

Check It Out!

Opening Windows

HOW CAN WE BROADEN our understanding of others' life experiences? How can we become more aware, more empathetic, more appreciative of the world's diverse cultures and beliefs?

Port Townsend Public Library Director Melody Sky Weaver says a journey toward antiracism and a greater acceptance of lifestyles that differ from our own are moral obligations.

"One of the ways to start that journey is through reading. It's a means to explore challenging ideas," she continued. She and other librarians, and many educators, like to view literature as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors.

Books as mirrors allow readers to see their own lives reflected in the pages of a good story. Books can also be windows, offering a view of how things are. Windows are particularly important because they reveal others' lived experiences, Weaver said. She believes that reading fiction builds empathy.

Not only is it critical for children (and adults, too) to see themselves in literature, but according to the organization Reading Is Fundamental, even though children of culturally predominant groups can always find their mirrors in literature, they need books as windows on reality to help them understand the multicultural world they live in. Through the pages of literature, they might see a glimmer of a Black father's anxiety when pulled over by a White cop, or viscerally comprehend the perils a Central American immigrant faces when traveling north to the US border, or begin to grasp how LGBTQIA+ teens come out to their parents.



on Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion

by Lynn Nowak

The third part of the overarching metaphor is the sliding glass door, which becomes a conduit for learning, where readers can "step through" and, via their imaginations, become part of those new realms. "Sliding glass doors help us bring worlds together. And isn't the library the space to do that?" Weaver asked. It provides a trusted place where people gain access to new or different ideas. "The library is really your passport to the world," Weaver said, explaining that it has a critical role to play in connecting. We want to remove barriers so that people can engage with our resources."

Over summer 2021, with a Summer Reading theme of "Reading Colors Your World," library staffers jumped in and developed diversity- and inclusion-themed book and media displays. Weaver said the Juneteenth holiday was an opportunity to explore antiracism topics, and the month of June also saw a celebration of Black music. Staff created grab bags, selecting books about diverse voices. "They were inspired because they know how important this is," Weaver said. "Delay is unacceptable."

Education about equity, diversity, and inclusion might mean stepping into someone else's shoes regarding gender identity, or attempting to understand what it's like to navigate the world in a wheelchair, or getting a glimpse of what it feels like to live in relentless poverty. It also, of course, involves learning about racism and implicit bias.

Ellen Chu, a Friends board member and editor of this newsletter, said that, like every child of immigrants in the

(continued on next page)

Read about equity, diversity, and inclusion

Port Townsend Public Library Director Melody Sky Weaver suggests two titles for a journey toward antiracism and better understanding of diversity:

So You Want to Talk about Race, by Ijeoma Oluo
White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism, by Robin DiAngelo

Chloe Vogel, library associate for youth services, adds a few favorite titles of her own:

The Autobiography of Malcom X, by Alex Haley
The Left Hand of Darkness, by Ursula K. Le Guin
If Beale Street Could Talk, by James Baldwin
Beloved, by Toni Morrison
The People's History of the United States, by Howard Zinn

A few of her favorites for children include:

The Name Jar, by Yangsook Choi,
Amy Wu and the Perfect Bao, by Kat Zhang
King and King, by Linda de Haan
Julian Is a Mermaid, by Jessica Love
We Are Water Protectors, by Carole Lindstrom
Rosa, by Nikki Giovanni

1950s, all she wanted was to fit in, so she didn't necessarily celebrate her Chinese heritage while she was young. No Asian characters in books really spoke to her. There weren't even many books *with* Asian characters. What did spark her interest were stories of gutsy girls—and boys, for that matter. “It was only a year or so ago after reading one of the many books on Chinese history—*The Last Boat Out of Shanghai*, by Helen Zia—that I found stories I

when the story is not necessarily about how Asian that person is, but just about regular kids stuff. They don't exist.” Happily, though, she soon found just the thing, ***You Are Home***, by Mackenzie Porter, illustrated by Xin Li (2021).

Chu said that, perversely, over the last few years when anti-Asian slurs became more frequent at the national level, she actually felt lucky that the lion's share of what discrimination she has experienced in her life and career was as a woman, not as an Asian. Applying for an editorial position at one publisher, in fact, she was told that the successful candidate was likely to be a man.

Creating a culture of equity

Launching a voyage of diversity education isn't enough, Weaver said. “We all have to be working to create a culture that promotes equitable opportunities for everyone, no matter their background. You

could relate to my own family's.”

