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SECONDARY EDUCATION

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THEMATIC GUIDE

Teaching Fiction and Nonfiction Pairings

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Pairing fiction and nonfiction gives middle school students the best of both worlds: engaging stories and real-world knowledge. This guide helps middle school students strengthen literacy, critical thinking, and content knowledge while exploring connections across science, history, civics, and more.

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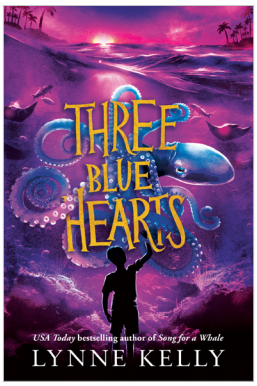
INTRODUCTION

Pairing fiction and nonfiction texts provides students the benefits of two worlds: the engagement of storytelling and the diversity of prose. In middle school, fiction-nonfiction pairings can be used beyond the English classroom in cross-content units about science, history, civics, and more. These pairings enhance literacy skills, as well as content learning, by building vocabulary, comprehension, and critical thinking. Students broaden their interests and skills while analyzing differences in style, structure, and point of view.

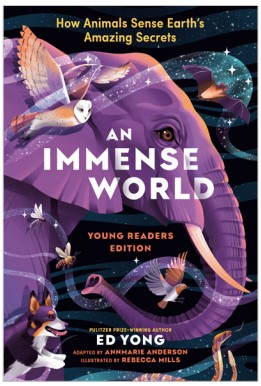
The activities in this guide, designed for grades 6–8, can be used in part or in their entirety, during whole-class or small-group instruction. Educators can also choose to adapt these activities for different or additional titles. Essential questions bridge texts and provide opportunities for comparing perspectives and researching facts within fiction. Middle school students will be encouraged to read, write, think, and collaborate, all while exploring the best of both worlds.

PAIR 1:
Three Blue Hearts &
An Immense World



Three Blue Hearts
LYNNE KELLY

9780593898390
Delacorte Press | Hardcover
$17.99 | 288 pages | Lexile: 670L
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**



An Immense World
How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us (Young Readers Edition)
ED YONG; Illustrated by REBECCA MILLS

9780593810910
Bright Matter Books | Paperback
$14.99 | 272 pages Lexile: 980L
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**

SUMMARIES

In Lynne Kelly's *Three Blue Hearts*, a twelve-year-old boy finds a fresh start, a displaced octopus, and his inner strength all in one summer.

An Immense World, by Ed Yong, is an immersive trip through the sensory spheres of multiple unique and mysterious creatures.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What can we learn from animals and the way they perceive the world?

How are animals and humans fundamentally connected, and in what ways are we ethically responsible to them?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

MOVIE TIE-IN

Show students the official trailer to the 2026 Netflix film *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, based on the bestselling book about an octopus named Marcellus and the humans he forever impacts (prhlink.com/ytremarkablybright). As they watch, ask students to determine who is narrating the story. Discuss how the stylistic choice to have an octopus control the narrative characterizes the creature as highly perceptive and intelligent. Next, direct students to Ed Yong's definition of "umwelt" in *An Immense World*: "a sensory bubble" or "the part of an animal's surroundings that it can sense and experience" (p. 4). Ask: How does Marcellus's sensory bubble, or umwelt, differ from those of the humans he interacts with in the movie trailer? As students read *Three Blue Hearts*, ask them to look for similar traits in the octopus, Ursula. Discuss: How does what we learn about octopuses in the trailer, in *An Immense World*, and in *Three Blue Hearts* change how we understand our own umwelt? What can we gain from seeing the world through the eyes of animals we are trying to protect?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

