



ab



Reading and Empathy

Professor Sarah McGeown
Literacy Lab
University of Edinburgh



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Sarah Mears MBE
EmpathyLab
Libraries Connected



Reading and Empathy

- What is empathy?
- Reading and empathy
- Young people's reflections on reading and empathy
- Provision and practice to nurture empathy: Empathy Lab



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Empathy

Cognitive empathy

The ability to understand others' perspectives, infer cognitive/emotional states

Affective empathy

The sharing of others' emotional responses and experiences

Behavioural empathy

Behaviours/actions resulting from internal experience of cognitive and/or affective empathy

Reading and Empathy

- Fiction books can reflect the social world we live in (Oatley, 2016).
- Compared to other forms of narrative (e.g., TV, film), books offer greater opportunities for insight into inner worlds and opportunities for personal reflection.

Previous research

- Significant correlation between social cognition and fiction reading (Mar et al., 2006; 2009).
- Fiction reading can support empathy not only due to what is read, but how one reads (Barnes, 2018).

Young People: Reading and Empathy

Aim: To expand understanding of the relationship between reading and empathy, drawing on young people's perspectives and experiences.

Individual interviews with...

37 adolescents

27 female, aged 12-14.

Self-described avid readers of fiction
(10+ fiction books a year).

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/lit.70006>



Original Article | [Open Access](#) | [CC](#) [i](#)

Reading and Empathy: Qualitative insights into adolescents' experiences with fiction books

[Elena Santi](#) [✉](#) [Katie Cebula](#) [Sarah McGeown](#)

First published: 16 June 2025 | <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.70006> | [VIEW METRICS](#)

Funding information: This is an unfunded research project.

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Abstract

Fiction books offer opportunities for readers to gain insight into fictional characters' perspectives, lives, and experiences, and in doing so, have the potential to support their empathy. This article provides novel insights from semi-structured interviews with 37 (27 female, 10 male, aged 12–14 years) regular readers of fiction from two high schools in Scotland. A data-driven inductive thematic analysis approach illustrated the cognitive and affective ways in which adolescents empathise with fictional characters; how feelings of empathy can transfer beyond fiction to real-life others; how feelings of empathy can personally enrich readers and support their social relationships; and how book content and writing style can facilitate readers' empathy. However, while many adolescent readers shared examples of how reading had supported their empathy, others did not,

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Empathising with fictional characters

Transference beyond fiction: Empathising with real-life others

Personal enrichment and potential to support social relationships

Facilitating empathy: Transportation into the fictional world

Empathising with fictional characters

Cognitive empathy

'It's interesting, I find, to figure out people's emotions and especially, like, in books [...] and it's fun and interesting to get the emotions that people are thinking and kinda not feel them with them per se, but just, like, understand them. And, like, it's almost like giving them a casual nod, you know, it's like.... 'Yeah, I understand this''

'It's just sometimes in books you get more about what a person might feel like... when you read it you can understand more about what's going inside his or her head.'

Empathising with fictional characters

Cognitive empathy

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Affective empathy

'Whenever the character feels something, you kind of feel it as well. Like, if something really embarrassing happens to a character, like, say they fall over in front of everyone, you feel embarrassed, even though it's not you falling over'

'Some books, I just feel like really close to the characters, like, I feel emotions for them. [...] in some books, when something sad happens, it sometimes makes me sad because, like, they're having a hard time. And if they're happy, they kinda make me happy.'

Transference beyond fiction: Empathising with real-life others

Known others

'My friend [...] his grandma died. And when I was reading about Batman, it made me realise how much, how sad he must have been, and then I realised that it's important for other people to try find out what other people's lives are like to make sure they feel better and not go through a lonely phase'

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Unknown others

'I sometimes read fact fictions about people with depression, and they really made me understand about what depression and social anxiety was like...and also self-harm and things like that...and I guess it also made me think about why sometimes people don't stand up to bullies and things like that, because in some books, because [they] just can't do that.'

Personal enrichment and potential to support social relationships

Personal enrichment

‘When I used to talk to people, I would definitely just think about, like, what I'm saying, why I'm saying it, and I wouldn't really listen to what they're saying. Definitely, with books it's been more helpful because I understand what they're saying and I understand a bit about how they're feeling because in these books you have to relate to how people are feeling and the emotions they're feeling. And it's definitely helped a lot.’

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Social relationships

‘It kind of helped me understand people because, like, I speak without thinking most of the time and, like, it can sometimes hurt people's feelings and I don't know why, I didn't know why before, but now it [reading fiction] started like helping me realise: ‘Oh, other people don't like, no, this is like OK for me but not really OK for them and stuff’. Cause I don't, I still don't really get other people's feelings but it's getting better.’

Facilitating empathy: Transportation into the fictional world

Story events, content and quality writing

‘Usually I’m reading books that aren’t in first person, but when they’re in first person, you’re really, like, inside their brain. So you, yeah, you share all their feelings.’

‘the characters were also very well written as you can really empathise with them and relate to what they’re going through with dealing with school as well.’

‘I think really does take you in with, like, the vocabulary they use and read this, like, make you feel like you’re there, like, being in those situations.’

Reading and Empathy?

- Only 16/37 gave examples of how reading had supported their empathy
- In their volitional reading practices, young people read for different reasons (Currie et al., 2025; 2026; Wilkinson et al., 2020; Webber et al., 2024; 2025).
- School-based practices to foster teenage empathy (Chisholm et al., 2017; Schrijvers et al., 2019).





