

# SCHNEIDER FAMILY BOOK AWARD: A Grades Pre-K–12 Booklist About the Disability Experience



Scot Smith

IN 2003, Dr. Katherine Schneider and her family endowed the American Library Association's Schneider Family Book Award to honor authors and illustrators for books that embody the artistic expression of the disability experience for children and teens. Dr. Schneider is blind and has been an advocate and activist within the disability community for decades. The first Schneider Family Book Awards were given in 2005, and dozens of books about the disability experience have been recognized by the ALA since then. Originally, three books in three categories—Young Children, Middle Grade, and Teen—were selected by the jury. Starting in 2019, the Schneider jury began to recognize honor titles in each of the three categories. A complete list of Schneider winners and honors can be found at [https://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/awards/1/all\\_years](https://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/awards/1/all_years).

Each year, the Schneider jury reads and reviews numerous picturebooks, nonfiction titles, novels, and memoirs about the disability experience for children and teens in order to pick the winners and honors. The definition of disability is intentionally broad and leaves room for interpretation by each jury. The

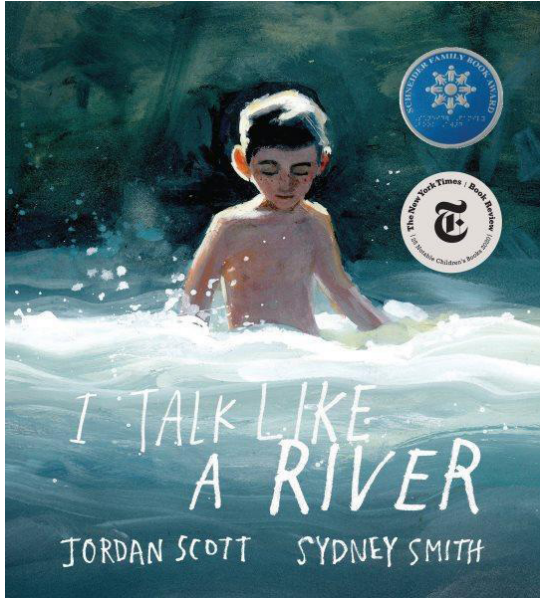
guidelines simply state that for a book to be considered for the Schneider award, it “must portray some aspect of living with a disability, whether the disability is physical, mental, or emotional.” In addition to debating a book's literary and artistic quality, the jury must also evaluate titles for authenticity, accessibility, representation, and

portrayal of the disability experience. The disabled characters in the books should be depicted as living full lives, not as people to be pitied. The complete manual for the Schneider Family Book Award can be downloaded at <https://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/sites/ala.org/awardsgrants/files/content/Revised%20Schneider%20Family%20Book%20Award%20Manual%202022.pdf>.

This list contains brief descriptions of eight books that have been recognized by the ALA for the Schneider Family Book Award, teaching suggestions, and recently published books related to the disability. Above all else, teachers and librarians must remember that disability is diversity, and today's

children and teens deserve books that authentically represent the disability experience.

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**Scott, Jordan. (2020). *I Talk Like a River* (Sydney Smith, Illus.). Holiday House. Unpaged. GR 1–4. Picturebook/memoir.**

Poet Jordan Scott introduces this memoir with the phrase “I wake up each morning with the sounds of words all around me.” Because of his stuttering, the boy cannot say some of those words. After a bad day at school where he feels isolated, bullied, and ashamed, the boy’s father takes him for a walk on the bank of a nearby river. There the boy comes to understand how his speech is oftentimes “like a river” with its dips, swirls, and ripples. Based on the author’s personal life and beautifully illustrated by Sydney Smith, this memoir offers powerful insights into the daily life of a young child with disabled speech and the importance of finding a connection with family and the natural world. Pair the evocative images with the award-winning audiobook, narrated by the author, for an even more powerful experience.

