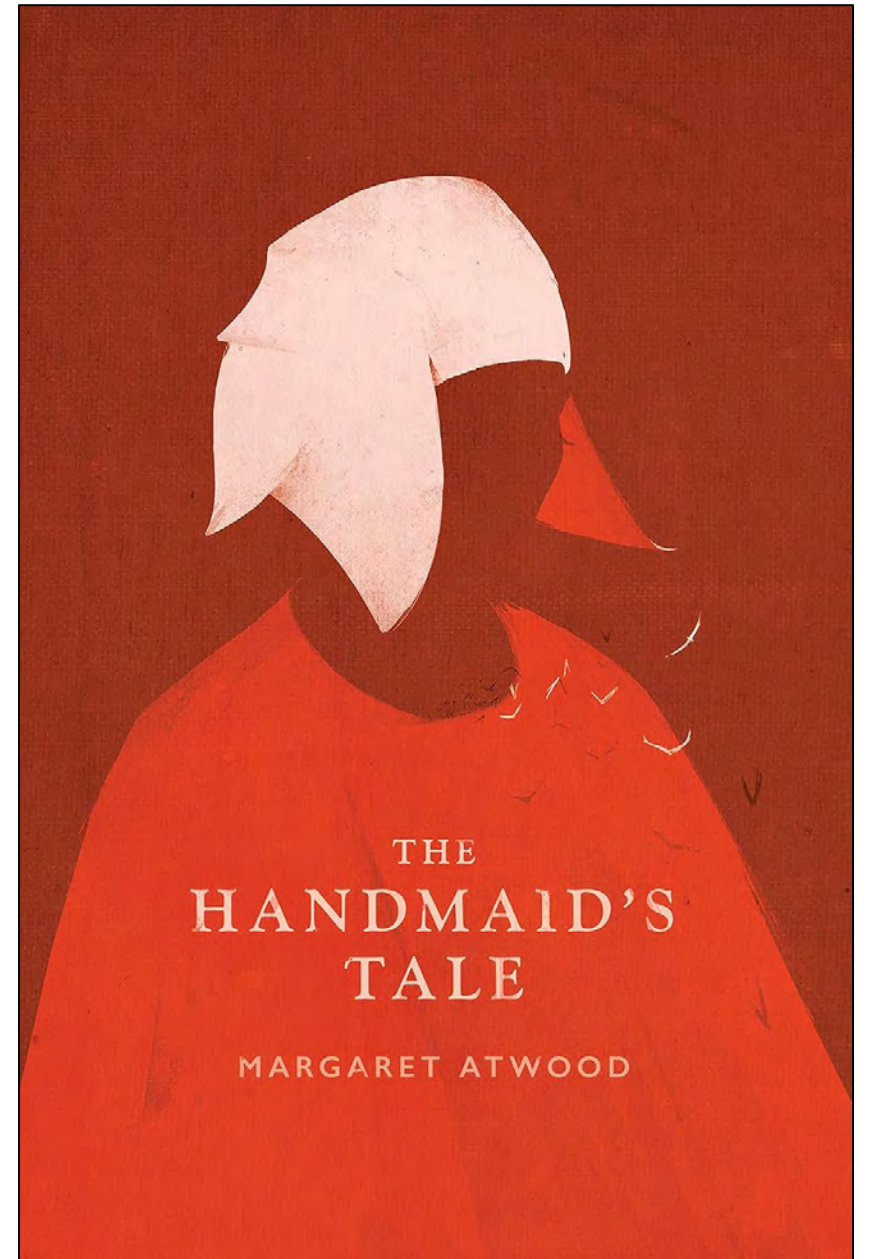


Challenged and Challenging Texts and Teaching

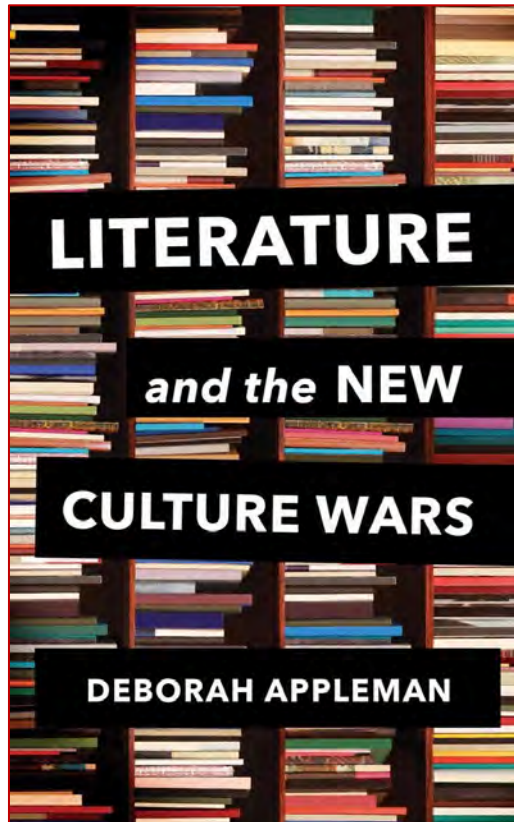
Carol Jago

ERWC Institutes

June, 2024



Teaching has always been hard, but it seems to be getting harder



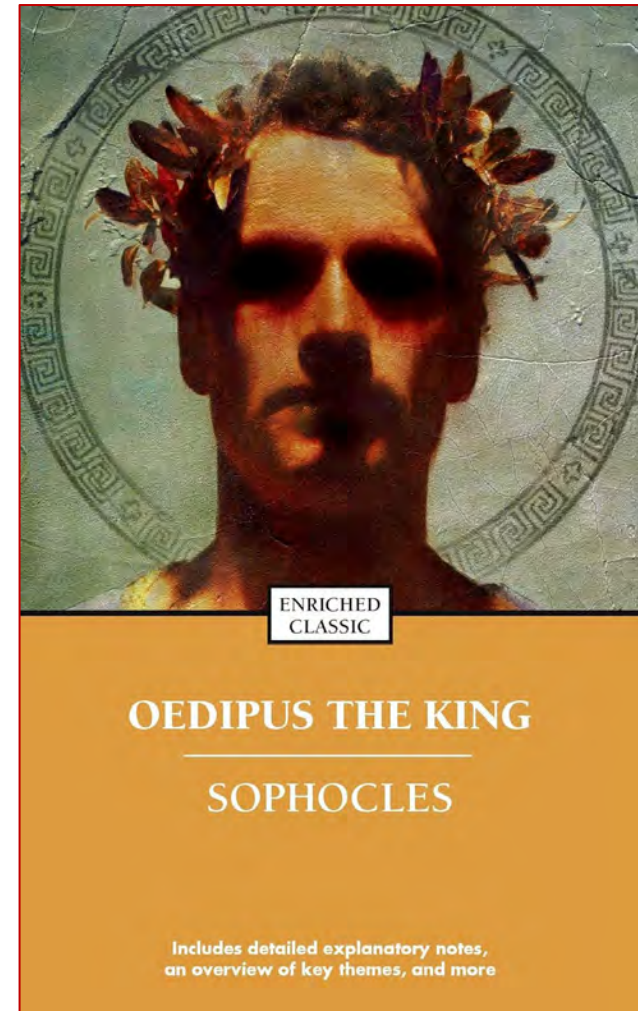
The “culture wars” have reshaped the politics of secondary literature instruction. As a result of challenges from both the left and the right—to language or subject matter, to potentially triggering content, or to authors who have been canceled—**school reading lists are rapidly shrinking.**

For many teachers, choosing which books to include in their curriculum has become an agonizing task with political, professional, and ethical dimensions.

