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## A Glimmer of Hope for Tomorrow: Conversations with the 2022 Social Justice Literature Award Winners

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# A Glimmer of Hope for Tomorrow: Conversations with the 2022 Social Justice Literature Award Winners

Judith M. Dunkerly, Char Moffit

You can absolutely use your voice to say, “Hey, that’s not fair, or what does that mean?” I think too often we do not listen to young people and explain things in a way that they can understand.

~ Chrystal D. Giles, award-winning author of *Take Back the Block*.

## Classroom Vignette

Kelly stares at her classroom library and sighs. As a first-year teacher, she is beginning to come to grips with the vast array of issues and topics that her second-grade students grapple with daily. Carlotta’s family are newly arrived immigrants who fled violence in their small Columbian village. She and her family live with relatives but fear deportation. Jessica, a winsome child with a usually impish grin, confided just yesterday that her mom had been sentenced to 7 years in prison. Kelly comforted her the best she could but struggled to put her complex emotions into words. Then there was Tyler, who whispered to her at recess that he wanted to be called Tabitha because that’s who she was and it was the most beautiful name in the world. With new restrictions sweeping across the country restricting what teachers can say or even read in their classrooms, Kelly runs her hands over the books that she knows can reach each one of these children and also sow the seeds of empathy, compassion, and respect for diverse experiences and views. With a look of determination, she selects a book and calls the children to the story rug. It may be just one story, told on one rainy Tennessee afternoon, but it will let one child know they are not alone.

## Introduction

Although the vignette above is a composite portrait of several teachers in various contexts, Kelly is not singular in her experience. Daily, teachers turn to children’s literature to heal hurt feelings, explore unseen worlds, and

show children that, whatever their circumstances, they are not alone. Picture books, graphic novels, and other youth-focused texts are “artifacts that convey cultural messages and values about society and help children learn about their world” (Koss, 2015, p. 32) In her seminal work, Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop (Bishop, 1990) spoke of children’s literature as mirrors and windows, later also calling on them to be sliding glass doors. Children’s and young adult literature allow children to see who they are and who they can be. They also facilitate a glimpse into lives, experiences, and circumstances that might otherwise be unknown. Lastly, they act as a humanizing portal for children to walk through different experiences and develop compassion, empathy, and respect in a world of permeable borders, diverse populations, and shifting identities. In this article, we share the insight and inspiration we experienced in interviewing the winners of the International Literacy Association (ILA)’s *Social Justice Literature Award* (SJLA). To foreground the rich conversation that will follow, we briefly situate it in the shifting and tumultuous education spaces we collectively inhabit.

In our current age of divisive political rhetoric, historic, and systemic racial inequities, as well as the attempted erasure of LGBTQIA+ identities within and outside of schools (Dunkerly et al., 2022), there is an urgent and profound need for children’s literature with a social justice lens to be mindfully included in our classrooms and curriculum. Recent legislation in states, such as Indiana, Tennessee, Texas, and Florida to unfortunately name but a few, serve as a warning in real time of the need to imbue our classrooms and practice with approaches centered on empathy, mutual respect, and advocacy. As the students we teach more and more reflect the diversity of our global community, it is imperative that the books we select reflect, include, and celebrate the rich tapestry of

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our shared humanity. However, it is clear from even the most cursory of observations that we have far to go.

It will come as little surprise to the readership of this journal that the vast majority of titles within the world of children's literature portray English-speaking, white, male, cisgender, temporarily abled-bodied characters (Crisp et al., 2016). Since 1994, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has compiled statistics on books by and about authors or topics centered on diverse populations. Despite seemingly apparent strides in the number of books by those who self-identify as members of diverse cultures and those who center representation in their work, the numbers paint a different, whiter, picture. For example, of the 3,717 books received by the CCBC from major and mid-level publishers, 83.2% were by white authors. Similarly, white characters were featured in 41.9% of the received titles. By comparison, books by Black authors comprised 6% of those reviewed, while 11.9% featured Black/African primary characters or subjects. For our purposes in this article, it is worth noting that only 0.8% of books were written by Indigenous authors, with 1% featuring Indigenous characters and/or subjects (Tyner, 2021). While these figures do represent an increase in books by and for diverse voices and experiences, we have far to go in ensuring equity in representation, and assuring that the books children see in our classrooms mirror the diversity embodied within them. However, with the rise in officially banned and challenged books (Kim, 2022) as well as those insidiously subjected to the tacit banning of quietly being pulled from classroom shelves, it is more imperative than ever to uphold and amplify voices at risk of being silenced.

