

## Collection Development

### Annotated List

**Target Audience:** Grades 7 and up; high school boys

Anderson, M. T. (2008). *The astonishing life of Octavian Nothing, traitor to the nation, volume*

*1: The pox party*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press. (**\$10.99**) ISBN: 9780763636791

*2006 National Book Award for Young People's Literature winner.*

From School Library Journal

Grade 9 Up—In this fascinating and eye-opening Revolution-era novel, Octavian, a black youth raised in a Boston household of radical philosophers, is given an excellent classical education. He and his mother, an African princess, are kept isolated on the estate, and only as he grows older does he realize that while he is well dressed and well fed, he is indeed a captive being used by his guardians as part of an experiment to determine the intellectual acuity of Africans. As the fortunes of the Novanglian College of Lucidity change, so do the nature and conduct of their experiments. [...] Readers will have to wait for the second volume to find out the protagonist's fate. The novel is written in 18th-century language from Octavian's point of view and in letters written by a soldier who befriends him. Despite the challenging style, this powerful novel will resonate with contemporary readers. The issues of slavery and human rights, racism, free will, the causes of war, and one person's struggle to define himself are just as relevant today. Anderson's use of factual information to convey the time and place is powerfully done.—*Sharon Rawlins, NJ Library for the Blind and Handicapped, Trenton*  
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*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

Anderson, M. T. (2008). *The astonishing life of Octavian Nothing, traitor to the nation, volume*

*II: The kingdom on the waves*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press. (**\$11.99**)

ISBN: 9780763646264

From School Library Journal

Grade 9 Up—Octavian, the 16-year-old slave whose story began in *The Pox Party* (Candlewick, 2006), continues his search for identity in this brilliant, affecting, and philosophical sequel. Octavian and his tutor escape from Octavian's master to relative safety in Boston where Octavian finds work as a violinist in a military band. After hearing of Lord

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Dunmore's promise of freedom for slaves, he enlists in the Royal Ethiopian Regiment. Following a loss at Norfolk, they then take up quarters aboard British ships, barely fending off starvation and smallpox. Octavian's uncertainty and doubt are tangible throughout. His detailed first-person narration is written in the richly expansive 18th-century prose introduced in volume one. He records the story while reviewing (and revealing to readers) his diary entries from the past year, so that "none of this shall pass from remembrance." He endures abuse, shame, grief, and humiliation, and comes close to despair; however, he is ultimately hopeful that humanity can aspire to more than warring and despoiling. Teens will identify with Octavian's internal tumult, how he experiences events as being acted upon him, and his transition from observer to participant, from boy to man. More than fascinating historical fiction, this is also a thoughtful and timeless examination of the nature of humanity and a critique of how society addresses (or ignores) identity, freedom, and oppression. Anderson's masterful pacing, surprising use of imagery and symbolism, and adeptness at crafting structure make this a powerful reimagining of slavery and the American Revolution dazzle.—*Amy J. Chow, The Brearley School, New York City*

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*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

Brooks, M., & White, C. (2014). *The Harlem Hellfighters*. New York, NY: Broadway. **(\$16.95)**

**ISBN: 9780307464972**

From Booklist Online: [www.booklistonline.com](http://www.booklistonline.com)

Brooks ([World War Z](#), 2006) makes a U-turn from zombies with this fictionalized account of the famous all-black 369th Infantry. The opening scene of a trench bomb sets the stage for the whole book: endless, grimacing faces and buckets of gore, mostly in the form of exploded bodies splattering across the page. This intro also betrays the book's chief concern: simply telling the story of WWI combat, albeit from an unusual point of view. As a result, the plot is fuzzy and the characters suitably enjoyable placeholders. We follow our diverse bunch from enlistment to training to the hell of France, where they fight through inhumane conditions with the utmost valor, and for what? Prejudice and humiliation at every turn. "They would rather see white Germans," says one soldier, "instead of black Americans march in triumph up Fifth Avenue." White's appropriately cluttered art has the horrific shock value of EC Comics classics like *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*, and the whole thing comes off as resolutely Tarantinoesque. The movie version should be along any second now. - [Daniel Kraus](#)

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[School Library Journal](#): **Gr 8 Up**—*The Harlem Hellfighters* is a fictional account of the 369th infantry regiment's deployment to France in World War I. White's illustrations are phenomenal, truly bringing each character and pivotal scene into sharp focus.