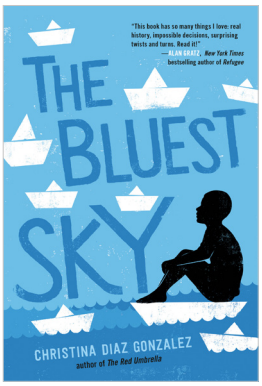
4 CS TEXT-BASED DISCUSSION

In the last chapter of *An Immense World*, Ed Yong argues for humans to address sensory pollution, saying, "Wilderness is not distant. We live in it every day. It is there for us to imagine, to savor, and to protect" (p. 248). Ask students to consider *An Immense World* and *Three Blue Hearts* together, and how each illustrates the fundamental connection between humans and animals, as well as the ethical responsibility each of us has towards the natural world. Form students into small groups, and direct them to conduct a text-based discussion using the 4 Cs protocol (prhlink.com/fourcs). Group members take turns speaking on each of the four Cs (connections, challenges, concepts, changes), providing text evidence, personal experience, or knowledge to support their thinking. After small groups have completed their text-based discussion, ask them to share their final "C" (a change in attitude, thinking, or action that was suggested by one or both of the texts). Discuss as a large group: How do fiction and nonfiction texts make arguments for change?

DOUBLE-ENTRY JOURNAL

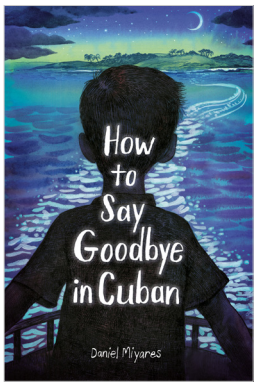
In both *Three Blue Hearts* and *An Immense World*, authors depict the extraordinary bond between humans and animals, as well as the consequences that happen when we ignore this connection. To promote active reading and to explore the theme in both texts, ask students to keep a double-entry response journal on this specific theme while reading both books. Double-entry response journals are two-column templates that list specific quotations and excerpts from the novel on the left and responses to text on the right. Responses might include analysis, questions, connections, reactions, or any other notes that help students engage with the text and the theme of interconnectivity. These journals can be brought to book circles, small-group activities, and class seminars, providing students with textual evidence to support their thinking and discussion. The journals can also provide ideas and support for culminating writing products. For more on double-entry journals, see this example (prhlink.com/adlitjournal).

PAIR 2:
The Bluest Sky &
How To Say Goodbye In Cuban



The Bluest Sky
CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ

9780593372821
Yearling | Paperback
$9.99 | 336 pages | Lexile: 650L
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**



How to Say Goodbye in Cuban
DANIEL MIYARES

9780593568309
Anne Schwartz Books | Paperback
$13.99 | 240 pages | Lexile: 370L

SUMMARIES

In Christina Diaz Gonzalez's *The Bluest Sky*, eleven-year-old Hector is caught between two worlds, the home he loves in Cuba and his exiled father in America.

How to Say Goodbye in Cuban, by Daniel Miyares, is a graphic novel and memoir that recounts a family's journey toward freedom during the Cuban Revolution.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What are the risks and costs of freedom for those who challenge oppression?

How do we balance the love of family, country, and self in times of political turmoil?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

CAUSE-AND-EFFECT MAP

The Mariel boatlift of 1980 is central to both *The Bluest Sky* and *How to Say Goodbye in Cuban*. Build knowledge around this mass emigration event by researching its causes and determining its personal, political, and cultural impacts. Ask students to read the short article "The Mariel Boatlift: How Cold War Politics Drove Thousands of Cubans to Florida in 1980" (prhlink.com/marielboatlift). As they read and identify reasons for and effects of the mass exodus, students should record their learning on a multiflow map (prhlink.com/thinkingmaps). Instruct students to include both positive and negative causes and impacts. As they read *The Bluest Sky* and *How to Say Goodbye in Cuban*, challenge students to add to both sides of the map, illustrating additional causes and impacts that become clear through the historic fiction and graphic novels. Afterward, discuss as a class: How does the experience and depiction of immigrants during the Mariel boatlift relate to the current perception and debate around immigrants to our country?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

