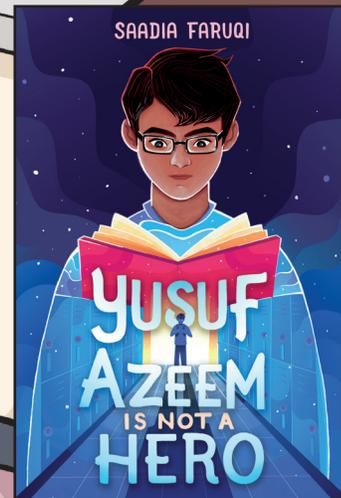
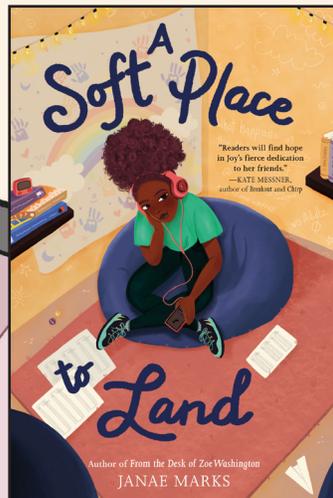
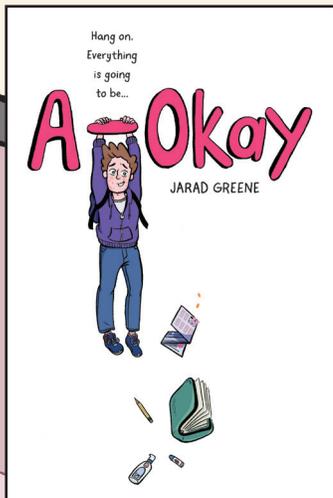
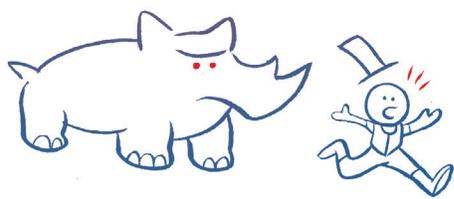
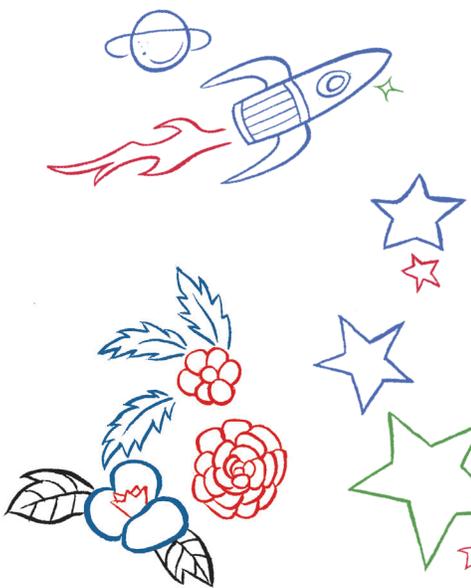
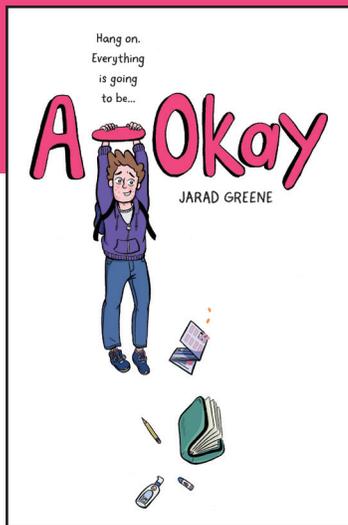


CLASSROOM CONVERSATIONS

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FEATURING
Booktalks, thematic discussion questions, and tips on how to run a successful book club for tweens!





A-OKAY

by Jarad Greene



Eighth grade was supposed to be the best year yet for Jay! Now, things refuse to go as planned. The acne that he hoped would disappear over the summer is not only still there on the first day of school, but has gotten worse. When he finally negotiates his way into art class, his new schedule is the complete opposite of his friends.

