

TEACHING AND DISCUSSING LGBTQIA+ BOOKS WITH MIDDLE GRADE READERS

Why should I teach books featuring LGBTQIA+ material to middle grade readers?

Transgender, queer, and gender-nonconforming youth should see themselves represented and understand that there are resources available for them. They, like all kids, deserve to know there are adults who care about their wellbeing.

LGBTQIA+ youth are more likely than their peers to experience abuse, depression, and suicidal ideation, and COVID-19 has worsened isolation for some (Cohen and Bosk, *Pediatrics*, 2020). The likelihood of youth experiencing suicidal ideation or attempting suicide is directly linked to the degree of support they receive from adults in their life (Mastroianni, *Healthline*, 2022). LGBTQIA+ youth in your classroom or library may not experience acceptance or support at home, and when no school or library materials acknowledge that you exist, it can be hard to feel like you have a future. An increase in the number of challenges to LGBTQIA+ materials in libraries and schools means that more children may not have access to these materials unless educators and librarians make a point of providing them (Levesque, 2022, Ellis 2022). Giving kids access to books about other LGBTQIA+ youth and adults in the past and present affirms that there have been always been other people like them, and that there are a myriad of possible futures available for them.

Encountering sympathetic LGBTQIA+ characters help readers of all identities understand what queer and trans peers may be experiencing.

All kids should be offered insight into the life of someone unlike themselves, and to see similarities between different life experiences; this develops empathy and understanding. For straight and cisgender students, reading about being gay or trans offers a chance to reflect on what shapes their own experience, and prepares them to interact with LGBTQIA+ people in the future.

Kids should get a chance to consider sexuality and gender and ask questions in a supportive environment.

Young people in school come from diverse backgrounds; many have never encountered information about gay or transgender people. When adults offer no information, LGBTQIA+ topics become taboo, and kids with those identities may be mocked or bullied. Children who have questions about the world around them and may not feel comfortable discussing sexuality or gender at home may find dangerous misinformation or hate speech online while searching on their own. Educators and librarians have an opportunity to facilitate respectful, age-appropriate discussions in a safe space that help kids access information without judgment.

It's important to understand the relationship of the LGBTQIA+ political struggle for decriminalization, access to health care, access to marriage, and freedom from persecution as connected to other political struggles.

Movements for LGBTQIA+ rights in the United States have always been connected to other battles: those for women's equality, for equality for people with disabilities, for pathways to immigration. The ways different groups of people have been treated by politicians, police, religious organizations, and society in general help us understand how we got to where we are today. By engaging in discussions of justice and injustice for all groups, educators can help students make connections between history and the present in order to understand their world better.

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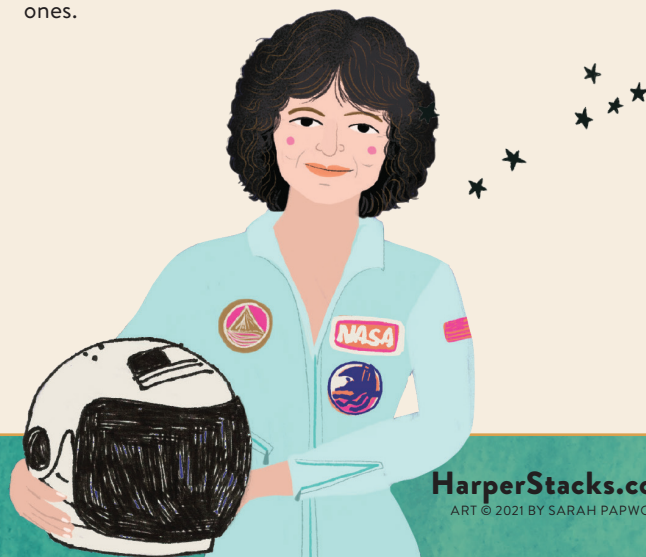
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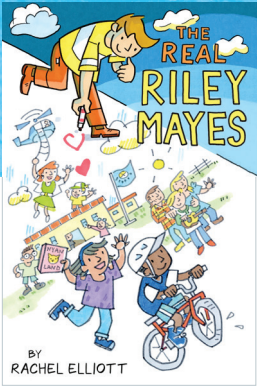
Mastroianni, B. (2022, January 27). How acceptance can reduce substance use, suicide risk for LGBTQ youth. *Healthline*. Retrieved January 29, 2022, from <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/how-acceptance-can-reduce-substance-use-suicide-risk-for-lgbtq-youth>

Guide prepared by Hal Schrieve, MLIS, a children's librarian at New York Public Library.