Questions to ask ourselves

How can we continue to teach troubling but worthwhile texts?

How can we help students (and their parents) understand that literature intends and should "trouble" us?



Happy Gen Zers Feel More Interest, Motivation and Purpose



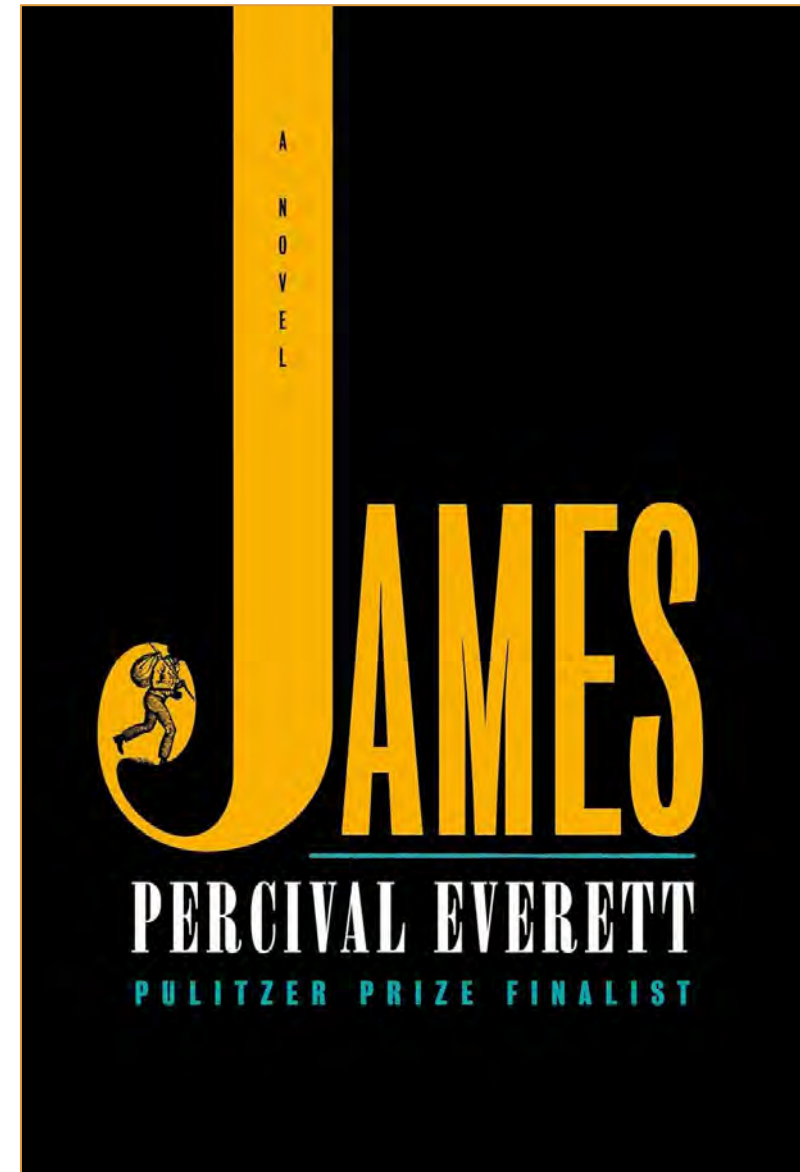
Gallup-Walton Family Foundation Voices of Gen Z, Nov. 27-30, 2023

GALLUP

The critical importance of **PURPOSE** and **RELEVANCE** in any curriculum

What Can We Do?

- Teach the controversy
- Offer alternative texts
- Pair texts
- Invite students to choose
- Talk with parents and administration
- Use critical lenses to trouble the text.