We are fortunate that the authors and illustrators featured here are a bold presence in children's literature. Much like the abolitionists and conductors of the Underground Railroad, their works provide a path forward toward freedom in educational spaces and shine a bright light into the shadows of censorship. As we hear from the winners of the 2022 SJLA, we invite you to consider how these stories and the experiences of the authors might be spaces of inclusion and representation in your practice. We turn now to a brief overview of the award, its history, and its criteria.

## The Social Justice Literature Award

The authors of this article are currently co-chairs of the SJLA. The SJLA originated in 2012 by members of the

Literacy and Social Responsibility Special Interest Group (SIG) of the ILA to recognize outstanding books, both in literary and artistic quality, for children and young adults that address social responsibility toward individuals, communities, societies, and/or the environment and which invite reflection and socially responsible action by the reader.

The committee recognizes award winners in four categories: fiction picture book, fiction, nonfiction picture book, and nonfiction.

The yearly cycle for the award starts in late August with a letter that is sent to each publisher of children's literature in the United States. Publishers then send books to the seven committee members that they believe fit the criteria for the award. Books are accepted through March. During the 2022 cycle, we received 164 titles.

The committee members read and discuss the books with a focus on the award criteria and then select a winner for each of the four categories. The fiction winner was *Take Back the Block* written by Chrystal D. Giles and focused on gentrification. This year we had a tie in the nonfiction category. The first nonfiction winner was *Art of Protest: Creating, Discovering, and Activating Art for your Revolution* written by De Nichols that explores the history of art protests and how to get involved in art protests. The second nonfiction winner was *Good Girls Do not Make History* created by Elizabeth Kiehner, Kara Coyle, Micaela Dawn, and Keith Olwell. This graphic novel tells the story of the women's suffrage movement. The fiction picture book winner was *Nia and the New Free Library* written by Ian Lendler about a young girl who led her community in rebuilding the public library. Lastly, the nonfiction picture book, *We are Still Here!: Native American Truths Everyone Should Know* written by Traci Sorell, extols the resilience of Native Americans despite historical genocide, modern systemic oppression, and threats of cultural erasure.

## A Cross-Pollination of Ideas

We had the opportunity to interview the award winners via Zoom. While the interviews for each of the books were conducted at different times, the following represents the compilation of the five interviews. In each interview, the same five questions were asked of each author (or team). When necessary for clarity, some responses were slightly paraphrased or edited. For continuity, we present

### PAUSE AND PONDER

- How do you find new books for your classroom?
- How do you find new authors?
- How do you choose which books to bring into your classroom?
- What are your thoughts on books being banned or challenged for classroom use?

the individual interviews in a conversational style drawing from a “World Cafe” (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) approach. A world cafe, “focuses on the intimate exchange, disciplined inquiry, cross-pollination of ideas, and possibility thinking” (Löhr et al., 2020, p. 2). Given the immediacy and inter-relatedness of the books’ topics, this approach allows us and the reader to engage collectively with the ideas presented to construct understandings, encourage reflective learning, and develop new ideas (Flick et al., 2004). All authors had the opportunity to member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) this manuscript before publication, and suggested revisions were honored. It is in this context and intersection of understanding, learning, and ideas, that we introduce the winners of the SJLA.

## Our Award Winners

*Tell us about yourself and how you came to write this book.*

**Traci:** I’m a Cherokee Nation citizen. I was born and raised here within the reservation. I’ve lived in numerous places since moving back home about four and a half years ago. I attended the University of Berkeley and had the opportunity to learn from Native faculty where I was a Native American studies major and ethnic studies minor. For my second book, I wanted to write a picture book with a focus on policy because there should not be a child in this country that comes out of elementary school, who does not have an idea about what happened to Native Americans in history.