Empathy
Lab

The main logo consists of the word "Empathy" in a large, orange, sans-serif font. Below it, the word "Lab" is written in a large, blue, sans-serif font. To the right of the text is a large, colorful sunburst graphic with rays in shades of orange, yellow, green, and blue, all radiating from a central blue dot.

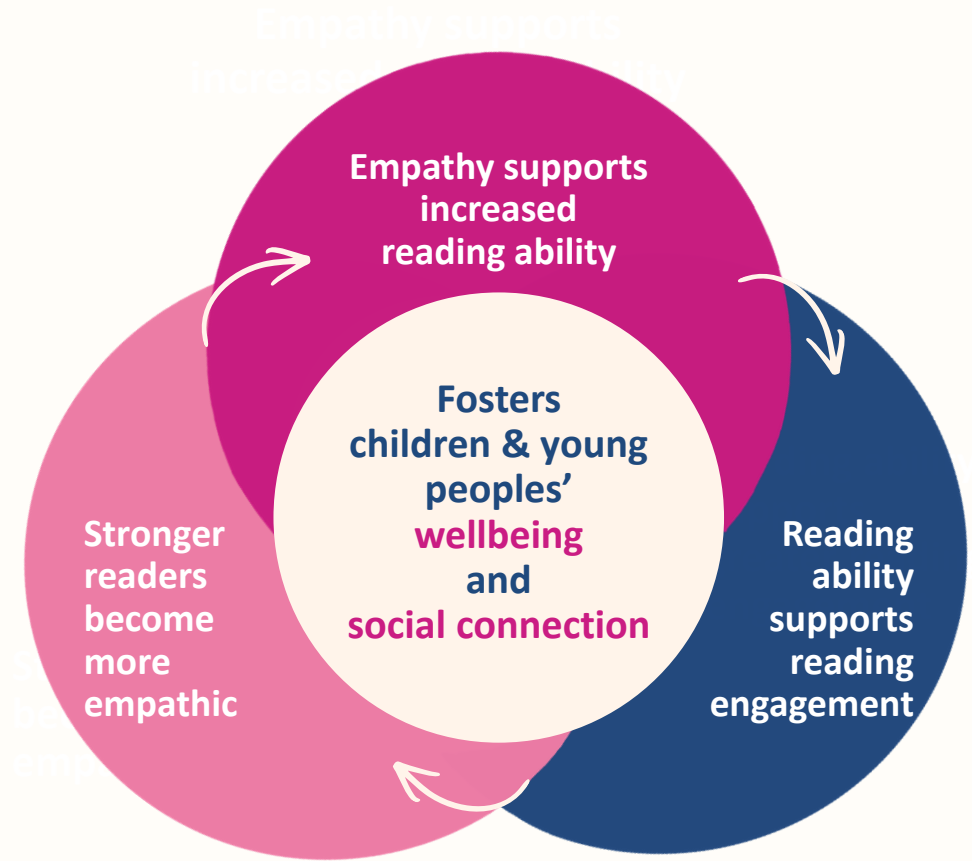
KEY FINDINGS

Reading Feelings research

November 2025, University of Sussex

"Empathy and reading ability grow together over time"

"Children who are better at understanding others' emotions become stronger readers"



Boosting empathy through reading is not just about practising a skill; it is also about providing children with meaningful, emotionally rich experiences with stories and supporting them in thinking about feelings, relationships and human behaviour

Dr Persefoni Tzanaki: University of Sussex

EMPATHY DAY

4 - 11 June 2026

FESTIVAL

Register now!

4 - 11 June

JUMP

into someone
else's story



Impact across communities

“[As] a school serving a community with high levels of deprivation and a significant number of pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL)... The Empathy Festival helps us build a school where every child feels seen, valued and understood”

Charlton Primary School

“Participating in the Festival strengthens the reading culture within the school. It encourages students to see books not just as academic tools but as gateways to connection and understanding”

Woolmer Hill Secondary School

“Being part of the Empathy Day Festival is truly heart warming – it reminds us that we’re all working together to build a more compassionate society”

