lo realizes none of her friends are suffering and she will need to seek out others in pain.

She looks for Kit, whom she briefly dated a few years ago and then became distant from. Kit's girlfriend, Lucita, had died in a car accident and he had been depressed ever since. She tries to ask him about the ritual but can't. Lo then finds Thomas, a student who was a child soldier in Liberia, who she has had a crush on for awhile. Thomas had been adopted by missionaries with a large, blended family. Kit and Thomas bonded over their grief and trauma. She asks Thomas to the ritual and he tells Lo that after seeing his parents murdered in front of him and being forced to shoot his friend, he has nothing left to lose; he will attend. Lo next finds Kaya, an old friend who has congenital analgesia, meaning she can't experience pain and must be extremely careful to not injure herself. She tells Kaya about the MS and she agrees to join in the ritual. Lastly, Lo recruits Ellen, who takes some forcing to come along.

The group of five meets Jay at sundown and he takes them to a Pueblo kiva, an underground room used for religious rituals. Jay has each one introduce themselves and explain how they are suffering. He gives each one of them a totem figurine, like the horse the Lo received earlier. As he begins to perform the ritual, Jay says they will need to return in a week to reverse it. The next morning, Lo begins to realize they have all switched burdens and have awakened with each other's totems in hand. She can no longer feel pain, just like Kaya. Kit seems manic, like Ellen on drugs. Ellen has Lo's MS symptoms, Thomas has Kit's fear of death, and Kaya has Thomas' PTSD. Lo convinces everyone they just need to help each other get through the next week.

Throughout the week, the five spend most of their time together and grow closer. Lo and Thomas become especially close and end up in a romantic relationship. Later in the week, Lo meets up with Jay who reveals that he knew Lo's Aunt Karine, who died from MS a few years ago. Karine had asked Jay to look after Lo. Kaya asks the other four to come with her into the mountains, despite the wildfires that are happening. Kaya, who is American Indian, has been having vivid flashbacks of a massacre of her Zumi ancestors. In a trance, Kaya climbs up a cliff and reveals that she has cut images of the massacre into her legs. Despite the other four insisting that they can help, Kaya jumps to her death. They call for an ambulance and, hours later, return to the kiva and the beginning of the story.

Lo finds Jay and asks if he can do anything to resurrect Kaya, but he says he cannot. Lo tells the other three she will reverse the ritual herself. She reminds them that in the past week they have all learned that they are more than their burdens and that they need community to cope with their burdens. After the ritual, Lo returns to where Kaya jumped and begins to dance with grief and joy in memory of her friend. The next morning she awakes with her MS symptoms and plans to visit Kaya's parents with the other three. Lo meets with Thomas first, who says his terrible memories seem a bit more distant now. They tell each other "I love you" and find that Ellen and Kit have also started a relationship. The four discuss the past week and Lo concludes that pain can lead to compassion and growth.

#### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is a wonderful book that shows the many ways people can suffer and the importance of finding others to help ease suffering. The five main characters are all unique, non-stereotypical, and fully developed. The voice of the novel is authentic and compelling.

Weaknesses of book: While this book has blatant mystical aspects, some parts of the plot, particularly Kaya's story, are far-fetched.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as growing apart from friends, learning to empathize, and learning to open up to others. Because the characters in this book have multiple psychological and physical illnesses, the problems of learning empathy and opening up to others are even greater.

Pace: This novel moves quickly and takes place over one week. There is a good deal of dialogue and frequent chapter breaks.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist, Lo. The style of this book's magical realism.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Empathy, Ethnic Identity, and Friendship.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This book is a great addition to this reading ladder as it features a diverse group of characters that have both physical and psychological illnesses. The protagonist has a realistic, yet sensitive, worldview that makes for an authentic story, despite the magical elements. Lastly, the themes of this book align perfectly with the goal of this project: to promote empathy and provide identification for adolescent readers.



## Critical Annotation

Author: Laurie Halse Anderson

Title: *Wintergirls*

Reading Level: 9-10

Sophistication Level: 10

Topic: Ability and Illness Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Friendship, Grief, Self Esteem

### Plot Summary:

This book begins as eighteen-year-old Lia learns from her mother that her former best friend, Cassie, has been found dead in a motel room. The night before Cassie had called Lia 33 times, but Lia never answered. Lia runs up to her room and listens to the messages, each one increasingly more desperate, begging Lia for help. Lia doesn't tell anyone about the calls.

Lia is anorexic and has been hospitalized in a rehabilitation center twice. In the past, Lia and Cassie had made a pact to be the skinniest girls in school. Lia's main goal in life now is to stay out of the rehabilitation while also hiding her rapid weight loss from her family. Lia's anorexia stems from her need for control. Her parents divorced when she was younger and her father remarried a woman named Jennifer. As a result, Lia brought control into her life with obsessive exercise and diet restriction. Lia resents her parents for hospitalizing her and refuses to have a relationship with either of them. Emma, Jennifer's eight-year old daughter, is the only person Lia is close to.

In the days after Cassie's death, Lia is haunted by Cassie's ghost. At first, the ghost simply appears to Lia, letting her know that Cassie's spirit is still around and that she has unfinished business with Lia. Lia believes Cassie is haunting her because she refused to pick up the phone that night. As the hauntings continue, however, Cassie begins to follow Lia around and even talk to her. In time, it becomes clear that Cassie is waiting for Lia to cross over into death, as well.

As Lia's self-harming behaviors become more out of control, Cassie's hauntings become more frequent. Lia doesn't understand why Cassie won't leave her alone or why Cassie makes such cruel statements about her being fat, ugly, and mean. Lia tries to restrict her diet even more, exercise harder, and cut herself more.

Finally, at her lowest weight ever, Lia nearly overdoses on sleeping pills in the same motel Cassie died in. Lia envisions Cassie welcoming her to the other side, saying that she's so proud of her and that death is only a moment away. However, Lia realizes that she wants to live. She struggles away from Cassie and back to life. Lia realizes she must change the way she views herself, her relationships, and her body if she wants to live. She enters the hospital and accepts treatment. For the first time in a long time, Lia is determined to live and knows it will be a difficult journey.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is a beautifully written, yet tragic story, of a young woman's descent into an eating disorder. The book treats the topic of anorexia with gravity and without glorification. The end is hopeful, yet realistic about the protagonist's long road to recovery.

Weaknesses of book: The formatting of the book, which uses a variety of text sizes, fonts, and strikethroughs can be distracting.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as finding control and accepting oneself. Grief and illness are also major problems in this book.

Pace: The pace of the book is fairly quick and the formatting variety breaks up the short chapters.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist. There are several formatting quirks in the book, such as the use of strikethroughs to denote Lia's inner thoughts that she cannot express.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Eating Disorders, Friendship, Grief, and Self Esteem.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This book is an appropriate addition to this reading ladder, as it deals with a significant illness that affects young women and, increasingly, men. Anderson's beautiful prose elevates this book from a typical problem novel and shows the obsessive and ugly side of eating disorders in a way that is still thoughtful and sensitive.

**READING LADDER 4:  
CLASS IDENTITY**

## **RATIONALE FOR READING LADDER: CLASS IDENTITY**

### **I. Why this topic? What is the significance for human beings in general? What is the significance for students in ninth grade?**

The topic of **CLASS IDENTITY** was chosen for this reading ladder because it holds significance for this specific group of students, as well as for all human beings. As noted in Chapter 1, class and class disparity are a significant, and often controversial, issue in the United States. Cushner, McClelland and Safford (2012) identify five social classes in the United States: the upper class, or social elite; the upper-middle class; middle class; working class; and the lower class, which includes the working poor and the underclass, or those who have been in poverty for a considerable amount of time (p. 443). They comment that prospects of moving up the social ladder have diminished due to globalization, loss of manufacturing jobs, and the consequent growth of minimum wage jobs (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 443). Cushner, McClelland and Safford (2012) note that while social class is not wholly determined by income, income disparity has grown so that the top 10 percent of income earners own 70 percent of the nation's wealth. Only 3% of the U.S. population identifies as upper class, 40% identify as middle class, 30% identify as working class, and 27% identify as lower class (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 443).

Class is a significant topic for all people because it affects every person, whether positively or negatively. The statistics for adolescent class identity, which this project focuses on, are also significant. According to Peterson and Hittie (2010), "Every community has children who are poor" (p.12). They continue, "In recent years, childhood poverty is again growing...In 2004, more than 35.9 million, or 12% of Americans including 12.1 million children, were considered to be living in poverty with an average growth of almost 1 million per year" (Peterson & Hittie, 2010, p. 12).