**Elizabeth and Keith:** We met as undergrads at American University in Washington, D.C. We were both film majors studying visual media. So I would say we come from a pedigree and track record of visual storytelling, not in bookmaking *per se*. Keith has been a film director and an editor since he was a teenager. But I [Elizabeth] have always been a very creative person, and definitely always an avid reader, so I double majored in literature. I have always loved books since my earliest memories. That’s the history that we come from that sort of brings us to our fondness and affinity for books and reading. I think a big reason why we decided to write this book was realizing that August of 2020 was the 100-year anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, and we thought, “Hey, this is a great thing to celebrate!” On top of which, I think the real catalyst was when Hillary Clinton lost the Presidential Election, and we were feeling pretty upset, so we decided to channel our energy into something good.

**Chrystal:** This is my second career. I actually had a full career in finance for 15 years. So I only started writing as an adult, and mostly it was because I wanted to see my family and kids reflected in the books that my son reads. I call it random ambition, because I had no idea how the publishing industry worked. I started writing really as

a way to put diverse characters and the lives of Black children at the center of the stories. *Take Back the Block*, in particular, was inspired by my community. I am from Charlotte, North Carolina, born and raised here. I noticed all of these changes happening. I really had thought neighborhood changes, displacement, gentrification were big city problems, and Charlotte is not necessarily a big city. So I wrote the book because I wanted to highlight what it’s like to try to hold on to a community in a place and to find purpose where you are from.

**Ian:** This book, *Nia and the New Free Library*, is inspired by my hometown library that my grandfather helped build. I love this library. I have a deep personal family connection with this library, and it’s a great library in the area. The library had a leak in the roof during winter time and the water pipes froze and burst with 60% of the kids area being destroyed. A bunch of people pitched in together to rebuild the library.

**De:** I am an artist, designer, researcher, and activist. During the height of my activism, I was living in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2014. I had just finished with grad school, and was working at an art museum as a community engagement specialist and educator. The summer after I had finished grad school, that’s when Michael Brown was murdered on the streets in Ferguson. Arts-based organizing became the way that I contributed and showed up in protest and started organizing other artists across the region. A publisher randomly found me online and learned about the *Mirror Casket* Project and said, “Can we reach out to you just to get your thoughts on this book that we want to write?” Long story short, they ended up selecting me to write this book.

## “Not just both sides, but all sides of the story”: Our Conversation with the Authors

As detailed above, these interviews took place on different days; however, they are presented here as one conversation. We were struck by the sense of how the authors came to their work from various perspectives, yet collectively believed in the enduring power of literature to inspire and reflect the strengths of individuals and communities in solidarity with justice. We began by asking about the nature and role of representation in children’s literature broadly, and specifically in their own work, and from that point, asked them to reflect on the message they want to be taken from their books and their own stories.

*What is the importance of representation in Children’s Literature?*

**Traci:** So those [diverse groups] are the people that I write for. That’s who I center, and I recognize that is my

readership. When kids are in their class, when they are looking at their peer group across the country, when they are looking at their peer group across the world.

**Elizabeth and Keith:** I think that representation is extremely important in children’s literature, and I think that is starting to change as far as the diversity that we see of the past 5 and 10 years being reflective of more diverse audiences. For example, my son, in the process of us doing the research and creation of this book, has started to notice gendered things around us in his life and society and community. I remember one day in the middle of the pandemic, he and I went out for a walk at the end of the day to get out of the house, and there was a sign that was posted at the end of the street that said, “Men at Work.” He said, “Mom, why does this sign say “men at work” when you are a woman and you work all the time? He’s now picking up on things that he sees in general that are very gendered, and is questioning why is this written in such a gendered way? Other people beyond our son have the capability to start tuning into things that they see.

**Chrystal:** Yes, when I think about representation, I think, you can see it on my cover. There’s a black boy who’s confident he has great energy, and he’s at the front of his story, and he’s in the center of a story. I think too often we do not get that representation in a way that’s positive and realistic and authentic. So I know for sure that when young people see themselves in a positive and authentic way in the stories they read, they feel more confident. They feel like not only they matter, but their stories matter as well.

**Ian:** I think that’s what’s great about more diversity is there’s more stories. There’s fresher stories. Just the world’s more interesting place—and people get to see that.

**De:** Oh, representation is critical, absolutely critical, especially in today’s society where there is endless access to information and inspiration.