On top of everything else, when he does manage to make some new friends, they both develop feelings for Jay. Only... he doesn't share the same feelings for either of them. When he finally gets on some medication to help with his acne, he is hopeful that everything is going to end up being a-okay. But will that hope be enough?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

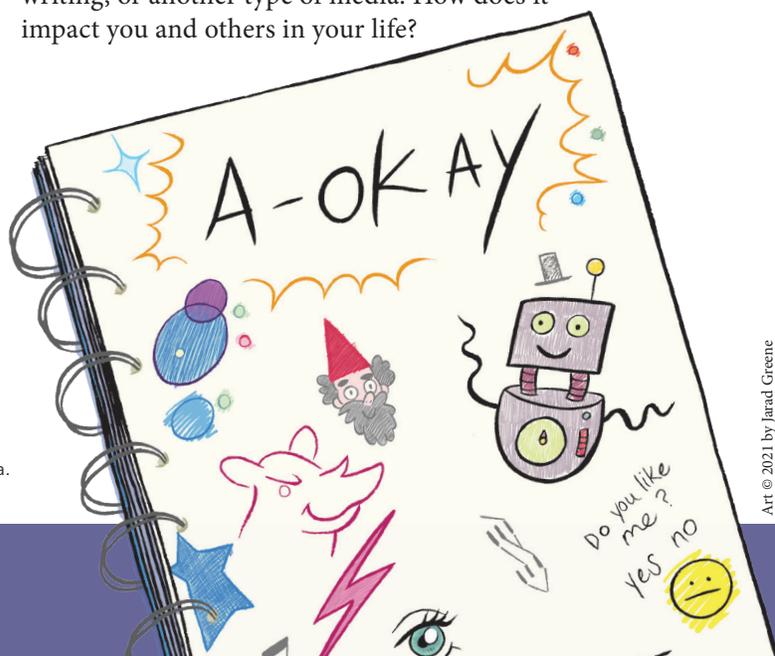
SELF-IMAGE: Jay has poor self-image at the beginning of the book. When he looks at his reflection in the mirror, Greene's illustrations magnify Jay's pimples, so they look bigger than they really are (p. 2). The same thing happens when he looks at himself in the car window (p. 7). How is self-image addressed at other points throughout Jay's story? Consider how you see yourself versus how others see you. Why do you think there are differences between your self-image and the perceptions of others? What do you think of Jay's reaction to his reflection at the end of the book (p. 230)?

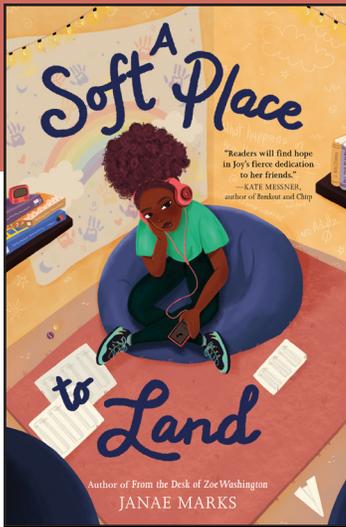
BULLYING: Ever since Jay was little, he was teased by his school bully, Aaron. It started when Aaron found out that the acne cream Jay was using had makeup in it (p. 28), and it continued from there. When Jay decides to buy new clothes and style his hair to distract from his acne, Aaron continues to bully him (p. 82). Why do you think Aaron is targeting Jay? Discuss how bullying has affected you. If you were able to have an impact on Jay's experiences, how would you address or confront the bullying he receives? How might you confront or address bullying in your own school?

IDENTITY: Aside from his struggles with acne, Jay begins to feel self-doubt and discomfort when he realizes that both Amy and Mark like him as more than friends, especially because he doesn't feel the same way in return (p. 158). Why do you think this is such a concern for him? Why do you think he is so comforted by the fact that the label "asexual" exists? Discuss why this particular identity might be difficult to embrace, considering how people talk about romance and couples in life, TV and movies, and in books?