Chu said what might have been helpful to her as a young person would have been stories featuring Asian kids dealing with universal coming-of-age matters or simply being kids. Her daughter, who now has a daughter of her own (whose father is Jewish), recently told Chu and Chu's son, “Apparently one of us will have to write a children's picture book series with an Asian as the main character

don't just read one book and you're done.” It's a continuing process.

Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie addressed the problem of the single story in a 2014 TED talk. “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” She said writers must tell their own stories, because “telling the stories that only we can tell—about our experiences, hopes, and fears—helps break down the power of clichés and stereotypes.”

“I think it's important to read and learn expansively, from childhood through adulthood,” said Chloe Vogel, library associate for youth services. “If we read only about topics that reinforce a limited world view, we will in turn see the world through a limited scope. When we see that experiences are multifaceted, we in turn think more complexly and are driven to ask critical questions.”

Chu expanded on the windows and mirrors notion with an additional idea: “You need more than one plane of glass to make a prism, and it is only the prism that enables you to see all the colors.”

In addition, she noted, the term *equity* is not exactly the same as *equality*. In fact, their meanings can be quite different. Whereas equality implies sameness, equity assumes difference and takes difference into account to ensure a fair process and, ultimately, a fair (or equitable) outcome, according to the American Library Association. Chu takes it one step further, suggesting that “equity blends fairness with justice.”

Racism and injustice are systemic in this country, Vogel said; no place remains unaffected. “I think it takes solidarity to approach these topics, and our community needs to engage in challenging conversations in combination with direct action and continued education.”

How then to approach diversity in a community that is mostly White? “Maybe ask yourself if you suddenly notice that someone you've taken for granted is, say, Asian,” Chu said. “Do you think it's weird that the editor of your newsletter, who is Chinese, never



learned much Chinese but has obsessed over Anglo-European grammar and nuance since middle school? Are you noticing people of color more? Do you wonder if you're making mistakes or doing the 'right thing'? Maybe you discover you dislike non-Whites. I think it's good to be alert to diversity and lack thereof, but feeling guilty or trying too hard could backfire into more, not less, polarization."



"We're all responsible for educating ourselves" and staying aware, Weaver said. Vogel concurred. She noted that it's important to learn about topics that we might be ignorant about, to practice gender-neutral pronouns, or to become involved in community organizations. "If someone tells me I've said something hurtful, I need to listen, apologize, and reflect on how not to make the same mistake again. Likewise, if I spend a lot of time talking about how bad I feel, then I'm probably putting someone else in the position of having to comfort me," Vogel said.

She and Weaver said library staff are always happy to provide reading lists for those who want to enhance their understanding of any topics related to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

"We need to start learning and growing together," Weaver continued. "Just be curious. Listen. Stay humble. Stay open," Weaver said. "The library is a place for adventurers and explorers, and we're never done on this learning journey. Never ever ever." 📖

Glossary

Language can contribute to oppression and also be a tool of liberation, according to the American Library Association. The language of equity, diversity, and inclusion is ever evolving, and agreement in usage is hardly universal. Still, to understand the terms, it helps to have some definitions. Those who want to educate themselves can further consult a slew of antiracism and diversity glossaries available online.

AAP: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. The Associated Press says that the acronym is widely used by people within these communities but is not as well known outside of them. It recommends spelling out the term.

Ableism: Prejudiced thoughts and discriminatory actions based on differences in physical, mental, or emotional ability, which contribute to a system of oppression, usually of able-bodied and able-minded persons against people with illness, disabilities, or less-developed skills. (University of Washington)

Black: "The capitalized term is used as an adjective in a racial, ethnic, or cultural sense. African American is also acceptable for those in the U.S., but the terms are not necessarily interchangeable." (Associated Press) In 2020 the *Chicago Manual of Style* changed its recommendation and now favors capitalizing both Black and White.

BIPOC: Black, indigenous, and people of color. The Associated Press recommends explaining the term, rather than using the acronym.