Draper, S. M. (2008). *Fire from the rock*. New York, NY: Speak. **(\$12.00)**

**ISBN: 9780142411995**

From Booklist

An honor student, Sylvia Patterson is thrilled when she is chosen as one of the first black students to integrate all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. But the racism in her town is terrifying, and she is not sure she can go through with it. Unlike her older brother, she does not want to be a hero and change the world. Besides, many in her black community are against integration; why not stay with her friends, concentrate on academics, and get to college? With stirring complexity, Draper personalizes the civil rights struggle beyond slogans and politics. There is sometimes too much historical background purposively woven into Sylvia's narrative, including her diary entries. But the surprising turnaround in the plot, as well as the shocking facts, will grab readers and raise the elemental issue: what would I have done? A final note fills in history and provides a list of Web sites. Pair this with Robert Sharenow's [My Mother the Cheerleader](#) (2007), about a white kid whose mother is part of the racist mob. — Hazel Rochman

Magoon, K. (2009). *The rock and the river*. New York, NY: Aladdin. **(\$7.99)**

**ISBN: 9781416978039**

*Coretta Scott King - John Steptoe Award for New Talent*

From School Library Journal

Grade 7 Up—Sam Childs, 13, is growing up in Chicago in 1968. His father is a civil rights activist, and the boy has been involved in peaceful demonstrations with his family. When he and his girlfriend, Maxie, witness the brutal beating of a friend at the hands of the police, his world begins to change dramatically. His 17-year-old brother brings a gun home and hides it in their shared room. Next thing Sam knows, Stick has run away from home and is involved with the Black Panther Party, whose philosophy his dad does not share. The brutality of the beating has wrought a change in Sam as well, and the good works he sees the Panthers doing in his neighborhood make him question his dad's opinion. The characters are well drawn and the complexities of the relationships between Roland Childs and his two sons are moving. The episodes of violence are graphic, but necessary to move the plot forward, and Magoon portrays

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well the tension between the Panthers and the Civil Rights Movement. An author's note provides further historical context. While the image of the Black Panther Party is somewhat idealized, this is an important book about a historical reality that has not been dealt with in juvenile fiction.—*Kristin Anderson, Columbus Metropolitan Library System, OH*  
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*This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

Maley, D. (2015). *Three links of chain*. Oklahoma City, OK: Jublio. (**\$11.95**)

**ISBN: 9780986115806**

From Kids Reads: <http://www.kidsreads.com/reviews/three-links-of-chain>

THREE LINKS OF CHAIN was inspired by the life of Blanche Kelso Bruce, a slave who worked in a print shop and was treated fairly well by his master. Blanche was well-fed, wasn't beaten and had even learned to read but, like all slaves, he longed to be free. His master had always promised to set Blanche free when he died, but when he is unexpectedly killed in the street, his widow reneges on the promise of freedom. Blanche comes to the difficult decision to run away to freedom, as he has no idea what the future will hold for him if he remains a slave.

Blanche's flight is set against the backdrop of "Bleeding Kansas," a territory rife with conflict between abolitionist and pro-slavery factions. Blanche is led to members of the Underground Railroad through rumors, folk stories and campfire songs. He runs into people that are kind and help him with food and shelter, but he is also tracked by slave catchers who exact terrible punishments on those suspected of being abolitionists or of helping runaway slaves.

THREE LINKS OF CHAIN is well-written and well-paced. Author Dennis Maley provides often lyrical descriptions of the events and scenery that compose this novel. The historical background seems to be well-researched, as Maley provides an extensive author's note with more details about the people and events in the story. Blanche's character, due to his high opinion of himself and his way of looking down upon other slaves, is difficult to like, but he becomes a much more likable and sympathetic character as the novel progresses. THREE LINKS OF CHAIN is a welcome addition to books about this time period and topic.

Reviewed by Aimee Rogers on August 17, 2015

Neri, G., & DuBurke, R. (2010). *Yummy: The last days of a Southside shorty*. New York, NY: Lee &

