

2025
Read for

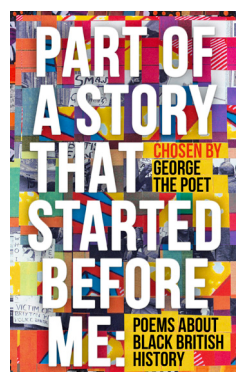
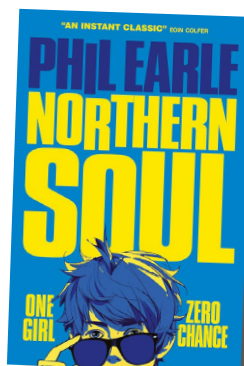
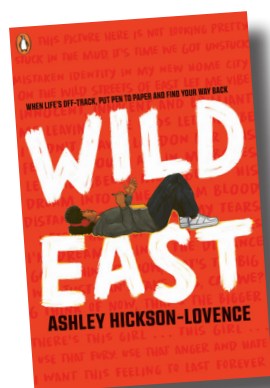
EMPATHY



Collection

Jump into
someone
else's story

A guide to
empathy-building
books for young people
aged 12-16+



30 titles selected by experts

Empathy
Lab

Jump into someone else's story

EmpathyLab's mission is to raise an empathy-educated generation, inspired to build a better world for everyone

What is empathy and why is it important?

Empathy is our ability to experience and understand someone else's feelings. In this increasingly divided world, and in the wake of the pandemic, children need this crucial life skill in order to thrive. Empathy improves their well-being, active citizenship and reading for pleasure. It has the power to create stronger, kinder communities.

Empathy and reading

Research shows that empathy is a learnable skill, and that books play a key role in developing it. When children identify with book characters, they learn to see things from other people's points of view. As they read, they are building their empathy skills, including **perspective-taking**, **listening**, **naming** and **sharing emotions** and **social action**.

Using the Read for Empathy books

An expert panel has selected these forty brilliant books for children aged 3–11. They have been specifically chosen for their power to boost empathy skills and an understanding of other people's feelings and life experiences. We would love you to use them to inspire children to turn their feelings of empathy into action – making a difference in their homes, schools and communities.

What you can do next

Our programmes, including the **Empathy Day Festival** in June and **Empathy Action Month** in November provide powerful focal points for using the books all year round to ensure *every* day is an empathy day (see page 9).

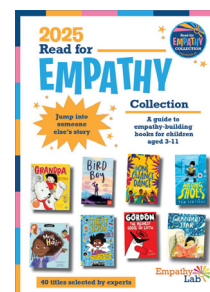
Join our mission to reach and benefit ONE MILLION children a year by 2026!

How does empathy work?

Empathy is made up of three elements.



A Read for Empathy collection guide for 3-11-year-olds is also available at www.empathylab.uk/RFE



'If you are interested in how you can foster children's well-being and resilience, there is good evidence that empathy should be a key priority. EmpathyLab's strategy of integrating work on empathy with literacy and reading for pleasure is efficient, and hugely potent.'

Professor Robin Banerjee, University of Sussex, Psychology Department



Novels

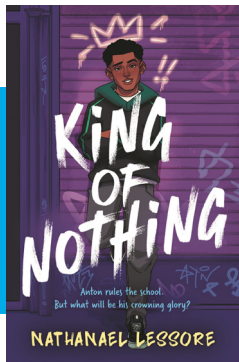
This * symbol indicates titles that are more suitable for older readers and books with themes that may need to be introduced with caution



Glasgow Boys*

Margaret McDonald

A brilliant exploration of two boys in very difficult circumstances and the emerging relationship that develops between them. It's poignant and life-affirming. Powerfully written, it challenges stereotypes and provides insight into the resilience of the two boys, Finlay and Banjo. **Faber**



King of Nothing

Nathanael Lessor

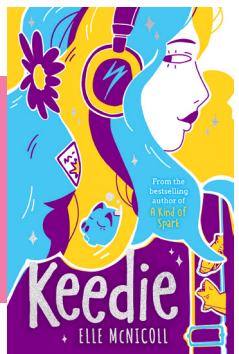
A transformation story. Anton is a feared gang member, reluctantly dragged into another way of life by his determined mother. A positive story about the dangers of toxic masculinity, tribalism, redemption and having the courage to be yourself. **Hot Key Books**



Sh!t Bag*

Xena Knox

Freya is angry! She has bowel disease and an ileostomy bag. She is sent to 'Poo Camp' to meet young people with similar experiences. Her development at the camp, building empathy for others and her frank conversations, makes this a moving and sensitive read. **Hodder**