The sheer number of both adults and adolescents who identify as poor or working class makes this a significant topic. However, the topic becomes even more significant when considering how vital inclusion and representation are for students from poor or working class backgrounds. As with adolescents who face negative racial, ethnic, or disability images, it is important to support positive identity images for adolescents from poor or working class backgrounds. Supporting those students is considered crucial to creating inclusive schools. According to bell hooks (1994), class identity may be the most overlooked facet of adolescent identity (p. 177). She argues that by continuing to not address class disparity, the classroom remains an undemocratic space in which some students are not represented and are not provided with the emotional support or educational tools to succeed (hooks, 1994, p. 177).

As with racial and ethnic and disability identity, there are often negative connotations attached to the poor and working class, making these adolescents even more vulnerable to low self-image. Like race, ethnicity, and disability, class is an important aspect of adolescent identity that deserves acknowledgement in educational spaces.

As noted in Chapter 2, the topic of this reading ladder is significant for this particular group of students. Economically, these students are middle to lower middle class and working class. Some of the students attend school on scholarship, while others have parents or relatives who pay their tuition. Some of the students have single parents and all of the students who live in a two-parent household have parents who work outside of the home. Many of the students have their own part-time jobs in retail or food service or work as babysitters and tutors. Because of the variety of class backgrounds of these students, class is a significant issue for them.

Just as with racial, ethnic, ability, and illness identities, it is imperative that students from poor or working class backgrounds receive affirmation and inclusion from educators. This means

not only ensuring that all students can succeed in the classroom, but that students see themselves represented in literary texts used in school. According to Michael Cart, *Booklist* columnist and reviewer, there is a need for books that will help “kids who are living outside of the mainstream in radically nontraditional families deal with their circumstances – circumstances that often result in their being marginalized, rendered invisible, regarded as unacceptably different, or even being persecuted by peers” (as cited in Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013, p. 129). This particular reading ladder provides five books that speak to the experiences of adolescents from a variety of class backgrounds. Because there are such a variety of class backgrounds in this group of students, this reading ladder contains a diverse group of books that will affirm the identities of many of these students and help students who do not share these identities to better understand their peers.

## II. WHY EACH INDIVIDUAL SELECTION HAS BEEN INCLUDED IN THIS READING LADDER

### **Story of a Girl** by Sara Zarr

Reading Level: 6-7

Sophistication Level: 7

Deanna Lambert's father caught her having sex in a car when she was thirteen years old and two years later, he still can't look her in the eye. Even though Tommy is the only boy she's had sex with, Deanna's reputation is ruined. Her dad was laid off and both of her parents now work retail jobs. Her two best friends have recently begun dating, causing Deanna to feel like a third wheel. She tries to maintain a close relationship with her older brother, but Darren and his girlfriend are busy struggling as teenage parents. Deanna learns to protect herself by becoming outwardly tough, but feels alone in the world. She copes by writing about a girl who has the same experiences and feelings that she does. Deanna eventually comes to realize it's not too late to take control of her life and help those around her make positive changes as well.

### **Such a Rush** by Jennifer Echols

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8-9

At fourteen, Leah Jones took on the role of adult while her mother moved from boyfriend to boyfriend, throwing away any money she has. At school, other students think Leah is trash because she lives in a trailer park. But Leah is preoccupied with other matters, like making rent and saving enough money for flight lessons at the airstrip where she works. Flying is the only time Leah feels free and by the time she is a senior in high school, she's good enough to land a job flying banner planes. When Mr. Hall, her boss, suddenly dies, his two teenage sons take over the business and pull Leah into a family feud.

### **The Hunger Games** by Suzanne Collins

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8

Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen lives in a poor, coal mining town in District 12 of Panem, in the former United States. Long ago the districts waged war on the wealthy Capitol and were defeated. As part of the surrender terms, each district agreed to send one boy and one girl to appear in an annual televised event called, "The Hunger Games," a fight to the death on live television. When her younger sister is selected to represent District 12, Katniss volunteers as tribute and finds herself caught up in the bizarre reality series where she is forced to survive while maintaining her humanity.

**Eleanor and Park** by *Rainbow Rowell*

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 9

Eleanor is bullied at school because she's poor, overweight and dresses in unusual clothing. Park is a half-Korean boy who has lived in Omaha, Nebraska, all his life but still feels like an outsider. When they first meet, Eleanor and Park can't stand each other. However, they somehow find themselves falling in love as they bond over music and comics. Park begins to learn how difficult life is for Eleanor, living in a crowded house with an abusive stepfather. When Eleanor's stepfather destroys her few possessions and becomes violent, it becomes clear that in order for Eleanor to be safe, she must leave Omaha.

**We Were Liars** by *E. Lockhart*

Reading Level: 9-10

Sophistication Level: 10

Cadence Sinclair Easton comes from an old money family, headed by a patriarch who owns a private island off of Cape Cod. She spends her summers there with her cousins Johnny and Mirren, and friend Gat (the four "Liars"). Issues of race and class arise as Cady and Gat fall in love. During their fifteenth summer, Cadence suffers a mysterious accident in a house fire. She spends the next two years in a haze of amnesia, debilitating migraines, and painkillers, trying to piece together just what happened. In the end, Cady realizes her own involvement in the tragedy.



## Critical Annotation

Author: Sara Zarr

Title: *Story of a Girl*

Reading Level: 6-7

Sophistication Level: 7

Topic: Class Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Family, Friendship, Self Esteem

### Plot Summary:

This book begins with Deanna Lambert, now a sophomore in high school, explaining that when she was thirteen years old, her father caught her having sex with her seventeen-year-old boyfriend Tommy Webber. Tommy had been a friend of Deanna's older brother Darren. Deanna says that in the three years since, her father hasn't looked her in the eye or really talked to her. When Deanna got to high school, her reputation preceded her and she feels as if she is drifting further and further from a metaphorical shore. Deanna, encouraged by her English teacher, writes a story about a girl surfing away from the shore. Excerpts are included throughout the book.

In addition to her father's emotional distance, Deanna's home life can be difficult and stressful. She comes from a working class family in the small town of Pacifica, California. Her mother is kind, but often tired from working long hours at a department store. Her father was laid off from his job a few years back and now works at an auto parts warehouse. Darren, who is now twenty years old, lives at home with his girlfriend Stacy and their baby, April. Stacy and Darren both work different shifts at a Safeway so they can take turns caring for April. Deanna does have two best friends, Jason and Lee, who are dating each other. Jason and Deanna have known each other forever and Deanna has always somewhat liked him. However, Deanna does not want to risk losing her two friends.

Deanna has decided that she will spend the summer working to make enough money so that she, Darren, Stacy and April can find a place of their own. She gets a job at Picasso's Pizza and learns that Tommy, her ex-boyfriend, also works there. Deanna is tempted to quit, but she likes Michael, the manager, who pleads for her to stay. Michael is gay and understands, like Deanna, what it feels like to be an outcast. Although Deanna feels like a young girl again when Tommy is around, she still thinks he is a jerk and resents him for not bearing any of the humiliation and rejection that she bears.

Lee confides in Deanna that Jason wants to have sex but she is not ready. Slightly bitter, Deanna tells Lee to not waste her time. She believes that Lee will go off to college and leave Deanna and Jason in Pacifica. Upset by the conversation and thoughts about her past, Deanna is pushed over the edge when some boys from school appear at Picasso's Pizza and harass her. That night, Deanna discovers that Stacy has run away. Deanna sees her father holding April and wonders how he can be so loving to the baby while so cold to her. As Darren packs to find Stacy, Deanna realizes that she is not going to move out with them and that everyone has somebody to love except for her. Feeling lonely, Deanna and Tommy kiss after work but then get in an

argument. Deanna confronts Tommy about how he made a joke of their relationship and he apologizes.

The next day Deanna feels as if everything has changed and she now has choices. Stacy has returned and Deanna wants to be out of the house when Darren comes home, so she and Jason go to the mall. Deanna is feeling good until some boys from school harass her. She and Jason go back to his house and they kiss. Deanna leaves, upset, feeling as though she can't escape her memories or her past. Deanna confides in Michael who tells her that running away will not solve anything, her troubles will just follow her. At home, Deanna finally confronts her father about how he's been ashamed of her. Deanna realizes she does have a family, but they need work. She makes a nice meal and her entire family eats together for the first time in years. Deanna tells Lee what happened with Jason. She stays away from Jason and Lee until school starts back up in the fall. Deanna's father begins talking to her again and Stacy and Darren find a place to rent. Deanna realizes that change doesn't happen overnight, but many small gestures can help.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: Zarr has written a brief yet powerful story of a misunderstood young woman who learns by trial and error how to move on with her life. Zarr addresses the book's mature content with a realistic and convincing voice. The characters are almost all complex and defy stereotypes.