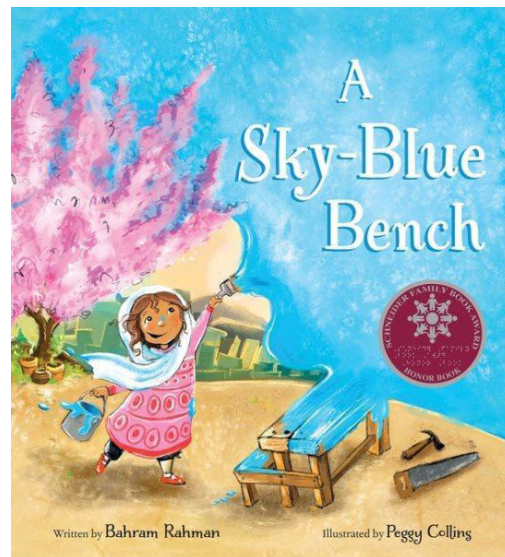
#### Teaching Suggestions

- Jordan Scott displays his skills as a poet with the copious amount of figurative language he employs throughout the book. Ask students to find examples of similes, metaphors, and imagery within the text.
- *I Talk Like a River* provides ample opportunity for social-emotional learning. Have students discuss the boy’s disabled speech and why empathy is important in this story. Students can also discuss the role of the father and talk about a time in their own lives when an adult helped them to deal with a difficult day.

- The sounds and sights of the natural world play an integral part in the boy’s understanding of his disability. Place students into small groups and let them discuss a time in their lives when a trip to a park, a lake, or the woods impacted their emotions in a positive way.
- Read the book aloud to students and then listen to the audiobook of Scott reading the story aloud (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNL-bNguy2o>). Ask students to compare and contrast your reading with Scott’s own words. Which reading evoked the most understanding of disabled speech? Why?

#### Related Books

- Frazier, S. T. (2021). *Mighty inside*. Levine Querido. GR 4–7.
- Harrington, C. C. (2022). *Wildoak*. Scholastic. GR 4–7.
- Rutter, H. (2021). *The boy who made everyone laugh*. Scholastic. GR 5–8.
- Varnes, A. (2021). *Say it out loud*. Random House. GR 4–7.
- Vawter, V. (2014). *Paperboy*. Random House. GR 5–8.



**Rahman, Bahram. (2021). *A Sky-Blue Bench* (Peggy Collins, Illus.). Pajama Press. Unpaged. GR K–2. Picturebook/realistic fiction.**

After an accident in which she lost part of her leg, a young Afghani girl is ready to return to school with her new prosthesis. Unfortunately, Aria quickly discovers that all of the school’s furniture had been burned for firewood during the winter, and she cannot comfortably sit on the floor because of her “helper leg.” Determined to attend school, she en-

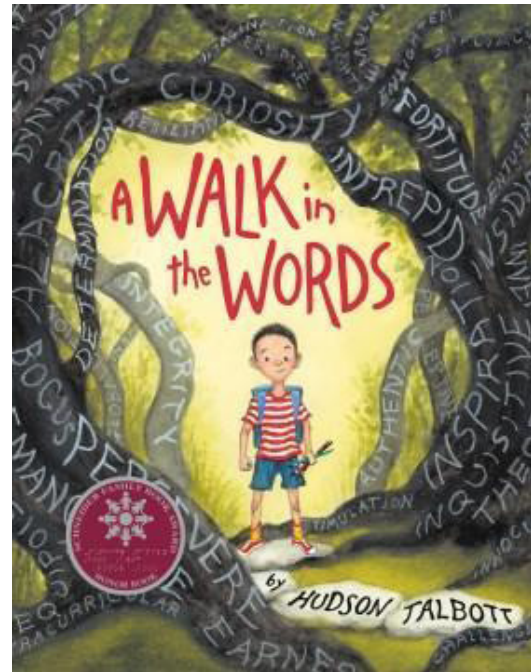
lists the help of a local carpenter, who gives her supplies as well as advice. With assistance from a friend, her little brother, and her mother, Aria builds a sky-blue bench so that she can attend class. This story is filled with themes of hope and resilience and is made stronger by Collins's bright and lively illustrations. The book is based on Rahman's experiences in Afghanistan.

### Teaching Suggestions

- Briefly discuss with students the history of Afghanistan and the education of girls in that country. Have students compare and contrast their classroom with Aria's. How are the classrooms the same? How are they different?
- The color of the bench—painted sky-blue by Aria—is a symbol for courage and wisdom. Aria displays much bravery and wisdom in this story. Ask students to find scenes in which Aria displays courage.
- Aria could not have built this bench by herself. She also had to solve numerous problems along the way. What problems did Aria have to solve? What supplies did she need? What tools did she use? How did others help her?
- Have students draw and color their own bench. Ask students about the importance of the color of their bench. Students can watch a short video with Peggy Collins (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGbesxlF1U>) for inspiration.

