

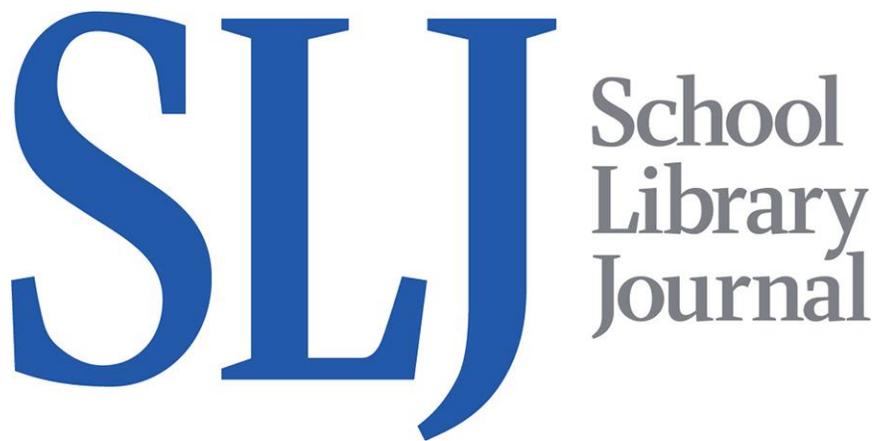
Melissa Hart, BA, MFA is the author of *Better with Books: 500 Diverse Books to Ignite Empathy and Encourage Self-Acceptance in Tweens and Teens* (Sasquatch, 2019), the middle-grade novel *Avenging the Owl* (Sky Pony, 2016), the middle-grade nonfiction graphic book *The Media Adventurer's Handbook: Decoding Persuasion in Everyday News, Ads, and More* (World Citizen Comics, 2020), and the memoir *Gringa: A Contradictory Girlhood* (Seal Press, 2009).

She is a longtime contributing editor and columnist at *The Writer Magazine*. Her essays have appeared in *Real Simple*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Advocate*, *Woman's Day*, *Working Mother*, *Motherwell*, *Brain Child*, *Hemispheres*, *Education Week*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and numerous other publications.

Melissa teaches for the MFA in Creative Writing program at Southern New Hampshire University, and she's a frequent presenter at conferences across the Pacific Northwest. She lives in Eugene, Oregon with her husband and their 13-year old daughter, where they enjoy hiking and kayaking, road trips and theater, and lots and lots of reading.

For more information, including TV and print interviews, visit www.melissahart.com .





PROFESSIONAL READING

Better with Books: 500 Diverse Books To Ignite Empathy and Encourage Self-Acceptance in Tweens and Teens

by [Melissa Hart](#)

[Sasquatch](#). Apr. 2019. 304p. bibliog. further reading. index. pap. \$19.95. ISBN 9781632172273.

COPY ISBN

★ This exceptionally useful text offers well-curated annotated bibliographies on subjects such as immigration, race and ethnicity, LGBTQIA+ identities, adoption, religion, and poverty, framed by brief and engaging essays on why each topic matters to readers today. Hart (*Avenging the Owl*) shares her personal connections to several issues, reflecting on how lacking or having the right story at the right time can make a world of difference to young people. Even with some appropriate overlap among lists and the wise focus on more recent titles, there is a feeling of abundance. Books vary widely in terms of genre and age level (with the occasional adult title featured), and Hart writes with an intersectional lens, considering within-group difference. Interviews with children's authors, including An Na, Chris Crutcher, Donna Gephart, Beth Vrabel, and Eric Gansworth, are seamlessly integrated and add insight, as do anecdotes from teachers and librarians. An introduction by author Sharon M. Draper and appendixes of additional resources and research further situate the book within the larger landscape of engagement with life-changing adolescent fiction.

VERDICT Offering valuable reading lists, this beautifully organized work should become a go-to resource for parents, students of young adult literature, teachers, and librarians

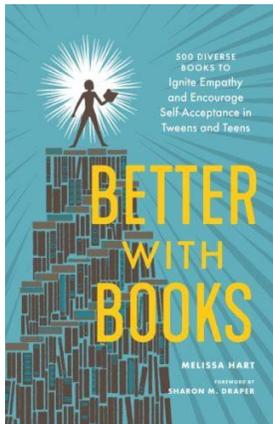
Reviewed by [Miriam DesHarnais](#), [Towson University, MD](#), Jun 30, 2019

Unexpected Jolts of Children's Literature

AUGUST 14, 2019 BY [ELIZABETH BIRD](#)

As you may know, my day job is as a librarian but not, as it happens, a librarian of *children's* literature specifically. A lot of days I spend my time sorting through all the new releases for adults (horrors!). But since my heart is firmly ensconced in the world of books for kids, I always note when a book has some connection to literature for the young. Today, I'd like to introduce you to six 2019 titles that may be worth noting.

Better With Books: 500 Diverse Books to Ignite Empathy and Encourage Self-Acceptance in Tweens and Teens by Melissa Hart



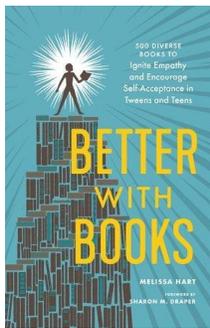
This actually came out back in April, but I only discovered it just now. According to the *SLJ* review it contains, “well-curated annotated bibliographies on subjects such as immigration, race and ethnicity, LGBTQIA+ identities, adoption, religion, and poverty, framed by brief and engaging essays on why each topic matters to readers today.” And while the introduction is by Sharon Draper, she is by no means the only author involved since there are interviews inside with An Na, Chris Crutcher, Donna Gephart, Beth Vrabel, and Eric Gansworth. I know Draper, but I was less familiar with Hart, who is a middle grade author (*Avenging the Owl*), a contributing editor for *The Writer Magazine*, and a creative writing teacher for Southern New Hampshire University's MFA program.