DECISION TREE

In *The Bluest Sky*, Hector is torn between staying in his beloved Cuba with his friends and the Math Olympiad, or leaving for America to join his exiled father. Arrange students in small reading groups who will build a decision tree as they read, illustrating all the factors and people who pull Hector in opposite directions. Decision pathway trees are visible thinking tools that can be used to trace a character's inner and outer conflicts as well as ultimate outcomes. As groups create their trees, they can use shapes, colors, and arrows to indicate choices, people, and push/pull factors. Model the process with an exemplar first. Groups can create their decision trees by hand, or they can use an online tool such as LucidChart (prhlink.com/lucidchart) or Canva (prhlink.com/canvadecisiontrees). After they finish, groups can share their visuals with the class. Discuss: How does Hector learn to balance family, country, and coming of age in such a complex and tumultuous environment? What can he teach us?

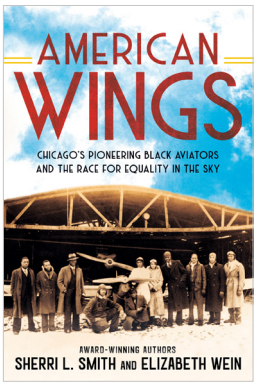
"LAYERS" ANALYSIS

Direct students to apply the "Layers" routine to analyze the graphic novel *How to Say Goodbye in Cuban*. With the Layers protocol (prhlink.com/harvardlayers), students select one layer or framework to view the author's work and analyze four different elements within that layer. Students can work independently, in partners, or small groups to analyze the work's narrative, aesthetic, mechanics, dynamics, or connections. For example, if students analyze *How to Say Goodbye in Cuban*'s mechanical layer, they will notice how the text alternates between black-and-white historical pages to full color and narrative pages about Carlos's emigration to America. When students select the connections layer, they can examine the graphic novel's similarities to and differences from *The Bluest Sky* and other works. Teachers might choose to introduce the elements one at a time, modeling analysis before students work on their own. Afterward, students can share their analysis digitally or orally, providing opportunity for classmates to see similarities and differences among the layers and the texts. Discuss with the class: How does examining a text or texts for multiple layers deepen our understanding? What new questions and opportunities for further learning does the analysis generate?

PAIR 3: *Flygirl* & *American Wings*

Flygirl
SHERRI L. SMITH

9780142417256
Penguin Books | Paperback
$12.99 | 304 pages | Lexile: 680L
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**



American Wings
SHERRI L. SMITH, ELIZABETH WEIN

9780593323991
G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers
Paperback | $12.99 | 384 pages | Lexile: 1210L
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**

SUMMARIES

In *Flygirl*, by Sherri L. Smith, Ida Mae is a young, Black female pilot who aims to join WASP during World War II. But to serve her country, she is forced to hide her race.

American Wings, by Sherri L. Smith and Elizabeth Wein, highlights the courageous group of Black aviators who successfully integrated the sky leading up to World War II.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

How does one's racial identity influence a person's self and public perception?

What can we learn from pioneers in aviation? What can we look forward to in the future?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

As an introduction to significant themes in both books, ask students to conduct a document analysis of a photograph of Willa Brown in 1938, right after she became the first African American woman to receive her pilot's license in the United States (*American Wings*, p. 149). Ask students to analyze the photograph using the National Archive document analysis process (prhlink.com/analyzephoto):

- Meet the photo
- Observe its parts
- Try to make sense of it
- Use it as historical evidence

Working in partners to analyze the photo, students should be sure to examine the caption, which reads, "'Pretty Aviatrix Sets Pace' is how newspapers captioned this picture." As partners discuss how to use the document as historical evidence, they should recognize how the caption speaks to the intersection of race and gender in the era. Not only has Brown had to fight as a Black American to earn her pilot's license; she also had to overcome the gender bias so glaringly clear in the caption. Discuss as a class: What else can we learn about these multiple bias challenges as we read *American Wings* and *Flygirl*? How does this intersectionality exist today?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