Low Books. (**\$12.99**) ISBN: 9781584302674

From School Library Journal

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Gr 7 Up—In 1994, an incident of Southside Chicago gang-related violence captured national headlines. Eleven-year-old Robert "Yummy" Sandifer shot and killed his 14-year-old neighbor Shavon Dean. Neri's retelling is based on public records as well as personal and media accounts from the period. Framing the story through the eyes and voice of a fictional character, 11-year-old Roger, offers a bittersweet sense of authenticity while upholding an objective point of view. Yummy, so named because of his love of sweets, was the child of parents who were continually in prison. While living legally under the care of a grandmother who was overburdened with the custody of numerous grandchildren, Yummy sought out the closest thing he could find to a family: BDN or Black Disciples Nation. In the aftermath and turmoil of Shavon's tragic death, he went into hiding with assistance from the BDN. Eventually the gang turned on him and arranged for his execution. The author frames the story with this central question: Was Yummy a cold-blooded killer or a victim of his environment? While parts of the message focusing on the consequences of choice become a little heavy-handed, the exploration of "both sides of the story" is unflinchingly offered. In one of the final panels, narrator Roger states, "I don't know which was worse, the way Yummy lived or the way he died." Realistic black-and-white art further intensifies the story's emotion. A significant portion of the panels feature close-up faces. This perspective offers readers an immediacy as well as emotional connection to this tragic story. *Barbara M. Moon, Suffolk Cooperative Library System, Bellport, NY*

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Paulsen, G. (2008). *The legend of Bass Reeves: Being the true and fictional account of the most valiant marshal in the West*. New York, NY: Laurel-Leaf Books.(\$6.99)

**ISBN: 9780553494297**

From Common Sense Media

In this fictionalized biography, Gary Paulsen, one of the all-time great voices (and personalities) of children's literature, is up to several things at once. First, of course, he is telling the story of Reeve's life, or what little is known about it. Second, he is filling in the missing details with an imagination born not only of research, but of having lived many of those details himself, in the course of a wild and wooly life only partially chronicled in his many autobiographical books. Third, the whole story is defending his thesis, expounded in his Foreword and Epilogue, that Reeves was the kind of real-life Western hero that more famous characters, such as the Bills -- Hickok, Cody, and the Kid, as well as Wyatt Earp and Kit Carson --

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only pretended to be. Paulsen is forceful, and more than a touch angry, in his argument, and by the end readers will be convinced that the silence about Reeves in histories of the period is an injustice.

The style is classic Paulsen -- meaty, gritty, and muscular. He doesn't dwell on the rougher aspects of his subject, but he doesn't shy away from them either. Above all, Paulsen is known for telling kids the truth, and not sugarcoating it. While more sensitive children may be bothered, most kids appreciate the directness and honesty, which is why this most prolific of authors (approaching 200 books) is also one of the most successful and highly regarded. THE LEGEND OF BASS REEVES has everything a kid, and adult, could want -- action, adventure, and excitement, all in the service of making known an important, but forgotten, historical figure. <https://www.commonensemedia.org/book-reviews/the-legend-of-bass-reeves-being-the-true-account-of-the-most-valiant-marshal-in-the>

Pelaez, J. F. (2013). *The day is a white tablet*. Salt Lake City, UT: WiDo Publishing. (\$16.95)

**ISBN: 9781937178246**

From Southern Literature Review

Jill Fletcher Pelaez creates a compelling fictional world steeped in lesser-known details of the last days of the Civil War in her novel *The Day is a White Tablet*. The story is told through the eyes of fourteen-year-old Tench Traymore, a black youth charged with the task of caring for his white cousin Lance by Lance's mother. Tench finds food and cooks it for Lance and does his cousin's laundry, enabling him to fight in more comfort than other Confederate soldiers. During battles, the terrified Tench remains hidden.

One fateful day, Tench reluctantly agrees to cook a meal for a host of generals, including Pickett and Fitz Lee. In Tench's absence, Lance is killed in a battle the oblivious generals don't even know is occurring. Thus begins Tench's journey to find his family and inform them of his cousin's death. As Tench confronts a multitude of obstacles from Federal soldiers to thugs and pirates, he undertakes an inner journey to conquer his fear and become an adult. A theme woven throughout the novel is that overcoming difficulties helps humans grow and discover strengths they didn't know they had. Green eyes, an outward sign of Tench's mixed heritage, complicate his journey.

The white matriarch of the Traymore family, Miss Lottie, is a strong, loveable character who tells both boys bedtime stories and passes along her love of the land. "Everything is a thing apart, yet a part of the whole," she tells them. It is a lesson not only of the natural world, but

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the underlying concept of the United States. The tension between parts and the unified whole helped fuel the Civil War and still inflames political arguments today. [...]

The author engages all the reader's senses without flinching from unpleasantness. She describes what remains of a dead man's face as "a bloody mash of clay." She paints the texture of moisture so well you know exactly how "a tent of dark clouds and light drizzle" looked and how "torrents of rain" felt when they "slapped" Tench's face.

