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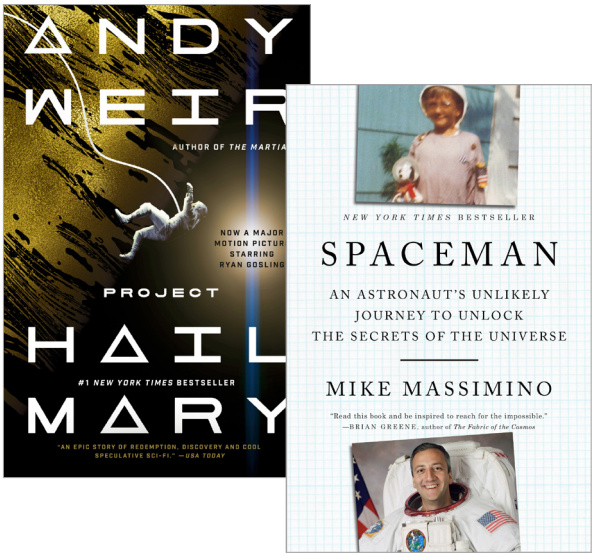
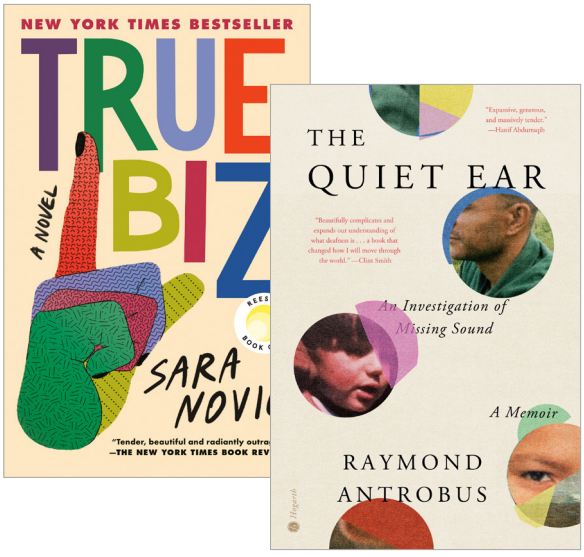
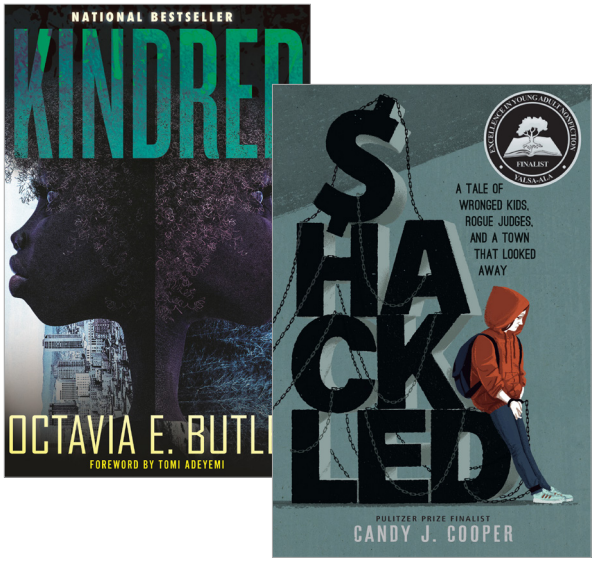
THEMATIC GUIDE

Teaching Fiction and Nonfiction Pairings

HIGH SCHOOL







This guide encourages high school students to strengthen critical thinking, media literacy, and civic understanding while exploring complex issues across disciplines through meaningful fiction and nonfiction pairings across subject areas.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

