Growing from a child to a teenager to a young adult usually involves a number of rites of passage. From bar and bat mitzvahs, sweet sixteen parties, and quinceañeras, to getting a driver’s license, attending prom, and graduating from high school, there are any number of formal and often public rituals that mark the steady journey from childhood to adulthood. While these events vary from culture to culture, they usually include educational milestones, parties that celebrate maturity, and special responsibilities that reflect newfound trust from one’s community. These moments can be both scary and exciting.

However, many formative moments for young people happen in more informal settings. Everything from dating to dealing with family or society at large provide opportunities for challenge and growth. And the truth is that young people are not navigating these public and private moments in a vacuum. Indeed, young people are sometimes figuring out their morals, values, and increasing independence while living in societies that do not always value their newfound voices. This circumstance is drawn into particularly sharp relief for young people in historically marginalized groups. Not only do they have to figure out all the “normal” stuff that comes with growing up, they have to do so with the added burden of negative social pressure. Under these extra societal pressures, young people are forced to perform a type of high-wire act requiring more than the usual intelligence or even pluckiness; this requires courage, bravery, and sometimes even heroism. Being brave often requires speaking truth to power, for as Audre Lorde insists, “Your silence will not protect you.”

If, as Lorde goes on to suggest, silence is a type of internalized tyranny that sickens us, what exactly does it mean to be brave? How does a young person — whether a teen or a young adult — decide to strike out against conformity and stand out from the crowd? How do they fight against powers bigger than themselves? How do marginalized young people — those who exist on the fringes of mainstream society because of their religion,
gender, race, sexuality, ability, or class — find the courage to not only be themselves, but assert their very right to exist?

Growing up brave on the margins of society means moving forward in the face of fear and daunting circumstances. As Edwidge Danticat suggests, “I am even more certain that to create dangerously is also to create fearlessly, boldly embracing the public and private terrors that would silence us, then bravely moving forward even when it feels as though we are chasing or being chased by ghosts.” The books in this series feature strong protagonists who rise to challenges and fight for justice in their communities in the face of parents who may not always understand them, peers who doubt them, and communities who dismiss them or even find them dangerous.

While there are a variety of ways to be brave, the core books in this series, Ms. Marvel, The Hate U Give, and March, focus on a few key ways young people growing up on the margins stand up for themselves and those they care about. First, they emphasize the role of discovering one’s own power, exploring how protagonists find out who they are and what they stand for. Second, they emphasize speaking truth to power, whether that means standing up to a mad scientist, telling the truth at a police station, or desegregating a lunch counter. Third, they emphasize fighting the powers that be, often by banding together with other scared, but brave, folks who are not only willing to fight for themselves but for the good of the greater society. While all three texts explore these key themes, each individual work focuses more deliberately on one aspect over another. Finally, all three works also explore the consequences — good, bad, and in between — of being brave, illustrating how young people’s choices can have an impact on themselves and the world around them.

**CORE TEXTS**

**Book 1 (Discovering Your Power): Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal by G. Willow Wilson & Adrian Alphona**

Ms. Marvel chronicles the life and times of Kamala Khan, a Muslim-American teenager living in hardscrabble Jersey City, New Jersey, who has to balance school, strict immigrant parents, and newfound superpowers, all while strange and seemingly unexplainable weirdness happens all around her. Superheroes like the previous Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers, and Iron Man are saving the world in nearby New York; meanwhile teens are randomly disappearing all across Jersey City, and Kamala finds herself with newly received superpowers. At the same time, Kamala is trying to maintain her schoolwork, friends, and rise to the expectations of her Pakistani immigrant parents. Sometimes it is harder to say what Kamala finds more difficult — negotiating growing up with her loving and (over)protective parents or figuring out her superpowers and defeating nefarious villains. Kamala is lovable, headstrong, smart, loyal, and sometimes goofy. The first volume of this comic book series finds our protagonist really figuring how what kind of young woman she wants to be: a person who is scared to speak up for what is right; a reckless, untrained superhero; or a young person who is strong enough and smart enough to protect her community, with some help from her friends and family. Ms. Marvel invites readers into a familiar yet fantastical world with a
heroine who is still learning the ropes of how to get on in a sometimes scary world. Ms. Marvel raises key questions: what does it mean to balance your family’s expectations with your own desires? How can you channel your newfound bravery without alienating others? What does it mean to be brave or courageous without being reckless?