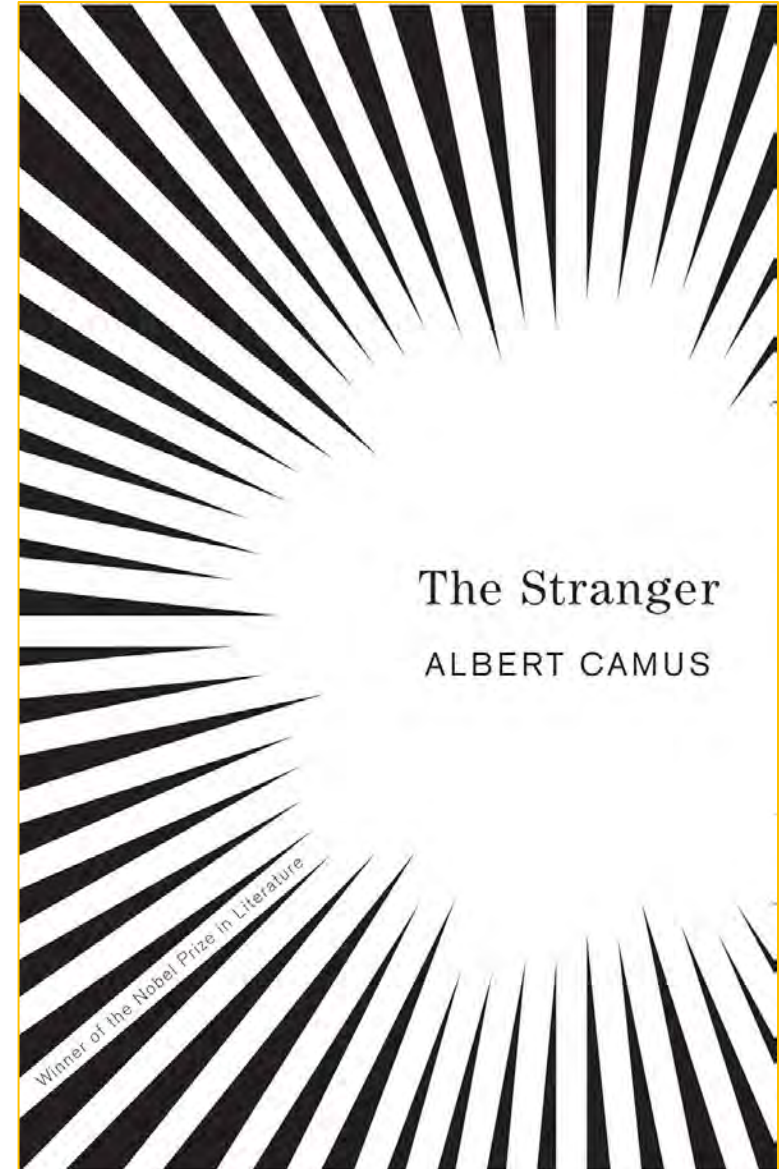


"A tour-de-force reimagining of Camus's *The Stranger*, from the point of view of the mute Arab victims." —*THE NEW YORKER*

