

An introduction to the Great Stories Club series,  
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## ESSAY

### TEXTS

\***Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation** (Octavia Butler, adapted by Damian Duffy, illustrated by John Jennings)

\***Flight** (Sherman Alexie)

\***All American Boys** (Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely)

**Stuck in Neutral** (Terry Trueman)

**MARCH: Book Three** (John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, illustrated by Nate Powell)

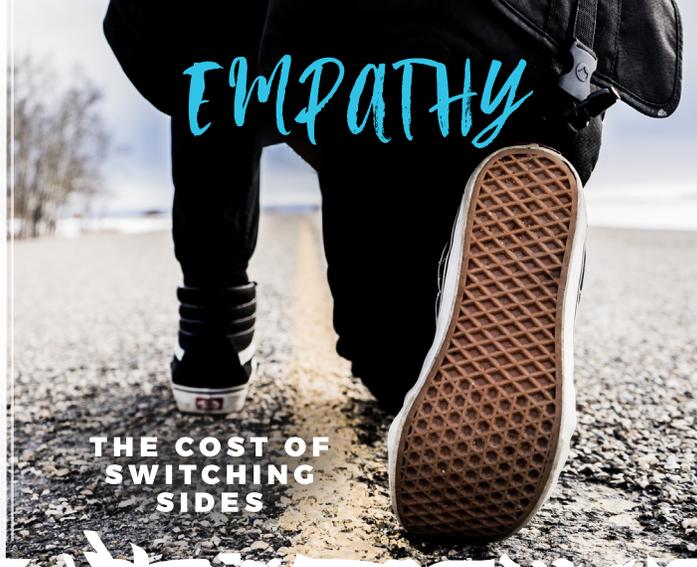
\*Denotes core texts.

Empathy has been held up as a balm for our divided society by everyone from neuroscientists to primatologists to political thinkers.<sup>1</sup> Yet as the consensus grows that we need to cultivate more empathy, the scarcer it seems to become. From political debates, to cultural choices, to classroom conversations, we seem increasingly unable to engage in empathetic exchange. Instead, we pick sides and dig in against perceived enemies.

Recent studies have made the case that literature is perhaps our greatest resource for developing empathy; as authors push us to inhabit the lives of their characters, we find ourselves a little less likely to retreat behind the walls of our own moral certainty.<sup>2</sup> The books chosen for this series complicate that equation: each text encourages readers to explore the power of empathy, but also helps us understand why empathy can be so hard to come by. Each text invites the readers to, in the words of Joyce Carol Oates, “slip ... into another’s skin, another’s voice, another’s soul.” They also confront readers with the dangers of feeling — and acting on — another’s pain.

Empathy can be considered the emotional corollary to the Golden Rule: “do unto others as you would have done unto you.” As useful as this model can be, it assumes that our own feelings are a good metric for judging the feelings of others. According to the Golden Rule, what I want (what I would want “done unto me”) must be what anyone else would want. What I find pleasurable will also be pleasurable for others. But what happens when our feelings and experiences don’t align with those of others? How, if at all, do we feel for each other without simply imposing our own expectations on everyone else?

In truth, empathy demands a great deal of us. To be empathetic requires us to embrace uncertainty, to loosen the bonds of loyalty and of history in order to truly imagine needs other than our own. To feel empathy is to relinquish a degree of power over another person, particularly the power that comes from violence. As Elaine Scarry has written, physical violence is only possible when pain is not transferable to the torturer. If those inflicting pain can refuse to identify with another’s position, and reject the sympathetic reaction



to another’s distress, then they can consider themselves immune, protected, invincible.<sup>3</sup> A position of such imagined invulnerability can be particularly enticing to adolescents struggling to create and maintain a sense of belonging and strength. Paul Bloom has gone so far as to suggest that empathy can actually reinforce tribal loyalties, and thus should be set aside when making policy decisions.<sup>4</sup>