Weaknesses of book: Because this book features heavy and sad content, some readers may not be satisfied with the ending. While the ending hints at hope, it is not a traditional happy ending. However, some readers may appreciate the realistic nature of the ending.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as bullying due to sexuality and class, experimenting with sex, and overcoming peer pressure. There also some general problems in this book, such as forgiveness and self acceptance.

Pace: This book is short and moves very quickly. The chapters are brief, as well.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist, Deanna. Deanna's voice is reflective yet realistic and often humorous. Excerpts of her creative writing are included in the book.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Family, Friendship, and Self Esteem.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This book was initially selected for this reading ladder because it features a protagonist who comes from a working class family and focuses on this issue. However, the book also has many additional merits, such as a unique and flawed protagonist, a realistic story, and a hopeful ending. Any adolescent who has ever felt like an outcast will likely enjoy and identify with this book.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Jennifer Echols

Title: *Such a Rush*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8-9

Topic: Class Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Betrayal, Friendship, Grief

### Plot Summary:

This book begins when Leah Jones is fourteen years old. She lives in a trailer park in South Carolina with her mother and just moved to Heaven Beach a month before. They've moved around a lot because her mother's boyfriends always promised her a job in each new town. However, Leah's mother mostly does not work. Leah decides that if she is going to live in a trailer park the rest of her life she won't just look up at the planes passing by; she'll learn to fly.

She gets a job at the small, local airport and notices that Hall Aviation, a banner towing company with a hangar at the airport, offers flight lessons. Mr. Hall, the owner, has three sons. Jake is older and flies the banner plane. The other two are twin boys, Alec and Grayson, who are the same age as Leah. Afraid her mother will take the money for flight lessons, Leah forges her signature and talks to Mr. Hall. Mr. Hall tells Leah that everyone is impressed with how competent she is at work and that he knew she was a born pilot. He agrees to give Leah lessons as long as she promises to quit smoking. Leah loves her first flight lesson and feels as if she finally has something to look forward to.

The book skips ahead three years and Leah is now eighteen and a commercially licensed pilot, along with Alec and Grayson Hall. It is now Christmas and they will begin to work for Mr. Hall during spring and after graduation. Even though Leah is closer to their father than his sons are, she does not really know the brothers and understands she is not part of their family. She overhears Grayson hypothesizing that Leah and Mr. Hall are having an affair and that is why she has been given free flight lessons. Leah is hurt but somewhat used to these kinds of rumors. She has, however, made a friend from school, Molly, whose normality reminds Leah how different she is from everyone else.

A month after Christmas, Mr. Hall's oldest son, Jake, is killed in a jet crash in Afghanistan. Mr. Hall dies soon after of a heart attack. His business closes and months pass by. Adding to her grief, Leah has been unable to fly since she would now have to pay for it. In April, Grayson, the moody twin, tells Leah he is going to run the business and he expects her to still fly for him. Leah refuses at first, scared Grayson will quickly lose interest in the business. Grayson, however, finds the original permission form with the forged signature and blackmails Leah. He also insists that Leah flirt with and date Alec for the week. Leah assumes Grayson is trying to manipulate his brother, but feels forced to agree to his condition. She learns that their mother, who had divorced Mr. Hall, is also in on Grayson's plan.

Leah dates Alec for a few days but feels a stronger connection to Grayson. One night during a tornado, Grayson drives Leah to the airport, fearing for her safety in the trailer. Grayson tells Leah he's been asking her to date Alec for his own good, to help him remember he's human. Leah and Grayson has some deep conversations and end up kissing a few times. The next day Leah learns that Alec has been intending to join the air force, like their dead brother Jake did, and that is why Grayson wants him to have a girlfriend. He hoped the relationship would keep him in South Carolina. Leah finds out that Alec actually likes Molly and she told him that Grayson was blackmailing Leah. Distracted, Leah accidentally crashes a plane, but is fine. Grayson comes to tell her that his father left Leah a plane in his will. She can sell a share so that she can fly it sometimes and still make a profit. Grayson asks Leah to his prom and she decides to find a new home with her plane profits.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is a simple but sweet book about a young woman who is resilient in the face of stereotyping and bullying. The plot moves quickly and the characters are well developed.

Weaknesses of book: Some of the dialogue seems forced and unnatural for teenagers. There are also some moments where there is too much exposition, which disrupts the flow of the book.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as first love, bullying, wanting to escape one's home life, and jealousy.

Pace: This book takes place primarily over a few days and moves quite quickly. There is a great deal of dialogue, which helps the plot move even more quickly.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist, Leah. Leah's voice is simple and straightforward.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Betrayal, Friendship, and Grief.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This book deals with many of the same issues as *Story of a Girl*, such as coming from a poor or working class background and having a reputation for being promiscuous. This book is longer and has a more complex plot that focuses on romantic relationships. The protagonist is an interesting and likeable character with unique ambitions. The mysterious aspects of the plot are intriguing and handled well.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Suzanne Collins

Title: *The Hunger Games*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8

Topic: Class Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Appearances, Power, Racial Identity, Sacrifice, Strength

### Plot Summary:

This book is divided into three parts: “The Tributes,” “The Games,” and “The Victor.” In Part I, sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen explains that she lives in the former United States in District 12. Years ago, the districts waged war on the wealthy Capitol and were defeated. As part of the surrender terms, each district agreed to send one boy and one girl to appear in an annual televised event called, “The Hunger Games,” a fight to the death on live television. The tributes, as they are called, are randomly selected at a reaping ceremony. Once a person turns twelve their name is entered each year until they turn eighteen. Each year the number of entries per person grows so that an eighteen-year-old will have seven entries that year. However, people can also buy a tessera, which puts in an additional entry in exchange for a year’s worth of food. District 12 is a poor, coal-mining district, so many people (including Katniss) have a few tesserae. Katniss and her best friend Gale hunt for food and discuss the possibility of ever running away from the district and living in the woods.

Katniss’ sister, Prim, is entered in her first reaping this year and is selected as tribute. Katniss volunteers to take her place. She reveals that in other districts where there are resources to train the tributes, many people volunteer. In District 12, to volunteer is a death sentence. Peeta Mellark, a boy from a family of bakers, is called as the other tribute. He and Katniss are not friends, but years ago when Katniss’ father died in a mining accident and the Everdeens were struggling, Peeta gave Katniss some bread. Katniss has since associated Peeta with hope and prays that she is not forced to kill him. Katniss is led to a room where she says goodbye to her family and friends. A girl, Madge, gives her a circular pin with a mockingjay, a hybrid bird that can replicate bird whistles and human words.

Katniss and Peeta are whisked off on a train with Effie Trinket, District 12’s representative from the Capitol, and Haymitch Abernathy, an alcoholic former Hunger Games winner who will be their mentor. They’re fed sumptuous meals and Haymitch agrees to help them. They arrive in the Capitol and Katniss is given a makeover by Cinna, her stylist. Cinna acknowledges that the Capitol must seem grotesquely opulent to Katniss. Katniss and Peeta are presented in the arena, where sponsors can decide to support them if they choose. Next, they go through training and Katniss shows off her abilities with a bow and arrow. She wonders if Peeta is being truly kind or trying to trick her into false comfort so he can kill her once the games begin. They are encouraged by Haymitch to appear friendly toward each other. At a televised interview, Peeta reveals that he is in love with Katniss, which Haymitch says will help them both win the public’s affection.

In Part II, the games begin as the tributes are released into the arena in a circle around the Cornucopia, which holds supplies and weapons. Katniss takes Haymitch's advice and runs toward the woods and water, only grabbing a few things. Some of the tributes immediately begin killing each other. At night, images of the dead tributes flash in the sky and Katniss is relieved Peeta is not among them. She is also relieved that Rue, a twelve-year-old from District 11 is also still alive. Katniss survives on her own for a few days and then discovers Rue while hiding from some career tributes in a tree. They drop a hive of wasps on the career tributes and survive another day. Rue, however, is speared and Katniss sings to her as she dies. Katniss covers Rue's body in flowers to show the Capitol that she cannot be controlled by them. An announcement is made that there is a rule change and two tributes can win the Hunger Games as long as they are from the same district.