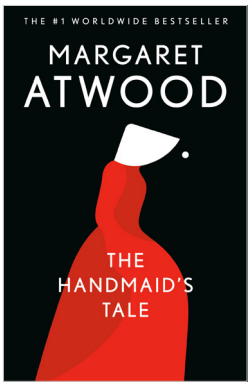
- INTRODUCTION 3
- PAIR 1:
  The Handmaid's Tale & *How Democracies Die* 4
  - SUMMARIES 4
  - ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS 4
  - CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES 4
    - Cartoon Analysis 4
    - ESCAPE News Analysis 5
    - Socratic Seminar 5
- PAIR 2:
  Project Hail Mary & *Spaceman* 6
  - SUMMARIES 6
  - ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS 6
  - CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES 6
    - Genre Study 6
    - "See, Think, Me, We" 7
    - Quick Clips 7
- PAIR 3:
  True Biz & *The Quiet Ear* 8
  - SUMMARIES 8
  - ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS 8
  - CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES 8
    - STEAL Character Analysis 8
    - "Step In, Step Out, Step Back" 9
    - Poetry Analysis 9
- PAIR 4:
  Kindred & *Shackled* 10
  - SUMMARIES 10
  - ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS 10
  - CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES 10
    - "I Used to Think... Now I Think..." 10
    - DIDLS Song Analysis 11
    - Product-Based Learning 11
- **ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE** 12

INTRODUCTION

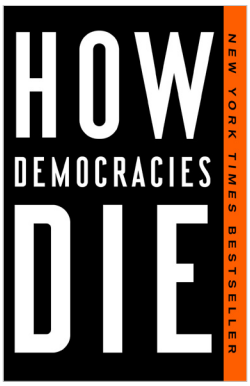
Pairing fiction and nonfiction texts provides students the benefits of two worlds: the engagement of storytelling and the diversity of prose. In high school, fiction-nonfiction pairings can be used beyond the English classroom in courses such as science, civics, history, government, and sociology. These pairings enhance not only content knowledge, but also build skills in media literacy, critical thinking, and social justice. As students read and analyze multiple genres such as dystopian fiction, memoirs, speculative science fiction, and more, they open doors and visualize possibilities in a world they are soon to enter as citizens and empowered agents of change.

The activities in this guide, designed for grades 9–12, 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. High school students will read, write, think, and collaborate, all while exploring topics critical to our current cultural landscape.

PAIR 1:
The Handmaid's Tale &
How Democracies Die



The Handmaid's Tale
MARGARET ATWOOD
9780385490818
Vintage | Paperback | $18.00 | 336 pages
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**



How Democracies Die
STEVEN LEVITSKY and DANIEL ZIBLATT
9781524762940
Crown | Paperback | $20.00 | 320 pages
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**

SUMMARIES

In Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, a totalitarian regime utilizes religion as a political tool and women's bodies as natural resources.

How Democracies Die, by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, is both a playbook and a warning for what happens when democracies refuse to acknowledge the warning signs of emerging authoritarianism.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Is our democracy in danger? the world?

How does power function in an authoritarian regime? responsible to them?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

CARTOON ANALYSIS

When students analyze political cartoons, they exercise visual and critical thinking skills, both of which are core to media literacy. Project one of the many handmaiden cartoons that appear regularly on news media sites. One image, for example, portrays a line of red-cloaked women with white bonnets entering a voting booth, then exiting from the booth dressed in twenty-first-century garb, their repressive cloaks tossed to the ground (prhlink.com/indatwood). Explain that *The Handmaid's Tale* author, Margaret Atwood, reposted this image in the days leading up to the 2016 presidential election. Ask students to analyze the cartoon using the National Archives cartoon analysis activity (prhlink.com/cartoonanalysis). In this protocol, students describe the image, consider possible interpretations, and connect to special interest groups and the bigger picture. After students have analyzed the cartoon individually or in partners, discuss with the class: How does this image speak to contemporary politics and social justice issues? How does it support or extend authorial purpose in *The Handmaid's Tale* (and in *How Democracies Die*)? Finally, show students a news video about red-cloaked demonstrators protesting authoritarian government in America (prhlink.com/afphandmaid). Discuss: Why has this outfit become an international symbol of political defiance?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

ESCAPE NEWS ANALYSIS

Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *How Democracies Die* illustrate what can happen when autocratic leaders control or curtail media and freedom of speech. Provide practice and a protocol for discerning fact from propaganda. Distribute two news stories from an online newspaper, social media feed, or other source. One of the texts should be from a valid source and the other from a questionable or absent source. Ask students to analyze the validity of each by applying the ESCAPE method to analyze **E**vidence, **S**ource, **C**ontext, **A**udience, **P**urpose, and **E**xecution. Share findings and determine which story is "fake" news and which is a more trustworthy source. Encourage students to use this method every time they are reading about or listening to current event news. In this way, they can truly be engaged and informed citizens ready and able to discuss and defend their point of view. And they will be more likely to recognize when something labeled "fake news" may just be a viewpoint with which autocratic leaders do not agree. For more information on the ESCAPE method of information analysis, see this from Newseum Ed (prhlink.com/newseumedposter).