*How do you see your book speaking to social justice issues?*

**Traci:** You know very much that we, as Native Nations, have a right to exist, we have a right to exercise our sovereignty and for the world to see that we have maintained agency. I see any of the books I write as first and foremost showing us in our full humanity.

**Keith and Elizabeth:** I think the book at its core is about 75-plus years of consistent and persistent social justice. What was striking to us when we were researching the book was the number of mother and daughter duos involved in this movement. These women made this movement their personal crusade.

**Chrystal:** So I love this question because I decided not to shy away from social justice issues in this book. I was honestly a little bit afraid to take this huge topic that really

does not have a simple solution and put it in a book for young people. I really feel like it’s a bit of an injustice to not talk to our young people about what’s happening around them. Books are a good way to enter the conversation.

**Ian:** I did not sit down and say, “I’m gonna write a book about social justice.” I do not think very much creative stuff tends to happen that way. This book is about doing something good, and that story is great because it talks, speaks of the value in everyone you know. It starts with the townspeople. Everybody’s got a good heart and everyone is pitching together, and everyone has value. And that message is the core message of any social justice movement which is, everyone has value.

**De:** Protest is just one form of organizing. It is one way to contribute to civic change. This book provides creative tools to get students, parents, and teachers started, and to learn a visual language, a visual vocabulary, in order to contribute to the space. I think my book gives readers accessible pathways for learning how to develop their own voice around social justice issues. Everyone may not be the best with words, but maybe they can draw. Maybe they can make something. Maybe they are good with yarn. Perhaps they can show up and visually have something that can catch the eyes of others and build momentum around their ideas.

*What do you want children and their caregivers to take away from your book?*

**Traci:** I do not know any people that would say, “I’m raising my child or my grandchild to be as ignorant as possible.” Even if someone is hell-bent on teaching hatred, which is definitely a taught thing, we do not come out hating people. I mean, you cannot understand the history of this continent, and the relatively new formation of the United States, which is not even 250 years old, if you do not understand Native Nations. We just simply have too many resources including children’s books for this [ignorance] to be happening.

**Elizabeth and Keith:** The rights that we have now have been hard fought for, and slipping back is possible. We should be aware of the struggle that we had, in case we have to do it again. We should not take it for granted. If you see something that’s wrong, or does not feel right about society, or in some ways is unfair, it’s our obligation as humans to live a life where we aren’t passive and we are just letting things happen to us, because we have the ability to shape the future. It’s up to us to really be the agents to drive toward a more positive future, so the more that people can feel empowered and feel as though everyone’s voice, including your child’s voice matters.

**Chrystal:** You can absolutely use your voice to say, hey, that’s not fair, or what does that mean? I think too

often we do not listen to young people and explain things in a way that they can understand. Let us talk about who benefits in this situation, because we also get to create or help create. It is also important that children are informed. I think when we start that information process early, they are informed. I also think empathy is extremely important at this age. Children can relate to the idea, “I love my home. I don’t want to move away.” That’s a very simple thing to which most people can relate. After that, then we add in the history [of gentrification], and culture and all of those things.

**Ian:** I went to the library all the time. I was a latch-key kid, so a lot of times my parents would just drop me off at the library for an afternoon. I knew all the librarians, and I just loved libraries. I loved reading. There’s a reason I’m an author. So I just wanted to write a book about something that someone loves and to inspire other people.

**De:** Definitely the histories of like the lineage of how artistic protest has occurred throughout time and across geographies. I think, when we witness certain injustices in today’s society we can be made to believe that this is just starting. But if you know, look at Japan in the umbrella movement. If you look back to the civil rights movement. There are all of these precedents for what we are experiencing today. I hope that readers can use some of that inspiration of what has happened, and take it and make it their own.

*What is your message for classroom teachers?*

**Traci:** I absolutely understand the difficulty that you are in. Do not mistake that. As a child, my family was living month to month. Neither of my parents had a college education. I do know what you have gone through to get your education. I know how little you are paid, and how few benefits you receive for all of the work that you do. It is critical work because you spend a lot of time with young people. There are ways, even in the midst of this environment, to bring in who everyone is, and to integrate those things into your classroom. Whether it’s sharing a paragraph or reflection or a book. You have a classroom of children who have visible and invisible disabilities, who have a variety of needs and backgrounds. Focus on the broader impact for your students in terms of understanding history and themselves.