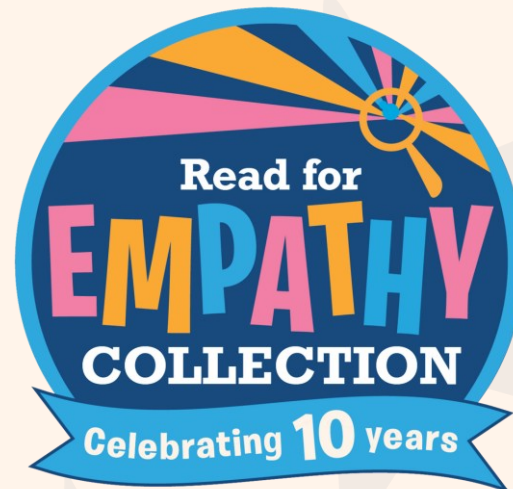
Tameside Library

Read for

2026

EMPATHY

collection



2026 collection guides

2026 Read for EMPATHY Collection
A guide to empathy-building books for children aged 3-7

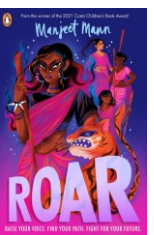
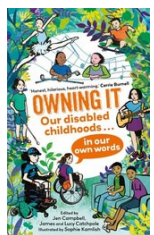
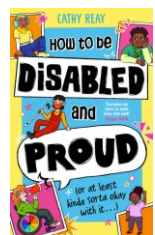
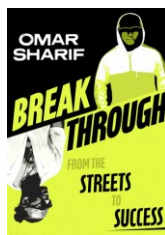
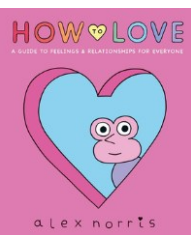
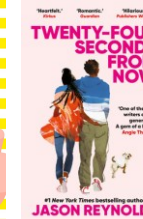
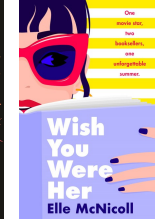
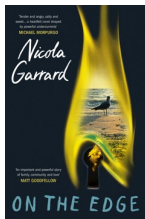
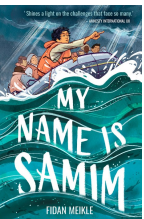
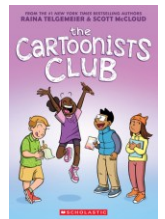
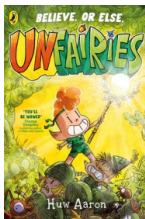
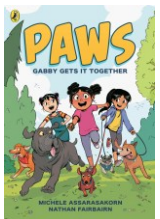
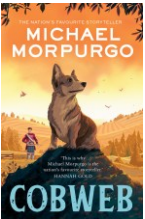
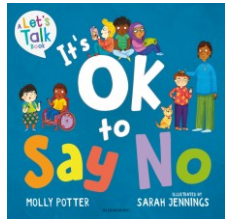
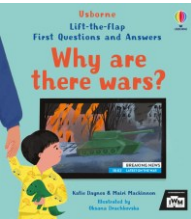
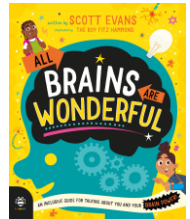
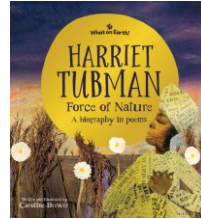
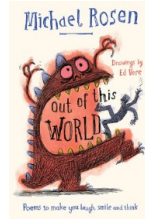
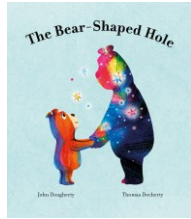
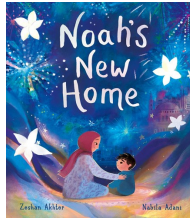
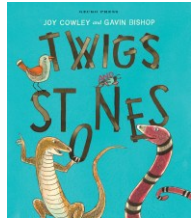
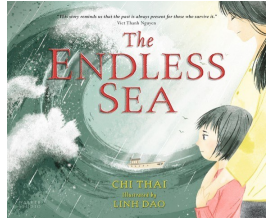
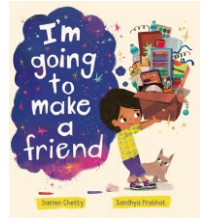
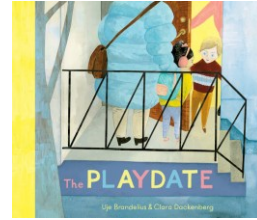
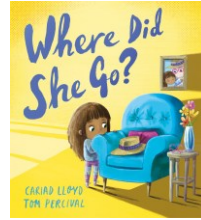
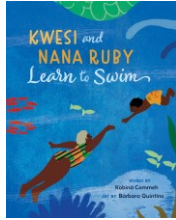
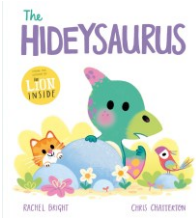
2026 Read for EMPATHY Collection
A guide to empathy-building books for young people aged 12-16+

40 titles selected by experts

25 titles selected by experts

GO ALL IN. Empathy Lab

GO ALL IN. Empathy Lab



Celebrating 10 years

‘Teaching children to be empathetic should be a right, not a privilege and if we do it well – through the power of beautiful books like these – we have the potential to actually change lives now and into the future’

Sonia Thompson, Headteacher/Director
St. Matthew's C.E. Primary Research & Support School

‘The collection is an essential resource that proves empathy can be learned and nurtured, and that stories are one of the most powerful tools we have for building a more compassionate society’

