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Description of the Novels

To help you choose the books most appropriate for your classroom, here is a thumbnail sketch of each novel. The reading levels are rated easy, medium, or challenging.

Ellen Foster, by Kaye Gibbons

Number of pages: 126

Cultural focus: Rural South

Reading level: Easy–medium

Summary: A young girl comes to terms with her miserable childhood by choosing a foster mother for herself and making amends with a childhood friend.

Central themes: The power of hope; forgiveness

Reservation Blues, by Sherman Alexie

Number of pages: 306

Cultural focus: Native American

Reading level: Medium–challenging, with challenging content

Summary: A group of Spokane Indians form a rock-blues band, an experience that forces them to examine their lives and culture.

Central themes: The merging of past and present; the burdens of heritage; the magic of music

Shizuko's Daughter, by Kyoko Mori

Number of pages: 208

Cultural focus: Japanese

Reading level: Medium

Summary: After her mother's suicide, a young girl is left with her indifferent father and unkind stepmother.

Central themes: Grief; the power of art; independence

The House on Mango Street, by Sandra Cisneros

Number of pages: 100

Cultural focus: Mexican American (Chicago)

Reading level: Easy

Summary: Through a series of vignettes, Esperanza describes her family, her colorful neighborhood, and her decision to become a writer.

Central themes: Cultural loyalty; the power of language

Somewhere in the Darkness, by Walter Dean Myers

Number of pages: 168

Cultural focus: African American

Reading level: Easy

Summary: 15-year-old Jimmy Little must come to terms with the ex-convict father who abandoned him long ago.

Central themes: Father-son relationships; male identity

Make Lemonade, by Virginia Euwer Wolff

Number of pages: 200

Central focus: Inner-city poor

Reading level: Medium (written in free verse)

Summary: When 14-year-old LaVaughn takes a babysitting job for Jolly, a 17-year-old single mother, the two girls discover how much they can teach each other.

Central themes: Independence; self-respect; maternal love

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, by Mildred D. Taylor

Number of pages: 276

Cultural focus: African American (1930's)

Reading level: Medium

Summary: The Logan family must fight for their land and their self-respect in a climate of virulent racism in pre-Civil Rights Mississippi.

Central themes: The dangers of racism; self-respect; family loyalty

MAUS: A Survivor's Tale, Volumes I and II, by Art Spiegelman

Number of pages: 150 (Vol. I) and 135 (Vol. II)

Cultural focus: Jewish

Reading level: Easy (comic-book form), with challenging content

Summary: By recording his father's memories of the Holocaust, a son confronts his complicated relationship with his father and his heritage.

Central themes: Father-son relationships; the horror of the Holocaust; the human capacity for good and evil

The Long Season of Rain, by Helen Kim

Number of pages: 273

Cultural focus: Korean

Reading level: Easy

Summary: When an orphaned boy comes to live with her family, Junehee realizes that the demands placed upon Korean women can destroy their lives.

Central themes: Mother-daughter relationships; female identity; the burdens of culture and tradition

Jesse, by Gary Soto

Number of pages: 166

Cultural focus: Mexican American (California)

Reading level: Easy

Summary: Burdened by strong family ties, the Vietnam War, and a fear of independence, 17-year-old Jesse struggles toward adulthood.

Central themes: Sibling love; independence; grief

Allegra Maud Goldman, by Edith Konecky

Number of pages: 174

Cultural focus: Jewish

Reading level: Medium

Summary: Allegra comes of age as a woman and a writer in a wealthy Jewish household in Brooklyn in the 1930's.

Central themes: The limitations of religion; female identity; the power of language

The Dreams of Mairhe Mehan, by Jennifer Armstrong

Number of pages: 119

Cultural focus: Irish-American immigrants (mid-1800's)

Reading level: Medium–challenging

Summary: A young girl in an Irish slum struggles to come to grips with the impact of the Civil War on her family.

Central themes: Sibling love; family loyalty; patriotism