In Part III, Katniss realizes that Peeta must have convinced the audience that they are in love. She finds a wounded Peeta and they kiss as she treats his wounds. She gets Peeta medicine that he needs and realizes she may have real feelings for him. There is now only one other tribute left, Cato. Peeta and Katniss head to the Cornucopia and find Cato being chased by vicious wolves. Katniss shoots Cato and he falls into the pack of wolves. Cato suffers while Peeta badly bleeds. Katniss finds Cato and shoots him out of pity. Another announcement is made that the earlier rule change has been revoked and now only one tribute can win. Not willing to be the one who kills the other, Katniss and Peeta prepare to eat deadly berries at the same time. Before they can, an announcement is made that they have just won. A hovercraft takes them away and Peeta is given medical treatment. Katniss is prepared for their on-air reunion and Haymitch tells her that Capitol is furious with her. He also mentions that Peeta is truly in love with her. As they head home, Peeta overhears that the relationship has been a strategy and questions Katniss' true feelings. She explains that she is confused about fiction and reality and what life will be like back in District 12.

#### Critique:

Strengths of book: The plot and world that Collins has created is exciting, provocative and moving. Under the gory veneer is a very serious commentary about wealth and power that is appropriate for a young adult audience. Most of the characters are well developed with interesting motivations and backgrounds.

Weaknesses of book: The story is not completely original as it is quite similar to Koushun Takami's novel *Battle Royale*. The writing is also quite simple and straightforward.

Problems of book: There are some traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as exploring romantic feelings, finding inner strength, and the importance of appearances. There are also problems such as maintaining one's humanity, learning to trust, and standing up for what one believes.

Pace: This book moves very quickly and the exciting plot helps keep up the momentum.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist, Katniss. Her narration describes the action in a straightforward manner.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Appearances, Power, Racial Identity, Sacrifice, and Strength.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a worthy addition to this reading ladder as issues of class, wealth and power are central to the story. Katniss is a powerful, yet humane, protagonist who experiences both extraordinary and mundane issues. While the other books in this reading ladder offer a modern and realistic portrayal of class, this book should help readers think about class on a larger and more global scale.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Rainbow Rowell

Title: *Eleanor and Park*

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 9

Topic: Class Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Love, Racial Identity, Self Esteem

### Plot Summary:

This book begins in August 1986 in Omaha, Nebraska, and is alternatively told from the perspective of the two sixteen-year-old protagonists, Eleanor and Park. Park is dealing with the usual bullies on the school bus when a new girl boards. She is chubby with wild, curly red hair, and unusual clothes. Park is a misfit in his own right as a half-Korean kid who wears all black and listens to alternative music. Eleanor has no choice but to sit next to him. They spend the first few bus rides in resentment, scowling at each other. They are also in the same English class, where it becomes apparent that Eleanor is a good reader but a distracted student.

Eleanor has just moved back in with her mom, her abusive stepfather Richie, and her four younger siblings. The house is so small that Eleanor shares a bedroom with her siblings and there is no bathroom door, just a curtain. Richie had kicked Eleanor out over a year ago and she stayed with her mom's friends. Eleanor's father lives across town with his fiancée and her son, Matt. Eleanor only has a few belongings that she keeps hidden away. Park comes from a middle class family, but has his own issues to deal with. His father prefers Park's younger, jock brother, Josh.

Park begins to realize that Eleanor is peeking over at his comic books during their rides to and from school. He becomes more considerate toward her and waits for her to finish a page before turning and only reads on the bus so she won't miss anything. Eventually, he gives her books to take home each evening and she returns them the next day. Eventually they begin to talk about music and Eleanor reveals that she's never heard bands like The Smiths or Joy Division, but she wants to. Park makes her a mix tape and gives her his walkman so she can listen. They begin to talk about music and books and quickly bond.

Park walks over to Eleanor's house one day and her stepfather, who has been beating Eleanor's mother, becomes suspicious. The next day Park and Eleanor hold hands on the bus and soon they are all each other thinks about. Eleanor babysits for her father and takes the chance to talk to Park all night, as she doesn't have a phone at her house. She evades a lot of his questions about her home life and Park tells Eleanor that he loves her. After an unfortunate meeting with Park's mother where Eleanor felt uncomfortable, Park confronts Eleanor's bullies and gets in a fistfight.

Eleanor's home life gets worse as Richie becomes more suspicious of her relationship with Park. Just before Christmas Eleanor and Park get in a fight over Tine, Park's ex-girlfriend from middle school who bullies Eleanor. They get back together and Eleanor tells Park everything about her family and Richie. Eleanor returns home one day to see that Richie has



discovered her relationship with Park and has destroyed all of her belongings. She realizes he is the one who has been writing obscene messages on her schoolbooks. Fearing for her life, Eleanor finds Park and tells him that her uncle in St. Paul, Minnesota will let her stay with him for the summer. Park insists on taking his father's truck and driving Eleanor there himself. They say goodbye and Eleanor's aunt and uncle take her in. They work to get her siblings out of the house, too. Park writes to Eleanor every day but receives no response. Eventually he stops. One day he receives a postcard from her that has three words on it, presumably "I love you."

Critique:

Strengths of book: This is a sweet and heartbreaking story about first love. It features two protagonists who are unapologetic about who they are and find comfort in each other. The two characters have distinct voices and are well developed. The plot is intriguing and incorporates creative use of popular culture.

Weaknesses of book: Some aspects of the plot are implausible and, at times, some minor characters feel like caricatures.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as finding first love, losing first love, and acceptance of self. Additional problems include abuse and harassment.

Pace: This book moves very quickly due to the alternating narratives of the two protagonists. The chapters are very short and include a great deal of dialogue

Style: This book is written in alternating third person point of view of both the protagonists, Eleanor and Park. The tone is conversational and sounds authentic.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Racial Identity, Love, and Self Esteem.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a great book to include in this reading ladder as it features a character that lives in poverty as well as a character from a middle class background. The dual narrative allows the reader to see what each of these characters experience, as well as how they view the other character. This book is likely to resonate with any teenager, as it is primarily a story about first love and finding someone to identify with.

## Critical Annotation

Author: E. Lockhart

Title: *We Were Liars*

Reading Level: 9-10

Sophistication Level: 10

Topic: Class Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Family, Illness Identity, Love, Racial Identity

### Plot Summary:

This book is divided into five parts and is narrated by Cadence Sinclair Easton, a teenager who lives in Vermont during the school year and spends the summer on her family's private island off Cape Cod. In Part I, Cadence introduces the reader to her family, the Sinclairs. Cadence's grandfather, Harris, heads the Sinclair family. His wife, Tipper, passed away not long ago. They have three daughters, one of who is Cadence's mother. The family has many secrets and often refuses to face reality. Her mother and her sisters often argue with their father about the future of the estate.

Cadence is now eighteen but her story takes place the summer she was fifteen years old. That summer, her father announced that he was leaving and that he can no longer be a part of the Sinclair family. Devastated, Cadence and her mother headed to Beechwood Island for the summer. Cadence had always spent her summers there with her cousins Johnny and Mirren, and friend Gat Patil (the four "Liars"). Cadence believed she was in love with Gat but learned during this summer that he had a girlfriend back at school in New York. Johnny pointed out that Gat is overly political and sensitive, but the other three Liars need him to keep them grounded. Gat and Cadence kissed one day and their romance secretly blossomed over the summer. One night Cadence went swimming and presumably hit her head on a rock, as she washed up on shore with no memory of it. She was hospitalized for hypothermia and didn't hear from Gat again that year. Cadence began to get headaches and to black out and was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury. She takes many pills for her injury and is advised to be careful. Cadence spent her sixteenth summer in Europe with her father and learned that she would have to repeat her junior year of high school due to her headaches and blackouts.

In Part II, Cadence reveals that since her accident she has begun writing variations on fairy tales. She has also begun to give away one possession every day. Cadence obsesses over what happened that summer and why she can't remember why Gat disappeared.

Part III takes place during Cadence's seventeenth summer. Everything seems back to normal with the Liars. Gat tells Cadence that he was worried he would never see her again. Cadence fights with her mother about getting rid of her father's belongings and continues to question what happened two years ago. She finds out that there are rumors she is a drug addict because of all the pills she takes. Cadence and Gat agree that they need a fresh start but he hesitates to start a relationship with her. He explains that they are from different social classes and Cadence's grandfather thinks of him as Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*, never good enough. He tells Cadence that, like Heathcliff, he is becoming terrible. Gat reminds Cadence

how privileged she is but that she always expects people to pity her. Memories start to come back to Cadence of her aunts sobbing at night.