### Related Books

- Bowling, D. (2021). *Aven Green, sleuthing machine*. Sterling Children's Books. GR 1–4.
- Fritsch, K., & McGuire, A. (2021). *We move together* (E. Trejos, Illus.). AK Press. GR pre-K–2.
- Jensen, K. (Ed.). (2020). *Body talk: 37 voices explore our radical anatomy*. Algonquin Young Readers. GR 9–12.
- Kensky, J., & Downes, P. (2018). *Rescue and Jessica: A life-changing friendship* (S. Magoon, Illus.). Candlewick Press. GR K–3.
- Pimentel, A. B. (2020). *All the way to the top: How one girl's fight for Americans with disabilities changed everything* (N. H. Ali, Illus.). Sourcebook Kids. GR 1–4.
- Soontorvat, C. (2022). *A life of service: The story of Tammy Duckworth* (D. Phumiruk, Illus.). Candlewick Press. GR K–3.
- Stoker, A. (2022). *Ali and the sea stars* (G. Reid, Illus.). HarperCollins Children's Books. GR pre-K–2.



**Talbott, Hudson. (2021). *A Walk in the Words*. Nancy Paulsen Books. Unpaged. GR 1–3. Picturebook/realistic fiction.**

Based on the author's childhood experiences when he was labeled a "slow reader," this picturebook details how a boy who is struggling with reading recognizes that he reads differently than his classmates. The boy says he is the slowest reader in class and feels intimidated by the words on the pages of books. However, he loves art and stories and gains confidence with his own method of reading. Eventually, he tears down his wall of shame and accepts that he is an atypical reader. Talbott's delightful illustrations reflect the boy's frustrations and successes with literacy. An author's note describes Talbott's own difficulties with reading and encourages "slow readers to savor the story."

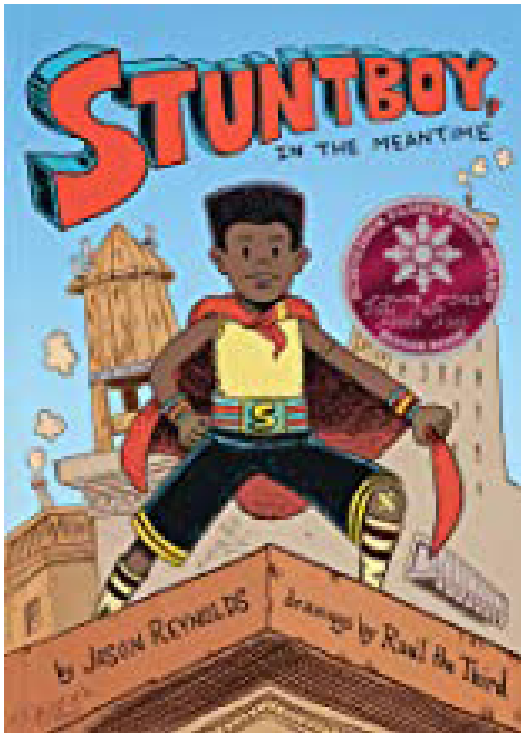
### Teaching Suggestions

- One of the techniques that Talbott used as a child to compensate for his disability was to turn words into images. Read aloud a short passage from a book and ask students to illustrate what they heard. Older students can read the passage themselves and then draw what they read.
- Talbott includes a Wall of Fame of slow readers. Included in that list are Shakespeare, Babe Ruth, and Sojourner Truth. Ask students to do some research on these individuals to see what contributions these slow readers made to literature, science, and history.

- Place students in small groups and ask them to brainstorm what strategies they use when they are given a difficult passage to read for class. After the group activity, share common strategies that help students with reading comprehension and fluency.

### Related Books

- Beaty, A. (2021). *Aaron Slater, illustrator* (D. Roberts, Illus.). Abrams Books for Young Readers. GR K–4.
- Hunt, L. M. (2015). *Fish in a tree*. Nancy Paulsen Books. GR 4–6.
- McGovern, K. (2021). *Welcome back, Maple Mehta-Cohen*. Candlewick Press. GR 4–7.
- McLemore, A.-M. (2022). *Lakelore*. Feiwel and Friends. GR 9–12.
- Rudolph, S. (2021). *Brilliant Bea* (F. Lee, Illus.). Magination Press. GR K–3.