The books selected for this theme don’t shy from the reality that true empathy can invoke a vertiginous loss of identity. Understanding another person’s perspective means enduring the loss of the righteousness that accompanies a fight against a clearly defined enemy. As the protagonist of *Flight* discovers, inhabiting the bodies of “enemies” blurs easy divisions between good and evil. Dana, the protagonist of *Kindred*, realizes her life has been made possible both by those with whom she identifies and by those who seek to oppress her. Her time travel to the days of slavery provides a powerful illustration of how individual loyalties are embedded in long and painful histories that have their own gravitational pull. *All American Boys* chronicles the difficulty of undergoing a break from these histories, and explores how difficult it can be to “switch sides,” once Quinn’s understanding of others’ suffering requires that he turn away from old allegiances. Finally, all of these readings explore the mechanisms for developing empathy for oneself when faced with a world that refuses connection. To hold on to a sense of one’s own humanity when there is little evidence anyone else sees you as fully human is a profound act: a turn towards vulnerability that is a prerequisite for empathizing with the pain of others. As the reading groups explore these texts, they will be asking some of the most pressing questions of our time: How can we find our own

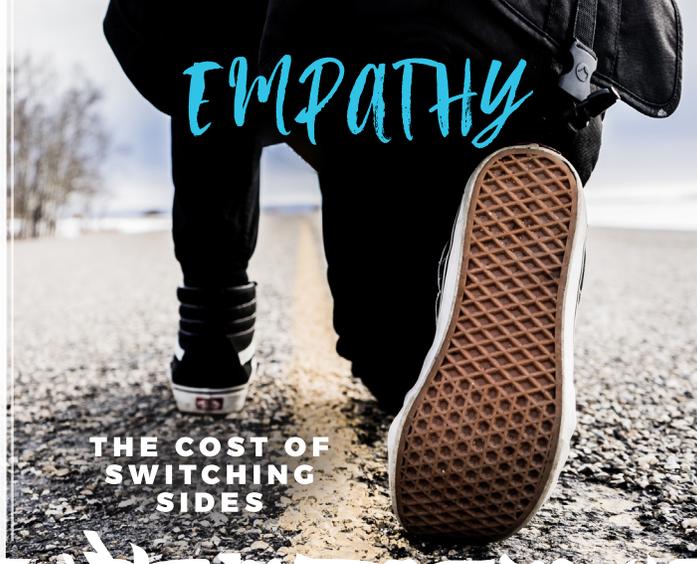
identity in connection with others, instead of in opposition to them? How can we move through the world in a way that lessens conflict rather than thrives upon it? What does it take to truly empathize with another person?

## CORE TEXTS

### **Book 1: *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* by Octavia Butler, adapted by Damian Duffy, illustrated by John Jennings**

In this text, a young black woman finds herself called back in time to the days of slavery. Why? She needs to save the life of her white male ancestor — at the expense of her black foremother — so she can preserve the genealogy that leads to her own birth. It is a fascinating exploration of how power can destroy empathy, as her relationship with her ancestor (whom she meets as a young boy) becomes increasingly cruel as he learns to inhabit the authority afforded to him as a young man in the deep south.

Dana’s mission to save both her ancestors requires that she come to terms with the motivations of both the victim (her enslaved and coerced great-grandmother Alice) and perpetrator (the violent and selfish slaveowner Rufus). In the process, she gains respect for the resilience of those who have suffered to survive and pass their legacy down to her. She also comes to terms with her own complicity — she wants to live in the present, and she benefits from her alliance with Rufus. As in *Flight*, the text allows for a powerful exploration of how we can empathize with our own past, even — perhaps especially — with mistakes made in our own (personal, family, national) history. As she finds herself empathizing with both



the oppressed and the oppressor, she finds her own place in history far more complicated than she had imagined.

### **Book 2: *Flight* by Sherman Alexie**

This book is narrated by Zits, a self-described “time-traveling mass murderer” whose name and deeds unravel as this captivating coming-of-age novel progresses. He is half-Indian and half-Irish, homeless in more ways than one. He winds up in jail, where he meets a teenager named Justice who encourages him to wreak vengeance on a world that’s wronged him. Zits then commences time-traveling via the bodies of others, all of whom must struggle with their own demons and must make their own peace with the deadly logic of vengeful justice.

Animated by his own pain, and the legend of the ghost dance — in which killing in the present can bring back those lost in the past — the fourteen-year-old “half-breed” protagonist Zits finds himself literally transformed into the bodies of other people who each represent a violent part of America’s racial history, and in many ways, a part of Zits’s own past. *Flight*’s depiction of the Ghost Dance, a ritual that promises to bring the past back and make all enemies disappear, offers a powerful site for thinking through the logic underlying revenge, and how empathy can short-circuit the vicious cycle initiated when one takes an eye for an eye.