"STEP IN, STEP OUT, STEP BACK"

Build knowledge and perspective around the tradition of racial "passing" in America. Ask students to meet in small groups and review several resources: the NPR article entitled "A Chosen Exile: Black People Passing In White America" (prhlink.com/passinginamerica), the audio recording that accompanies the article, and a movie trailer from the acclaimed 1959 film *Imitation of Life* (prhlink.com/imitationoflife). Groups should stop and discuss each resource as a group before moving to the next one, applying the "Step In, Step Out, Step Back" strategy (prhlink.com/thinkingroutine). In "step in," students discuss what the person or character in the text is feeling, believing, or experiencing. Next, in "step out," they determine what more could be learned to better understand the person's outlook. Finally, in "step back," group members reflect on their own perspectives and how it feels to look at another's point of view.

Back in the large group, facilitate a discussion around passing, performing, and identity. Are people who choose to "pass" simply performers in their own life? According to author Allyson Hobbs in the NPR article, "To write a history of passing is to write a history of loss… Loss of self. Loss of family. Loss of community." How does this ring true with Ida Mae in *Flygirl*? As an extension, challenge students to make connections to their own experience. After establishing or reviewing discussion norms that ensure respect and equity of voice, ask students: What forms of "passing" do we see in current society? How do we react? What is gained, what is lost, and why?

COLLABORATIVE WHITEBOARDS

American Wings introduces students to real-life pioneers similar to the fictional Ida Mae in *Flygirl*. Provide students the opportunity to learn more about these pioneers and about aviation history by collaborating on digital whiteboards. After researching these historical figures, partners or groups can use online tools such as Miro (miro.com/online-whiteboard), Lucidspark (lucid.co/lucidspark), or Figjam (figma.com/figjam) to post learning from *American Wings* and other resources. Collaborative whiteboards often disappear after a short time, so students can collaborate in the space of one class period and save the whiteboard as a PDF. Ask groups to research their pioneer, post one fact at a time, and keep up to date on what groupmates or other groups are posting in order to avoid duplication.

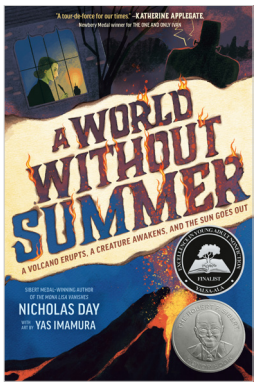
After the research and posting session is complete, collaborative groups should write a short summary emphasizing the pioneer's unique qualities, achievements, and contributions. Post the whiteboards in a central location such as the class website or Google classroom in order for groups to learn from one another. Pioneers from *American Wings* include Charles Anderson, Willa Brown, Cornelius Coffey, Bessie Coleman, Janet Harmon Bragg, Lewis Jackson, and John Robinson, as well as the Tuskegee Airmen. Additional pioneers might include Glenn Curtiss, Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, and the Wright brothers, Discuss: What in aviation history and development do we owe to these pioneers? How far have we come in racial justice since these figures fought to serve their country and achieve their dreams? What aviation advances do we have to look forward to? Additional

- prhlink.com/tuskegeeairmensi
- obap.org/hof
- prhlink.com/phbhm
- prhlink.com/sividhistory
- prhlink.com/blackaviators
- aerospaceamerica.aiaa.org
- nasa.gov/general/advancing-technology-for-aeronautics

PAIR 4:
When Tomorrow Burns &
A World Without Summer

When Tomorrow Burns
TAE KELLER

9780593485583
Random House Books for Young Readers
Hardcover | $17.99 | 272 pages | Lexile: 710L
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**



A World Without Summer
A Volcano Erupts, A Creature Awakens, and the Sun Goes Out
NICHOLAS DAY
Illustrated by YAS IMAMURA

9780593643877
Random House Studio | Hardcover
$19.99 | 304 pages | Lexile: 780L
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**

SUMMARIES

Three middle schoolers face numerous challenges of friendship and fate in *When Tomorrow Burns* by Tae Keller.