**Reynolds, Jason. (2021). *Stuntboy, in the Meantime* (Raúl the Third, Illus.). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. 257 pp. GR 3–5. Hybrid/realistic fiction.**

Young Portico Reeves has always experienced “the frets,” incessant worries and intrusive thoughts that

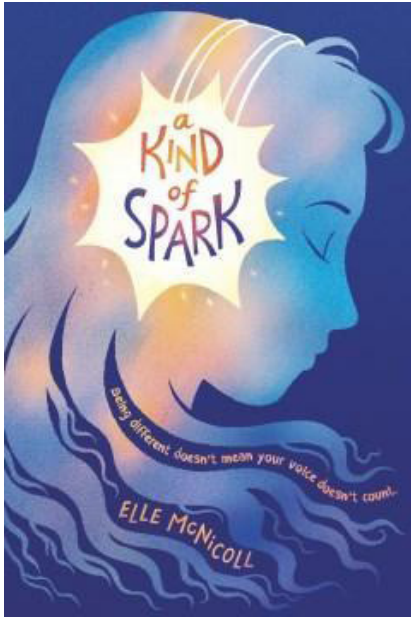
cause anxiety. His frets are getting worse because of his parents’ impending divorce, their constant arguments, and the presence of his archenemy Herbert Singletary the Worst. To cope with his anxiety, Portico creates the superhero Stuntboy, an alter ego whose job is to keep everyone in the neighborhood safe from harm. Together with his best friend Zola, Portico begins to understand his fretfulness, develops some techniques to quell his anxiety and panic attacks, and even befriends Herbert. Raúl the Third’s masterful cartoon illustrations are essential not only for understanding Portico’s issues with anxiety but for the setting and narrative structure as well. *Stuntboy, in the Meantime* is the first book in a planned series.

### Teaching Suggestions

- Portico creates the superhero Stuntboy as a way to deal with his anxiety. Ask students to create their superhero. What powers would this superhero have? What would their superhero look like? Have students describe in writing and artwork their own superhero.
- Stuntboy, in the Meantime* is an episodic novel. Place students in pairs and ask them which of the eight chapters is their favorite. Have them explain why.
- Zola helps Portico with his anxiety by suggesting some techniques he can use to quell his worries. Have students list some of Zola’s suggestions and discuss how they might use those practices in their own lives.

### Related Books

- Dee, B. (2022). *Haven Jacobs saves the planet*. Aladdin. GR 4–8.
- Ludwig, T. (2022). *Brave every day* (P. Barton, Illus.). Alfred A. Knopf. GR pre-K–2.
- Mandanna, S. (2021). *Kiki Karilla breaks a kingdom*. Viking. GR 4–8.
- Ormsbee, K. (2022). *Growing pangs* (M. Brooks, Illus.). Random House. GR 3–6.
- Oshiro, M. (2018). *Anger is a gift*. Tor Teen. GR 9–12.
- Stein, D. E. (2022). *Don’t worry, Murray*. Balzer + Bray. GR pre-K–2.
- Sumner, J. (2022). *The summer of June*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers. GR 5–8.
- Telgemeier, R. (2019). *Guts*. Graphix. GR 4–8.



**McNicoll, Elle. (2021). *A Kind of Spark*. Crown Books for Young Readers. 179 pp. GR 4–7. Realistic fiction.**

Fifth-grader Addie is autistic. Being neurodivergent, she often hears and experiences the world around her more deeply than others do. Autism is not what she has; rather, autism defines who she is. Although she is treated cruelly by her teacher and bullied by some of her classmates, she is strong and determined to be herself. During a lesson, her teacher discusses the history of her Scottish village and explains that some women from the town were accused of witchcraft and executed unjustly. Addie becomes fascinated with their story and lets nothing stand in her way as she tries to discover what really happened during the witch trials. She eventually finds a way to honor the legacy of these misunderstood women with whom she feels a special connection. In *Addie*, McNicoll, herself neurodivergent, has created a protagonist who will challenge readers to think about what it means to live life with autism.