THE MEURSAULT INVESTIGATION

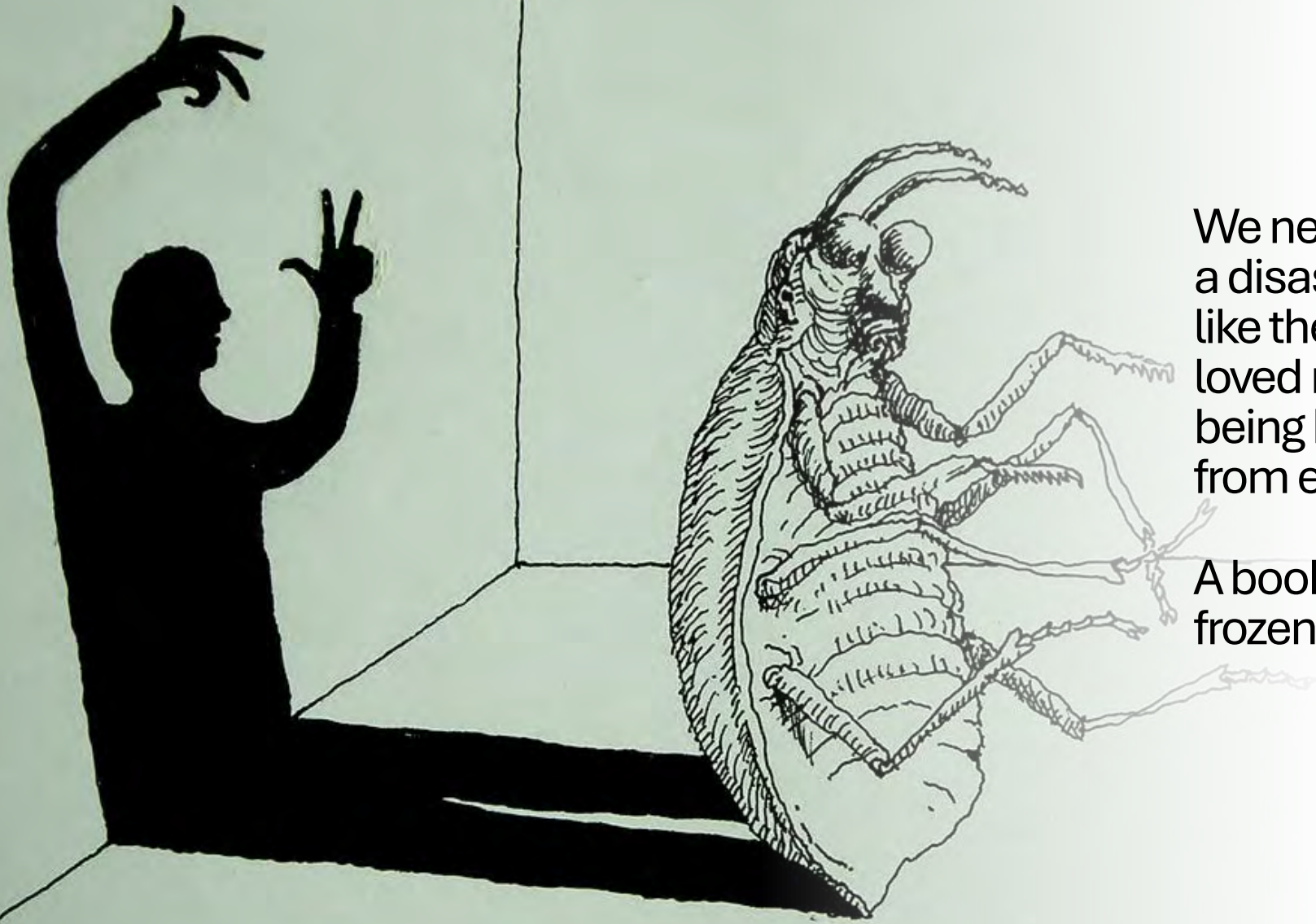
• a novel •

KAMEL DAUD



The Stranger
ALBERT CAMUS

Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature



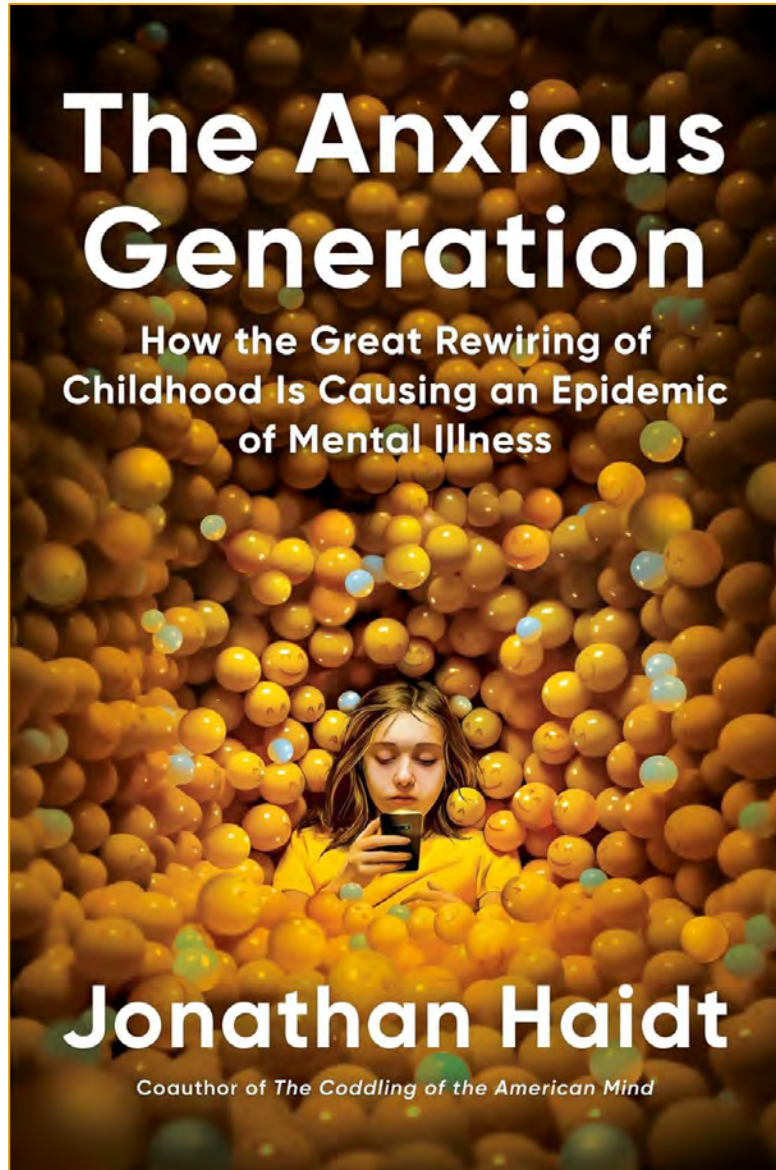
We need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone.

A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.

- Franz Kafka

1. **The smartphone is a constant companion** more than four hours of teen smartphone use on an average day.
2. Phone use during school hours is nearly universal but varies widely.
3. Notifications are plentiful, with half receiving **237 or more per day.**
4. TikTok is irresistible.
5. Over half of teens used their phones overnight on school nights.