Tips for running a Pride unit in your classroom or library

- ★ **Prepare for potential challenges before you begin.** Assess the environment of your school or library and determine whether your administration or board will support you if you are challenged. Talk with coworkers ahead of the unit and explain your goals. Prepare to respond to assertions that you are discussing inappropriate or sexual topics with children by outlining the actual subject matter you are discussing clearly. Make sure you understand your library's collection development policies so you can refer to them when challenged, and **learn how to report censorship with the ALA**. You can also reach out to organizations like **GLSEN** and the **National Center for Transgender Equality's School Action Center**.
- ★ **Offer models to young people you interact with on how to discuss other people's lives and bodies respectfully.** Do not field questions about trans people's anatomy or allow jokes about gay people; respond to crude or insulting "jokes" with information and by asking questions prompting empathy.
- ★ **Offer space to process difficult topics.** In discussions of bigotry and homophobia, students may respond emotionally or connect these events to their own lives or experiences. Make sure there is room in your plan for space; plan to be available in some way for students or parents who may want to continue a discussion and make sure you are aware of local resources for LGBTQIA+ youth.
- ★ **Choose activities that allow children to relate content to their own lives and express themselves in art.** Choosing artistic or expressive activities, like interpreting the colors of the rainbow flag or responding to a book in comic form, gives kids a chance to reflect on their relationship to a work's meaning—without prescribing a specific kind of reaction or relationship to LGBTQIA+ issues.
- ★ **Discuss respectful language, but don't get bogged down in vocabulary.** Terms people use for their identities are constantly changing. Make sure you know a little about current terms and be ready to define them for students (words like transgender, cisgender, nonbinary, asexual, pansexual, intersex), but make it clear that even within the LGBTQIA+ community, language changes often. The most important thing is to refer to people with respect and take into account how they like to be identified.
- ★ **Use a combination of nonfiction texts, fiction, graphic novels, poetry, and video in programs and discussions.** Offer your students options! Young people may have different interests, learning styles, and priorities, and will respond differently to different formats. Some kids may relate to a realistic fiction book about a peer; others may be drawn to nonfiction about activism, books of art, or fantasy.
- ★ **Talk about the history of LGBTQIA+ people as the history of a political movement.** While people who are gender-nonconforming and same-gender-loving have always existed, they have not always understood themselves as part of a group. The identities that we default to using today in America and many other places are the result of discrimination and common experiences producing groups of people who understood they shared political goals. These groups worked together to fight criminalization and harassment. These efforts to work together haven't always been easy, as racism, ableism, transphobia, and other prejudices can mean some LGBTQIA+ people's safety isn't as valued. Consider sampling a part of the **transcript** from **Sylvia Rivera, "Y'all Better Quiet Down"**, 1973, or for younger audiences, read **Sylvia and Marsha Start A Revolution**.
- ★ **Avoid showing history as a timeline of inevitable progress.** Young people should understand that there are ongoing crises happening in our world and that things can get both better and worse; things change as people act to change them. Talk about how legal rights for groups of people change and about the organized effort it took to get there.
- ★ **Highlight diverse communities.** Seek works by women, men, and nonbinary people, and books by authors of color and about Black, indigenous, and global history in addition to white historical figures and activists. Ensure that working-class activists and writers are represented alongside wealthy ones.