### **Book 3: *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely**

This book revolves around an instance of police brutality from the perspectives of two high school classmates: Rashad, a black teenager who is brutally beaten by a police officer, and Quinn, a white classmate who sees the beating but (at first) takes no

action. The novel follows both young men as they learn that the loyalties to family and friends that had guided them so far needed to be reassessed. For Rashad, his righteous anger at the police is complicated by the knowledge that his own father had committed wrongful violence when he was on the force. Quinn, for his part, must come to terms with the fact that the cop who beat Rashad is his surrogate father figure.

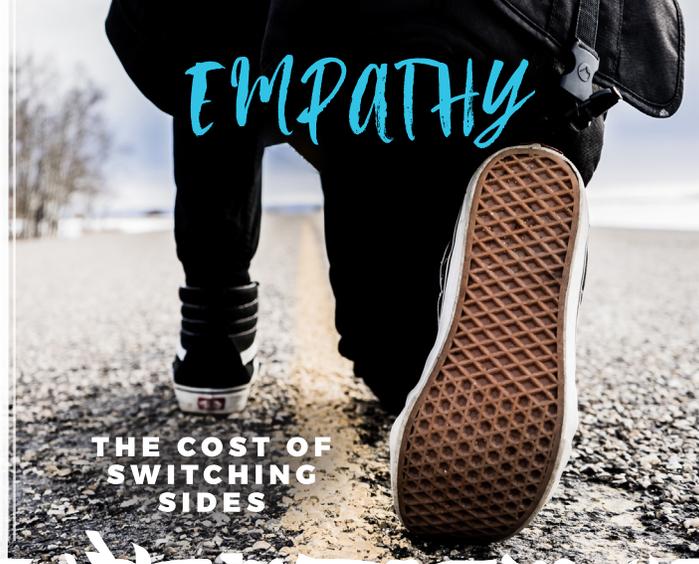
This text explores how loyalty — to family, to friends, to a social group — can actually obstruct empathy. Quinn’s struggles to pretend as if a wrong has not been committed, to pretend as if it will all go away, speaks to how powerfully we can resist empathy’s call when it requires that we step out of our comfort zone. After all, Quinn’s own identity, as a son and as a friend, is challenged when he chooses to empathize with Rashad. This text also demonstrates how resisting empathy is precisely what allows the cycle of violence to continue unabated.

### **ADDITIONAL TEXTS**

#### **Book 4: *Stuck in Neutral* by Terry Trueman**

This fictional firsthand account of a teenaged boy with severe cerebral palsy chronicles the crisis that comes to pass as his father, overwhelmed with (what he believes is) empathy for his suffering son, plots a mercy killing. Because the father imagines disability to be such a terrible fate, he almost commits a horrible crime. He feels sure that death is what his disabled son (who enjoys his life, but can’t communicate that fact) would want.

The text invites readers to explore how we often impose our own ideas, feelings, and expectations on others, even as we



think we are being empathetic. The book portrays Shawn's inability to fully register as a person worthy of care and of making his own decisions in a way that may resonate with young adults who struggle for autonomy and to make their voices heard. It also offers a powerful exploration of how our embodiment (youth, race, disability, gender) can sometimes render us the victims in other people's stories, regardless of how we might see ourselves. This text invites readers to explore the gap between how other people might view us and how we understand ourselves.

### **Book 5: MARCH: Book Three by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, illustrated by Nate Powell**

This award-winning text chronicles the life of civil rights icon John Lewis, offering an extended exploration of how people can feel empathy for those they have long dismissed as "other." Racism is a particularly devastating example of how powerfully identity can rely on the denial of empathy — and the mutual humanity that empathy recognizes — to outside groups. The text's focus on Lewis also pushes us to think about the rewards — and costs — of having empathy for those who see us as the enemy. *Book Three* examines the political power of suffering, but ultimately it suggests that relying solely on moving hearts is not enough: you also need to garner political power of your own.

The *MARCH* trilogy allows us to think about empathy as a tool for social justice. As John Lewis and other civil rights

leaders work to reshape the hearts and minds of the (white) American public, there are several moments in which we can see that change take place — or be repressed — on the faces of those in the middle of this fight. What happens when we see suffering in front of us that we can no longer deny? How, if at all, does that feeling demand a change in perspective, and in politics? What is gained and what is lost in this moment? *MARCH*, like *Kindred*, also allows readers to grapple with painful choices made in the past, and, perhaps to think about how empathy can provide a path for coming to terms with that history for both the guilty and the wronged.

### **REFERENCES**

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