FRIENDSHIP: Throughout the book, Jay struggles to maintain his friendship with Brace, especially after their argument (p. 154). Jay also struggles to understand his friendships with Mark and Amy, which are complicated when they both start having deeper feelings for him. Friendships are important, but they can also be difficult. Why are each of his friendships important to Jay throughout his struggles with self-image and self-discovery? Have you ever grown apart from a friend? How have you worked through other kinds of challenges with friends? Why do you think friendships are so crucial people of all ages?

THE ROLE OF ART: Art class—and art in general—is very important in Jay's story. Art is what brings him closer to Amy and Mark, for instance. Art helps Jay and Brace reconcile their friendship after things fall apart earlier in the book. In what other ways does art bring people together throughout the book? How do art and illustration help Jay to cope with difficulties? Think about what art means to you, whether painting, drawing, music, writing, or another type of media. How does it impact you and others in your life?





A SOFT PLACE TO LAND

by Janae Marks



Joy Taylor has always known home to be where she has her own private bedroom, thick walls, and a spacious backyard. However, when her father loses his job, everything changes. In her new apartment building, Joy endures thin walls that do not contain her parents' arguing, a shared bedroom with her little sister, and the crushing news that her piano lessons must be put on hold. Unexpectedly, she finds solace in the "Hideout," a hidden storage room and cozy refuge only the kids in the complex know about, and a mystery letter writer there who seems to understand exactly what she's going through. Janae Marks' compelling and passionate storytelling of Joy finding "a soft place" to land, amid all the changes around her, brings hope, healing, and courage to young readers.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

HOME: When Joy moves to a new neighborhood, she sorely misses her old stomping grounds. Joy laments "how different everything is now" (p. 85). What does she miss about her old home? What is different about her new living situation? How has home been redefined for her now that she is living in an apartment building? What struggles with home does Joy have, of which her parents may possibly be unaware? Lastly, how have Joy's views of what home encompasses shifted from the beginning to the end of the book?

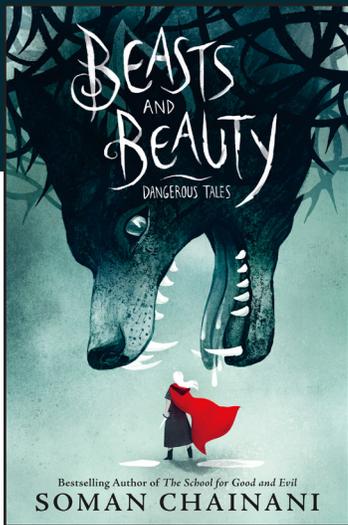
NEIGHBORS AS COMMUNITY: Joy is welcomed by a kind community that exists in her apartment building. How does Joy experience neighborliness in her new home? How has Joy's family benefitted from having a new community of neighbors around them, despite changes in their own family dynamic? When Joy is in a dire situation after losing Ziggy, how do her neighbors pitch in to help? What do you think it means that even people she hasn't "met before, but only seen around the building a few times" (p. 226) are willing to assist?

FRIENDSHIP: Joy experiences feelings of significant loss and sadness when she moves to her new apartment building, but she gains a new group of friends. First, Nora befriends her and introduces her to the other kids her age in the building. Joy expresses, ". . . I miss the feeling of home. I belonged there. I'm not sure I'll ever belong here" (p. 86). How do these friendships as a whole and individually help Joy to know that she "belongs" in her new home? How do these new friendships build confidence and stability in Joy?

THE HIDEOUT: Joy is introduced to "the Hideout" by her new friend Nora. What is the number one rule for the Hideout, a secret place "just for the kids in the building" (p. 51)? What does the Hideout represent for Joy? What symbolism does it carry for Nora, and perhaps their other friends in the building? When the Hideout is accidentally discovered, Joy declares, "It's official. The Hideout is closed" (p. 171). What loss does this symbolize? How is "Home Base" (p. 278), a new reiteration of the Hideout, symbolic of the growth and transition Joy and her friends experience?