In Part IV, Cadence remembers the main house burning. She realizes that she, Johnny, Mirren and Gat set it on fire. The aunts had been fighting more and more and the Liars decided to just burn it down. A huge fight broke out with Harris accusing his daughters of being selfish and wasting all of the opportunities they had been given. Cadence and Gat convinced Johnny and Mirren that burning the main house could solve the family's problems. During the seventeenth summer, Cadence says that they fixed the family, but Mirren points out that there are still problems.

In Part V, Cadence reveals the truth about what happened that summer. Gat, Johnny and Mirren all died in the house fire. Cadence reveals that the house caught fire much more quickly than anticipated. Cadence realizes that she has hallucinated or imagined the Liars being alive that summer because she needed them to help her remember. Cadence concludes her story by saying that the tragedy she caused now defines her life, but it won't always define it.

#### Critique:

Strengths of book: This book has an intriguing premise and an intriguing plot. The integration of fairy tales combined with an unreliable narrator provides a sort of puzzle for the reader to solve. Lockhart's prose can be quite beautiful and she paints a vivid mood and setting.

Weaknesses of book: Some of the story's timeline can be confusing. Less advanced readers may also find the unreliable narrator to be confusing, as well. The characters are not as fully developed as they could be.

Problems of book: There are some traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as falling in love with the wrong person and living up to family expectations. Additional problems include trauma and guilt.

Pace: While the plot of this book is non-linear and often poetic, the short chapters help guide the reader through somewhat quickly.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist, Cadence. In addition, Lockhart includes Cadence's fairy tales, emails, and letters.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Family, Illness Identity, Love, Racial Identity, and Trauma.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is an excellent book to conclude this reading ladder as it deals with another relationship between people from different classes. Lockhart's writing is smart and the mystery of the protagonist's past makes this a worthwhile and enjoyable book.

**READING LADDER 5:  
SEXUAL IDENTITY**

## **RATIONALE FOR READING LADDER: SEXUAL IDENTITY**

### **I. Why this topic? What is the significance for human beings in general? What is the significance for students in ninth grade?**

The topic of **SEXUAL IDENTITY** was chosen for this reading ladder because it holds significance for this specific group of students, as well as for all human beings. As noted in Chapter 1, sexual identity is a significant, deeply personal, and often political, issue in the United States. Moje and MuQaribu (2003) describe sexual identity as “the range of ways one might be identified, including...straight, gay, bisexual, lesbian, or transgender” (p. 204). While sexual identity is a significant topic for all people, regardless of how they identify, this project looks at people who identify as non-heterosexual or non-straight because of their historical status as a minority. The acronym LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning) will be used to identify those who fall into this identity category. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) reports that approximately 9 million adult Americans identify as LGBTQ. There are suggestions, however, that as non-heterosexual identities become more universally accepted, these numbers may rise.

Not only does a significant portion of the general population identify as LGBTQ, but a significant and growing number of adolescents – the focus of this project – also identify as LGBTQ. According to Young (2011), in a school of 1,000 students as many as 100 will be gay, lesbian, or bisexual; 10 will be transgender; and one will be inter-sex (biologically neither male nor female) (p. 198).

The sheer number of both adults and adolescents who identify as LGBTQ makes this a significant topic. However, the topic becomes even more significant when considering how vital inclusion and representation are for LGBTQ students. As with adolescents who face negative racial, ethnic, disability, or class images, it is important to support positive identity images for

LGBTQ adolescents. Supporting those students is considered crucial to creating inclusive schools. Peterson and Hittie (2010) note, “Gay students in schools are an invisible minority, a direct result of the ridicule, prejudice, and abuse that such students both fear and experience. Given that research indicates that around 10% of the population is gay, this presents a major challenge” (p. 15).

As with racial, ethnic, disability, and class identity, there are often negative connotations attached to LGBTQ adolescents, making these students even more vulnerable to low self-image. Like adolescents from poor or working class backgrounds, LGBTQ students are often considered invisible in schools. Like adolescents of color, disabled adolescents, and adolescents from poor or working class backgrounds, LGBTQ students are also often negatively stigmatized (Peterson & Hittie, 2010, p. 15). Because of this invisibility and negativism, the sexual identity of LGBTQ adolescents should be affirmed and acknowledged by educators.

As noted in Chapter 2, the topic of this reading ladder is significant for this particular group of students. As Young (2011) states, statistically 10% of any group of students will identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and 1% will identify as transgender (p. 198). Some of the students for whom this project is designed vocally identify as lesbian or bisexual, but it can be assumed that others are still questioning their sexual identities. Because of the various sexual identities of these students, this topic is significant for them.

Just as with racial, ethnic, ability, illness, and class identities, it is imperative that LGBTQ students receive affirmation and inclusion from educators. This means not only ensuring that all students can succeed in the classroom, but that students see themselves represented in literary texts used in school. This particular reading ladder provides five books that speak to the experiences of adolescents with a variety of sexual identities. Because there are a variety of

sexual identities among this group of students, this reading ladder contains a diverse group of books that will affirm the identities of LGBTQ students and help students who are heterosexual or non-questioning to better understand their peers.

## II. WHY EACH INDIVIDUAL SELECTION HAS BEEN INCLUDED IN THIS READING LADDER

### **Annie On My Mind** by Nancy Garden

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

In this book, Liza chronicles her friendship turned love affair with a girl called Annie during their senior year of high school. Liza is expected to be a model student at her elite prep school and Annie is just struggling to find friendship in her rough neighborhood in New York. As their relationship becomes more serious, Liza is forced to come to terms with her identity. After their relationship is publicly exposed and the girls head off to their respective colleges, Liza realizes that she loves Annie very much and has come to terms with who she is.

### **Ask the Passengers** by A.S. King

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8

Astrid Jones is a high school senior in a small, close-minded Pennsylvania town who loves to lie on the picnic table she and her father built in the backyard and send her love to passengers in the airplanes as they pass overhead. She sends her love off to strangers because she has no use for it at home with her people-pleasing mother who prefers her younger sister and her underachieving father. Astrid is questioning her sexuality and is pressured by her secret girlfriend to come out. She is also keeping her sexuality a secret from her two best friends, who are in a fake relationship to hide their own sexual identities. As Astrid opens up to more people about who she really is, she finds it easier to connect to others.

### **Everything Leads to You** by Nina LaCour

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 9

Eighteen-year-old production design intern Emi is getting over her first love and trying to establish her place in the Los Angeles film industry. During the summer before her freshman year of college, Emi and her best friend Charlotte find a letter at an estate sale of a recently deceased film legend. Their search for its intended recipient leads to Ava, a beautiful young woman to whom Emi is immediately attracted. As Emi and Charlotte discover more about Ava's mysterious background, Emi and Ava grow closer.

### **Nevada** by Imogen Binnie

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 9

Maria Griffiths, a young transgender woman living in New York City, works at a dead-end retail job and has trouble connecting with her long-term girlfriend. She numbs herself with drugs and alcohol to avoid how disconnected she feels from her own body and emotions. When Maria suddenly loses her girlfriend and her job in less than a day, she decides to take off on a trip



across the country and celebrate her freedom. In Nevada, Maria meets James, a young man who she believes is struggling and needs her help. As Maria tries to help James, she learns about herself.

**The Miseducation of Cameron Post** by *Emily M. Danforth*

Reading Level: 9-10

Sophistication Level: 10

This book follows Cameron Post throughout her adolescence in Montana. When Cameron is twelve, she kisses a girl for the first time and her parents are killed in a tragic accident. Cameron spends the next few years living with her grandmother and aunt, feeling guilt and confusion about her sexuality and how it relates to the death of her parents. In high school, she meets and secretly dates a beautiful cowgirl named Coley. When Coley betrays Cameron, Cameron is sent to a Christian reform center for LGBTQ youth. There, Cameron finds a family of her own and eventually escapes. She finally finds peace with herself and with her past.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Nancy Garden

Title: *Annie On My Mind*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 7

Topic: Sexual Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Class Identity, Love, Resilience

### Plot Summary:

This book begins with the protagonist, Liza Winthrop, writing a letter to Annie Kenyon from her dorm room at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where Liza is a freshman architecture student. In the letter, Liza states that she needs to sort out what happened between her and Liza. To do this, she goes back to the beginning of their story, last November. Annie, then a student at Foster Academy, was visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. She discovers Annie, a pretty girl with dark hair, singing to herself. They strike up a conversation and tour the museum together, getting in trouble when they play around the suits of armor. They exchange information before Annie heads uptown and Liza heads back to Brooklyn

Liza reveals that she lives with her two parents and younger brother, Chad, in the nice neighborhood of Brooklyn Heights. She is a good student at her financially struggling private school and has ambitions of getting in to MIT. She was nominated for and won the role student council president, which means she needs to set a good example and encourage good behavior. After she observes and doesn't report her classmate, Sally, piercing ears in the bathroom, Liza is reprimanded and scheduled for a disciplinary hearing. Mrs. Pointdexter, the headmistress, tells Liza her leadership is even more important, as a good reputation will help the school raise enough funds to stay open. At the hearing, Liza and Sally are both suspended for a week and Liza learns there will be a vote of confidence in her as student council president. If she is not reelected it will go on her permanent record, potentially ruining her chances of getting in MIT.