Keedie

Elle McNicoll

Keedie Darrow is driven by her fierce passion for justice. She is always ready to defend those who are vulnerable, but it can lead her into trouble. A hugely engaging character, even as she battles her own issues. A wonderful novel that challenges misconceptions around neurodivergence. **Knights Of**



Little Bang*

Kelly McCaughrain

Lots to empathise with in this story of teenage pregnancy, set in Northern Ireland around the time of the 2017 abortion bill. Sid and Mel's predicament is exquisitely depicted and the debate examined compassionately. Leaves the reader with much to ponder. **Walker**



Illustration from *Keedie* © Kay Wilson, 2024

A Sudden Storm

Bali Rai

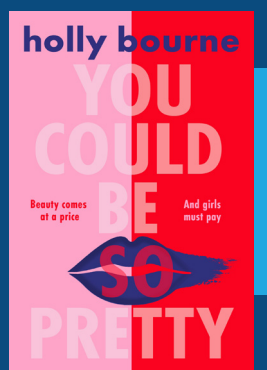
On Arjan's sixteenth birthday, he is horrifically attacked by a racist gang. This powerful story allows us to step into the lives of a family whose lives are ruined by something so senseless as hating someone for the colour of their skin. **Barrington Stoke**



You Could Be So Pretty*

Holly Bourne

An arresting novel set in a dystopian world scarily like our own, where girls work hard to become 'Pretty', denying themselves food, enduring painful procedures and fearing becoming 'Objectionables'. This book challenges young people to understand gender roles, misogyny and inequality. **Usborne**



The Boy in the Suit

James Fox

Readers experience the life of Solo, who, with his mum, gatecrashes funerals to find food. Poverty and mental health issues are exposed in this story, alongside the non-judgmental compassion of those who make life better for vulnerable people. **Scholastic**



Novels



Only This Beautiful Moment*

Abdi Nazemian

Three generations of a family having to hide their true identities in cultures that don't accept them. An entrancing, complex novel about LGBTQIA+ acceptance, but also of a family trying to connect and come to terms with its own history.
Little Tiger



Sister Spirit

Efua Traoré

Tara loves her adoptive family but is tormented by a past she doesn't understand. She visits Nigeria to understand her family secrets. A magical story where empathy enables Tara to find answers and recognise that others have identities that are denied by society.
Zephyr



The Girl Who Couldn't Lie

Radhika Sanghani

A magical story about Priya and an exploration of truth. Is honesty always the best policy or are white lies sometimes kinder? Readers must decide as they enjoy this funny, sometimes painful story about how empathetic communication builds and maintains relationships.
Orchard

The Fights That Make Us

Sarah Hagger-Holt

An explosively joyful novel. Jesse (in 2023) and Lisa (in 1988) act to challenge the legislation and prejudice around LGBTQ+ rights. Their stories explore the painful human impact of discrimination that forces people to hide their true selves.
Usborne



The 10 p.m. Question

Kate De Goldi

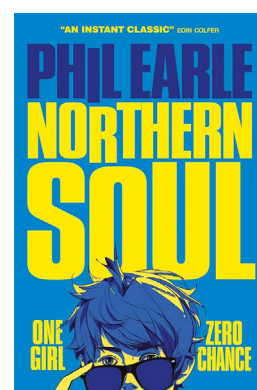
A beautifully written and funny story about anxiety. Wonderful characterisation helps us connect deeply with twelve-year-old Frankie's overwhelming worries. Thank goodness for his warm and caring family who help him.
Old Barn Books



Northern Soul

Phil Earle

Awkward Marv is desperate to meet Carly, the new girl at school. Readers will recognise and feel empathy as his hapless attempts end in comical failure. We believe in him as his confidence grows and he realises that life is full of unexpected surprises.
Barrington Stoke

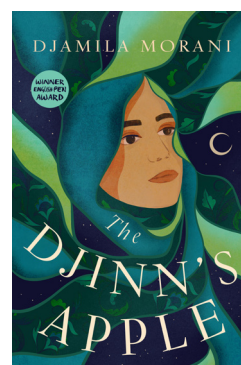


The Djinn's Apple

Djamila Morani

Translated by Sawad Hussain

Baghdad during the Abbasid Empire. Nardeen escapes when her family are murdered. She battles twin emotions of revenge and love. Readers connect with Nardeen, rooting for her to find a way to succeed in a world of powerful men.
Neem Tree