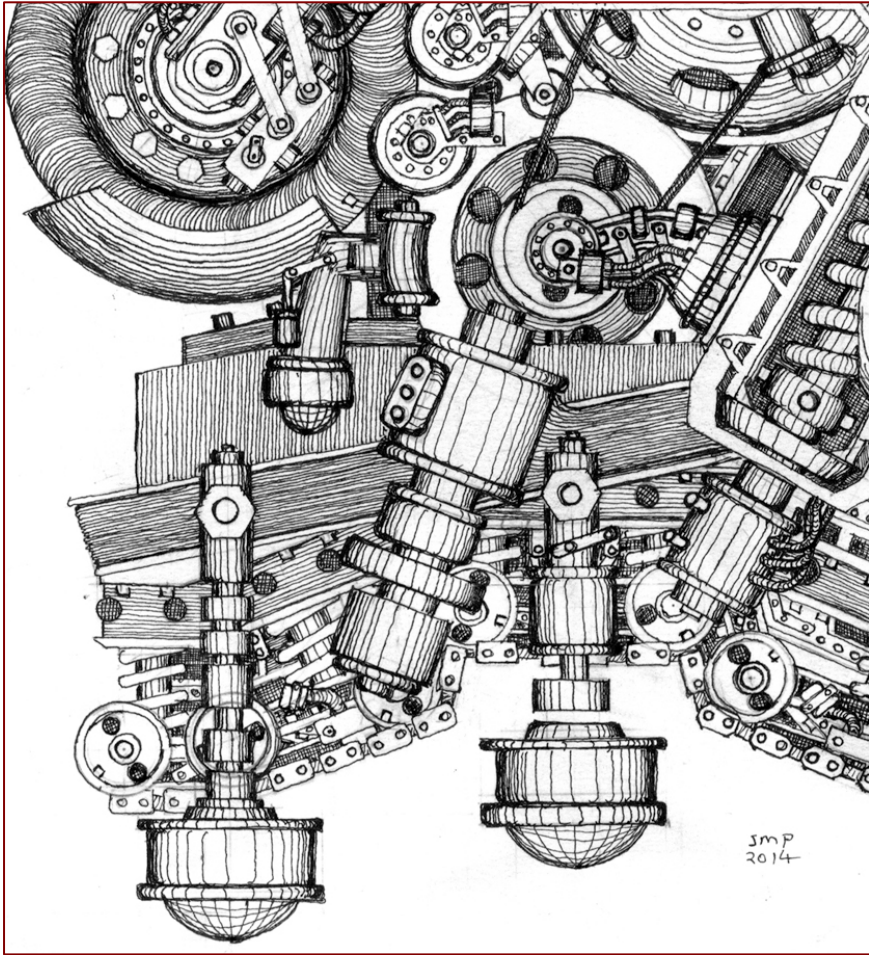
Four foundational harms

1. Social Deprivation

2. Sleep Deprivation

3. Attention Fragmentation

4. Addiction



How do students' reading habits seem to be changing?

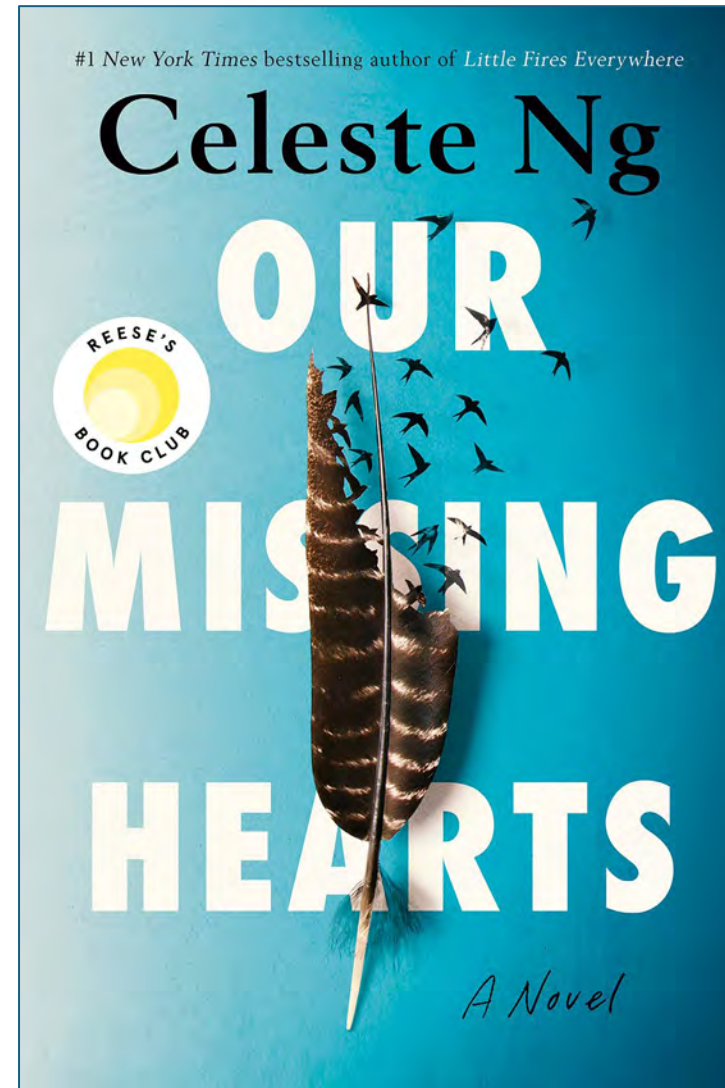
How are these changes creating problems of practice for you?

Every text is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work.

- Umberto Eco

Harold Bloom's criteria for choosing which books to teach:

- aesthetic splendor
- cognitive power
- wisdom



The Fiction Effect

Using the PISA database with data for more than 250,000 teenagers from 35 countries, researchers found evidence that teenagers who spend more time reading *fiction texts* have significantly stronger reading skills than peers who don't read — or read less — fiction.

It's called it the "fiction effect."

Reading complex novels entails distinct practices from the kind of reading that typically occurs on screens, especially when one considers ultra-brief formats such as text messages.



Forty-two percent of lower-performing students report rarely reading for fun

A larger percentage of 13-year-old students reported **never or hardly ever reading for fun** on their own time compared to 2020 and 2012



How often do you read for fun on your own time?

At least once a week

Proportion of **lower-performing students** (below 25th percentile)



Proportion of **higher-performing students** (at or above 75th percentile)



Once or twice a month



A few times a year



Never or hardly ever



* Significantly different ($p < .05$) from students performing at or above the 75th percentile.

TEENS CHOOSING TO READ

Fostering
Social,
Emotional,
and
Intellectual
Growth
Through Books



Gay Ivey • Peter Johnston

What happens when teens
read “disturbing” books?

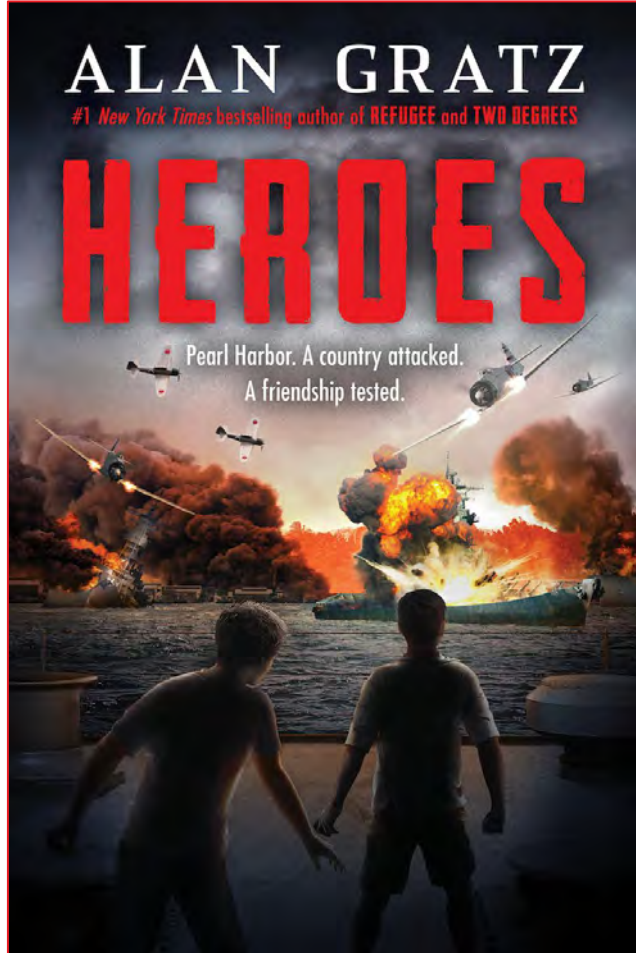
What Happens When Teens Read “Disturbing” Books?