INNOVATION: Though Joy finds herself in a time of unwanted transition, she does not let this stop her from dreaming and creating pathways for her ideas. How does Joy demonstrate entrepreneurial savviness? What ideas does she execute with help from the adults around her? Furthermore, how is she a thoughtful risk-taker? How does she use her ideas to ultimately reach her goals and strengthen the friendships around her? How do her ideas and decisions foster and preserve her relationships with friends and neighbors in her building?

Guide created by Esther H. Ra, Ed.D., M.A., teacher educator, university career advisor, literacy specialist, and certified teacher.



BEASTS AND BEAUTY

by Soman Chainani



In *Beasts and Beauty*, Soman Chainani breathes new life into twelve classic fairy tales, giving each of them a fresh take relevant to young people today. But be warned: These tales are not for the faint of heart, nor for the weak in spirit. No, these tales will enlighten you, challenge you, maybe even frighten you—and they’ll introduce you to characters you won’t soon forget.

You know the tale of Little Red Riding Hood. You’ve heard the story of Sleeping Beauty. You may have even learned all about The Little Mermaid . . . or so you think. What if everything you thought you knew wasn’t what you thought you knew? What if Red Riding Hood managed to outwit the wolf and get her revenge? Or what if Sleeping Beauty was a prince being haunted in his sleep instead of a princess cursed at birth?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

PERSPECTIVE: The subtitle of this collection is “Dangerous Tales.” What do you think this refers to in regard to each of the stories? What themes are covered within this collection that might be considered “dangerous,” and to whom? Whose perspectives are being highlighted? Why do you think those are the focus? Consider conversations that happen between you and your friends and family, and in your classrooms. What impact do differing perspectives have on these conversations?

SUBVERSION: Each of these fairy tales contains familiar elements from the originals, but the author finds ways to subvert, or unsettle, each tale for a purpose. As you read each tale, consider what has been changed—setting, character, the ending, or some other element—and what has been kept from the version(s) you remember. Which changes surprised you the most? Why do you think those changes were made? How do they subvert the moral or the dominant theme of each tale?

FEAR AND ANXIETY: In *Beasts and Beauty*, the tales reflect questions and anxieties that are more contemporary, such as those related to gender and sexuality, misogyny and abuse, and even ideas about beauty. Keeping this in mind, think about some more specific social fears that are reflected in these tales. What kinds of insights do the tales offer? Are they insights that you have thought about before? Consider how each tale provides a new way of viewing and interpreting the world. How have your own perspectives shifted after reading this collection?

OBEDIENCE: Fairy tales are often “full of warnings that grumpy adults love. How else can a spirit like [the readers’] be kept tame and under control?” (p. 122). What do you think this means? How can fairy tales be used to tame

people? What do you think the author means when he writes, “The truth is full of warnings too. But not for children” (p. 122)? Who else is being warned? Consider how truths or warnings can sometimes lead people to acts of rebellion instead of obedience. How are rebellious individuals treated in these retellings? What are the consequences for them? Why?

BEAUTY AND MONSTROSITY: Many fairy tales equate beauty with goodness and monstrosity with evil. Just look at “Beauty and the Beast” (p. 155). How are the concepts of beauty and monstrosity treated in each of the tales? Consider some of your answers to the previous questions, particularly in relation to subversion and warnings. Are there times when beauty turns out to be monstrous? Or times when monstrosity turns out to be beautiful? How else does the author of this collection change the concepts of beauty and monstrosity related to gender (i.e. beautiful boys or monstrous girls)?

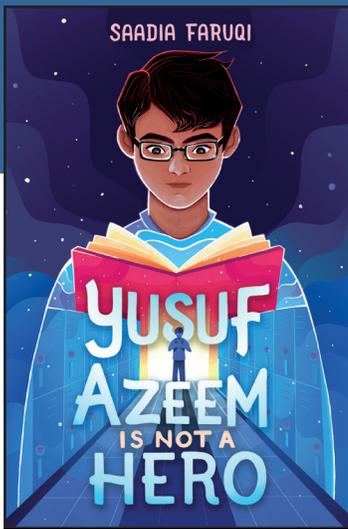
POWER AND SUBMISSION: “There is nothing more attractive to a man than a girl who silently surrenders her power to him. It is what fairy tales are built upon” (p. 251). Think about the fairy tales you know—movies, books, short stories—and consider how many of them are built upon a foundation of girls and women submitting to men. Which tales in this book use that same narrative? Which ones challenge it? What happens in the tales where the genders of some characters are not the same as in more traditional versions? Are there ways you could challenge these expectations in the real world?