Book 2 (Speaking Truth to Power): The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas

The Hate U Give is a timely book that focuses on key themes in young adult literature, like finding your voice, navigating friends, frenemies, and first loves, and figuring out family. At the same time, the novel tackles important themes like racism, interracial relationships, gang violence, and police brutality. Protagonist Starr Carter is a smart, hardworking young woman caught between the love and loyalty of her family and community and the possibilities and promises held out in the world of her prep school. After witnessing the murder of her childhood best friend, Starr must figure out if she should move from the shadows of both worlds and step into the light to defend not only her friend, but also her community. Indeed, the novel skillfully balances Starr’s coming of age alongside a discussion of the current civil rights movement known as the Movement for Black Lives, whose rallying cry is “Black Lives Matter,” reflecting the frustration many black communities have in the face of quotidian systemic violence. Thomas’s novel asks: How can you create the space to be yourself wherever you go? What if your true identity is not accepted? How do you stand up for the rights of others? What does it mean to speak truth to power? How can you walk away from violent or hurtful situations with your dignity intact?

Book 3 (Fight the Power): March: Book One by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, & Nate Powell

Generations of slavery, then Jim Crow segregation, followed by the rollback of key civil rights gains, has meant a precarious existence for many African Americans; however, it is often difficult to talk about this painful history. Nevertheless, considering the horrible acts of racist violence like the 2015 Charleston massacre or the persistent threat of racialized violence means that the past isn’t even really the past. Poet and essayist Elizabeth Alexander mulls over the history of black bodies on display, from lynchings to the beating of Rodney King, noting, “Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries.” March is a beautifully illustrated graphic novel that manages to tackle serious subjects, such as what Alexander references, in an honest, forthright, and accessible way. It masterfully brings together Georgia Congressman John Lewis’s childhood in rural Alabama, illuminating his early work in the civil rights movement alongside his current work as a legislator. March makes a point of underscoring all the deliberate choices Rep. Lewis made to be brave, make his voice be heard, and to fight for what’s right. March raises important questions: what are you willing to put on the line for your beliefs? How can one person make a difference in a giant system?

Additional Texts

Book 4: Shadowshaper by Daniel José Older

Shadowshaper is a book that tackles serious topics such as gentrification, cultural appropriation,
immigration and assimilation, spirituality, and sexism in a fun, accessible way. Sierra Santiago is a smart and relatable heroine who has to figure out her parents, boys, and a secret heritage one summer. Conflicts within and among immigrant communities, alongside the increasing dangers for the communities by outsiders, are center stage in the fast-paced novel. Besides crafting the ultimate teen heroine, Older makes New York City itself, and particular neighborhoods such as Bedford-Stuyvesant and the iconic Coney Island, into vibrant characters, drawing in readers who are familiar with the locales as well as newcomers with his vivid descriptions. Shadowshaper asks: What does it mean to embrace your heritage, especially when it is under attack? What does it mean to be brave if it means defying your family? How do you band together with others to protect your community?

Book 5: X: A Novel by Ilyashah Shabazz and Kekla Magoon

X: A Novel takes a no-holds-barred look at the early life of twentieth-century leader, Malcolm X. Rather than focusing on his accomplishments as a religious leader and advocate for human rights, X focuses on all the events that influenced his rise to prominence — from the loss of his parents (one to violence, the other to a mental institution), to his repeated encounters with interpersonal and institutional racism, to his move from the Midwest to the East Coast, to his life of petty crime, to his eventual imprisonment, and, finally, his religious epiphany. X is an unflinching portrayal, delving into why a young Malcolm Little initially rejected his parents’ political and moral teaching in favor of zoot suits and easy money. X invites readers to consider: how can family be a source of strength and pain? Is it braver to break from your past and start anew or face your old demons? Can you ever really run from your past?

Book 6: The Sun Is Also a Star by Nicola Yoon

The Sun Is Also a Star raises the bar on the tried-and-true “star-crossed lovers” theme to create a story that skillfully mixes teen romance with a coming-of-age story, an immigrant narrative, a story of race in contemporary America, and a meditation on fate versus free will. Protagonists Natasha and Daniel are smart and relatable individually, and make a delightful and convincing couple the reader will root for, despite the seemingly insurmountable odds. The Sun Is Also a Star raises key questions: are we beholden more to fate or free will? Can we shape our destinies? Is love at first sight real? Is it braver to go for what you want, despite the consequences, or is it better to take a more measured approach to life?

REFERENCES

2. Edwidge Danticat, Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work, 2011.