Annie calls Liza to make plans for the weekend and Liza is overcome with nervousness. They go to another museum and again have fun playing pretend. Annie's father is from Italy and works as a cab driver, while her mother works as a bookkeeper. Annie's grandmother lives with them in a rundown building. Annie hopes to go to college in Berkeley and says that people in California are nicer than in New York. The next day Liza calls Ms. Stevenson, her art teacher and student council advisor, for information on her suspension. Instead, Ms. Widmer, Liza's English teacher, answers the phone. Liza remembers hearing that Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer live together.

Annie and Liza meet up again that week and hold hands. Liza notes that she likes the feeling of Liza's hand in hers. Liza visits Annie's school and is shocked how at how much it is like a prison. She understands why it was hard for Annie to make friends. They spend the next few days together over Thanksgiving break. On Sunday everything changes for Liza as she and Annie kiss. Liza feels torn apart between what she desires and what she has been raised to

believe. Annie says she has always thought she might be gay, even before meeting Liza. Liza tells Annie that she thinks she loves her.

Liza gets reelected as student council president and meets up with Annie. They decide to continue their relationship. Over the winter they spend all their time together and keep the status of their relationship a secret. With the looming threat of school closure, Liza is asked to participate more in fundraising efforts. She receives her acceptance letter to MIT and begins reading books about gay characters. She begins to feel more comfortable with her identity. Liza is asked to feed Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer's cats while they are on spring break. She and Annie take the opportunity of an empty house to finally have sex. They spend almost all of their two week break at the house and Liza lets the fundraising campaign slip to the back of her mind. The girls discover that the two teachers share a bed and have many books about lesbianism. The girls start to envision a future together.

On the last day of break, Liza misses a fundraising meeting. Sally and Ms. Baxter, the headmistress' religious assistant, come over to the teachers' house and discover Liza is a lesbian, as well as Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson. Ms. Baxter says she must report the incident and leaves. The two teachers talk to Liza and Annie the next day, trying to anticipate what will happen at school. At school Liza learns she is suspended and will have an expulsion trial. Her mother is understanding, but Liza lies to her that her relationship with Annie is just experimental. At the trial, the trustees make it clear that what Liza does on her own time is of no concern to the school. She is not expelled. Ms. Widmer and Ms. Stevenson leave the school and head out to the country to change careers. Liza and Annie meet with the teachers, who remind the girls that their relationship is more important than their jobs.

Back in her dorm room, Liza calls Annie and asks if she'll be home for Christmas. They plan to reunite and tell each other, "I love you."

### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is a sweet and inspiring book about first love in the face of adversity. Garden does an excellent job creating interesting characters with an authentic and bittersweet relationship.

Weaknesses of book: Some readers may find the plot to be too simplistic or non-problematic.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as finding first love, exploring sexuality, and living up to other's expectations. There are also problems unique to the characters' sexual identity, such as facing intolerance and questioning one's own identity.

Pace: The book moves quite quickly and has a good amount of dialogue to break up the chapters.

Style: This book is primarily written in first person point of view of the protagonist, Liza. Additionally, there are two sections – one at the very beginning of the book and one at the very end – that are written in third person point of view of the protagonist, Liza.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Class Identity, Love, and Resilience.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a wonderful book to begin this reading ladder as it not only features two young women falling in love, but also a young woman exploring and eventually coming to accept her own identity. Because this book was written in the 1980s – prior to the popularization of same sex marriage and greater visibility of LGBTQ people – it is an excellent way to show young readers how differently LGBTQ people were treated only thirty years ago. While the story is quite simple, Garden writes about the characters' complex feelings with skill and beauty.

## Critical Annotation

Author: A.S. King

Title: *Ask the Passengers*

Reading Level: 7-8

Sophistication Level: 8

Topic: Sexual Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Alienation, Family, Love

### Plot Summary:

This book begins with Astrid Jones, a high school senior in a small Pennsylvania town, explaining that she always sends love to the people in airplanes that fly above. She says that if she gives her love away for free, without reciprocation, she will be free. Whenever Astrid sends love to the passengers, King provides a short narrative of a passenger from the plane, people who are also experiencing trouble or loneliness.

Astrid has two best friends at school, Justin and Kristina, who are in a fake relationship. Both are gay and use their relationship as a cover to “double date” another couple. While Justin and Kristina are a popular couple, Astrid is somewhat of a misfit. Astrid grew up in New York City and still doesn’t consider Unity Valley to be her home. Astrid’s high school junior sister, Ellis, and her mother have embraced small town life, but all Astrid notices is the thinly veiled racism and small-mindedness. Her mother, who works from home and still dresses in a full business suit and heels each day, largely ignores Astrid and dotes on Ellis. Her mother also texts with Kristina, Astrid’s best friend. Astrid and her father, who is a recent marijuana fanatic, have a better relationship, but his laid back attitude causes marital problems. Astrid finds comfort in her humanities class, which encourages freethinking, and her literary magazine at school. Astrid plans to move back to New York after high school and become an editor.

Astrid reveals that she has been questioning her sexuality, but there is no gay/straight alliance club at school, just neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan. She hasn’t even told Kristina. Astrid works for a catering company where she has a secret relationship with her coworker, Dee, a student from a neighboring town. They are best friends but recently have begun kissing each other. Astrid says Dee scares her because Dee is confident in her own sexuality and Astrid is not. After some pressuring, Astrid joins Kristina and Justin at a local gay bar. Astrid has a great time at the bar and jokingly tells a lady there that she has a girlfriend. After some pressuring, Astrid tells Kristina and Justin that she is dating a girl but is still questioning her sexuality. Astrid tells Dee everything and they go to the bar with Kristina and Justin that weekend. While there, Astrid realizes she is in love with Dee and she is probably gay because she feels so at home in the bar.

Astrid goes to a college party with Kristina and Donna and kisses a girl named Kim there. Later that night, Astrid meets up with Dee at the bar and realizes she is ready to have sex. However, police arrive at the bar and check IDs. Justin, Kristina, Dee and Astrid are made to call their parents to pick them up. Astrid’s parents don’t realize she’s gay and are upset that she was out at a bar. Astrid realizes her mother became distant when Astrid stopped thinking the way she

does. The same thing happened to her father when he stopped caring about the same things Astrid's mother does.

At school, Kristina, Justin and Astrid are gossiped about. At home, Astrid's father tells her that it's safe to talk to him, but Ellis tries to distance herself from her sister. Some parents become convinced that there are gay teachers at the school and call for their resignations. Astrid's parents confront her and say that Kristina told them that Astrid had dragged her to the gay bar. Astrid tells her parents that she's not sure about her sexuality. She also confronts Kristina about her lie. Astrid feels completely alone and wonders when people will let her love them. She and Kristina make up.

At a "Tolerance Day" school assembly, Astrid becomes overwhelmed with the ignorance of her peers and she and Kristina walk out. Astrid loudly shouts that she is gay and insults Unity Valley with profanities. She is suspended and as her dad picks her up, Astrid tells him about Dee and her issues with their family. Astrid tells her mother she is gay and makes amends with her. She tells Dee that she is now out and feels relief. At Thanksgiving, Astrid and Ellis also make up. Astrid introduces Dee to her family. A passenger on the plane is on her way to a gay conversion camp and she sends her love for her girlfriend out to a stranger so they can keep it safe. Astrid feels an overwhelming feeling of love and promises to keep it safe.

#### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is a quirky, sweet and affirming book about a young woman's struggle to come to terms with her sexuality. King uses an interesting narrative structure to tell the story of a smart, funny and sympathetic protagonist. The story is simple, but interesting throughout the book.