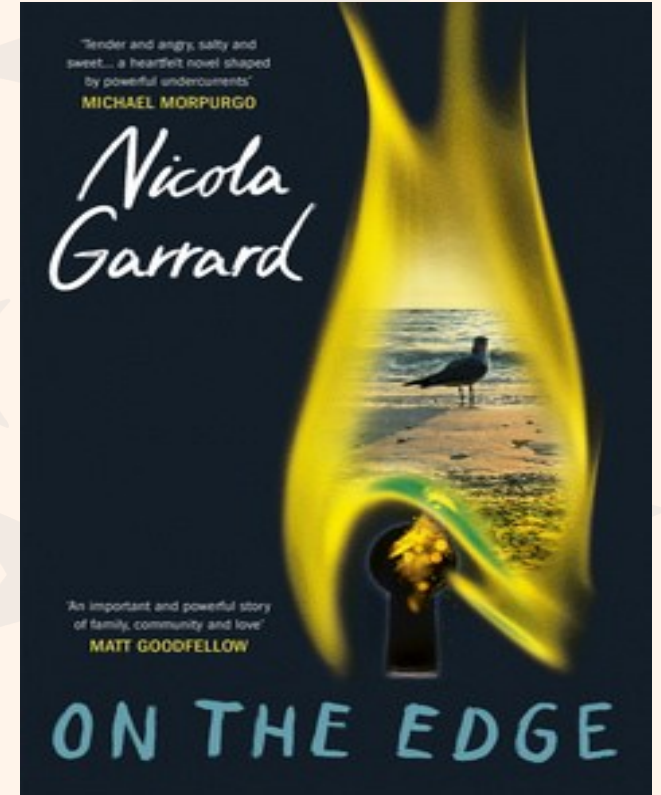
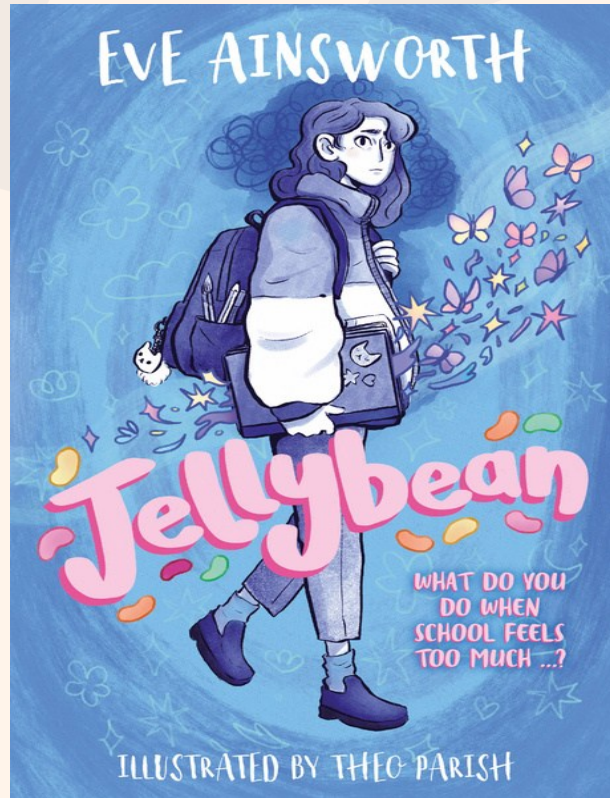
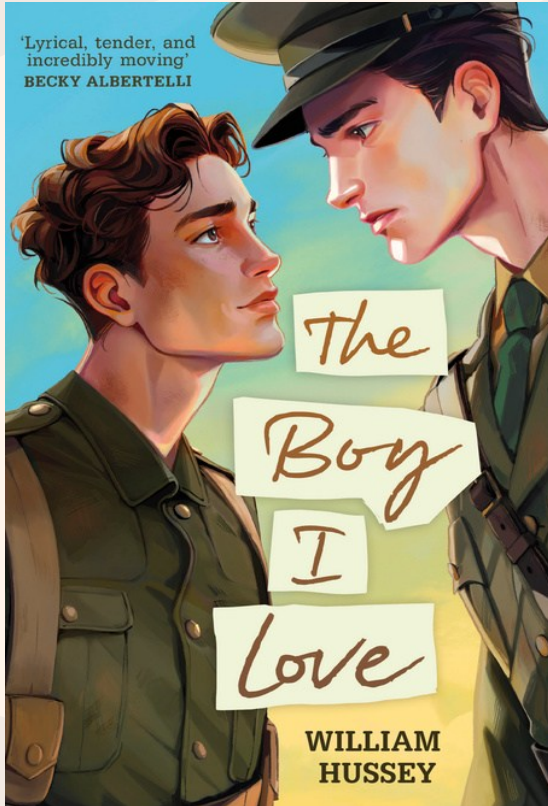
Kate Wilson, Group CEO, Nosy Crow