This classic coming-of-age novel is well-plotted with plenty of twists and turns and evil villains for Tench to confront. Pelaez clearly did extensive research on the escape of Captain Wood and General Breckinridge to bring their perilous journey through Florida and across the Caribbean to life through the eyes of a fictional youth.

At the story's end, you can't help but hope the courageous young Tench will make his dreams come true. – Donna Meredith Southern Literary Review

<http://southernlitreview.com/reviews/the-day-is-a-white-tablet-by-jill-fletcher-pelaez.htm>

### Extra Book for Consideration

Woodson, J. (2016). *Summer games*. Colorado Springs, CO: CreateSpace Independent

Publishing Platform.(\$15.00) ISBN: 9781530257263

Amazon.com Customer Review:

I've followed Woodson's work for several years now, ever since coming across his essential "To Make a New Race" while researching a book of my own. I've never been disappointed with his work, and this novel is no exception. "Summer Games" is an engaging, hilarious road novel in a quasi-picaresque style that follows the exploits of four African American characters (dressed as Ethiopian princes, no less!) as they travel cross-country to the Summer Olympics. As another reviewer points out, the sentences here are exquisitely crafted, although they never get in the way of the flow of the narrative. The novel examines some of the ideas that Woodson has discussed in his non-fiction works, namely, how esoteric ideas influenced artists, writers and the intelligentsia in the early decades of the 20th century, as well as questions of race, identity and the elusive, possibly illusory, and certainly always changing, human condition. The characters often invoke well-known figures from the early and mid 20th century, although they are well-drawn enough to take on their own identities. The humor is sharp, and often reminded me of Paul Bowles at his best and most astute. Woodson's humor constantly makes biting observations about our prejudices and behavior, and so he has (and we readers have) a lot of fun with the way characters interact with each other. Woodson's novel is a comic novel that belongs to a great tradition of comic novels, from Twain

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to Schuyler to Heller. Not many writers write them anymore, and when they do, not many writers get it right. Woodson gets it right, again.

The novel would be challenging, but appropriate for high school students. There isn't any foul language, as far as I can recall. There are situations that are perhaps a little heavy for younger students (mention of the fact that African Americans were often in danger of lynching, etc..) but these should be okay for high school students. – Whit Frazier

### Selection Process

When selecting the above nine titles for consideration the principal objective was to locate titles that could enrich students understanding of African American experiences through historical fiction novels. It was also important to maintain a diverse set of themes, topics, and genres of literature that not only incurred student interest but held value within the schools Catholic teachings. Additionally, I did not just look for standard novels but graphic novels as well, which are a big hit since they were introduced on campus. Overall, the selection process was about finding novels I thought students would enjoy while hopefully gaining some understanding of what it might have been like to live as an African American during such times as the Civil War or the Civil Rights Movement.

While I started with various Google, Goodreads, and Amazon searches for lists of African American historical fictions, it became evident that finding nine titles would not be that easy, especially when they had to be appropriate for high school level students. However, I did find one list that was written specifically for my target audience from [Jefferson-Madison Regional Library](#) and it became my primary starting point with four titles making the final cut. From there I was able to find additional books by looking at lists from Goodreads or Amazon. In total I researched close to 40, or more, titles trying to procure a diverse set of nine. To



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narrow down to the nine novels in this collection, I did a variety of things including looking at price and subject, but the most important was reading literary reviews from School Library Journal, Booklist, and Southern Literature Review. Through these sites, I was able to determine if I felt the novels were high school appropriate as well as thought provoking. While I do wish I could have found a few more options outside of the themes of the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, I am very pleased with the final selection.

I do have a tenth book listed, it is not part of the nine because there are no literary reviews for it just yet as it was published March 2016. I kept it as part of the collection development because I strongly believe it could be a great addition to the collection. I used an Amazon Customer review instead of a literary one but I did speak, through comments, with this individual to see if it would work for the target audiences. This would be a book worth looking at even if it is yet to be reviewed by School Library Journal or Booklist.

During this process I also found three non fiction novels to have considered at a later date.

### **Three Nonfiction Titles to Consider at a later date:**

[I See the Promised Land: A Life of Martin Luther King Jr](#)

[The Port of Chicago 50: Disaster, Mutiny, & The Fight for Civil Rights](#)

[Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom: My Story of the Selma Voting Rights March](#)