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## Multiracial Characters

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) advocate critical reading and, in doing so, are aligned with multicultural education, which encourages the consideration of multiple perspectives and experiences through literacy. According to the CCSS' introduction to the English language-arts standards' goals, "Students actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, and they are able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. They evaluate other points of view critically and constructively."

Multicultural children's literature has been pivotal to pedagogical approaches geared toward expanding readers' worlds, but traditionally this has meant teaching about single cultures, such as Latino, African American, and so on. U.S. census data from the last two decades indicates an increasingly racially mixed population (9 million in 2010). Including children's and young adult literature with mixed-race content in the curriculum offers teachers and students rich and unique opportunities to learn and demonstrate the skills described in the CCSS' anchor standards.

First, fiction that describes the lives of contemporary and historical characters with multiple racial and cultural heritages is particularly relevant to today's increasingly diverse student population. Second, the focus on mixed-race identity in the books listed below easily affords educators opportunities to examine and analyze craft and structure in fictional texts with clear connections to history and social studies, thus building knowledge in content areas, as encouraged by the CCSS. Furthermore, these texts invite readers to think about the social construction of racial identity and authors' intentional choices in the creation of multiracial characters.

The books described below were published in the last decade and have been selected for their literary quality as well as their treatment of mixed-race issues. There are, of course, many more mixed-race novels for teen and preteen readers, some of which are problematic in their stereotypical or superficial representation of multiracial identity. The books in this set lend themselves well to critical discussion of racial identity—some being more nuanced than others—and, overall, they include protagonists who are exploring their multiracial identity in a variety of ways and contexts. Their experiences are not "typical" of mixed-race people, though

readers will find points of connection and recognition. These books have been chosen because, in addition to significant mixed-race content, they contain characters and themes that young readers will find appealing.

The Common Core State Standards advocate a thematic approach so that students compare the perspectives of different authors while building knowledge on a topic. Educators can create sets of novels, book groups, or literature circles that encourage comparison of a range of mixed-race stories and different authors' treatments of the topic. In this way, the CCSS can be addressed within a rich, multicultural context.

### Middle Grade

**Camo Girl.** By Kekla Magoon. 2011. 224p. Aladdin, \$16.99 (9781416978046); paper, \$6.99 (9781416978053); e-book, \$5.99 (9781442417229). Gr. 4–6.

In this novel, three characters deal with the loss of their fathers. At school, bullies pick on biracial Ella, who has patches of light and dark skin on her face, and her best friend, Zachary, because he exhibits Asperger's-like traits. New-student Bailey is the only African American boy at their school. This is a tender story about loss, love, and friendship.

**Half and Half.** By Lensey Namioka. 2003. 144p. Yearling, paper, \$5.99 (9780440418900); e-book, \$5.99 (9780307529695). Gr. 4–6.

Fiona and Ron Cheng are half Chinese and half Scottish. Fiona is thrown into a tizzy when an application form requires the selection of one racial category. She wants to choose both "White" and "Asian" but cannot, and marking "Other" is not an option. The arrival of both Chinese and Scottish grandparents adds a heavy dose of cultural stereotypes that both complicate and resolve Fiona's identity dilemma. Ultimately, hybridity reigns supreme, and neither culture is subverted in favor of the other.

**Hiroshima Dreams.** By Kelly Easton. 2007. 192p. Dutton, e-book, \$13.99 (9781440678318). Gr. 5–7.

In this subtle, lyrical contemporary novel, readers get to know Lin O'Neil as she changes from a shy five-year-old to a thoughtful, observant teenager. This gentle bildungsroman does not need calamity to spur self-realization. Instead, Lin's journey from child to teen is guided by the wisdom and patience of her Japanese grandmother. Issues of race and culture are depicted as part of many elements of the family's life, neither more nor less important than school, work, or relationships.

**I Wanna Be Your Shoebox.** By Cristina Garcia. 2008. 208p. Simon & Schuster, paper, \$6.99 (9781416979043); e-book, \$6.99 (9781416996842). Gr. 5–8.

Yumi Ruíz-Hirsch's sense of identity is rooted in her

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knowledge of family history. Before her grandfather dies, Yumi insists that he tell her everything about his life so that she may know her own. Yumi's stories include those of her Japanese grandmother, Jewish grandfather, Cuban mother and grandparents, adopted Guatemalan cousin, and life in multicultural Brooklyn and Los Angeles. Multiple plots and a vast range of characters make this a busy but enjoyable read.

**The Other Half of My Heart.** By Sundee T. Frazier. 2010. 304p. Delacorte, \$16.99 (9780385734400); paper, \$6.99 (9780440240068); e-book, \$6.99 (9780375896637). Gr. 4–6.

Life is very different for twins Kiera and Minni King, who appear African American and white, respectively. Racial-group membership is at the core of this novel, as the twins compete in a program for African American preteens. As the characters confront and deflect a range of social attitudes that include or exclude them on the basis of appearance, readers—like Kiera and Minni—learn that the more important elements of racial and cultural identity have to do with history and legacy, rather than skin tone.