THE REAL RILEY MAYES

by Rachel Elliott



Booktalk

Fifth grade is just not Riley’s vibe. Everyone else is squared up—except Riley. Her best friend moved away. All she wants to do is draw, and her grades show it. One thing that makes her happy is her favorite comedian, Joy Powers. Riley loves to watch her old shows and has memorized her best jokes. So when the class is assigned to write letters to people they admire, of course Riley’s picking Joy Powers! Things start to look up when a classmate, Cate, offers to help Riley with the letter, and a new kid, Aaron, actually seems to get her weird sense of humor. But when mean girl Whitney spreads a rumor about her, things begin to click into place for Riley. Her curiosity about Aaron’s two dads and her celebrity crush on Joy Powers suddenly make more sense. Riley becomes worried that the things that make her unique will always keep her separate from other kids. Can she show people who she really is and keep her friends?

Discussion Questions

1. Riley draws pictures of Joy Powers, daydreams about having adventures with her, and thinks about her all the time—but doesn’t realize she might have a crush until she imagines Joy kissing her onstage [p. 65]. This causes Riley to wonder if Cate will be scared of her [p. 67]. Why do you think realizing she has a crush on Joy makes Riley feel upset and uncomfortable? Do you think she would have felt that way even if Whitney hadn’t called her a “lesbo” during gym [p. 38]?
2. Riley’s friend Aaron is worried that kids at school will only know him as the kid with the gay dads, and that he won’t have control over who finds out, or how [p. 27]. Riley tries to keep his secret, but when she gets too excited and curious thinking about his dads, she spills the beans [p. 124]. What kinds of things do you think Aaron is worried about happening? What is he worried about Riley saying to his dads? Do you think his reaction to Riley telling other people is reasonable?
4. Riley feels good the first time she cuts her hair, even though her mom doesn’t seem very happy and it gets her noticed at school [pp. 30-31, p. 35]. Have you ever made a change to your appearance that felt good to you, even if other people didn’t like it? Would you like to make a change like that? Why do you think Riley’s mom encourages her to keep her hair long?
5. Riley’s brain works better with pictures than with written words. She works with Cate and Aaron to write her letters to Joy Powers. Cate likes writing, but needs Riley’s skills with drawing [pp. 35, 46-47]. Do you feel like your brain works in pictures, words, or sounds best? Is it harder for you to learn or pay attention to things when they’re in a format you don’t understand? Have you ever worked with someone else whose strengths were different than yours? Was it hard?
6. When Riley writes “does being gay ruin your life” in the search engine on her school’s computer, what do you think she’s hoping to find [p. 80]? What do you think she might have found if her school’s computer had not censored the result? Why do you think the school computer is set up to censor the result of that search? Are there times you wish you could look something up, but can’t figure out how?
7. Riley’s mom suggests brainstorming as a way to help Riley write her letter. Have you ever tried this method of brainstorming? Did it help? How do you think Riley’s brainstorms helped shape her finished letter and comic? Are there other ways of brainstorming that work for you?
8. Riley tries to make friends and pay attention in school, but also ends up getting in fights a lot [pp. 91, 136]. What do you think adults don’t understand about how fights between kids work? Are there things you do to avoid fights that Riley doesn’t do? How does it make you feel when you choose not to fight someone who’s making fun of you?

Activities

1. Working together with a partner, draw a comic about one of the following:
 - the adventures you would go on with a celebrity you admire
 - the best day you can imagine
 - a fantasy world like Nyanland where people (or cats) have magic powers.

You can either take turns writing and drawing panels, or one person can write the script (dialogue) for the comic, and the other person can illustrate it.

2. With a partner, talk about the things that Riley and other people in *The Real Riley Mayes* do or say that hurt other people’s feelings. As a whole class, generate a list of ideas about why people might do or say those things, on purpose or not on purpose. Then in small groups, brainstorm what people should do next when they’ve hurt someone’s feelings that way and illustrate it.