In the illustrated nonfiction book *A World Without Summer*, author Nicholas Day recounts the environmental crisis caused by the 1815 Mount Tambora volcanic eruption.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

In what ways are humans and the environment inextricably connected?

What grounds us and empowers us even when the future is uncertain?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

PODCAST CONNECTION

Both *When Tomorrow Burns* and *A World Without Summer* reveal the connection between climate disasters and literature. To generate interest, ask students to listen to the NPR podcast "Did Climate Inspire the Birth of a Monster?" (prhlink.com/nprclimate). The podcast describes the inspiration behind Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and how changes in weather can impact art and literature. As students listen, ask them to jot down one or two points from the podcast that they'd like to learn more about. Then they can research those facts in *A World Without Summer*, which details the worldwide impact of a volcanic eruption on people and culture, including the creation of *Frankenstein*. Introduce students to the genre known as "cli-fi," or fiction linked to climate change. Encourage students to explore examples of cli-fi and climate-based poetry (prhlink.com/earthdaylit). Discuss as a class: In what ways can art reflect human concern for climate crises and act as an advocate for change? As an extension, students can analyze Amanda Gorman's poem "Smoldering Dawn," about the California wildfires (prhlink.com/sunsetgorman).

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

SONG ANALYSIS

The characters in *When Tomorrow Burns* are increasingly anxious about a prophetic book, middle school stress, and the fires that are threatening Seattle. Project the term "ecoanxiety" on the whiteboard, and ask the class to think/write/pair/share what they think the term means. Ask students to partner-read the Unicef blog "What is Ecoanxiety? Understanding how Climate Change Impacts Children's Mental Health" (prhlink.com/unicefecoanxiety). As they read about ecoanxiety, students should refine their definition of the term and look for parallels to the characters in *When Tomorrow Burns*. Discuss: In what ways do Nomi, Violet, and Arthur feel like they are living in a world on fire, both figuratively and literally? As an extension, show students a taped performance (prhlink.com/ytawfineplace) and the lyrics (prhlink.com/warrenlyrics) to Alex Warren's song "Fine Place to Die." Discuss the song's extended climate metaphor and chorus line "The world's on fire." How does Warren's song support the theme of resilience in When Tomorrow Burns?

CULMINATING WRITING ASSESSMENT

A culminating assessment provides students with a frame for reading and analyzing texts, and it provides a personalized, formal writing opportunity at the end of the reading. Students should be introduced to this prompt prior to reading so that they read with a purpose. Prompts should be complex enough to encourage critical thinking and to promote a variety of student responses. Students can apply thinking and evidence from their during-reading annotations and from other class activities as they respond to the prompt. Culminating writing prompts from *When Tomorrow Burns* and/or *A World Without Summer* might include:

- Write an essay in which you analyze how Tae Keller's distinctive style reveals his purpose in *When Tomorrow Burns*. Consider his characterization, mix of narration, poems, and texts, or another of his writer's crafts. Support your thesis with examples and details from the text.
- Analyze how *When Tomorrow Burns* and/or *A World Without Summer* speak to themes of ecoanxiety, resilience, and community through purposefully chosen literary techniques such as point of view or perspective. Use explicit text evidence to support your thesis.

As an extension, students can meet in peer feedback groups, either in person or online, to plan, revise, and publish their work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Laura Reis Mayer is a professional learning consultant from Asheville, NC. She develops and facilitates learning for national education organizations. A twice-renewed National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT), she taught middle school, high school, and college English, speech, drama, and literacy. She has written more than 50 teacher guides for multiple publishers.

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