Guide created by Dr. Robert Bittner, YA Literature Specialist, University of British Columbia. Follow him on twitter at @r_bittner.

HARPER

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YUSUF AZEEM IS NOT A HERO

by Saadia Faruqi



Yusuf is just an ordinary boy . . . or so he thinks. A newly minted middle schooler, he loves his family, friends, and robotics. From the small town of Frey, Texas, Yusuf has always felt at home and that he belonged to the community. Then he begins to wonder about the “Never Forget” banners around town. Why does his Muslim American community, including his own family, bristle at the mention of them? Yusuf soon learns that it will be the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. He discovers how previous events in history unfairly affect and define his identity as a Muslim American boy and his community at large. *Yusuf Azeem Is Not A Hero* is a timely story of navigating against prejudice in the face of bullying, dismantling Muslim stereotypes through friendships, and claiming identity through family and community.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

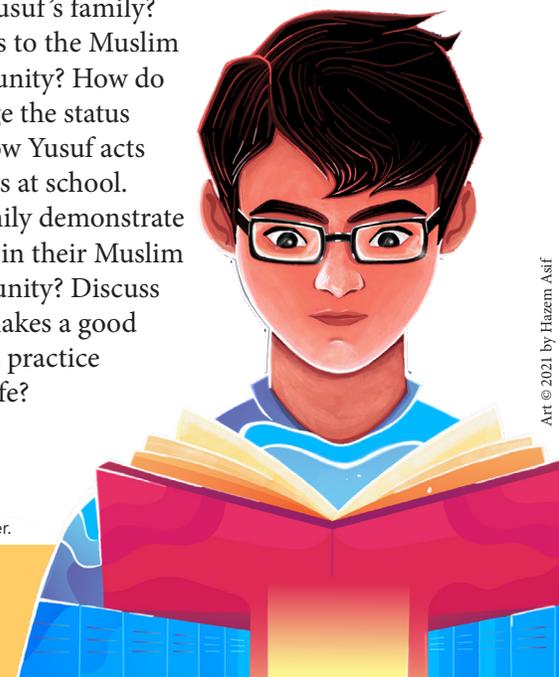
HOME AND BELONGING: For Yusuf and his family, Frey, Texas, is their beloved home. This was where Yusuf was born and raised, where he has friends, and where his community’s mosque is being built. In fact, Amma, his mother, was also born and raised in Texas. In what ways have Yusuf and his family been a part of the fabric of community in Frey? Alternatively, how are Yusuf and his family challenged about the meaning of “home” in Frey, Texas? Why does Mr. Khan feel pressure to “participate in all the town’s activities” (p. 97)?

“NEVER FORGET”: As the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks approaches, Yusuf begins seeing banners of this common phrase he heard while growing up. “Never forget” appears frequently in the book as a reference to the 9/11 attacks as an unforgettable event in history, but also as a double-edged reminder in his own life and family. When Yusuf faces the stress of daily insidious notes found in his middle school locker, what is the “message” (p. 85) he is told not to forget? What are some themes that Yusuf’s family and his Muslim American community must “never forget”?

STEREOTYPING: Throughout the book, *stereotyping* occurs frequently in Frey. What is the definition of stereotyping? What do you see as evidence of stereotyping toward Yusuf, but also to the Muslim American community at large? How can stereotypes be hurtful and dangerous? What happens to Yusuf at school that leaves him bewildered, while others look “at him with . . . fear and anger” (p. 287)? How have stereotypes impacted your life? How can we work to combat these harmful views?