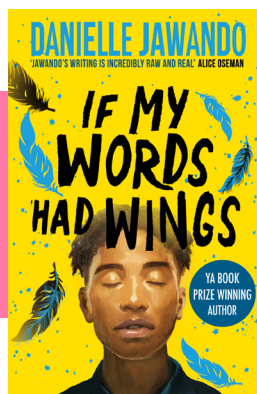
Running Away For Beginners

Mark Illis

This novel opens as Jasper receives a cancer diagnosis. He deals with his fear by running away with friends. As he has time to reflect, connections deepen. And while life is still scary, we know that Jasper has the resilience to face what is to come.
Scholastic



Novels



If My Words Had Wings

Danielle Jawando

Inspired by a visiting poet, Tyrell is determined to build a new life through spoken word when he leaves a young offenders' institution. But society sees him as a criminal. A sad indictment of the way we negatively attach labels to young people, that may stick forever.

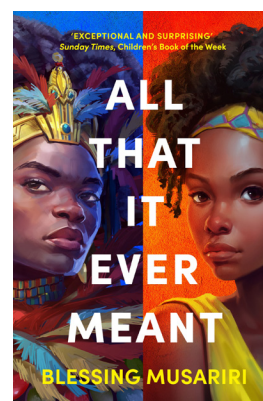
Simon & Schuster

All That It Ever Meant

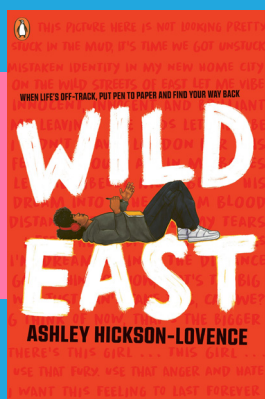
Blessing Musariri

A beautifully crafted story of family, love and loss. Mati is travelling across Zimbabwe with her father and siblings. We experience the disconnection of a family who are bereaved and angry, but who must work through their emotions in order to heal.

Zephyr



Verse novels & poetry



Wild East

Ashley Hickson-Lovence

Ronny is a Black teenager traumatised by violence, but making a new life in Norwich. Readers will hold their breath for Ronny and rejoice as he finds a talent that helps him reach towards a positive future. An unputdownable verse novel, with expertly crafted characterisation.

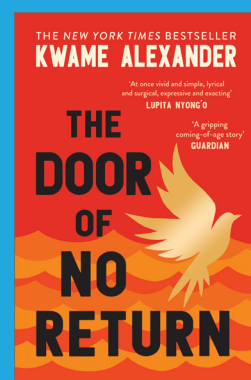
Penguin

The Door of No Return

Kwame Alexander

A breathtaking verse novel about an African boy captured and forced into bondage. We become so immersed in Kofi's story that we feel every bit of his pain and yearning. Readers will viscerally experience human cruelty but also resilience and hope.

Andersen



Where the Heart Should Be

Sarah Crossan

An affecting portrayal of the Irish famine. Power and class are explored in this historical verse novel, documenting the brutality of the rich oppressing the poor. A spare quality to the writing makes the emotional impact all the more powerful and intense.

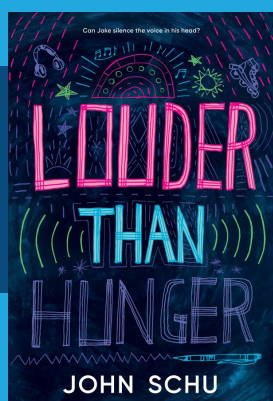
Bloomsbury

Part of the Story That Started Before Me: Poems About Black British History

Chosen by George the Poet

An anthology of poems highlighting the history of Black people in Britain from the Romans onwards. Grows our understanding of Britain as a historically multicultural society where many cultures have contributed skills and knowledge, yet have been oppressed and persecuted.

Penguin



Louder Than Hunger*

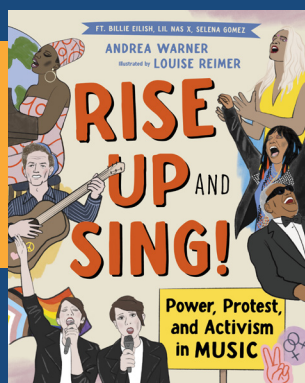
John Schu

Jake battles anorexia and depression and is dominated by the voice telling him not to eat. Reflecting the personal experience of the author, this is a beautifully written verse novel depicting male vulnerability and showing that recovery is possible.