SOCRATIC SEMINAR

To build relevance and promote discourse with diverse views, conduct a Socratic seminar (prhlink.com/lfjsocratic) based on *How Democracies Die*. Ask students to concentrate on Table 1: Four Key Indicators of Authoritarian Behavior (p. 23). In it, Levitsky and Ziblatt present the following indicators:

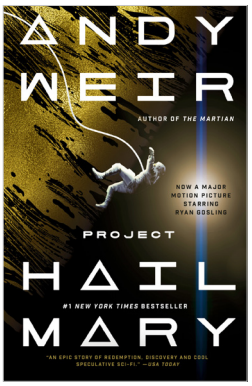
1. Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game
2. Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents
3. Toleration or encouragement of violence
4. Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media

During the discussion, take a facilitator's role. Ask a low-risk opening question to encourage total class participation in a round-robin response. Second, move to a core question for the purpose of analyzing text details and providing evidence for claims. Finally, end with a closing question that promotes connection and relevance. Example prompts based on the "Fateful Alliances" chapter of *How Democracies Die* (pp. 11–32) include:

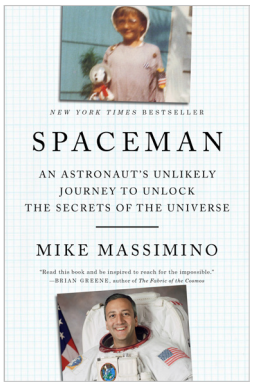
1. Is our democracy in danger of moving towards authoritarian rule? (This is a simple "yes" or "no" round-robin response that will be elaborated upon during the next question.)
2. How can you use one or more of the four indicators (pp. 23–24) and their accompanying descriptors to support your claim that our democracy is/is not in danger? Use text evidence and your own research and knowledge of current cultural and political climates.
3. How might you connect the topic of decaying democracies to your own life, to the world, or to other texts/media/etc. (including *The Handmaid's Tale*)?

Afterward, discuss: How did the seminar deepen your understanding of the text(s)?

PAIR 2: *Project Hail Mary* & *Spaceman*



Project Hail Mary
ANDY WEIR
9780593135228
Ballantine Books | Paperback | $22.00 | 496 pages
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**



Spaceman
An Astronaut's Unlikely Journey to Unlock the Secrets of the Universe
MIKE MASSIMINO
9781101903568
Crown | Paperback | $18.00 | 336 pages
Lexile: 920L | Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**

SUMMARIES

In Andy Weir's *Project Hail Mary*, Ryland Grace is the unlikely hero tasked with saving Earth and all of humanity, but first he has to wake up and remember his own name.

Spaceman, by Mike Massimino, is the lively memoir of the childhood space dreamer and grownup NASA astronaut who walked in space and fixed the Hubble telescope.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What are the cultivated character traits that contribute to a life of purpose and reward?

How can the combination of science, fantasy, and fiction entertain, educate, and inspire?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

<u>GENRE STUDY</u>

Prior to reading, show students the official trailer to the 2026 major motion picture *Project Hail Mary*, based on Andy Weir's bestselling book (prhlink.com/ytprojecthailmary). As they watch, ask students to note any emerging themes or tropes. Students should notice themes of self-doubt, redemption, and discovery, and they might recognize tropes such as the reluctant hero chosen to save the world. Next, ask students to list the elements from the trailer that seem science-based (like the Earth-based rescue mission) and in another list, all the elements that seem fictional (like a sun-eating microbe and Rocky, the alien). If needed, students can watch the trailer a second time.