HISTORY MATTERS: According to Yusuf’s Uncle Rahman, “History informs our present and affects our future” (p. 81). Yusuf understands what this means firsthand by reading his uncle’s journal. Uncle Rahman’s journal chronicles the raw events, emotions, and consequences experienced by to Muslim Americans during the time of the 9/11 attacks. When Yusuf feels the same effects twenty years later, how does Uncle Rahman’s journal help him process what is taking place around him? Similarly, what “violence” does Yusuf witness at school that causes him to breathe uneasily? Why can he not stop thinking about the “painful, hurtful violence” he witnessed (p. 241)?

COMMUNITY ALLIES: Yusuf discovers many are against him, his family, and his Muslim American community because of prejudice. However, there are also many allies around Yusuf. First, what is an ally? Who are Yusuf’s allies? Who are the allies to Yusuf’s family? Who are the allies to the Muslim American community? How do the allies challenge the status quo? Consider how Yusuf acts as an ally to others at school. How does his family demonstrate allyship to others in their Muslim American community? Discuss what you think makes a good ally. How can you practice allyship in your life?



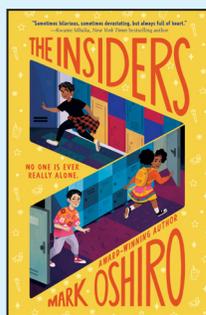
Art © 2021 by Hazem Asif

TIPS FOR ORGANIZING A BOOK GROUP:

- The fastest way to advertise is through word of mouth. Recruit a few enthusiastic readers who are willing to get things started!
- Give participants options and let them decide. Pull a list of potential books and share information about them with your readers.
- Come prepared with a few good questions, but let them drive the discussion. Begin each meeting by letting the kids introduce themselves and share their thoughts and initial impressions about the book. Let their conversation about the book start organically and use the questions if and when you need them.
- Don't be afraid of silence. It can be scary to speak up for the first time—especially if you're new to the group—so don't feel the need to fill the silence with chatter. The quiet gives them some time to think about how to answer a question you offered or to build up the courage to say something.
- Be ready with information about the next book club selection before they leave!

Tips provided by Cindy Minnich, a high school English teacher and certified school librarian in Pennsylvania.

MORE DISCUSSION-WORTHY TITLES

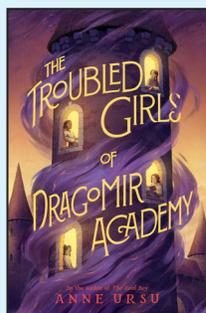


The Insiders

Mark Oshiro

★ “Oshiro’s intersectional saga conveys a strong message about letting go of secrets and, with help from loved ones, reclaiming space.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY (starred review)

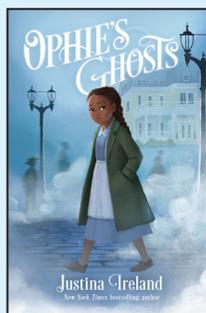


The Troubled Girls of Dragomir Academy

Anne Ursu

★ “Remarkably raw and honest.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS (starred review)

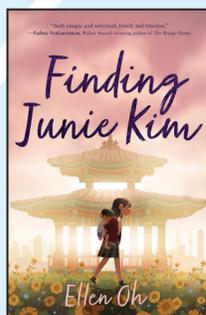


Ophie's Ghosts

Justina Ireland

★ “Equal parts supernatural suspense and historical fiction, Ireland puts a compelling spin on the classic whodunit narrative.”

—BOOKLIST (starred review)

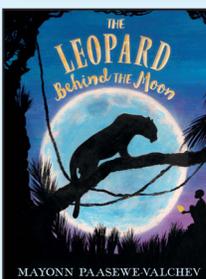


Finding Junie Kim

Ellen Oh

★ “A first purchase for middle school and upper elementary collections.”

—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL (starred review)



The Leopard Behind the Moon

Mayonn Paasewe-Valchev

★ “Captivating ... readers will be engrossed from start to finish.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS (starred review)