Weaknesses of book: Some of the many narrative features (such as imagined dialogue, and passenger narratives) may be distracting for some readers.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as finding first love, exploring sexuality, and living up to other's expectations. There are also problems unique to the characters' sexual identity, such as facing intolerance and questioning one's own identity.

Pace: This book moves very quickly due to the interesting narrative structure, dialogue, and short chapter.

Style: This book is primarily written in first person point of view of the protagonist, Astrid. There are also occasional passages written in first person point of view of the airplane passengers.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Alienation, Family, and Love.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a great addition to this reading ladder as it offers a sort of updated version of *Annie On My Mind*. All of the relationships featured in this book – girlfriends, friends, siblings, and parent-child – are realistic and thoroughly developed. King writes imaginatively and cleverly, weaving in interesting symbolism. While the plot is simple, the characters and narrative features are complex and fascinating.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Nina LaCour

Title: *Everything Leads to You*

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 9

Topic: Sexual Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Class Identity, Loss, Love, Racial Identity

### Plot Summary:

This book is divided into three parts and is set in Los Angeles. Part I begins with Emi Price taking her last final exams, just as Morgan, her girlfriend, has broken up with her. Emi, who works in the movie industry as an aspiring production designer, swears off dating film industry people, such as Morgan, a scenic designer. Emi has a twenty-two-year-old brother Toby, who is a location scout. Her father is a professor of pop culture and her mother is a professor of gender studies and black studies.

Emi and her best friend, Charlotte, learn that that Clyde Jones, a famous Western movie actor, has died. They attend the estate sale with Ginger, a famous production designer, who Emi is working under as an intern. They find Emi's brother, Toby, a belt buckle that belonged to the legend. Toby needs to leave for two months to scout for a film in Europe and he decides to let Emi and Charlotte have his apartment while he is gone on the condition that something great takes place while they stay there. Emi is excited about the apartment and the fact that she is going to design one room for the film Toby is scouting for, *The Agency*. Emi is also sad that Morgan broke up with her and Charlotte is heading off to Michigan in the fall while Emi attends a local college.

Later that night, Charlotte and Emi listen to the Patsy Cline album they got at the estate sale and a sealed envelope falls out of the sleeve. It says that in the event of Clyde Jones' death, the letter be hand-delivered to Caroline Maddox. The girls head out to the address listed on the envelope, but Caroline no longer lives there. Emi and Charlotte learn that Caroline died in 1995, so they open the letter. The letter says that Caroline was Clyde's daughter and that he has money saved in an account for Caroline and someone named Ava, who they assume is Caroline's daughter. The girls begin to search for Ava. They confirm that Ava is Caroline's daughter and find out that Caroline had a role as an extra in a few films. They track down Ava's phone number and invite her over to the apartment. As Ava approaches, Emi feels as if her life is a movie and something very important is about to happen. Ava is about Emi and Charlotte's age and strongly resembles Clyde. She says that Caroline's best friend adopted her after Caroline died. Ava ran away from home a few years ago and now lives in a shelter and has a retail job. Secretly, she has always wanted to be an actress. Ava did not know that she is Clyde's granddaughter and she has never seen one of his movies, so they watch one.

Rebecca, Morgan's friend, and her boyfriend, Theo, offer Emi a job on an independent film they are directing and producing. Emi would be production designer and can hire one person to work with her. She loves the script for *Yes & Yes* and agrees to work on the film with



Charlotte as her assistant. As Emi and Charlotte go to meet Ava again, Emi confides that she has a crush on Ava. As Ava tells the girls about her life and the struggle of not knowing who she is, Emi encourages Ava to try out for the lead female role in the independent film.

In Part II, Emi helps Ava prepare for the audition. In order for Ava to get the money from the account Clyde set up, she needs her birth certificate. Ava and Emi break in to Tracey's house and steal it. Ava confides in Emi that she was once in love with her best friend, Lisa, but kept it a secret from their families. Ava eventually realizes Emi is also gay. Ava gets the part in the film and Emi loves her role as production designer, gaining confidence each day. Ava finds out her mother died of a heroin overdose and someone was with her at the time. After she finds out, Ava gets kicked out of the shelter for throwing things and making a mess. Emi, Charlotte and Ava's friend, Jamal, set out to find her. Ava is sleeping soundly in her car and Jamal tells Emi and Charlotte that Ava really likes them and is grateful for their friendship.

In Part III, Ava gets her money from the Clyde account and gets a penthouse apartment in Venice, where Emi and Charlotte are staying. As Emi approaches the deadline for having her sets done, she realizes she is in love with Ava. They track down a producer named Lenny who was mentioned in the original letter from Clyde. Lenny reveals that he is not Ava's father, but he was a close friend of Caroline's and was the one who discovered her dead body. Emi realizes that Ava is not a mystery to be solved, just a person trying to live her life. Emi decides to film an important scene in Toby's apartment. Ava tries to kiss Emi and then accuses Emi of having a perfect life with no room for Ava in it. A week later, Emi apologizes to Ava and tells her she wants to get to know her, not just the mystery of her past. Ava asks Emi and Charlotte to go with her while she talks to Tracey for the first time in a few years. Tracey is cold to Ava and this causes more turmoil for both Ava and Emi. Eventually, the two realize they are in love and Emi understands that life is not like a movie, but can be even more emotionally moving.

#### Critique:

Strengths of book: This is an interesting book as it features a mystery, a love story, and a story of professional ambition. The characters are diverse, fully developed, and interesting. LaCour's writing is straightforward, but her description of the filmmaking process, from screenwriting to production design, is detailed and vivid.

Weaknesses of book: Some elements of the plot seem quite farfetched, but because the book has a theme of fiction versus reality, it is allowable.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as fulfilling professional aspirations, finding love, and coping with loss.

Pace: This book moves quite quickly, considering how much happens in the course of the book. LaCour includes pages of the screenplay, which also provides some variety and helps quicken the book's pace.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist, Emi. The book is written in a straightforward and realistic style. The descriptions of the production design and Los Angeles scenery offer some imagery.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Class Identity, Film Industry, Loss, Love, and Racial Identity

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This is a great addition to this reading ladder as it focuses on sexual identity, racial identity and class identity. While these identities are central to the two main characters, they are not the focus of the book. Instead, professional ambitions, friendships, and an eventual romantic relationship, take center stage. Emi is a flawed and relatable protagonist with a lot to learn about her chosen career and love. All of the relationships portrayed in this book seem authentic and many are deeply moving.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Imogen Binnie

Title: *Nevada*

Reading Level: 8-9

Sophistication Level: 9

Topic: Sexual Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Hope, Loss, Love, Resilience

### Plot Summary:

This book is divided into two parts and is told from the perspective of Maria Griffiths, a twenty-nine-year-old transgender woman living in New York. Part I takes place in late October and begins with Maria discussing how she feels disconnected from her body, particularly because she has male sex organs. She works in a large, used bookstore in Manhattan and lives in Brooklyn. She finds out that her girlfriend, Steph, has cheated on her with Kieran, a transgender guy whom Maria works with. Maria, who is ambivalent about the relationship, has no emotional reaction and says that she has been this way for some time. As Maria heads off to work, she is not sure if they have broken up.

Maria grew up in rural Pennsylvania and has had trouble with eating disorders and drug abuse. She didn't realize she was transgender until she was in New York. She avoids Steph for a few days by going to the movies alone and coming home late. She thinks about when she met Steph and how she hasn't been single since she fully transitioned. She goes to a coffee shop and reveals that she has been a blogger for almost a decade, writing about gender and other topics. At work, Kieran tells Maria that Steph didn't cheat on her; she was just trying to get an emotional response out of Maria. Maria realizes she needs to break up with Steph that night. However, when Maria gets home from work, Steph breaks up with her first. Maria leaves and heads off to meet Piranha, Maria's only other transgender friend. Piranha is a tough, punk girl whom Maria met at a camp for transgender people. After Maria tells Piranha about her troubles, Piranha tells Maria that because of her chronic pain issues, her doctor will not let her undergo sex affirmation surgery. Maria wakes up the next morning feeling irresponsible and free. She once again shows up late to work and is fired. Maria decides to borrow Steph's car and take a trip for a few days to celebrate her freedom. She takes the money she had been saving for her sex affirmation surgery and buy heroin. She heads off and considers going west, perhaps to California.