Submission criteria

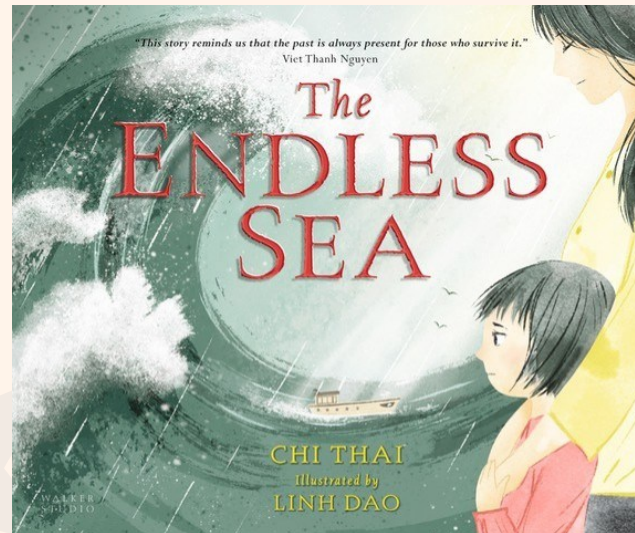
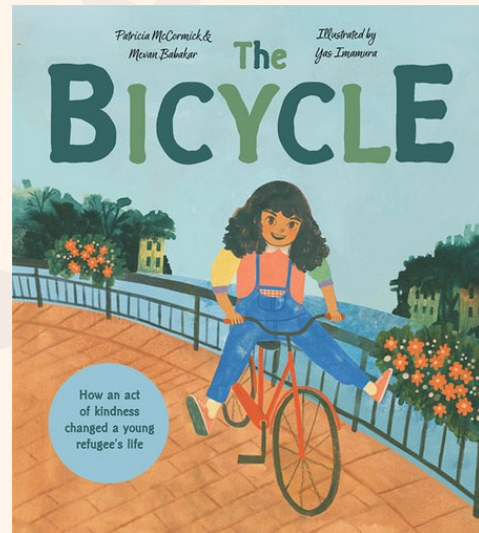
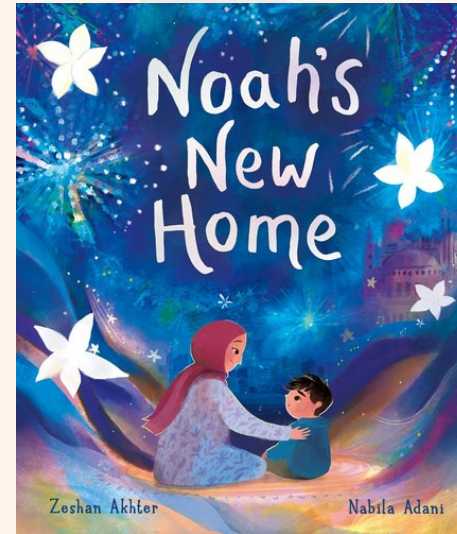
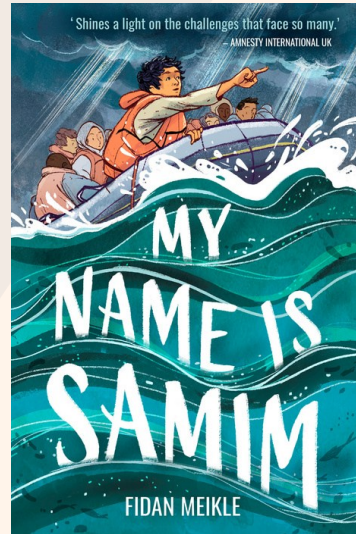
- ★ Excellence of the writing and illustrations
- ★ Quality of the characterisation supporting children to explore feelings and motivations
- ★ Authenticity of the contents either through authors' lived experience or particularly in-depth research
- ★ How the book:
 - represents our diverse communities
 - challenges tribal thinking and promotes understanding between individuals and communities
 - supports key empathy skills: perspective-taking (e.g. through different characters' points of view); emotion recognition and vocabulary, empathic communication or social action
 - explores key social issues of the day e.g. refugees, homelessness, food poverty and climate change provides insight into challenging life circumstances e.g. bereavement, mental health, disability



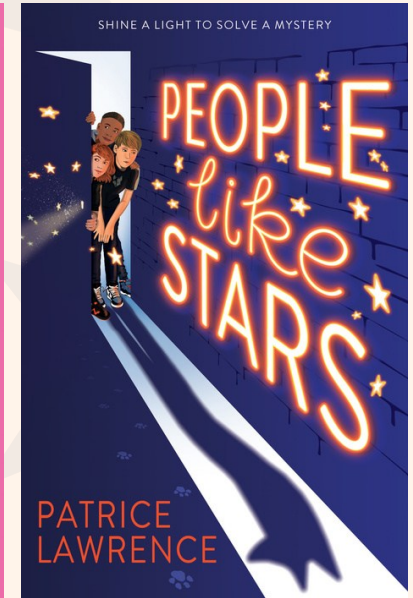
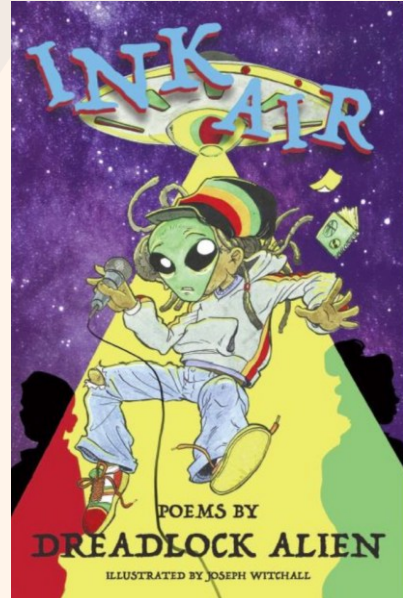
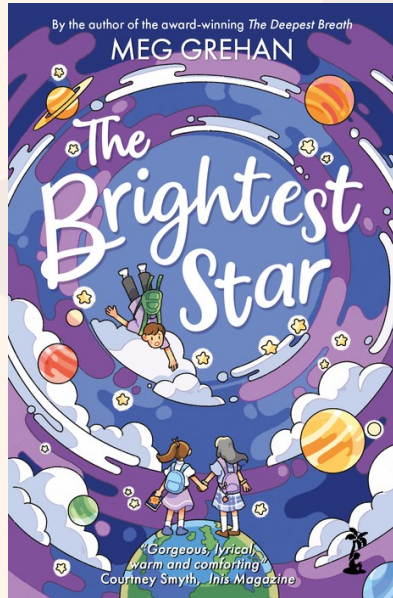
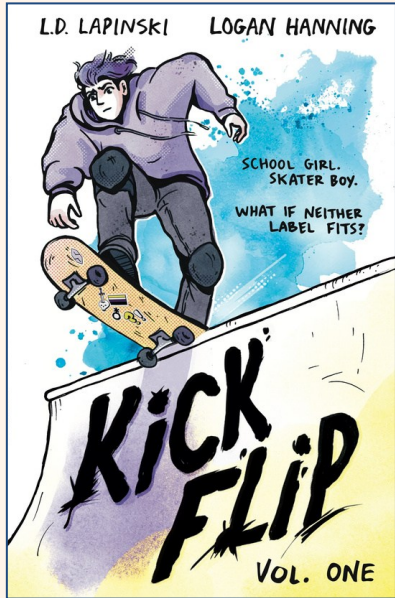
Meet....