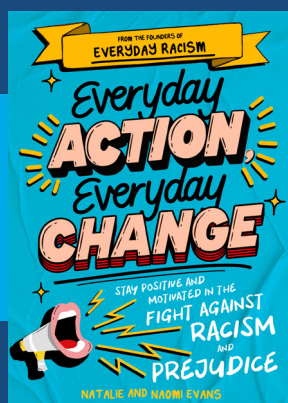
Walker



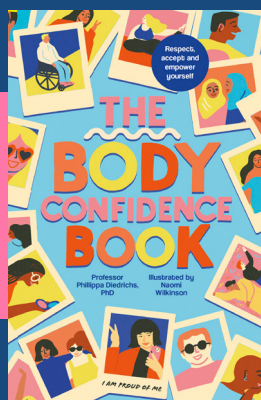
Non-fiction



Rise Up and Sing!: Power, Protest, and Activism in Music
Andrea Warner
 Illustrated by Louise Reimer
 Highlighting how empathetic arts can provoke change, this is a fascinating celebration of leading musicians including Rhianna, Alicia Keys and Bob Marley, who have used music as protest in areas of activism including the climate emergency and disability rights.
 Greystone Kids



Everyday Action, Everyday Change
Natalie and Naomi Evans
 An accessible, warm book that explores the damaging impact of racism and prejudice on individuals and society. Offers practical tips, honest stories and promotes empathy and understanding. The authors believe that one of the most important words on the planet is empathy.
 Wren and Rook



The Body Confidence Book
Professor Philippa Diedrichs PhD, illustrated by Naomi Wilkinson
 An empowering book challenging societal norms around body image and appearance. Offers advice on talking respectfully to others, appearance and activism in the wider community. A great resource for young people to support friends and build their own self-confidence.
 Frances Lincoln



Graphic novels

Homebody*

Theo Parish

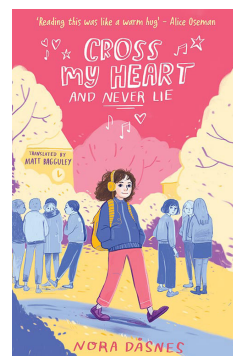
An autobiographical graphic novel about growing up confused and desperate for understanding. Theo gently airs uncertainty around gender and identity, seeking the one that feels most like 'home'. This book is non-judgemental and full of compassion and empathy.
 Macmillan



Cross My Heart and Never Lie

Nora Dâsnes

Friendship is tough. Tuva's friends are meeting boys, but she still wants to play in the woods. A graphic novel that will reassure young people that everyone grows up at different rates, that relationships change and that there is more than one way to be a girl!
 Farshore



Tosh's Island

Linda Sargent, Joe Brady & Leo Marcell

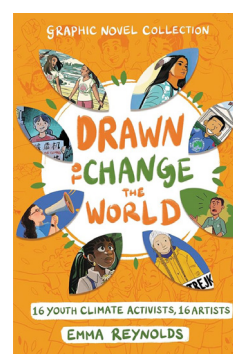
Based on Linda Sargent's lived experience. Tosh loves growing up on a farm, but life changes dramatically when she is diagnosed with Still's disease. Depicting the rollercoaster of emotions Tosh goes through, there are no solutions, but the story ends with optimism for Tosh's future.
 David Fickling



Drawn to Change the World

16 Youth Climate Activists, Curated by Emma Reynolds Illustrated by 16 Artists

Empathy for the environment and for young people living through ongoing climate change is the theme of this title, curated by Emma Reynolds. Shines a spotlight on the stories of sixteen youth climate activists to inspire young people to become active changemakers.
 Harper Alley



TOP TIPS on reading for empathy

- 1. Diverse stories** share books that allow children to see their own life experiences reflected, but also introduce them to books set in other countries and with characters of different races, religions and experiences. Inspire them to imagine life for people in different situations from their own.
- 2. Talk about characters** focus on the characters and their feelings, more than the plot. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers! Wonder together about what the characters are thinking or feeling and what they might do next.
- 3. Help recognise feelings** use lots of different emotion words when discussing stories. This will help children understand people's feelings and why they behave in certain ways. Our emotion maps from top illustrators are a great resource:
www.empathylab.uk/Rfe-illustrators-gallery
- 4. Listen 100%** listening is a crucial part of empathy. Listen carefully as children explore what they feel about characters. Use our listening resources:
www.empathylab.uk/the-listening-switch
- 5. Don't forget the pictures** illustrations are especially good for 'reading' other people – what do the pictures tell us about how the character feels?
- 6. Put empathy into action** could a book help inspire children to take action to help others? Find a range of rich social action resources here:
www.empathylab.uk/empathy-action-month

The power of picture books for all ages

Picture books play an important empathy-building role for all ages. Try using these pairs of books to explore similar themes with different perspectives. Picture books selected from our Read for Empathy collection for 3–11s.