Part II takes place in late November and begins from the perspective of James in Star City, Nevada, a small town with a Wal-Mart and not much else. James' girlfriend, Nicole, just stormed off and he is smoking marijuana to help him avoid his feelings. Nicole and James are both twenty years old and have been dating for a few years. Maria sees James at the Wal-Mart, where he works, and immediately thinks James is transgender but doesn't realize it yet. As James helps Maria find a CD he realizes she is transgender and feels a connection with her. Maria realizes she is not good at many things, but she is good at writing and talking about being transgender. She finds James and they meet up after work. They talk about what James wants out of life. Maria tells him that he's so young he can do anything and become anyone he wants to be. James tells Maria he isn't sure if he's transgender. Maria tells James that she has figured out

many things during her extended road trip. She realized she uses drugs and alcohol to help numb herself until she could be herself. Now that she has successfully transitioned and her new life has begun, she wants to reset herself and tune into her emotions.

Maria and James decide to go to Reno together to get rid of the heroin Maria has been holding on to. They talk about their relationships and Maria realizes that just because James reminds her of herself at that age doesn't mean he is just like her. She realizes he is not a project or a puzzle that she can solve. In Reno, James steals some of the heroin and they head to a casino to gamble. James heads home on a bus and leaves Maria there.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: Binnie does an excellent job creating internal dialogue for the characters in this book. The story is simple but engaging. The narrative structure, in which the point-of-view is shared by a few characters is an interesting and effective choice.

Weaknesses of book: The lack of quotation marks for dialogue and the extremely conversational tone of the book may be confusing for some readers.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as finding oneself and dealing with relationships. There are also problems unique to the characters' sexual identity, such as facing intolerance, questioning one's own identity, and self-medicating with drugs and alcohol.

Pace: Because there is so much internal dialogue in this book, it does not move as quickly as some others in this reading ladder. However, the short chapters do help to quicken the pace.

Style: This book is written in third person point of view of an omniscient narrator. Binnie writes in an extremely conversational tone and does not use quotation marks for dialogue. This creates a sort of stream of consciousness effect.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Family, Loss, and Resilience.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: This book is a good addition to this reading ladder as it is one of the few recent novels with a transgender protagonist. Maria is a flawed yet relatable protagonist who learns about herself through trial and error. The story is often comedic and full of many interesting pop culture references.

## Critical Annotation

Author: Emily M. Danforth

Title: *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*

Reading Level: 9-10

Sophistication Level: 10

Topic: Sexual Identity

Sub-Topic(s)/-Theme(s): Family, Loss, Resilience

### Plot Summary:

This book begins in the summer of 1989 and the reader is introduced to the narrator and protagonist, Cameron Post, a twelve-year-old girl living in Miles City, Montana. On a hot summer day, Cameron and her best friend Irene Klauson share a kiss, causing Cameron to feel both extremely guilty and excited. Later that night, Cameron learns that her parents have been killed in a car accident while camping. Cameron's Grandma Post and Aunt Ruth move in to the family home and in the months following her parents' death, Cameron becomes obsessed over her kiss with Irene, wondering if her parents somehow knew about it and if that could have caused their death.

Cameron spends the summer before high school competing on the swim team where she meets Lindsey Lloyd, an out and experienced lesbian from Seattle who spends her summers in Montana. Lindsey and Cameron develop a romantic relationship and Lindsey acts as a sort of mentor to Cameron. Lindsey's stories about the pride and acceptance of gay people in Seattle contradict everything Cameron has learned at the church her Aunt Ruth has forced her to attend. Lindsey returns to Seattle and Cameron begins high school.

In high school, Cameron meets Coley Taylor, a beautiful cowgirl who lives on a ranch. Cameron and Coley soon become close friends and Cameron attempts to ignore her romantic feelings for Coley, helped by the presence of Coley's boyfriend, Brett. The following summer, Brett joins a travelling soccer team and Cameron and Coley begin a secret, physical relationship. After almost being discovered by Coley's brother, Coley confesses to her mother about the relationship, saying that Cameron had corrupted her. The church pastor and Cameron's aunt and grandmother are alerted and all agree that Miles City is not a good place for Cameron to be and that she would be enrolling in God's Promise, a facility to reform homosexual teens.

Cameron arrives at God's Promise in the fall and soon makes friends with two other "disciples," Jane Fonda and Adam Red Eagle. Their friendship keeps them from "forgetting themselves," something that seems to happen as a result of the work that is done at Promise. Cameron realizes that what she is being taught at Promise is beginning to make an impact on her and weigh her down. The addition of group support sessions compounds this feeling as she hears the horrific stories of what many of her peers have gone through as a result of being gay. During one session, Mark Turner, the model disciple, begins acting strangely saying that his progress has not been enough for his father. The next day the disciples find out that the night before Mark had tried to kill himself by mutilating his genitals with a razor and bleach.

Jane, Adam and Cameron decide they need to escape Promise and begin planning for an escape in June. Cameron decides that in her last month at Promise, before escaping, she will be honest in her sessions with Lydia, the strict assistant director, so that she can perhaps figure out some things about herself. Cameron realizes that their escape plan must include a trip to Quake Lake, where her parents died. During her last session with Lydia, Cameron comes to realize that her parents' death was not a result of her kissing Irene, that their lives were not a lesson for her, but that they were full people leading their own lives. At the end of the session Cameron says she is ready to move on. Adam, Jane and Cameron escape with the pretense of going for a hike. They head for Quake Lake and arrive at dark. Cameron feels the need to get in the water, so she takes a candle and ventures into the water alone. She acknowledges that all of her life so far has felt tied to Quake Lake and she wants to just soak in it, so she spins around until she is dizzy, then blows out the candle and swims back to shore, feeling a sense of closure. Adam and Jane had made a fire on the beach and set out dinner. Cameron looks forward to the world beyond the shore, the forest and the mountains.

### Critique:

Strengths of book: Through the character of Cameron, Danforth offers a unique narrative voice and character. Danforth writes skillfully and interestingly, providing rich imagery and details of the landscape of Montana. This book contains powerful and vivid imagery of family and loss.

Weaknesses of book: This is a long book that takes place over many years. Some readers may feel as though certain sections of the book could have been condensed or removed.

Problems of book: There are many traditional coming of age problems in this book, such as accepting oneself, finding love, and coping with peer pressure. Additional problems include coping with loss, coping with grief, and facing extreme prejudice.

Pace: This is a long and often poetic book, so it is certainly the slowest-paced in this reading ladder. However, the different sections help the reader progress through the book.

Style: This book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist, Cameron. Danforth writes in a poetic and descriptive style.

Other Uses: This book could also be used to explore topics and themes such as Family, Loss, and Resilience.

Personal Reactions and Recommendations: Overall, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is a moving and well-written novel that conveys themes that are appropriate for and meaningful to a young audience. Teenagers in particular will be able to identify with Cameron and learn something about their own identity and place in the world by reading this novel.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSIONS

This project is guided by the idea that all students deserve to have their intersectional identities acknowledged and affirmed by educational curricula. Specifically, this project seeks to find a way to foster, acknowledge, and affirm the identities of adolescent women within an English language arts curriculum. As the research from Chapter 1 shows, identity formation is an important developmental task during adolescence. For young women, the formation of a female identity can be particularly complicated and difficult due to society's prescribed gender roles and expectations. Further complicating gender identity is the notion of intersectionality — that a person's many different identities (such as racial, ethnic, or sexual identities) intersect in significant ways.

The research discussed in Chapter 1 illustrates the importance of identity affirmation in inclusive classrooms. Encouraging students to bring their identities into the classroom not only builds personal and academic confidence in students from minority identity groups, but can also develop empathy among students from majority identity groups. One way to acknowledge and affirm the identities of students is through the use of young adult literature. Because this genre of literature focuses on identity formation, it is an excellent tool for English language arts educators to use to create inclusive classrooms that address all students' identities. Reading ladders are an ideal way to introduce students to young adult literature and to challenge them to read more rigorous texts.

This project consists of five five-book reading ladders that each focus on a different aspect of identity. The topics of these reading ladders are: African American Identity, Ethnic Identity, Ability and Illness Identity, Class Identity, and Sexual Identity. Each reading ladder also contains at least seven additional sub-topics or sub-themes. The sub-topics and sub-themes highlight the intersectional nature of identity, as there is a great deal of identity overlap among the books. Each book in this project focuses on a female protagonist and is written by a female author. These twenty-five books about young women with varying and intersectional identities will provide students with both mirror and window opportunities. Some books will act as a mirror, reflecting and affirming a student's identity. Other books will act as a window, showing a student how others experience life. It is hoped that this project will provide a challenging and intriguing way to introduce adolescent women to literature that acknowledges their intersectional identities and fosters their empathy toward others.



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