**Elizabeth and Keith:** When I was thinking about my answer to this question, I remembered my favorite history teacher Mr. McCallen. He would come into class dressed up as characters from the lesson he was gonna do that day. He was one of those guys. It really was awesome. My message to teachers is that kind of enthusiasm will be remembered by students for the rest of their lives. Teachers impact their students. Also, I think it is important

to show all sides of the story. Teaching American history and looking at women’s perspectives is teaching American history and looking at the Native American perspective or the perspective of African Americans or Asian Americans is teaching American history.

**Chrystal:** One of my characters in the book is a male teacher, Mr. Baker. I did not want him to be at the forefront of change. I wanted him to facilitate. So, for classroom teachers, Mr. Baker is an amazing example of what an ally looks like. He is a person who is just facilitating by pushing students toward deeper thought and change. If we can start there with classroom teachers introducing topics and ideas, and then allowing young people to have these discussions, answering questions, and facilitating deep conversations. This is a huge issue. It’s monumental. There is no easy fix, but we can start the conversations, and I think classroom teachers bringing this into the classroom starts the conversation, and it kind of pulls back the veil of what’s happening around us. I think at this age you are starting to think beyond your house, beyond your front porch. You’re looking at your neighborhood. You’re looking at, for example, “What’s different between that person and me?”

**Ian:** The reason I wrote the book was because I love reading. I love books, but the reason the book wrote itself was because it’s a story about community. You know that’s what the story ends up being about. And for any teacher anything that can help gather people together around a story is a great first step.

**De:** I think this is a hard one. I would not want any teacher to get fired on my behalf. I would encourage teachers to be more attentive and sensitive to the needs of their students. I encourage them to lead with a servant’s heart. The role of the teacher, in my opinion, should not be to indoctrinate students into one form of thinking, but to help them think critically, inform their own ideas and opinions and perspectives, and expose them to different resources and to different world views. My encouragement to teachers is to recognize our own conscious and unconscious biases, and break through these in order to serve and contribute to the well-being and educational growth of our students.

*As an author of books for children and young people, how do you respond to recent book bans and challenges?*

**Traci:** There’s just more and more of these soft bans, because it’s really not even the explicit bans, right? It starts with that. It’s not just the people that take it out of their classroom library, their school library, or do not put it on display in the public library. It might be on the shelf, but you know it’s not going to be front and center and sales start dropping off. So [publishers] are going to sell books that they can move. That’s what they’ll choose to publish. So it’s chilling. We are losing books that are needed. Teachers and

librarians' livelihoods are in jeopardy. I want people to be able to access whatever books that they need.

**Elizabeth and Keith:** The upswing feels like front-page news, and historically, we do not look back on book bans, especially a huge broad uptick in them, as a positive. Organized attempts to narrow peoples' worldview and control it, including countries with mass censorship programs, are worrying because society should always be encouraging people to think critically. It's important to understand that sometimes you have to fight back, and our story is totally about that fight. I found an article that was talking about a book that was written and published in 1637, called *New English Canon*. It was written by an English businessman, Thomas Moreton. This book was banned by the Puritans, and is allegedly the first banned book in the United States, which made me very curious. I need to read this book this weekend, which is now my plan.

**Chrystal:** This topic is such a hard one for me. I found out recently that *Take Back the Block* was banned in a county in Florida, and I was shocked, devastated and really upset about it. Just like you mentioned, sometimes the banning is not this large campaign. It's just this little quiet thing happening where it's just removed. It's incredibly harmful. It's also incredibly harmful for young people. My book represents a young boy at the heart of his community. He's confident and he's learning. So when you ban his story, you are literally saying, "Your story doesn't need to be heard." And so everything about representation is completely erased, and so it's harmful. It also suppresses the idea that everyone's voice means something. So again, when you get back to what books are allowed in schools, they are often a singular narrative. Book banning and censorship tears down everything that we are trying to work to build up, and it takes away that conversation. All of those conversations about empathy and learning all of that stuff is kind of ripped away.