**The Whole Story of Half a Girl.** By Veera Hiranandani. 2012. 224p. Delacorte, \$16.99 (9780385741286); lib. ed., \$19.99 (9780375989957); e-book, \$10.99 (9780375984419). Gr. 4–6.

A sudden move from a progressive private school to a traditional public one brings racial identity into sharp focus for Sonia Nadhamuni, who is half Indian and half Jewish American. In addition to adjusting to a new school and making new friends, Sonia and her family have to deal with her father being unemployed. Young readers will empathize with Sonia's tumultuous feelings and familiar issues concerning families, friendships, and school.

## Young Adult

**All the Broken Pieces.** By Ann Burg. 2009. 224p. Scholastic, \$16.99 (9780545080927); paper, \$6.99 (9780545080934); e-book, \$7.99 (9780545279031). Gr. 6–10.

This emotionally dense novel in verse is delivered in the sad, quiet voice of Matt, the child of a Vietnamese woman and a white American soldier, who now lives with his adopted, white family in the U.S. Memories of the war—and the racist attitudes of his peers—keep Matt aloof from the people around him. Burg addresses and resolves complicated relationships in credible ways, and readers will learn how the Vietnam War affected those who were there and those who were not.

**Behind You.** By Jacqueline Woodson. 2004. 160p. Puffin, paper, \$7.99 (9780142415542); e-book, \$7.99 (9781101157275). Gr. 7–12.

Several narrators jostle for space in this sequel to *If You*

*Come Softly* (1998) as they grapple with the death of their friend Miah. Carlton, Miah's best friend, is biracial, and in this novel he realizes that he is gay. Miah's death creates an otherwise unlikely friendship between Carlton; Miah's girlfriend, Ellie; and Kennedy, a new boy whom people mistake for Miah.

**Black, White, Other: In Search of Nina Armstrong.** By Joan Steinau Lester. 2011. 224p. Zonderkidz, \$15.99 (9780310727637); paper, \$7.99 (9780310720003); e-book, \$4.99 (9780310396192). Gr. 7–10.

Centuries of racial politics are packed into this dense novel. Nina Armstrong feels caught between African American and white peer groups at school, and now she feels caught between her separated African American father and white mother. Contemporary urban racial tensions are framed within the context of the 1991 Oakland fires and characters' responses to the media coverage. Meanwhile, Nina loses herself in the story of Sarah, one of her ancestors who fled slavery and went north on the Underground Railroad. This novel sometimes reads like informational text, and readers will not miss the parallels between historical and contemporary racism.

**The Death of Jayson Porter.** By Jaime Adoff. 2008. 320p. Jump at the Sun, paper, \$7.99 (9781423106920). Gr. 10–12.

Jayson's life is beset by trauma: drugs, poverty, abuse, and rejection by both black and white communities. Narrated by Jayson in poetry-slam-like verse that is heavy with pain and anger, this novel offers an angst-ridden perspective of biracial teenage life that still allows readers to find a hint of hope at the end.

**Dogtag Summer.** By Elizabeth Partridge. 2011. 240p. Bloomsbury, \$16.99 (9781599901831); paper, \$7.99 (9781599908298); e-book, \$7.99 (9781599906737). Gr. 6–9.

Tracy, or Tuyet, has memories from when she was very young and lived in a village in Vietnam, before she was adopted by her white parents. She remembers a boy teasing her for being a “half-breed,” just like an American peer taunts her for being Vietnamese. When she discovers a pair of dog tags in her father's toolbox, she begins to ask questions about his involvement in the war and about her biological parents.

**Gray Baby.** By Scott Loring Sanders. 2009. 336p. Houghton, \$17 (9780547076614). Gr. 8–12.

Clifton Carlson is warm, funny, and compassionate, despite the fact that he witnessed the murder of his father by a racist policeman and was raised by an emotionally absent mother. He befriends an old man, Swamper, who turns out to be his grandfather. By the time this secret is revealed, the two are close enough that Clifton can confront the old man for

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rejecting his mother when she married a black man. Swamper is not allowed to hide behind the social mores of the time as an excuse for being racist, and the resolution is both satisfying and credible.

**Hidden Roots.** By Joseph Bruchac. 2004. 144p. Scholastic, o.p. Gr. 6–9.

Bruchac skillfully brings close the horrors of the 1960s eugenics efforts in Vermont that devastated American Indian communities. Eleven-year-old Howard gradually learns that his parents and uncle live in fear of their Abenaki and Mohawk heritage being discovered. Bruchac's sparse and deliberate prose evokes the dark secrecy necessitated by institutional racism. Readers are treated to a glimpse of Abenaki beliefs and traditional values without the usual stereotypes.