Afterward, discuss as a large group: Does the story seem more speculative science fiction (not necessarily based on science), hard science fiction (grounded in science), or a combination of both? As an extension, ask students to read an article that discusses the book's use of both genres (prhlink.com/spacephm). Ask: Why do the book and movie choose to blend these subgenres of science fiction? Discuss how the mix provides believability and entertainment. Challenge students to look for elements of speculative and hard science fiction as they read *Project Hail Mary*, and to consider the impact on readers.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

"SEE, THINK, ME, WE"

In *Spaceman*, as in many memoirs, the author utilizes photographs to provide context and elevate central themes. Show the class two pictures from the text: the childhood cover photo and the final image from the book's photo insert, where the author appears in a NASA shuttle. In both these photos, Mike Massimino is pictured with his childhood Snoopy, who is dressed in astronaut gear. Using the "See, Think, Me, We" image analysis routine, ask students to respond to both photos together (prhlink.com/seethinkmewe). Students should initially work through four analysis rounds independently, each time providing a more detailed lens. Students consider:

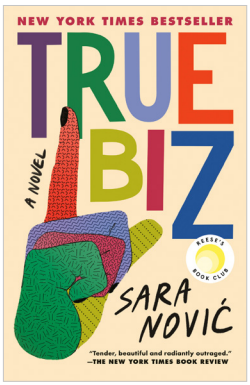
- What do I see? (What details do I observe?)
- What do I think? (What about the image or accompanying words makes me think that?)
- What connections can I make? (How does this work relate to me?)
- What broader connections can I make? (How does it relate to bigger ideas and issues?

After students note their observations, ask them to discuss their thinking with a partner. Next, ask students to read the middle paragraph on page 8 of *Spaceman*, where Massimino tells readers how his brother gave him the Snoopy astronaut when Mike was seven. Discuss as a class: How does this excerpt, taken together with the Snoopy photos, help develop themes of persistence and lifelong dreams? What other character traits does Massimino call on to reach his dreams? What personal or broader connections emerged in your partner discussion? How do photographs help clarify, extend, or change our thinking while reading nonfiction?

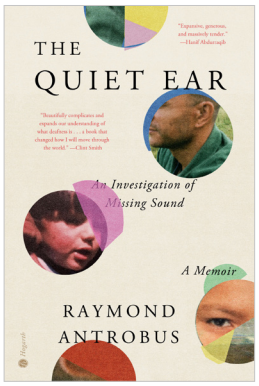
QUICK CLIPS

The Hubble Space Telescope is central to both *Project Hail Mary* and *Spaceman*. Challenge students to build and share knowledge about the Hubble telescope using a social media quick clip format, similar to TikToks, Instagram Reels, or YouTube Shorts. Direct students to select one article, video, image, or interactive from NASA's incredibly rich Hubble website and create a quick clip summarizing the feature for classmates (science.nasa.gov/mission/hubble). Students will post their video on a collaborative digital space such as Padlet (padlet.com) (which allows quick video recording) or Google Classroom (where students can post a video created on their cell phone or laptop camera). Adobe Express and Canva also provide clip makers. Instruct students to start their quick clip with a "hook" and to leave their audience with two to three compelling facts. Classmates can then post reactions and responses. Discuss: How did creating and viewing peer videos extend your knowledge after reading? For more information on the value of short-form videos, see Edutopia (prhlink.com/edutopiavideocontent).

PAIR 3:
True Biz &
The Quiet Ear



True Biz
A Novel
SARA NOVIĆ
9780593241523
Random House | Paperback
$19.00 | 416 pages
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**



The Quiet Ear
An Investigation of Missing Sound: A Memoir
RAYMOND ANTROBUS
9780593732106
Hogarth | Hardcover | $29.00 | 208 pages
Also available: **E-Book, Audio Download**

SUMMARIES

In *True Biz*, by Sara Nović, a world of change is in store for students and staff at River Valley School for the Deaf.

Raymond Antrobus's memoir *The Quiet Ear* is the story of a deaf, mixed-race child who finds his voice within poetry and the "missingness" of sound.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

In what ways do we need to transform perceptions about deafness and the deaf world?