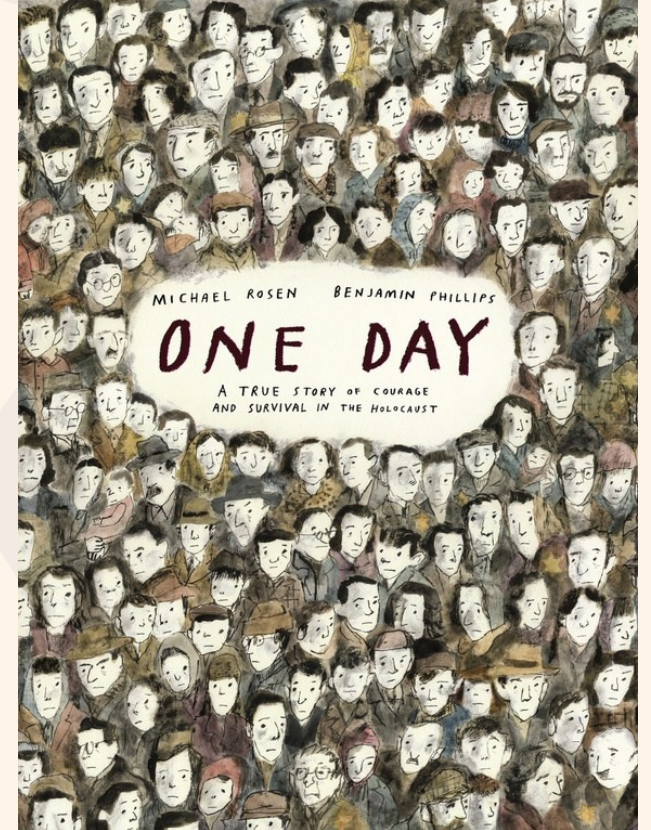
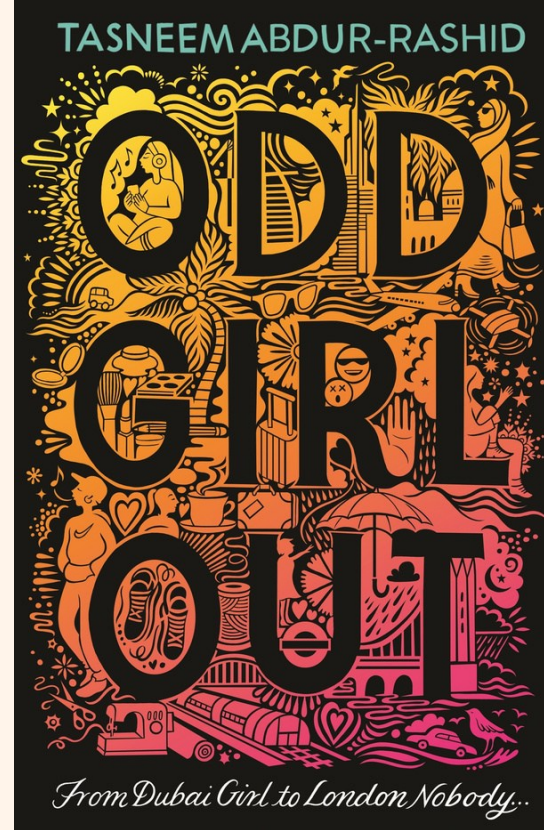
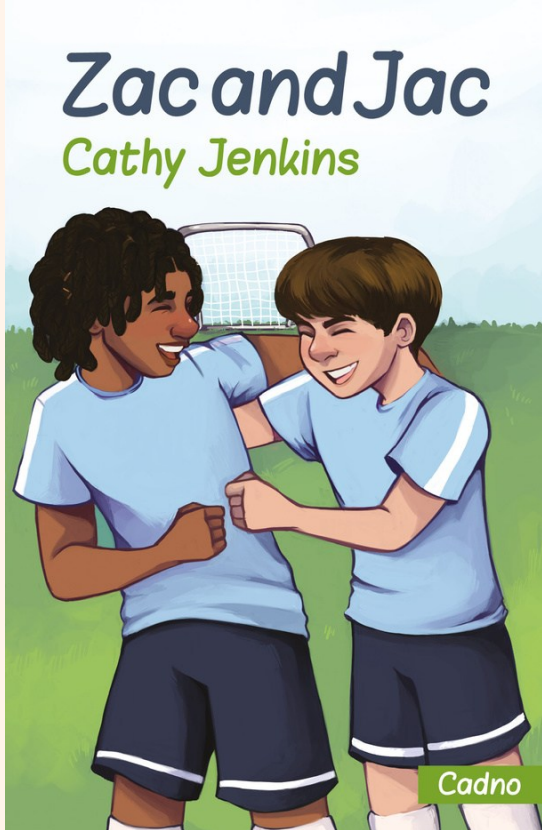
Refugees