Ivey and Johnston followed 8th grade students two years into high school and found that they, who previously reported reading little or nothing, were reading like crazy — both in and out of school — and that their reading achievement improved. While this was the initial motivation for their teachers, it became the least interesting outcome.

Students reported becoming better people, a change also noticed by their parents and peers. Reading engaging narratives about characters with complicated lives helped them become more empathetic, less judgmental, more likely to seek multiple viewpoints, morally stronger, and happier. Yes, Happier. They reported improved self-control and building more and stronger friendships and family relationships.

Central to these changes, they explained, were **conversations about the books** with peers, teachers, or family members — whoever they could recruit for different perspectives on provocative or confusing parts.

Students described characters’ questionable decisions as cautionary tales, not narratives to live into, a concept they found laughable, plausible only to someone who hadn’t read the book. The books helped them to see the consequences of problematic decisions and language. The complexities of characters’ lives and the consequences of their decisions deepened students’ moral thinking while making them grateful for their lives and families. The books reduced their own self-absorption, diminishing personal concerns that might otherwise overwhelm them.

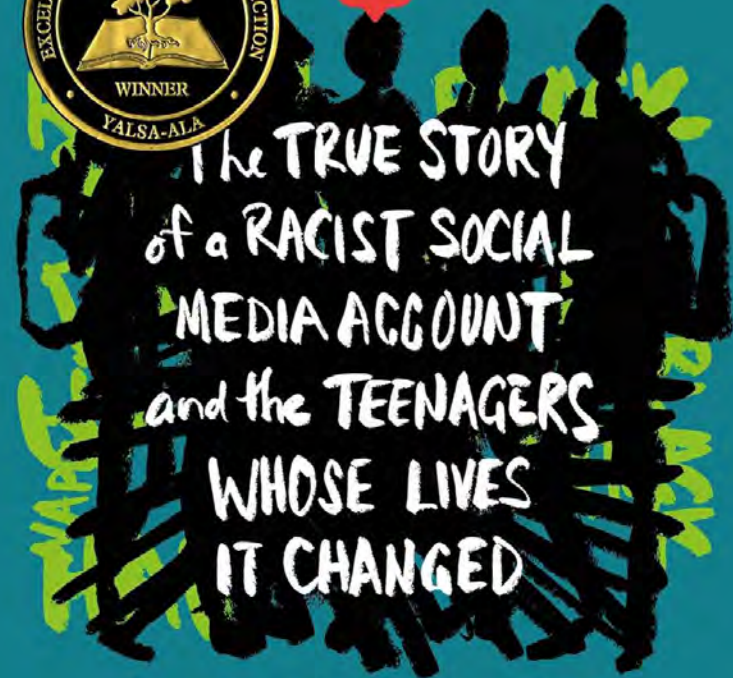


Students build stamina by **READING**

- Know when to skim and when to slow down.
- If comprehension breaks down, instead of stopping, reread.
- Don't mistake an aversion for a particular book with a hatred for reading.