What, other than sound, can deafness take away? What can it contribute and create?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

<u>STEAL CHARACTER ANALYSIS</u>

Invite students to "steal" a character from *True Biz* or *The Quiet Ear* in order to determine the author's purpose. The STEAL protocol provides a window into character and to broader themes in both books (prhlink.com/oercommons). Students use five different colors to highlight text and determine:

S - What/how does the character speak?
T - What are the character's thoughts?
E - What are the character's effects on others?
A - What are the character's actions?
L - What are the character's looks?

Students can work independently or in partners, and they can concentrate on one or more of the main characters/authors from either text (Charlie, Austin, or February from *True Biz* or Raymond from *The Quiet Ear*). After highlighting, students can record their thinking on a two-column chart, complete with page numbers and analysis. At the bottom of their chart, students should write a summary indicating how the character analysis informs their understanding of author's purpose. As a group, share the different character analyses and discuss: What did we learn about the different and multiple worlds these characters inhabit? What coming-of-age experiences did you relate to, and what does this tell us about our own similarities and differences to deaf culture?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

"STEP IN, STEP OUT, STEP BACK"

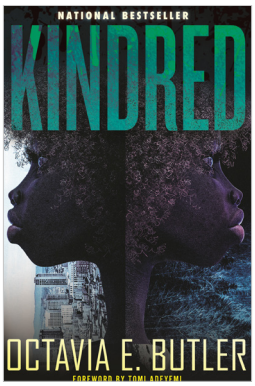
In *True Biz*, Charlie's failed cochlear implant elevates a controversy in the deaf community. Build knowledge and perspective around cochlear implants by asking students to read and discuss the article "Hear Me Out: Hearing Each Other for the First Time: The Implications of Cochlear Implant Activation" (prhlink.com/pmcnih). After students have read and annotated the article, divide them into small groups where they will apply the "Step In, Step Out, Step Back" strategy to discuss the debate around cochlear implants (prhlink.com/thinkingroutine).

While discussing the article, student groups will choose to focus on one or more of the following: a deaf child, the parents of a deaf child, the deaf community, or the hearing community. In "step in," groups discuss what that specific character, person, or group of people is feeling, believing, or experiencing. In "step out," the group determines what more could be learned to better understand that person's or community's outlook. Finally, in "step back," groups reflect on their own perspectives and how it feels to look at another's point of view. Back in the large group, ask students what surprised them in the article, and discuss the mindset of "fixing" the brokenness of being deaf. Do implants and mainstreaming transform deaf children for the better? What is gained, and what is lost? According to Raymond Antrobus in *The Quiet Ear*, "If sound is missing, it implies something is needed" (p. 6). How does this ring true with characters in both books? Where does this brokenness idea fit into the cochlear implant debate?

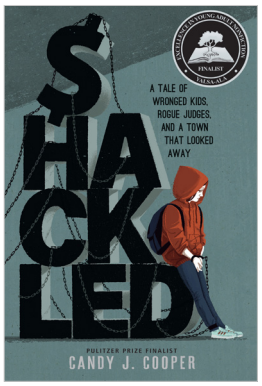
POETRY ANALYSIS

Raymond Antrobus, the author of *The Quiet Ear*, finds his missing voice in poetry. Challenge students to analyze his signed poem "Dear Hearing World" (prhlink.com/ythearingpoem). After students have watched and listened to his performance, provide the written version of the poem (prhlink.com/griffinprizehearing) and ask students to analyze it using the DIDLS technique. With DIDLS, students consider diction, imagery, details, language, and sentence structure in order to understand tone and determine the poet's point of view. Once students have had the opportunity to annotate each of these poetic elements, discuss: What is Antrobus accusing the hearing world of, and how would you describe his tone? What specific diction from the poem led you to this interpretation? What words, phrases, and lines in the poem remind you of issues raised in *The Quiet Ear* and in *True Biz*? How does watching the poet sign add to your understanding of his poem, his memoir, and Nović's novel?