Diversity: "Describes the myriad ways in which people differ, including the psychological, physical, and social differences that occur among all individuals, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, religion, economic class, education, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, mental and physical ability, and learning styles. Diversity is all-inclusive and supportive of the proposition that everyone and every group should be valued. It is about understanding these differences and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of our differences." (University of Washington)

Equity: Equity ensures that individuals are provided the resources they need to have access to the same opportunities as the general population. While equity represents impartiality—i.e., a distribution is made in such a way to even opportunities for all people—equality indicates uniformity, where everything is evenly distributed among people. (University of Washington)

Inclusion: Refers to "an environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully; are valued for their distinctive skills, experiences, and perspectives; have equal access to resources and opportunities; and can contribute fully to the organization's success." (American Library Association)

Latinx: Recently coined, gender neutral, and preferred by some in lieu of **Latino** or **Latina**, the traditional nouns and adjectives for a person from, or whose ancestors were from, a Spanish-speaking land or culture or from Latin America. (Associated Press)

LGBTQIA+: A shorthand way of describing a diverse community composed of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, agender, asexual, pansexual, gender nonconforming, and others. (Lehigh University)

Native Americans, American Indians: For those in the United States, both terms are acceptable in general reference for two or more people of different tribal affiliations. For individuals, use the name of the tribe if available. (Associated Press)

Neurodiverse: Describes neurological differences (such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, Tourette's syndrome); acknowledges that these differences come from genetic variations and are often not visible. (Lehigh University)

Whitesplaining, —splaining: Regardless of intent, when people of privilege assume they have expertise and start explaining oppression to a member of an oppressed group, rather than listening. Whitesplaining is a form of racism. (Lehigh University)

Sources: American Library Association, Associated Press, Chicago Manual of Style, Lehigh University, University of Washington

Friends, and What They Read, Are Diverse

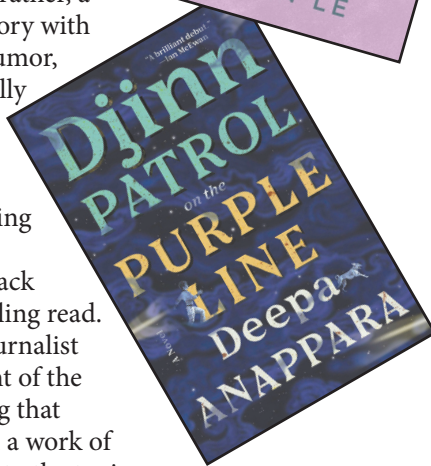
◆ *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line*

Deepa Anappara (2020)

Mystery, magic, and a sense of social consciousness are beautifully woven together in this Edgar Award-winning debut novel. Nine-year-old Jai lives in a *basti*, a sprawling slum located along an unfinished metro line in an unnamed Indian city. Jai's favorite things to do are to watch reality police shows on television and play with his two best friends, Pari and Faiz. So, when a child goes missing from their school, Jai decides to put to work the skills he has gleaned from the cop shows and enlists his friends to join him in "detectiving" the facts behind the disappearance.

Under a sky choked with smog, yet still smelling of spices and sizzling treats, the trio confronts the fears and prejudices of local parents, the corruption and indifference of the police, and the possibility that the force behind what becomes a string of disappearances just might not be human at all but, rather, a soul-snatching djinn. Jai tells the story with a nine-year old's exuberance and humor, equal parts street-smart and blissfully innocent of the big social issues of inequality, race, religion, and caste that swirl around him. *Djinn Patrol* entertains while it enlightens, tackling uncomfortable truths and difficult subjects packed inside a hard-to-crack mystery that makes for a truly thrilling read.

Deepa Anappara worked as a journalist in India, concentrating on the plight of the nation's poor children, but by telling that story here, in a novel rather than in a work of nonfiction, she allows us to enter into the topic in a very personal way, through Jai's wide-open eyes. Anappara writes with such texture and detail, you'll feel like you are right there in the narrow alleyways of the *basti*, where menace stalks the neighborhood right under the shadow of the gleaming towers of the wealthy. Whether you read this book as a mystery or as a critique on the evils of an inequitable society, *Djinn Patrol* is unputdownable, and Jai is an absolutely unforgettable character. —Kristine Kaufman



◆ *A Pho Love Story*

Loan Le (2021)

I was captivated by this tale of two young Vietnamese teens, Bao and Linh, who were born and raised in the United States. Their families, having fled Vietnam during that war, came to the States seeking a new start.

Their story at first seems a modern-day version of Romeo and Juliet, with each family bitterly angry at the other. All their lives, the young protagonists had believed that the feud was over their families' competing restaurants. One day, Linh's family offers a special, 2-for-1 pho, and as Bao leaves his own restaurant, he notices Linh weeping in the alley across the street. Although he and Linh have not talked since childhood, he walks over to discover why and learns that a waitress has walked out, and Linh is overwhelmed with the extra load. And because Linh's parents work the back of their restaurant, Bao is able to help out discreetly in front—and thus the tale unfolds.