SMALL TOWN PRIDE

by Phil Stamper

Booktalk

Jake has known he's gay for years. However, when he finally comes out to his parents, their acceptance is a little louder than he expected. His dad's decision to put up a huge Pride flag in front of their house attracts the attention of local homophobes—and also Mayor Miller, who is up for re-election and doesn't want controversy to divide the small town of Barton Springs. Jake wonders if holding the first-ever Barton Springs Pride could change people's minds about LGBTQIA+ people, so he starts making plans with his parents and best friend to propose a festival at the next town council meeting. Meanwhile, Jake starts realizing that Brett, Mayor Miller's son, might have personal reasons for being interested in the flag . . . and in Jake.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think it was okay for Jake's dad to put up the flag without asking Jake? Do your parents ever do something that's "for you" that feels like it isn't about what you want or have asked for? How do you feel about the way Jake's parents speak to him about what he needs or wants?
2. The mayor of Jake's town says that she personally loves the Pride flag but is worried about the message it might send [pp. 65-66]. What is the message she is worried about? Is it possible to love a Pride flag but ask someone to take it down? What do you think the mayor's real feelings are? What do you think she knows about the feelings of other people in the town?
3. How do you think it feels for Brett to know that his mom is opposing the Pride festival? When you see the mayor criticizing and controlling Brett's behavior, how do you feel [pp. 46-47]? Why do you think she doesn't give Brett the same space to talk about his feelings as Jake's parents?
4. There are references in this book to Black Lives Matter: Jake's dad has supported it and argued with other adults about it online. People in Barton Springs also sometimes have Confederate flags and "Don't Tread On Me" bumper stickers [p. 10]. Why do you think we don't hear more about racism or race from Jake? Discuss how Jake's life might be different if he was a gay Black boy in Barton Springs.
5. How do you think Jake's life would be different if he lived in a medium-sized town instead of a very small one? How would his life be different if he lived in a larger city? If he lived in a larger city that didn't yet have a Pride festival, how would the path to starting one be different?
6. Jake assumes he can count on the support of his math teacher Mr. Foley [pp. 97-99], but realizes quickly that he's mistaken, and his teacher doesn't support their town having a Pride festival. What do you think Mr. Foley is worried about happening at a Pride event? Is it the same thing that other people are worried about? How do you think this teacher's opinions might affect the way he treats kids who are gender-nonconforming or gay?
7. Jake knew he was gay for a long time but waited to tell his parents until he was older. Why do you think he waited? What kind of response do you think he was worried about getting from his parents? How do you think it felt to his parents to know he was worried about telling them?
8. During the town council debate on the Pride festival, Jake's Uncle Jeremy speaks in favor of the Pride festival, even though it "isn't his scene" [p. 153]. We know that Uncle Jeremy has argued a lot with Jake's dad online before, and sometimes about LGBT issues [p. 92, p. 127]. What do you think made him change his mind about Pride enough to speak up? Has anyone in your life changed their mind about an issue because someone they love became affected by it?

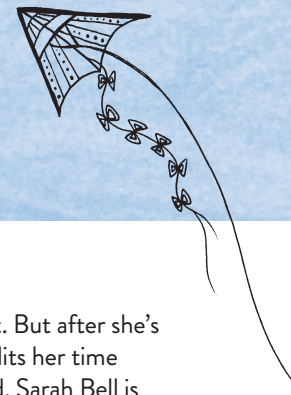
Activities

1. Using online news sources, research whether your town or city has a Pride festival. Where is it held? If you can, find out who started it and when. Was there resistance to the Pride festival?
2. With a partner, brainstorm an event, policy, or initiative that you think would improve your town. This could be something that improves people's experience of the town—like a farmer's market, or more bike lanes or sidewalks—or be a festival or initiative to educate or raise awareness about a cause or a part of history. Write down or illustrate the steps you think you'd need to take to make this happen. Who would you write or present your proposal to?