**The Latte Rebellion.** By Sarah Jamila Stevenson. 2011. 332p. illus. Flux, paper, \$9.95 (9780738722788). Gr. 9–12.

The Latte Rebellion begins as a high-school social movement to raise awareness about multiracial identity and raise money for a trip to Europe. Asha Jamison and a cast of other mixed-race characters find themselves in over their heads as the movement goes viral. Asha's academic record begins to crash as she spends more time being a misguided activist, and when her college rejection letters pour in, readers might wonder if this is a cautionary tale about balancing activism with other responsibilities.

**Mexican WhiteBoy.** By Matt de la Peña. 2008. 256p. Delacorte, \$15.99 (9780385733106); paper, \$8.99 (9780440239383); lib. ed., \$18.99 (9780385903295). Gr. 9–12.

As the title implies, this novel centers on the racial identity of Danny Lopez, who feels that he does not fit anywhere because he is biracial. Danny yearns to be with his father, who left the family some years earlier, perhaps, Danny fears, because they weren't "Mexican enough." By spending the summer with his dad's family in the barrio, Danny slowly learns to accept the love and support of friends and other family members who are ultimately more reliable than his absent father.

**Off-Color.** By Janet McDonald. 2007. 176p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16 (9780374371968). Gr. 7–12.

Racial identity is at the core of this lively novel. Cameron Storm stumbles upon a photograph of an African American man who turns out to be her father. Then her mother loses her job, and they have to move from their white neighborhood to a racially diverse one. Progressive teachers and candid friends expand Cameron's worldview as she figures out her new identity as a person of color. The novel ends with a big party and the possibility of romance.

**Riot.** By Walter Dean Myers. 2009. 192p. Egmont, \$16.99 (9781606840009); paper, \$8.99 (9781606842096); lib. ed., \$19.99 (9781606840429); e-book, \$8.99 (9781606841969). Gr. 7–12.

Written in a screenplay format, this novel is set in New York City in 1863 during the Draft Riots, between the black and Irish communities. For Claire Johnson, this means suddenly having to figure out if her allegiance lies with her Irish mother's people or her African American father's. Claire's journey from naive to reflective is a reminder that racism and the effects of the Civil War were not relegated to the Deep South but were felt as far north as Manhattan.

**Stringz.** By Michael Wenberg. 2010. 216p. WestSide, \$16.95 (9781934813331). Gr. 6–9.

Playing the cello is more important to 14-year-old Jace Adams than his racial identity. But as he struggles to fit into a new school in a new neighborhood, Jace encounters racist attitudes and expectations from peers and teachers, who assume he is a troublemaker, not a talented musician. Eventually, he finds his niche with a small group of unconventional friends with diverse backgrounds and interests.

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## Common Core Connections

The following are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with recommended books about multiracial characters. You can find more information about the standards at [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

**In the Classroom:** Ask students to create a t-chart (two columns under a single heading) to juxtapose key details about identity as they are depicted in *Camo Girl*, which is written in first person, and *The Other Half of My Heart*, which is written in third person. After a discussion about point of view, have students add to the chart with insights about their own identity written from first- and third-person perspectives.

### Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.6.** Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.

**In the Classroom:** Using *Half and Half*, *Hidden Roots*, *Hiroshima Dreams*, or *The Whole Story of Half a Girl*, teach a mini lesson about making inferences. Then ask students to write in double-entry journals that include teacher- and student-selected excerpts from the novels that reflect characters responding to challenging situations. Remind students to explain how certain words and phrases enable them to make inferences.

### Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2.** Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

**In the Classroom:** After selecting *All the Broken Pieces*, *Dogtag Summer*, *I Wanna Be Your Shoebox*, or *Stringz*, have students choose and modify a progression chart from the SmartArt graphics in PowerPoint to identify and describe the movement of the plot. Students can include voice recordings, music, video, and other technological modes of communicating their learning.

### Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3.** Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters

respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.

**In the Classroom:** Have students compare *Riot*, which is written in a screenplay format; *Behind You*, which is narrated in the first person by multiple characters; and *The Death of Jayson Porter*, a novel in free verse. Ask students to focus on the first-person narrations of the protagonists, who are negotiating their mixed-race identities. The texts lend themselves well to performance, so students might also use reader's theater or create their own videos and post them on YouTube to demonstrate how the text structures contribute to their understanding of the characters, plot, or mood.

### Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.5.** Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.

**In the Classroom:** *Black, White, Other* and *The Latte Rebellion* feature characters who are involved in or learn about activism and resistance. The novels are rich with the language of social movements. Students can create semantic-feature analysis charts to deepen their understanding of vocabulary and multiple meanings of words.

### Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.4.** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

**In the Classroom:** In *Gray Baby*, *Mexican WhiteBoy*, and *Off Color*, protagonists' understanding of their biracial identities are closely connected with the settings in which they operate. Students can create story maps in which they demonstrate in pictures and in writing how time and place impact characters in dynamic ways.

### Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.3.** Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).