PAIR 4:
Kindred & *Shackled*



Kindred
Young Adult Edition
OCTAVIA BUTLER
Foreword by TOMI ADEYEMI
9780807008096
Beacon Press | Paperback
$14.99 | 320 pages | Lexile: 580L



Shackled
A Tale of Wronged Kids, Rogue Judges, and a Town that Looked Away
CANDY J. COOPER
9781662620133
Calkins Creek | Hardcover
$19.99 | 192 pages | Lexile: 1140L
Also available: **E-Book**

SUMMARIES

In the neo-slave narrative, speculative science fiction *Kindred*, by Octavia Butler, Dana must return to her violent roots in slavery in order to fully comprehend her life in the present.

Candy J. Cooper's *Shackled* relays the shocking story of Pennsylvania children intentionally imprisoned so corrupt officials and business leaders could profit.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What forms of human slavery exist in the twenty-first century, and how can we combat them?

How can I stay informed and empowered around current social justice issues?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

"I USED TO THINK… NOW I THINK…"

While reading *Shackled* and *Kindred*, books that challenge accepted social narratives, encourage students to reflect on their thinking with the "I Used to Think… Now I Think…" protocol (rhlink.com/usedtothinknf). For example, after reading the "Intolerance" chapter of *Shackled*, students can consider how incarceration impacts prisoners, and how race, politics, and profit play a part. While reading *Kindred*, students might reflect on the status of racial reconciliation in our country. Model how to apply the "I Used to Think… Now I Think…" routine and provide time to use it with peers. Using turn and talks or think/write/pair/shares, students can stop throughout their reading of the texts and reflect with peers on their changed thinking about social justice. Discuss: How does the strategy help me think about my thinking and the thinking of others? Why is it important to read, research, or consider multiple viewpoints? As an extension, provide a recent article to read alongside the book, and encourage students to reflect on its alignment before applying the "I Used to Think… Now I Think…" strategy. With *Shackled*, students can read "The 2025 Reconciliation Bill

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Allows Private Prison Execs to Cash in on Cruelty" (prhlink.com/nilcreconbill). With *Kindred*, students might read "How Slavery in the U.S. Impacts Race Relations Today" (prhlink.com/msutodayrace). Ask: What is the benefit of reading and discussing texts about social justice?

DIDLS SONG ANALYSIS

In *Kindred*, Dana realizes she is literally connected to the legacy of slavery both in body (her missing limb) and blood (her ancestral relationship to Rufus). Encourage students to reflect on the complexity and legacy of American slavery with the John Legend song "Glory" and the DIDLS analysis method. Show the class the video of "Glory," which intersperses historical images with scenes from the movie Selma (prhlink.com/ytgloryselma). Review the lyrics, as well (prhlink.com/glorylyrics). Students will then work independently or in partners to examine diction, imagery, details, language, and syntax (DIDLS) in order to determine the song's tone and purpose. Using text evidence found in the song, students should come to understand the song as both inspirational and confrontational. Ask students to share specific words and phrases from the song that connect to *Kindred*. Discuss: Why does the speaker say "Selma is now" and "Sins that go against our skin become blessings"? Why does he recall Rosa Parks and Ferguson, Missouri in the same breath? How does his line "Saw the face of Jim Crow under a bald eagle" serve as an indictment? How do these lyrics portray pre-Civil War slavery as inextricably connected to the lives of Black Americans today?

PRODUCT-BASED LEARNING

Processing their learning with multimedia tools and creating digital products provides students the opportunity to deepen understanding and converse with authentic audiences. Direct the class to the "Modern Abolition" section of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center's website (prhlink.com/freedomcenterabolition). Ask students to read the website with the goal of understanding what forms slavery takes today and what powers its existence. Challenge students to become teachers by creating a digital educational product that explains modern-day slavery in a format that will educate and inspire audiences to action. Students might create a digital poster or brochure, a podcast, a video, or any number of other multimedia products. The goal is to inform and inspire others to become agents of change. For more on digital products, see Edutopia (prhlink.com/edutopiagraphicdesign) and (prhlink.com/edutopiapbl). Provide time for students to examine and respond to each other's products. Discuss: How has what you learned about modern slavery added to your interpretation of *Shackled* and/or *Kindred*?

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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