



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GREAT STORIES CLUB SERIES

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TEXTS

- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *Dreaming in Indian: Contemporary Native American Voices*, edited by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale
- *Mother of the Sea* by Zetta Elliott
- *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano* by Sonia Manzano
- *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* by Luis J. Rodriguez
- *The Shadow Hero* by Gene Luen Yang, illustrated by Sonny Liew

“**T**he past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past.” Barack Obama used these words in 2008 to argue that we can only truly understand—and begin to overcome—the bitterness of modern race relations through a brave and accurate accounting of history. Obama’s line borrows from one that appears in a book by Southern author William Faulkner. In other words, he turned to literature as a source of wisdom about the difficult subject of race in America, and built on what he found there to imagine new pathways towards justice, healing, and unity. Similarly, the “Deeper Than Our Skins” theme is grounded in literature that can help us look beneath the surface of racism in America to reveal how the past is alive in the present. This theme uses powerful stories of oppression, resistance, suffering, and triumph to identify the roots of racialized experience in the United States, and to inspire discussions about how to construct more equitable futures for the people in our country and world.

Some of America’s oldest and most deeply held beliefs center on the right to liberty for all people, but these lofty goals have always come with notable exceptions. The Declaration of Independence famously announces, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that



among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Even if we leave aside the fact that this statement applied only to white men (most women in early America lacked property rights and could not vote), the Declaration’s claim of universal fairness and freedom ignores that the new country it sought to found was carved out of land forcibly taken from Indigenous residents, whose populations European settlers had devastated through disease and genocidal violence. In addition, many of the founding fathers who wrote the Declaration of Independence were slave owners, and the American economy would be built on the stolen labor of African-descended peoples under the Atlantic and domestic slave trade.

What historian William H. Chafe calls “the original sin of America’s history”—the racism that runs alongside and undermines the country’s high ideals—continues to be a troubling feature of our national makeup. “Seeing the truth of American history,” he argues, “from beginning to end, represents the only chance for America to become the kind of nation it claims to be.”¹ Although we are a proud nation of immigrants, one wave of migrants after another has faced racist and/or culturally driven discrimination upon their arrival. The first immigration law ever passed by Congress was aimed against a single ethnic group: the Page Act of 1875 barred Chinese women from entering the country, and it was shortly followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which banned all Chinese laborers. Even full citizens have not been safe from government-supported racism; during the Second World War, over 110,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry were forcibly relocated to camps, even though most of them were U.S. citizens. In these and other ways, many racial and ethnic groups have struggled against dehumanizing stereotypes, discriminatory policies, and intolerant attitudes as they attempted to make the United States their home.

Even as the U.S. has passed laws to reverse some of its racial injustices, others continue to thrive, often grounded in attitudes and policies that have been passed down over generations. Basic humanities questions lie at the heart of these conflicts: What does it mean to treat one another as

1. William H. Chafe, “History Matters,” *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 50:1 (2018), 9-26.



fully human? How do people understand their own humanity when those in power systematically deny its existence? How can writing, music, and art convey the depth and complexity of racialized experience, and pave the way towards justice and healing? Black, brown, and Indigenous people have tackled these questions for centuries, providing a rich legacy of scholarship to help us understand the origins and effects of racism. Frantz Fanon, for example, wrote in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) about how Black people are forced to perform whiteness in order to navigate life under colonial rule, and of the insecurities that being constantly treated as lesser plants in their minds. W. E. B. Du Bois’s work on “double consciousness” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) addresses the Black American experience of simultaneously seeing oneself authentically and also “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” More recent work by scholars like Sara Ahmed point to the cultural expectation of whiteness that makes most institutional spaces (offices, border security, universities, businesses) comfortable by default for white bodies, and much less comfortable—at times even presumed illegal—for people who know themselves to be excluded from this constructed racial category. Whether supported by policies that target Black, brown, and Indigenous people (like the system of criminal laws since the 1980s that amount to what Michelle Alexander calls the “new Jim Crow”), or by small acts of everyday discrimination and belittlement known as microaggressions, racism remains a major part of the American story.

In spite of this, people from a wide array of racial and ethnic backgrounds – including many young people—have found ways throughout America’s history to speak out, find joy, remember their heritages, and imagine better worlds for themselves and others. White allies have overcome feelings of discomfort to listen and relate as fellow human beings, and, recognizing how racist thought limits us all, chosen to stand alongside Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities in demanding justice and equality. But for real transformation to take place around race, both laws and hearts must change. Literature offers an accessible first step: giving readers the chance to walk in other people’s shoes for a period, and to encounter feelings as well as facts.