**Ian:** The idea is that people need to be protected, and that someone designates themselves the Protector. It happens from the Left and from the Right. Quite a few books have been pulled and pulped because of the Left as well. So it's on both sides. You know, the more open that you are the better.

**De:** I've been fortunate, that to my knowledge, my book has not been banned or received heavy public criticism. But I do think that there's power in not keeping the book as the book, that the same lessons can be taught by going beyond the book and creating a community with people as there are ways to circumvent the public education system, school systems at large, in order to instill and cultivate the creative process with people. Many of the workshops that I lead from the inspiration of my book are not often in schools, instead, they are in libraries, conferences, and

comic book expos. I like these spaces because people can opt-in or opt-out. There is no mandate to participate. I love witnessing it. When parents, you know, get their children activated with their issue that they care about which may not be the issue that I care about. But everyone has an issue that they can advocate for, or a social thing, a social challenge that they want to improve. And so I think that sense of one's openness and understanding that what I've written is not just within this book, but also across the entire experience that I have with others.

*What gives you hope?*

**Traci:** What gives me hope is that young people—even those in kindergarten—are not afraid to share their thoughts, feelings, and what they find unjust, funny, and puzzling. My hope is that as adults we will work more diligently not to take that from them. That expression and connection to themselves, other sentient beings, the land and world around them should continue to expand during their lifetime, not contract.

**Chrystal:** One of the beautiful things about middle grade literature is that it's kind of this unspoken rule that you always end the story with hope. So it's one of my favorite things to write for young people. When you write books for teens, you do not necessarily have to give them hope because they have their own view of the world and it is what it is with young people. You do want to leave them with a glimmer that tomorrow is better, and that you can have an impact on the future.

**De:** It is the children that give me hope.

## Conclusion

In reading these authors' books and in having the opportunity to talk with them about their inspiration and experience in writing them, we are again reminded of the critical importance of representation in children's and young adult literature. Books such as these truly act as the windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors that Ruth Bishop Sims (1990) envisioned. Yet beyond viewing or even inviting children to step into other figured worlds, books centered in social justice topics also "creates a sense of identity, consciousness, and agency that enable [children of diversity] to speak and act for themselves, and be who they are. For others, exposure to differences steers them clear from a false sense of ethnocentric pride and also "normalizes" differences in others, to identify inequities and use their platforms to amplify the voices of historically disenfranchised communities" (Anand & Hsu, 2020; p. 124). In reading these books, and exploring these topics, educators are doing more than engaging children in literacy practices. They are creating the foundation on which individual agency, collective well-being, and compassionate humanity rests.

## TAKE ACTION!

1. Finding and using social justice themed books in your classroom is a great start! Try pairing these books with the strategies you will find here in the International Literacy Association's Culturally Responsive Teaching Resources ([linked here](#)).
2. Stand against book bans by visiting and consider joining [United Against Book Bans](#). On this site you will find critical information and strategies to fight censorship so that books like the ones featured here will remain available to everyone.

These are indeed perilous times for education. Teachers are facing unprecedented pressure to conform to narrow and reductive views of “what belongs” in classrooms and school libraries. Yet, we are confident that despite the challenges teachers like Kelly in our opening vignette are facing, they are reading rich literature, and facilitating deep discussions that lead their students to nuanced understandings of the world we together inhabit. More than ever, it is vital that we avail ourselves of books like these that encourage empathy, fight against apathy, and open the doors to myriad possible futures for all children. For in those pages, we will find that glimmer of hope in tomorrow.

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The work contained herein adheres to the ethics and integrity of our field and professional affiliations. In accordance with ethical qualitative research, all participants had the opportunity to member-check the manuscript prior to final submission.

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- *Elizabeth Kiehner and Keith Olwell*: <https://www.quarto.com/books/9780711265424/good-girls-don-t-make-history>
- *Traci Sorell*: <https://www.tracisorell.com/>
- *Ian Lendler*: <https://ianlendir.com/>
- *Chrystal Giles*: <https://www.chrystalgiles.com/>
- *De Nichols*: <https://www.denichols.co/>

Visit these Sites for More Information, Titles, and Resources for the Classroom and beyond.

- *Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison*: <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/>
- *Social Justice Books*: <https://socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/>
- *We Need Diverse Books*: <https://diversebooks.org/>