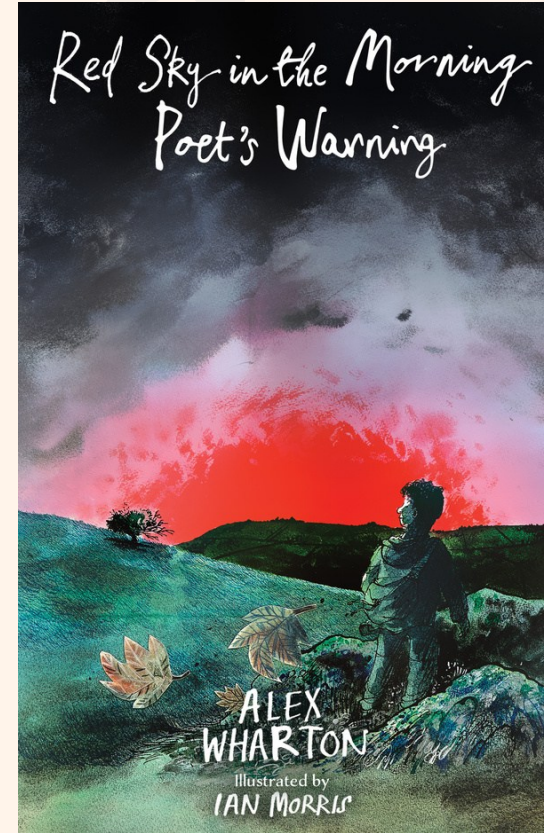
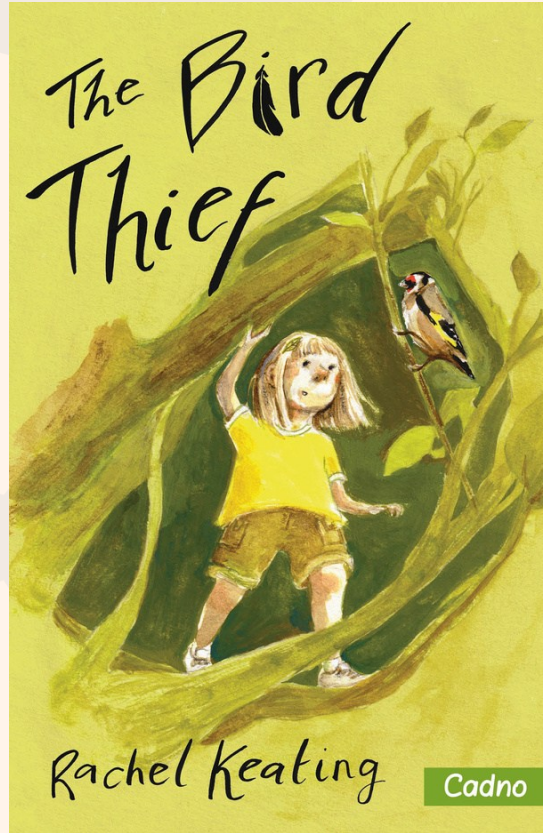
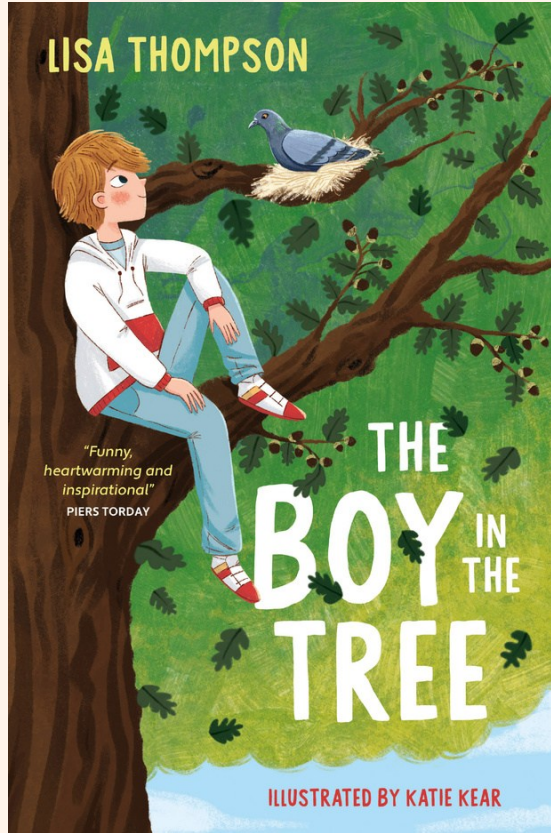
Identity



Racism and persecution



Environment



EMPATHY DAY FESTIVAL

4 - 11 June 2026

Register now!