FIGHT + Flight

by Jules Machias



Booktalk

Avery Hart lives for the thrill and speed of her dirt bike and the pounding thump of her drum kit. But after she's diagnosed with hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a disease that affects her joints, Avery splits her time between endless physical therapy and worrying that her fun and independence are over for good. Sarah Bell is familiar with worry, too. For months, she's been having intense panic attacks. No matter how much she pours her anxiety into making art, she can't seem to get a grip on it, and she's starting to wonder if she'll be this way forever.

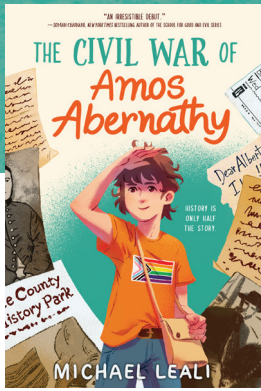
Just as both girls are reaching peak fear about what their futures hold, their present takes a terrifying turn when their school is seemingly attacked by gunmen. Though they later learn it was an active shooter drill, the traumatic experience bonds the girls together in a friendship that will change the way they view their perceived weaknesses—and help them find strength, and more, in each other.

Discussion Questions

1. Readers learn about some of the different ways Ehlers-Danlos syndrome affects Avery's life. She regularly experiences excruciating pain from minor injuries, and her joints can be damaged by activities that wouldn't hurt other people. Discuss reasons she might not talk about her pain, and why you think she hides her fears about the future. Why do you think she doesn't ask for more accommodations in her classes, or explain her disorder to people who bump her in the hall?
2. Avery observes that some people think Mason is hyperactive or inattentive because he's Black, rather than because he was "literally born with a differently ordered brain" [p. 134]. She also says that the school doesn't have enough counselors to meet the needs of all the students with ADHD [pp. 67, 68]. If so many kids have ADHD, why don't people recognize the source of Mason's issues? How is ADHD similar to a joint disorder like Ehlers-Danlos? How are they different? How is treating people with physical or neurological differences than you related to racism?
3. Principal Ritter and the school board decide to hold an active shooter drill that feels more realistic—and therefore terrifying—than previous drills. Why do you think he and the school board doesn't consider how frightening the drill would be? Do you think the backlash is warranted? What do you think schools, cities, and states should do to prevent active shooters?
4. When Avery and James want to get revenge on Principal Ritter, Mason and Sarah try to stop them from setting fireworks off outside PrincipaRitter's window. Why do you think Avery and James don't want to listen to them? Discuss Principal Ritter's emotional reaction to the fireworks. Did their "revenge" have the intended outcome?
5. Do you think James should have been arrested for setting off the fireworks? Do you think he really will be treated more harshly than Avery would have? What do you think James is thinking after he's arrested?
6. Mason calls out Avery for bossing him around and making him do things he doesn't want to do. Do you think Avery has been listening to Mason's attempts to communicate what he wants? Discuss examples in the book where you see Avery disregarding Mason when he tries to tell her about what's going on in his life.
7. In small groups, discuss The Talk Mason's parents gave him and your reactions to it. Do you think Avery would have known about The Talk if Mason hadn't told her? How do you feel when you think about police? Consider your response and why it might be different for others.

Activities

1. In groups or partners, make a list of questions and ideas you have about:
 - Disorders, or about physical, neurological, or emotional differences that people have. What do you know about the needs of people with these differences? What are ways schools, families, or friends might be good allies to people with these differences? What would you like to learn more about in this regard?
 - Mental health and trauma. What kinds of events might cause trauma? How do people who have experienced trauma act? What would you like to learn more about in regards to trauma?
 - Racism and police violence. Why are people of color more likely to have negative experiences with the police? What are your ideas about why this happens? What things can you do to better educate yourself about racism?
 - School shootings and active shooter drills. What do you already know about school shootings and what causes them? What questions do you have? How do you feel about shooter drills at your school?



THE CIVIL WAR OF Amos Abernathy

by Michael Leali

Booktalk

Amos Abernathy lives for history. Literally. He's been a historical reenactor nearly all his life. But when a cute new volunteer arrives at his Living History Park, Amos finds himself wondering if there's something missing from history: someone like the two of them.