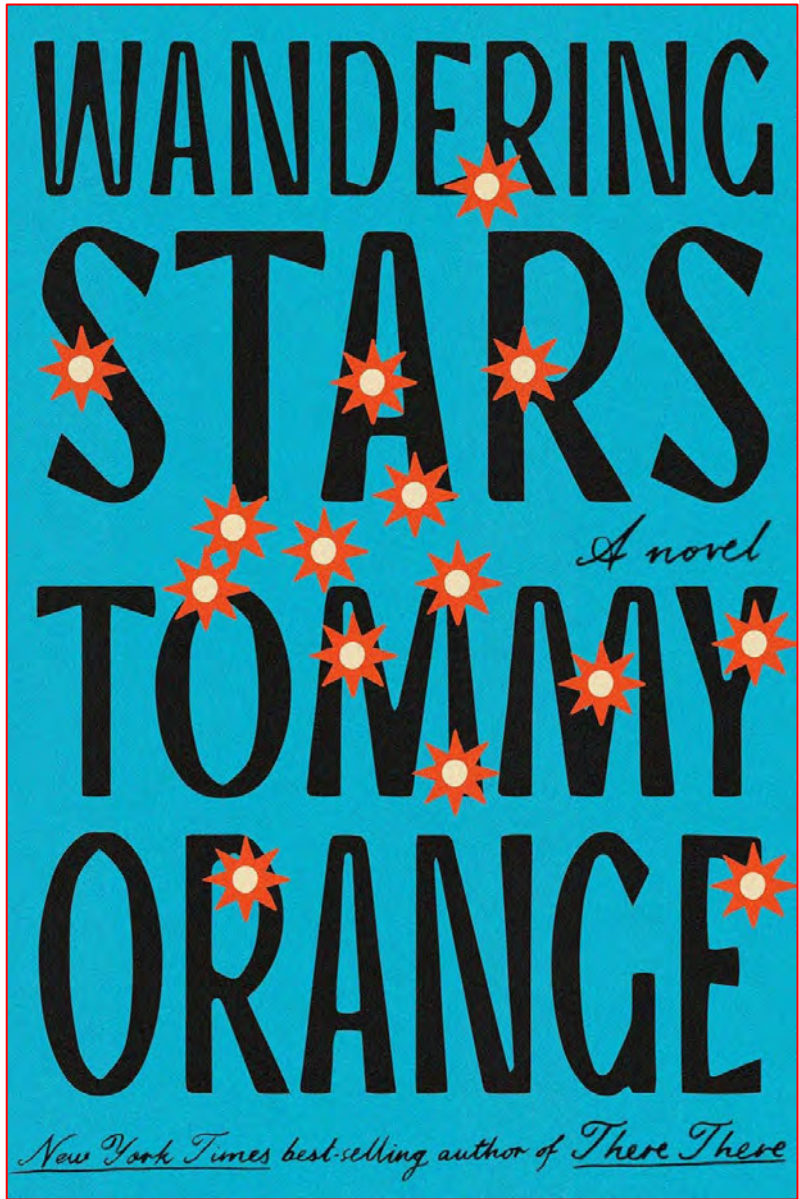
ACCOUNTABLE



The TRUE STORY
of a RACIST SOCIAL
MEDIA ACCOUNT
and the TEENAGERS
WHOSE LIVES
IT CHANGED

DASHKA SLATER

NEW YORK TIMES-BESTSELLING AUTHOR



WANDERING

STARS

A novel

TOMMY

ORANGE

New York Times best-selling author of There There

Martyr!

"Kaveh Akbar is one of my favorite writers. Ever." —TOMMY ORANGE



NEW YORK TIMES
BEST SELLER

A NOVEL

Kaveh Akbar



A Novel

HELP

A NOVEL

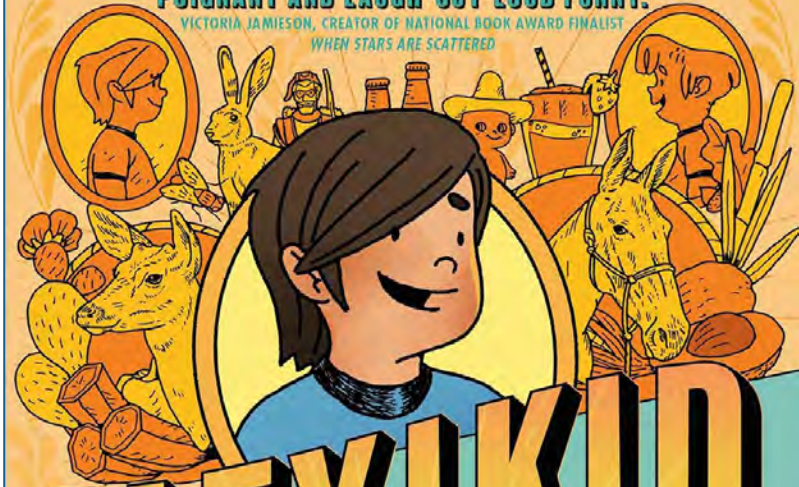
WANTED

ADELLE WALDMAN

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *THE LOVE AFFAIRS OF NATHANIEL P.*

"POIGNANT AND LAUGH-OUT-LOUD FUNNY."