While listening to the audiobook, read by Vyvy Nguyen and Ryan Do, I felt as if I had entered a culture totally unknown to me, one centered on family and community. My eyes and ears were opened to the trauma of the Vietnam war and the problems—including racism—that refugee families face living in a culture that is neither their own nor especially easy to assimilate into. The teens must wrestle with these difficulties, in addition to the undisclosed family history from Vietnam their parents brought with them when they emigrated. In the end, it's up to Bao and Linh to find a way forward, for themselves and their families. —Fran Post



Ranie Keithahn

ranie@olympus.net

◆ **Bodies Are Cool**

Tyler Feder (2021)

Big bodies, small bodies, dancing, playing, happy bodies! Look at all these different bodies! Bodies are cool!

So begins the most delightful book about body positivity that you're ever likely to discover. But the rhythmic, rollicking, read-aloud text in this picture book is so much more. Paired with bright, colorful illustrations of every conceivable type of body, its messaging for kids is spot on—and not only about body image.

Through pictures and clever, well-chosen words, *Bodies Are Cool* shows black, brown, and white people; skinny people, fat people, and everyone-in-between people; tall and short people; hairy people and hairless people, with “Bodies are cool,” ending each refrain of the singsong text. Boys, girls, men, and women: some roll in wheelchairs; some identify as LGBTQIA+; some are old, some young, others freckled or tattooed or with pregnant bellies.

In the biography on the book jacket, author-illustrator Feder describes herself as having a round tummy, fuzzy eyebrows, and a mole on her left arm with a little hair growing out of it. Her book jacket biography declares, “Her body is cool, and so is yours!”

What an inclusive, celebratory book! And it's not just for children and their families. Adults should give themselves a pick-me-up and read this gem. The affirmation, “I love my body,” can't help but make you smile.

Growing bodies, aging bodies, features-rearranging bodies, magic ever-changing bodies. Bodies are cool!

—Lynn Nowak



◆ **Your Name Is a Song**

Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow (2020)

In this beautifully illustrated narrative about a mother and daughter, we first see Kora-Jalimuso coming home from school upset after everyone in her class, including her teacher, mispronounces her name. Her mother listens, and then explains that her name is a song, and that she should be proud to sing it. Together, they walk through vibrant city streets, skies spiraling with sunset colors, singing the names of Trayvon, Jalonte, and Ahlam. This book shows the power between mother and daughter, and what it looks like when mothers help their children feel strong and celebrated. Readers learn that when someone mispronounces

their name, they should sing it out loud, and be proud of each melodic syllable. After all, names embody the history of one's family, bound within a unique time and place.

◆ **Nonsense!**

The Curious Story of Edward Gorey

Lori Morensen (2020)

This picture-book biography about author Edward Gorey is stunning and strange, replete with illustrations of black cats, gothic mansions, and flamboyant dinner parties. Like Maurice Sendak, Gorey was a profound, innovative children's author who

pushed the boundaries of children's literature. His stylistic illustrations and minimalist text left room for young readers to form their own ideas about where the story was going and what it meant. Gorey skillfully juxtaposed both dark and light themes in his illustrations, creating artwork with a polarizing effect. Some people felt that his books were too dark for children; others fell in love with the gothic and otherworldly places he created. Polarizing or not, his books undeniably succeeded in enthraling generations of readers.

This short biography is a great primer for anyone interested in picture books and art history. It is a gentle reminder that it's okay to be different and that there's beauty in expressing yourself authentically. As Sendak once said about his own work, “Not everybody likes it; that's fine. I don't do it for everybody. Or anybody. I do it because I can't not do it.”

—Chloe Vogel



More Friends Reading

◆ *Untraceable*

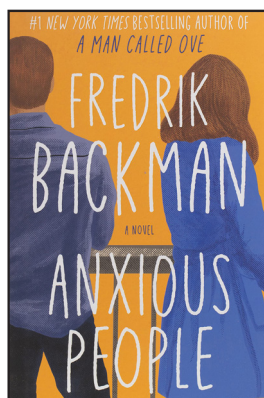
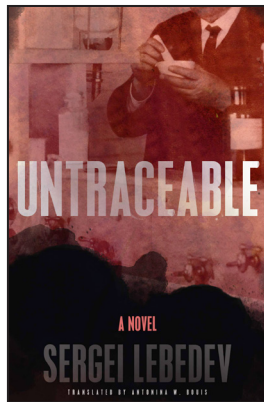
Sergei Lebedev (2021)

On March 4, 2018, in an English cathedral town, Russian agents poisoned retired Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter with Novichok, a military-grade neurotoxin the agents carried in a perfume bottle. The intended victims survived, but an innocent bystander died after handling the perfume bottle the agents had carelessly discarded. These events loosely inspired Sergei Lebedev's *Untraceable*, a grim exploration of evil in the service of an amoral state.