4 - 11 June

JUMP

into someone else's story



AMAZING festival lineup



What to expect

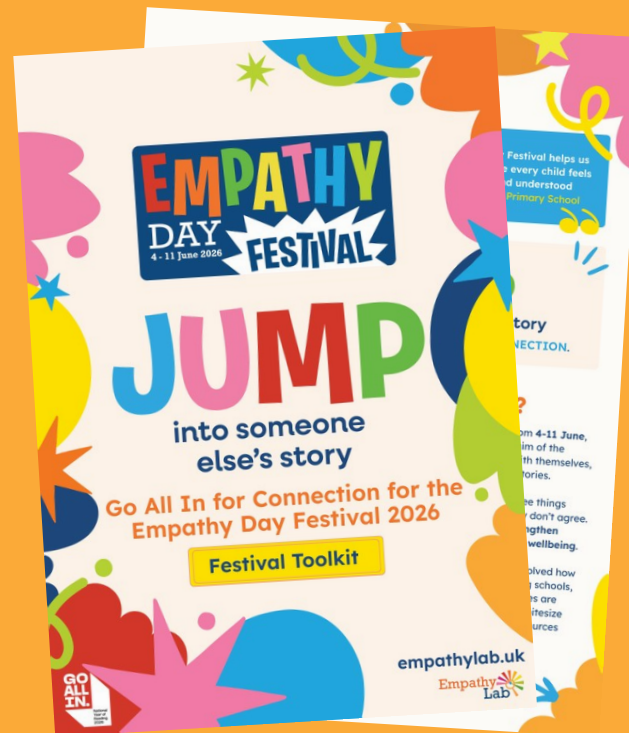
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Register to take part



2.

Festival toolkits released on **20 March**



3.

Printable activity resources Available from **10 April**



4.

On demand digital films available from **18 May**



Look out for the link to the festival webpage in your inbox



Join LIVE & ONLINE!



Primary
Thursday 4 June, 1.30-2.00pm
Louie Stowell & Jeffrey Boakye
Recommended for ages 7-11, Key Stage 2/ P5-7
[Sign up now](#)
In collaboration with 

Secondary
Monday 11 June, 1.30-2.00pm
Matt Goodfellow & Manjeet Mann
Recommended for ages 11-14, Key Stage 3-4/ S1-3
[Sign up now](#)
In collaboration with 



Friday Book Club
Empathy Day Festival Edition
Thursday 11 June, 2-2.45pm
Join **Ed Vere, Mevan Babakar and Lisa Thompson** for a fun & interactive session, hosted by **Jenny McLachlan**.
[Sign up now](#)
In collaboration with 
from 

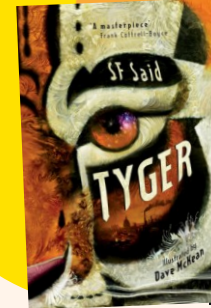
On demand

Empathy Day Assembly

Featuring S.F. Said

Recommended for ages 7-13,
Key Stage 2 & Lower KS3, P3-S2

Use our new assembly slide deck to jump into someone else's story and read, connect and act.



In collaboration with



Empathy Day Assembly – in Wales

Recommended for ages 7-13, Key Stage 2 and Lower KS3,
P3-S2

Pre-recorded assemblies in English & Welsh with author/illustrator, **Huw Aaron**. Versions available for both **primary** and **secondary**.

Draw with Rob

For all ages

Our annual empathy-themed draw along with superstar illustrator, **Rob Biddulph**. Step-by-step inspiration for all ages.



SPARK EMPATHY with...



Rachel Bright

Recommended for ages
4-7,
Key Stage 1/ P2-3

Explore feelings and
finding connection
with others

Cariad Lloyd & Tom Percival

Recommended for ages
4-7,
Key Stage 1/ P2-3

Explore a gentle story
of grief and how we
can support each other



Patrice Lawrence

Recommended for ages
7-11,
Key Stage 2/ P5-7

Explore buried
secrets and long lost
connections

Chanté Timothy

Recommended for ages
7-11,
Key Stage 2/ P5-7

Explore how to
create your own
"Supa" graphic
novel characters



Kristina Rahim & Ian Eagleton

Recommended for ages 7-
11, Key Stage 2/P5-7

Explore and
celebrate families of all
kinds

In collaboration with
 just like us

Michael Rosen

Recommended for ages
11-14,
Key Stage 3-4/ S1-3

Explore the courage
of refugees in a true World
War II story

In collaboration with
 Refugee Week



Nathanael Lessore

Recommended for ages
11-14,
Key Stage 3-4/ S1-3

Explore what happens
when our online and
offline identities
collide

Cathy Reay & James Catchpole

Recommended for ages
11-14,
Key Stage 2-3/S1-3

Explore and
celebrate real-life stories of
disability



Take the Empathy Challenge

Empathy Choice

Share your favourite empathy-building read

Empathy Glasses

DESIGNED BY
Ramzee!

Empathy Resolutions

Commit to ONE thing to change the lives of others

Empathy Book Club



BOOK CLUBS
IN SCHOOLS

The Big Lunch: Sharing Stories



Empathy Comic Strip

Create your own empathy-themed comic strip

Empathy Character

Create a character 'feeling file'

Empathy Exchange

Conversation prompts designed to connect

Empathy News

Celebrate the GOOD things in your community

Thank you for listening

Opportunity for questions and discussion



Contact details: Sarah@empathylab.uk
Co-founder and Chair, EmpathyLab
Programme Director, Libraries Connected



University of Edinburgh Literacy Lab:
<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/literacylab/>

Contact details: s.mcgeown@ed.ac.uk

Reading and Empathy project led by Dr Elena Santi, with Dr Katie Cebula