Amos is sure there must have been LGBTQIA+ people in nineteenth-century Illinois. His search turns up Albert D. J. Cashier, a Civil War soldier who might have identified as a trans man if he'd lived today. Soon Amos starts confiding in his newfound friend by writing letters in his journal—and hatches a plan to share Albert's story with his divided twenty-first century town. It may be an uphill battle, but it's one that Amos is ready to fight.

Discussion Questions

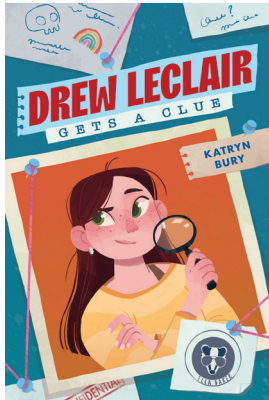
1. Amos is excited because Albert Cashier, a Union soldier in the Civil War who lived as a man, is from just a couple towns over. Amos feels a connection with Albert, even though they don't share an identity. Why do you think Albert's story speaks to Amos? Why does he write letters to Albert?
2. Amos has only recently begun to seriously consider how the historical society he works with presents history. When you've learned about history at school or in museums, do you notice racism or sexism in how history is told? Discuss some instances in which you were taught one thing that you later found out wasn't entirely accurate. Why do you think some people don't want to teach the full truth?
3. When Chloe decides to become the first female blacksmith—and the first Black blacksmith—at the center, she's told the blacksmith isn't taking apprentices. But then a white boy is accepted as an apprentice, a decision Amos's mom defends. Do you think any of Mrs. Abernathy's arguments make sense? Why do you think she is trying to defend her actions? How do you think Chloe feels?
4. After Amos and his friends' reenactment, Mr. Simmons angrily accuses Amos and his friends of trying to control history and "rewrite the past to make themselves feel better" [p. 270]. Why is it important to him to insist that LGBTQIA+ people didn't exist in the past?
5. Chloe points out that many more narratives are missing from Living History Park: "queer stories, Black stories, queer Black stories. What about Native Americans? What about identities we haven't even thought to think of yet?" [p. 270]. Why do you think this is? What kind of history has Amos been taught? What kind of history have you been taught?
6. What do you think Chloe learns from blacksmithing? Why is this part of history so important to her?

Activities

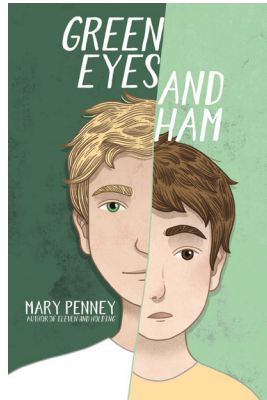
1. Read and discuss **this article** featuring Michael Twitty, a food history scholar and Black gay man whose work focuses on recreating historic Black recipes and tracing the genealogy of Black people and food in the South:
 - The persimmon beer recipe as Twitty knows it is almost certainly the same one that was made under enslavement. He says "I feel like I'm one more generation where it doesn't die." How are Twitty's goals in learning about history different from white reenactors at the Living History Park?
 - Discuss what Twitty says about the idea of foraged food as "savage" in Western thought, and how Black Indigenous foragers are seen and treated. How does that differ from cultivated food? What can we learn from Twitty's research and Indigenous and Black foraging traditions?
2. Using this map, explore the area around your school: <https://native-land.ca/>.
 - What languages were spoken on the land your school is on? Are there multiple overlapping territories or languages?
 - Click on one of the territories; a box should pop up saying "contact local nations to verify." What links do you see for the people whose language is marked on the map? Have you ever heard of their language or nation? Do they still live in your state, or is their reservation far away? What are your interactions with indigenous people in your area?
 - What treaties were signed in your area? Have you ever heard of them? How did they affect where people could live, fishing rights, or hunting rights?
 - What do you feel about this resource, and about the information you are learning about indigenous languages and land? Why do you think most people don't know this information?