VICTORIA JAMIESON, CREATOR OF NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST
WHEN STARS ARE SCATTERED



MEXIKID

A GRAPHIC MEMOIR



BY PEDRO MARTÍN

Award-winning author of *Crash from Outer Space*

CANDACE FLEMING

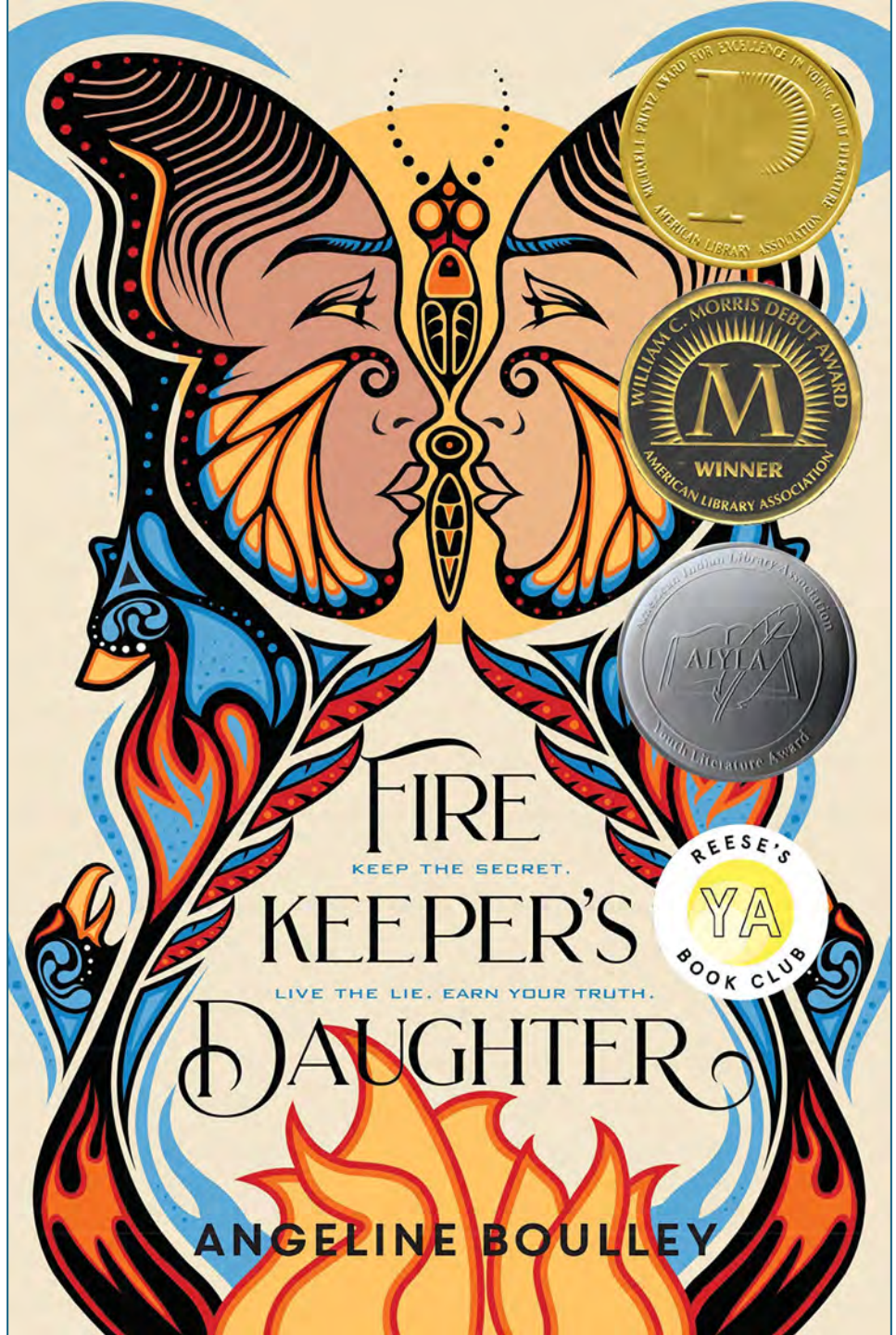


The Enigma Girls

**TRUE
STORIES
IN
FOCUS**

**How Ten Teenagers Broke Ciphers,
Kept Secrets, and Helped Win World War II**





FIRE

KEEP THE SECRET.

KEEPER'S

LIVE THE LIE. EARN YOUR TRUTH.

DAUGHTER

ANGELINE BOULLEY



POVERTY, BY AMERICA

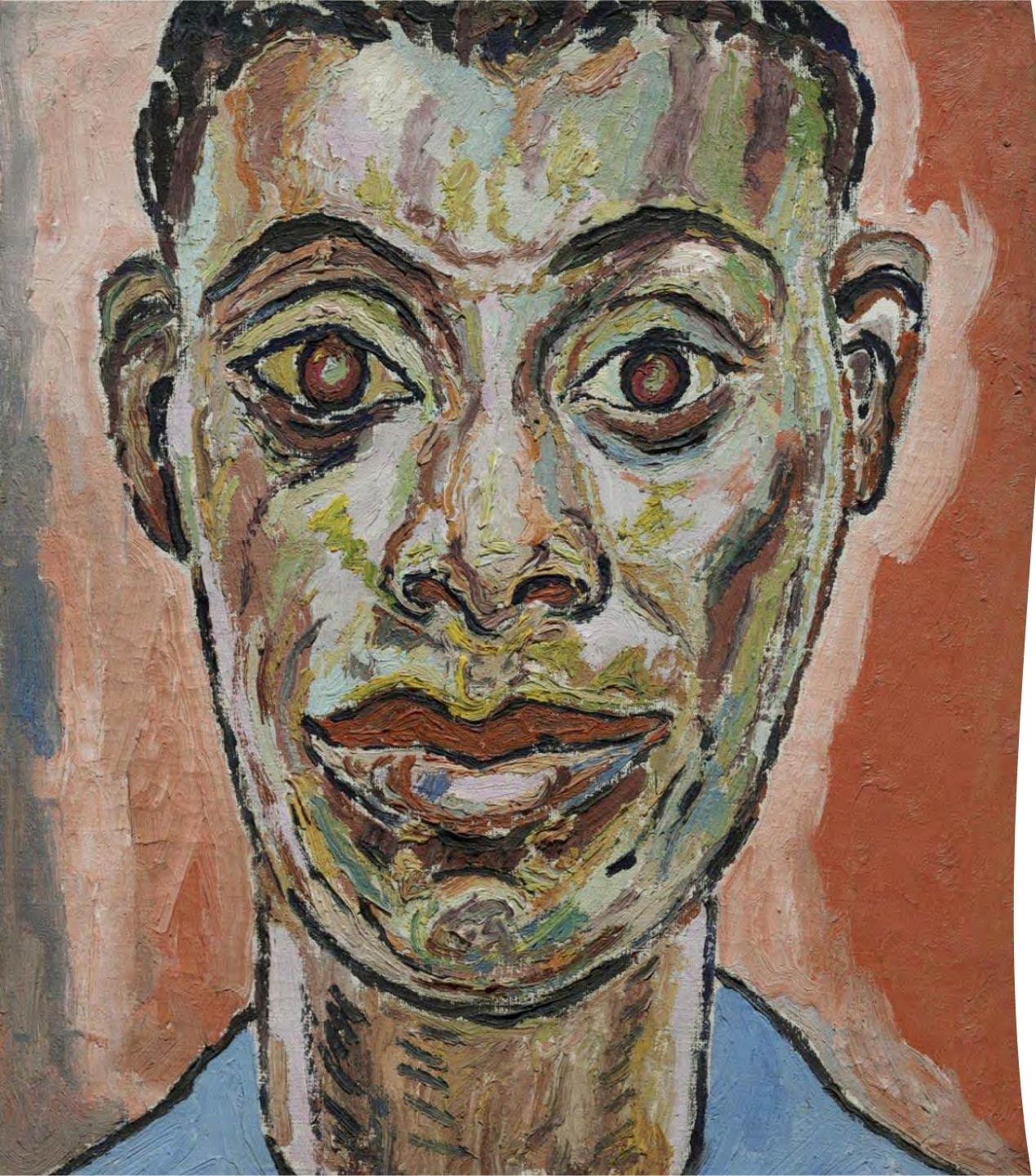
MATTHEW DESMOND

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF EVICTED

Teaching
Resources

[https://endpovertyusa.org
/#teaching-resources](https://endpovertyusa.org/#teaching-resources)





You think your pain and your
heartbreak are unprecedented in the
history of the world, but then you read.

It was books that taught me that the
things that tormented me most were
the very things that connected me with
all the people who were alive, or who
had ever been alive.

- James Baldwin