

finding your VOICE

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER



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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GREAT STORIES CLUB SERIES

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TEXTS

- *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* by Isabel Quintero
- *Piecing Me Together* by Renee Watson
- *I Am Alfonso Jones* by Tony Medina, Stacey Robinson, and John Jennings
- *American Street* by Ibi Zoboi
- *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo
- *Anger is a Gift* by Mark Oshiro

The old adage goes “children should be seen and not heard.” That conventional wisdom implies that speaking up and out is the exclusive realm of adults. It also suggests that children and young people don’t have important things to say — that they should stay out of adult conversation.

The truth is that young people have been vital to making change by speaking and showing up in the face of adversity. Take Joan of Arc, for example. In 1429, while just 18 years old, she led a French army to the besieged city of Orléans in a victory over the English. But we don’t have to go back to 15th-century France to find young heroes. On November 14, 1960, 6-year-old Ruby Bridges became the first African American child to integrate a white Southern elementary school. Her mother and U.S. marshals had to escort young Ruby to class because of violent mobs in her hometown of New Orleans. Bridges was born the same year that *Brown v. Board of Education* made “separate but equal” public spaces illegal, and her bravery was a milestone in the Civil Rights movement. There are countless examples of young people speaking out and taking a stand against injustice.

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Speaking truth to power is never easy. Joan of Arc was burned at the stake. Ruby Bridges endured daily threats of violence for one year as she single-handedly integrated her elementary school. As Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa insists, “Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out.” The price for speaking up against the status quo can be steep. Yet, for many, the price of resistance — of speaking up and out — is worth it. For, as black feminist writer bell hooks reminds us, “Sometimes people try to destroy you, precisely because they recognize your power — not because they don’t see it, but because they see it and they don’t want it to exist.”

Finding Your Voice includes texts that highlight the necessity and power of young people speaking up despite challenges, social pressure, and even the threat of bigger dangers. Whether it is finding righteous anger as a superpower or speaking up through poetry and art, *Finding Your Voice* features young people speaking out against racism and other injustices in order to make the world better.

There are many ways to find your voice; however, the books in this series focus on a few key ways young people speak truth to power. First, they emphasize the significance of one’s individual voice, no matter how seemingly small or powerless that voice is. Secondly, the texts emphasize standing up for oneself; this could mean standing up to a sexist bully, calling out an adult who misjudges you, or speaking out against racial profiling. Finally, these novels illustrate young people empowering others to use their voices through writing, art, and community organizing to advocate for institutional change and social justice.

BOOK 1: *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*

Gabi, A Girl in Pieces is an epistolary novel that chronicles the eventful senior year of high school student Gabi Hernandez. Along with her best friends Cindy (who becomes a teen mom) and Sebastian (who comes out as gay), Gabi has to navigate her father’s drug addiction, her mother and aunt’s strict rules, and the politics of high school in a small town. Gabi does this by sharing her thoughts in a journal and by writing poetry. She is at once a loyal and fierce friend, sister, daughter, and girl, and someone who doubts herself, makes mistakes, and is constantly learning. Writing out her thoughts gives Gabi the confidence to stand up to bullies, date the guy of her

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dreams, apply to college, and prepare to leave home. As an epistolary novel, *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* features the voice of a narrator that is spunky, inquisitive, and smart. The book raises the following key questions: how do you negotiate life when the adults around you are struggling? How do you balance your family's expectations with your own desire to grow, learn, and experience new things? How do you balance being a hyphenated American?

BOOK 2: *Piecing Me Together*

Piecing Me Together focuses on the junior year of Jade Butler. Jade is an aspiring collage artist, photographer, and lover of the Spanish language. She is also a working-class African American girl who is isolated at her elite prep school where few of her classmates share her experiences. Although she lives in a neighborhood that is low on resources and her mother struggles paying the bills, Jade is surrounded by loving family and friends. She bristles at being singled out for a mentorship program for "at-risk" girls. She wonders why, despite her hard work, she is treated either with pity or ignored all together. Jade is a thoughtful and plainspoken narrator who asks piercing questions and seeks out difficult answers. *Piecing Me Together* invites these key questions: what do you do when people assume they know who you are based on your race, where you live, or how you speak? How do you stand up for yourself to parents, teacher, and/or mentors who may be well meaning but just don't get it? How can you use art as a strategy to express yourself and change the world around you?