More Middle Grade Books featuring LGBTQIA+ characters

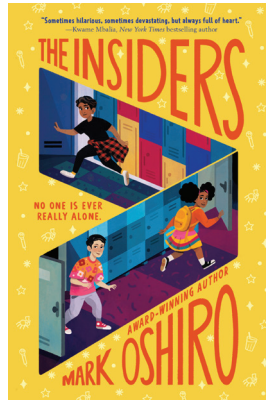
For title suggestions, educator resources, free downloadables, author videos, and more, visit hc.com/PrideOnEveryPage.



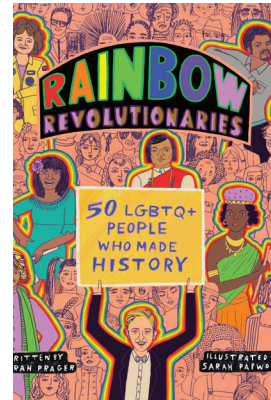
Drew LeClair Gets a Clue
by Kathryn Bury



Green Eyes and Ham
by Mary Penney



The Insiders
by Mark Oshiro



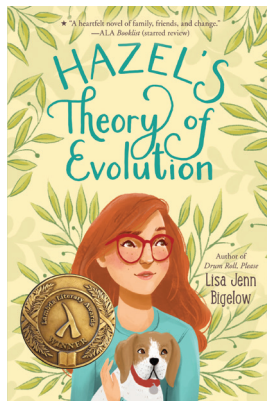
Rainbow Revolutionaries
by Sarah Prager



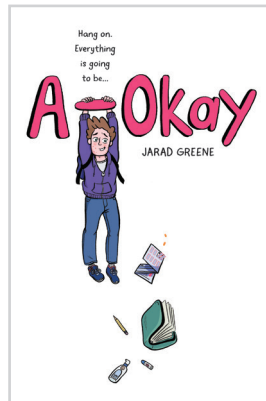
The Best at It
by Maulik Pancholy



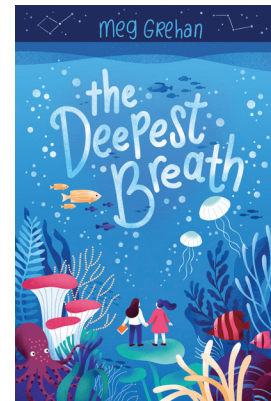
A Home for Goddesses and Dogs
by Leslie Connor



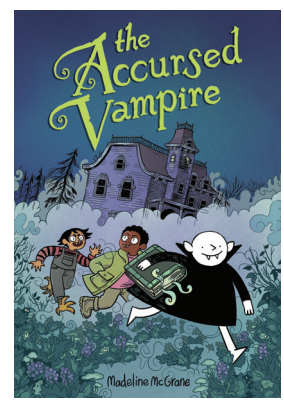
Hazel's Theory of Evolution
by Lisa Jenn Bigelow



A-Okay
by Jarad Greene



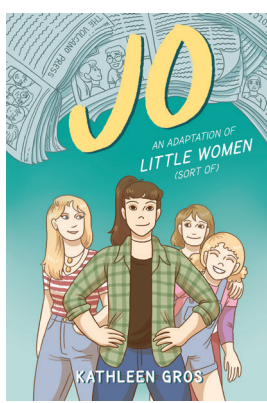
The Deepest Breath
by Meg Grehan



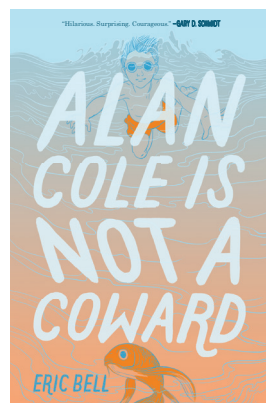
The Accursed Vampire
by Madeline McGrane



Estranged: The Changeling King
by Ethan Aldridge



Jo
by Kathleen Gros



Alan Cole Is Not a Coward
by Eric Bell



Drum Roll, Please
by Lisa Jenn Bigelow



The Other Boy
by M.G. Hennessey