Find out how to **order the books** in this guide on page 10

What we offer schools, libraries and families

Use our year-round programmes, resources, training, booklists and national events to inspire families and young people to build empathy awareness, skills and action.



February
70 expertly-chosen books to build empathy

November

Focus on putting empathy into action



June

EMPATHY
DAY
2 – 12 June 2025
FESTIVAL



A ten-day festival to celebrate and grow empathy. Empathy Day on 12 June

Schools' training programme to build an empathy ethos into your school



Training for those living and working with young people – and businesses



SAVE THE DATE!

Major conference 27 November 2025
The latest empathy research
and how to use it to benefit young people

Find out more about our conference, programmes and training at www.empathylab.uk or email info@empathylab.uk



The inaugural Empathy Day Festival 2-12 June 2025

Take part in our ten-day festival to JUMP INTO SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY. Inspiring activity menu: **daily author/illustrator inspiration sessions**, updated **Empathy Challenge**, **CPD webinars** with key organisations, family weekend in **bookshops and libraries**, **nationwide assembly** with Children's Laureate, **Frank Cottrell-Boyce** plus two Welsh assemblies.

- Inspire children and young people to become **Empathy Activists** by learning what empathy is, developing their empathy skills and putting empathy into action
- Discover the **unique power of books** to develop real-life empathy
- Get involved *however* you want and *whenever* you want – use our **flexible framework** to inspire widespread **community participation**
- Showcase the work of the children and young people in your setting



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

EMPATHY CHALLENGE

Use these nine creative activities to help develop key empathy skills in your setting in the run up to/on Empathy Day

READ

Empathy Bookshelf

Which books deserve a space on our empathy bookshelves? Join in a mass sharing of ideas. Share photos/videos

NEW

Empathy Characters

Empathising with characters is powerful. In pairs/groups, use our emotions guide to consider a character's feelings. What would you like to say to them?

NEW

Empathy Artists

Use our 500-word Empathy Shorts to spark creative work to imagine someone else's life experiences. Creative writing, poetry, artwork, drama...

CONNECT

Empathy Chat

Get to know someone better by having a good chat. Use our prompts to ease into a rich conversation

NEW

Empathy Reflections

People love feeling truly understood. Use our five point guide to practice key empathy skills - listening and reflecting back what you've heard

NEW

Empathy Emotions Map

Use leading illustrator's examples to make individual or group emotions maps, tracking changing feelings across a day. Great way to understand and share feelings

ACT

Empathy Superpower Glasses

Practice seeing through others' eyes. Decorate and don our superpower glasses, designed by a leading illustrator

NEW

Empathy Post

Use our illustrated cards to send a message of empathy to someone you know, maybe include an empathy reading recommendation just for them

Empathy Resolution

Become an empathy activist! Make a resolution to put empathy into action in your home or community. Use our special bunting!

Register for your FREE resources

Empathy Day toolkits released 20 March 2025, full of ideas and resources to get involved

<https://www.surveyhero.com/c/EmpathyDayFestival2025>

From our expert judges

'It is such a difficult world to navigate for a child or young person...this collection will help them achieve that and they will find something that resonates.'

Dawn Woods, School Library Association

'The books in this stunning collection will help us all to create stronger, more compassionate and kinder communities where everyone can flourish.'

Kevin Cobane, University of Birmingham

'When I look at what's happening around the world and in the UK, I'm not sure we've ever needed a collection of books like this more than we currently do.'

Graham Fairweather, The High School of Glasgow

'In this collection we're talking about emotional struggles, race, refugees, depression, loneliness, family issues. The authors bring those experiences and write about them. That's what makes it so important. There is something for every child, young person or adult.'

Sarah Smith, Brent Libraries

How to order the books in this guide

- Find your **local independent bookshop**
www.booksellers.org.uk
- Order online via **EmpathyLab's Bookshop.org** page
uk.bookshop.org/shop/empathy-lab
- Contact your **usual book supplier**
- Borrow the books from your **local library**



**Help us build a more
empathetic society!**

Encourage more people to take part in the Empathy Day Festival. Alert **at least ONE** more person about our work by asking them to sign up to our newsletter (below)

**Stay up-to-date with all things EmpathyLab
Be the first to hear about events and training
by signing up to our mailing list**

www.empathylab.uk