Diversity in MG Lit #9 Better With Books

Ordinarily I feature a group of books in my monthly feature but today I'm going to call out one book that offers a guide to 500 diverse books. There are many roundups of diverse books in addition to this one. Solid on line resources like The Brown Bookshelf to name just one. There are also other books that round up and recommend books for kids *A Family of Readers* edited by Rodger Sutton and Martha V. Parravano is one from several years ago. But here is what makes BETTER WITH BOOKS so notable. Consider the tag line: 500 diverse books to ignite empathy and encourage self-acceptance in tweens and teens. That's a great mission and it's more books by a considerable margin than most of this type of book. In the introduction Sharon Draper says, "all of them...speak to contemporary issues and offer a solid starting point for the essential human quest toward greater understanding of ourselves and others. "

Melissa Hart has a beautifully expansive way of looking at diversity going beyond race, ethnicity, gender identity and class to include categories like



- Adoption and Foster Care
- Immigration
- Learning Challenges
- Mental health
- Religion and Spirituality
- and Physical disabilities

Categories that are often over-looked.

You'll find books you already know and love and plenty of lesser known gems. The books featured are all published in the last 10 years and will provide a foundation for empathetic reading for many years to come. It will be a particularly good book to give as a gift to a favorite teacher.

Rosanne Parry is the author of 4 MG novels and the forthcoming A WOLF CALLED WANDER and LAST OF THE NAME. She is a bookseller at Annie Blooms and teaches in the Masters in Book Publishing program at Portland State. She writes in a treehouse in her back yard.

PRAISE FOR *BETTER WITH BOOKS*

“An essential resource for parents, librarians, teachers, and all who help guide our teens and preteens: the reading list topics speak precisely to the kinds of issues they face every day. Reading fiction and memoir offers them another way to expand their understanding of themselves and develop empathy for others—both of which are vitally important in an increasingly complex world.”

—**Nancy Pearl, bestselling author of *Book Lust*, librarian, and literary critic**

“This collection of themed book lists is a valuable resource for educators, librarians, parents, and other adults who recognize the power of literature in the lives of young people.”

—***Publishers Weekly***

“Buttressed by insightful opening essays based on the compiler’s own experiences, this guide covers approximately 500 books in 11 categories...The annotations give major plot points and are concisely and engagingly written...An excellent resource...”

—***Booklist***

“When you’re a teenager or preteen, knowing that you’re not the only one going through something makes you feel considerably less alone. *Better with Books* includes corresponding fiction and memoir recommendations to deal with all of the issues and insecurities that young people face. It’s super thorough and helpful and I will definitely be referencing it as my daughter grows up.”

—**Padma Lakshmi, actress, television host, and author of *Love, Loss and What We Ate***

“The right book read at the right time can change a life, and that’s why *Better with Books* belongs in every library. Timely, compassionate, and wise, this is a remarkable reference guide.”

—**Katherine Applegate, Newberry Medal award-winning author of *The One and Only Ivan***

“If you’re a parent of tweens or teens, or you work with them, *Better with Books* is an absolute must-have reference book. Essays about important topics, such as body image, mental health, and race, are brimming with personal stories, author interviews, and other helpful information. You’ll also find five hundred recommended books for preteens and teens organized by topic, with summaries of each title. This gem needs to be on your bookshelf!”

—**Donna Gephart, award-winning author of *Lily and Dunkin* and *In Your Shoes***

“Stories heal, bind, illuminate, and guide us. As an educator always searching for stories to help support and aid my students, I need a guide as thorough and essential as *Better with Books*. This will definitely sit on my shelf adorned with many Post-it notes!”

—**An Na**, award-winning author of *A Step from Heaven* and *The Place Between Breaths*

“This book is incredibly insightful, organized, and detailed. Hart delivers a wonderful, diverse series of lists and summaries that would be an excellent addition to any home, library, or classroom.”

—**Peter Brown Hoffmeister**, author of the National Book Award-nominated *Too Shattered for Mending*

“Authors write for many reasons, but one of the most important is to let readers know that whatever difficulty they face, they’re not alone. Few tweens and teens are willing to expose their vulnerabilities, and that is as it should be. But when they see their struggles in story—when they come upon a character with whom they feel true kinship—their sense of isolation recedes. We live in a culture where differences that should be celebrated are often not. Kids find truth in story, and often they find answers. *Better with Books* is a comprehensive guide for educators, parents, and anyone looking to find just the right book for a preteen or teen.”

—**Chris Crutcher**, award-winning author of *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* and *Whale Talk*

“If you’re looking for even more reading suggestions...pick up this guide to 500 diverse books. The books are organized by category, so you can find something to read based on issues that are important to you—like immigration, mental health, religion, race, and more.”

—**New Moon Girls**

“Must-read reference book for teens and tweens.”

—**KATU TV, AM Northwest**

“This book is a must-have for parents of preteens, teens, educators, counselors, librarians—for anyone who spends time with youth. We have no way to measure the impact of placing the perfect story in the hands of a young adult in need or a parent struggling to understand what their teen is going through.”

—**Eugene Weekly**

“This book of books can help teens find fiction about important topics.”

—**KING-TV, New Day NW**