BOOK 3: *I Am Alfonso Jones*

In *I Am Alfonso Jones*, Alfonso Jones' life is on an upswing. His dad's wrongful conviction is overturned, and he is returning home after more than a decade in jail. He is working up the nerve to tell his best friend that he likes her. And his school is even doing a hip-hop rendition of *Hamlet*. Life has not been easy for him and his mom, but things are finally looking up. But, in an instant, all that is changed when Alfonso is gunned down by police. Much of the graphic novel takes place with Alfonso as an ancestor who watches from the afterlife as his family and friends deal with the aftermath of his killing. *I Am Alfonso Jones* reflects our current political climate and makes

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connections between the current #BlackLivesMatter movement and the continued struggle for civil rights and against the state-sanctioned violence that too often plagues communities of color. *I Am Alfonso Jones* is a graphic novel with energetic illustrations. It also includes handy resources at the end to contextualize discussion. *I Am Alfonso Jones* invites the following key questions: how are the struggles young people navigate today connected with the struggles of the past? How are they different? What does it mean to carry on after the death of a loved one?

BOOK 4: *American Street*

In *American Street*, Fabiola Toussaint and her mother arrive in the United States from Haiti for a better life. But when they get to customs at the airport in New York the two are separated: Fabiola, an American citizen, gets to continue on to their final destination, while her mother is detained by immigration. For months Fabiola lives with her aunt and cousins on the corner of American Street and Joy Road in Detroit, waiting for her mother's release. Fabiola writes letters to her mother and navigates the expectations of her family members, who expect her to shed her cultural practices, such as speaking Creole and practicing Vodou. Meanwhile, Fabiola's aunt and cousins are embroiled in some shady business and Fabiola unwittingly gets involved. When Fabiola is offered an opportunity to get her mother released, she must choose between her mother's safety and her extended family. *American Street* is a coming-of-age story with a relatable heroine who is grappling with serious moral questions. The novel offers these key questions: what does it mean to be American? Is it possible to assimilate to a new culture and still keep parts of your life that you love? Should you be loyal to family if you believe what they are doing is wrong?

BOOK 5: *The Poet X*

The Poet X is the story of Xiomara Batista, an Afro-Latinx high schooler from Harlem who is tall, curvy, opinionated, and confident. She is also scared, frequently misunderstood, and searching for answers. Her mother wants her to be a devout Catholic but she has questions about the faith. There is a double-standard between how she and her brother are treated. Xiomara's working

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class community in Harlem is home, but the street harassers who ogle and taunt her make her angry and ashamed of her body. Xiomara, whose name means “one who is ready for war,” combats these experiences by writing her thoughts in a journal and creating poetry. She also meets a music-lover named Aman who shares her love of words. Her parents tell her “pero tu no eres facil” — that she’s not easy — and she isn’t. Xiomara stands up for her introverted twin brother Xavier with her words and her fists, but she wonders who will stand up for her. As a novel in verse, *The Poet X* highlights Xiomara’s thoughts and experience in poetic yet accessible language. *The Poet X* invites the following questions: how do you stand up for yourself when you are constantly under surveillance? How do you get others to advocate for you? How can you channel art to express and liberate yourself?

BOOK 6: *Anger is a Gift*

Anger is a Gift has an ensemble cast of young people of color, but at its heart is Moss Jeffries. Still reeling from the murder of his father six years earlier, Moss wrestles with anxiety daily. He finds support in his friends, mother Wanda, a host of adults in his community, and in Javier, a new romantic interest. While Moss is a thoughtful person and a dedicated student, his high school is a battlefield where school resource officers and metal detectors seemingly outnumber schoolbooks and school supplies. At first, Moss is reluctant to fight the powers that be, afraid that this will trigger his panic attacks. But with the help of his motley crew of smart and supportive friends, family, and community members — who run the gamut from disabled, queer, trans, adopted, and many more identities — he helps to organize against the repression at his school. By going inside Moss’s head, the novel also gives an inside perspective on struggling with mental illness without stigma. Oshiro’s prose is poignant and tender. *Anger is a Gift* invites the following key questions: how can young people fight institutional oppression? What does it mean to have an intersectional approach to liberation? How can you create and maintain a diverse community where everyone feels included?