The plot centers on Kalitin, a Russian defector who developed the untraceable poison of the title, and Shershnev, a Russian intelligence officer sent to assassinate him. The novel bears some resemblance to the traditional espionage thriller: as the predator gets closer to the prey, each develops an understanding and even grudging affinity for the other. But the book focuses not on the chase but rather on flashbacks of each man's life. The flashbacks take place in the characters' own minds; in this way Lebedev illustrates the gradual shriveling of the men's respective souls as each becomes more obsessed—Kalitin, with his poison and Shershnev, with his murderous mission. Their self-justifications become increasingly grotesque until the predictable but nevertheless memorable final scene. For the reader, immersed in the claustrophobic psyches of these deservedly doomed individuals, the end is almost a relief.

The novel searingly examines the mind and soul of the apparatchik, the ordinary functionary capable of committing atrocious acts. Lebedev faults both the apparatchiks themselves and the Soviet, and Russian, state for which they worked. Kalitin and Shershnev choose their fates, but their choices are influenced by a regime that rewards, materially and psychologically, each descent toward inhumanity. While Lebedev directs his primary fire against the state, the book has universal resonance, with autocracy a growing global danger, not least in the United States. Lebedev did not intend to ask, Can it happen here? but his novel answers emphatically, yes.

—Rich Johnson is a recovering attorney who writes about wildland fires, spies, and baseball—seldom in that order



◆ *Anxious People*

Fredrik Backman (2019)

Feeling anxious? Fredrik Backman's *Anxious People* is a book about human anxiety, frailty, connections, despair, compassion, and hope. It's also about parental love. And it's often very funny. The action begins right away. A desperate bank robber in a small Swedish town takes a group of people hostage in an apartment during a real estate open house. Each character is introduced and later interviewed by one of the quirky father-son police team who investigates the mysterious and confusing case. All the characters share anxiety, but it manifests (and also hides) itself in different ways.

Backman published this novel in Swedish in 2019, its English translation in 2020. Certainly those were anxious times in the world, as is 2021. Politics, climate change, and pandemics, however, are not the source of the characters' anxieties. On the first page Backman writes, "This is a book about a lot of things, but mostly about idiots." He recognizes the challenges of modern life, though, also writing, "There's such an unbelievable amount that we're all supposed to be able to cope with these days. You're supposed to have a job, and somewhere to live, and a family, and you're supposed to pay taxes and have clean underwear and remember the password to your damn Wi-Fi."

Filled with the narrator's psychological and philosophical insights, which touched me deeply, *Anxious People* is an unusual novel with many twists and turns. During their ordeal as hostages, all the characters slowly reveal secret parts of their lives. When I thought I understood what was happening, or believed I knew a character, a new layer of truth would emerge. The narrator is skillful in hiding, and then revealing, key aspects of the truth as the connections and relationships among the hostages deepen. Unlike most novels that wind down to a close, Backman continues just a little longer. I loved that.

—Wendy Feltham

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D. Malcolm Dorn

(360) 385-2771

contact@wallyworks.net

1037 Lawrence St.
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THE PORT TOWNSEND PUBLIC LIBRARY was founded in 1898 by volunteers and, thanks to continuing community support, has remained an active Carnegie Library since its present doors opened in 1913.

The Friends of the Port Townsend Library, established in 1978, supports programs, services, and materials beyond what the city's library budget covers. Every year we fund reading programs, events, and activities for all ages; we also hold book sales and publish three newsletters. Newsletters are available in the library, around town, and at friendsofptlibrary.org.

Our funding comes primarily from supporters, donations, and book sales. We invite anyone to become a Friend and attend our board meetings, which take place on the second Wednesday of each month, 3:30 PM, usually at the Library Learning Center (corner of Lawrence and Harrison). Please contact us by e-mail at friendsofptlibrary@gmail.com for updates.

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