Through fiction, nonfiction, comics, poetry, short stories, and art, the books in “Deeper Than Our Skins” uncover the often-hidden histories of America’s Indigenous, Black, and immigrant



communities. Each one offers points of connection that reach across time and cultures to affirm our shared humanity, while recognizing the importance of remembering and recounting unique origins and narratives. Meant to be read and discussed in various combinations, the works in this theme aim to empower young people to draw upon knowledge about the past to explore their own intersectional identities, empathize with others, and identify how they can be agents of racial healing and change.

BOOK 1: *Between the World and Me*

This moving nonfiction book brings both personal and national pasts into conversation with the present in the form of a letter from Coates to his teenage son. Written in the age of Black Lives Matter, this intimate window into one man’s story always circles back and around the recognition of how Black lives have been and continue to be treated as less valuable than white ones in America: from their status as property under slavery to the effects of mass incarceration and police brutality today. Through its recollections of Coates’s own coming of age in Baltimore and stories about American violence against Black bodies, this book asks us to identify where Blackness fits in the “American dream.” At the same time, it challenges readers to rethink whiteness, to see it as “a modern invention”: what might it reveal about our nation if we recognize race as a primarily social invention, rather than a biological reality?

BOOK 2: *Dreaming in Indian: Contemporary Native American Voices*

This collection of short stories, poetry, interviews, and visual art offers insight into the vibrant array of experiences, nations, and identities that inform contemporary Indigenous voices. It emphasizes the pressing modern issues that young Native people navigate every day, from heartbreak to poverty to the desire for self-expression. In its organization and content, this book immediately disproves the popular myths that there is such a thing as a single Native American culture and that Native people can be associated with primitivism and the long-ago past. Instead, it challenges readers to ask themselves what role histories--both distant and recent, real and misconceptions--play in not only Native but *all* of our contemporary identities.



How do we all continue to (re)live the past in the present? What elements of this should be celebrated, and which still require transformation if we are to develop a more just society?

BOOK 3: *Mother of the Sea*

This brief novella is a West African-inspired retelling of “The Little Mermaid” that provides insight into some of the foundational injustices at the heart of American race relations. Set on a Middle Passage slave ship, the story follows one African girl’s attempt to hold on to her identity and secure her freedom amidst the physical, psychological, and sexual horrors of being transported to American shores. Elliott, who has written about the relative lack of fantasy literature printed by and for Black Americans, weaves a magical thread through this tale of rebellion and resilience. The book leaves us to consider questions about not only the impact of slavery on modern understandings of race and gender, but also about what kinds of stories make it into young people’s hands and shape the racial expectations of the next generation of thinkers.

BOOK 4: *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano*

This book, written by the woman best known for introducing generations of Americans to Latino/a/x culture as Maria on the long-running children’s show *Sesame Street*, intertwines family secrets and Puerto Rican heritage in a story about the love between mothers and daughters. Set against the 1969 youth-led uprising in Spanish Harlem, this tale of intergenerational conflict, social awakening, and racial and ethnic self-identification shows how understanding the past—of one’s self, one’s family, and one’s cultural heritage—can help youth take on the future. What might make young people of color in the United States feel ashamed of their race and/or ethnic heritage? What kind of experiences and exposure can help them take pride in their origins and communities? This book asks these questions and suggests some answers while illuminating a key moment in US history in a warm, accessible way.



BOOK 5: *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*

In this memoir, Luis J. Rodriguez spins a rich web of stories about life as he encountered it as a Mexican-American child, gang member, student, friend, lover, activist, addict, and father in the Los Angeles area in the 1960s and '70s. Through his nonstop recounting of remarkable experiences, Rodriguez (“Chin”) addresses the systems of poverty, violence, and oppression that characterized his life. By juxtaposing tales of humor, cruelty, intellectual searching, and tenderness, this book especially calls attention to the complexity and humanity of people that mainstream culture often dismiss as “bad.” Why might someone pigeonholed like this continue to act in ways that reinforce other people’s stereotypes about them? How do racial and ethnic identity, as well as linguistic differences and geographic isolation, shape the creation of such stereotypes? What makes them last even as circumstances and cultures change over time?

BOOK 6: *The Shadow Hero*

This graphic novel tells the story of how Hank, the teenage son of Chinese immigrants, tries to become a superhero in the 1940s—a time when comic book heroes were wildly popular among young people, but Asian-Americans were largely seen as dangerous outsiders by mainstream white culture. In the process, *The Shadow Hero* creates an Asian-American origin story for the Green Turtle, a World War II-era superhero created by Chinese-American comic book writer Chu Hing but whose face and ethnic identity are never revealed. This book raises questions about the limits of patriotism and empathy in the face of racial discrimination, and encourages conversations around the gaps and stereotypes in America’s history of racial representation from pop culture to politics.