#### Teaching Suggestions

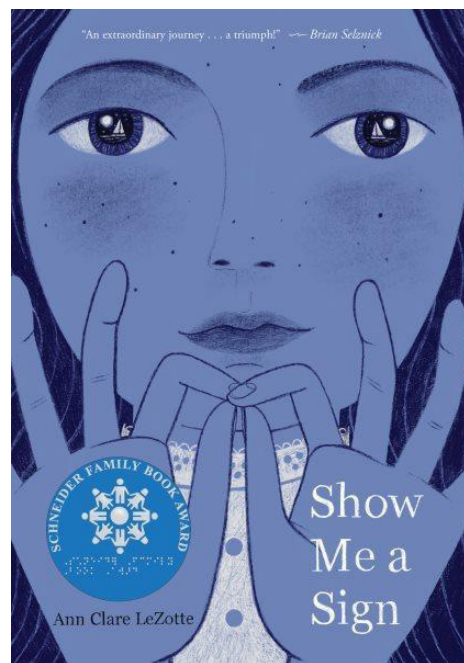
- Addie shares a special connection with her older sister Keedie, who is also autistic. She also develops a special bond with her new friend Audrey. Ask students to write a personal narrative about when a family member or a friend helped them through a difficult time.
- Addie is emphatic that she is autistic. She corrects anyone

who says she has autism. Prompt students to think and write about the differences between the two expressions.

- Have students watch a short interview with author Elle McNicoll ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cu8x\\_9k9Kqk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cu8x_9k9Kqk)). McNicoll talks about neurodivergence, representation, and authenticity. Ask students to discuss how their attitudes toward autism have changed after they have read the book and listened to the interview.

#### Related Books

- Bailey, J. (2019). *A friend for Henry* (M. Song, Illus.). Chronicle Books. GR pre-K–2.
- Carter, C. (2021). *Fifty-four things wrong with Gwendolyn Rogers*. Quill Tree Books. GR 5–8.
- Kapit, S. (2020). *Get a grip, Vivy Cohen!* Dial Books for Young Readers. GR 4–6.
- King, W. (2022). *Butt sandwich and tree*. Simon and Schuster. GR 4–7.
- Myers, A. G. (2021). *A bird will soar*. Dutton Books for Young Readers. GR 4–7.
- Patrick, C. (2020). *Tornado brain*. G. P. Putnam's Sons. GR 6–9.
- Scott, L., & Westcott, R. (2020). *Can you see me?* Scholastic. GR 5–8.



**LeZotte, Ann Clare. (2020). *Show Me a Sign*. Scholastic. 269 pp. GR 3–7. Historical fiction.**

Mary Lambert lives on Martha's Vineyard, where many

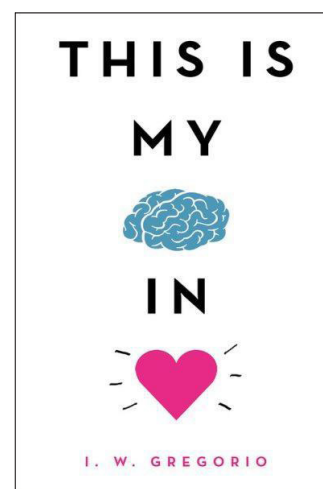
of her neighbors and members of her family are deaf. They communicate through a shared sign language and have developed a strong sense of community. However, Mary's life is turned upside down when she is kidnapped by a "scholar" and taken to Boston for medical experiments. Abused emotionally and physically by her captors and homesick for her island community, Mary longs to return to her home and plots her escape from imprisonment. LeZotte, a Deaf author, provides a well-researched, well-crafted, and suspenseful historical account of Martha's Vineyard and the people who lived there in the early 1800s. Of particular note in this story are LeZotte's descriptions of the grief Mary feels after her beloved older brother is killed and the tension between the English settlers and the Wampanoag people.

### Teaching Suggestions

- Ableism, or more specifically, audism, is the concept that those who can hear are superior to those who are hearing-impaired. Ask students to compare and contrast how Mary is treated on Martha's Vineyard with the discrimination she faces in Boston.
- Mary and her father are deaf. Her mother is hearing. So was her brother. Have students compare and contrast Mary's relationships with her parents.
- The Wampanoag are discriminated against by some of the English settlers on Martha's Vineyard. When Mary is in Boston, she also experiences discrimination because she cannot hear. Ask students to create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast how the Wampanoag people are treated on Martha's Vineyard and how Mary is treated in Boston.

### Related Books

- Cerra, K. O'M. (2022). *Hear me*. Carolrhoda Books. GR 5–8.
- Frost, H. (2020). *All he knew*. Farrar Straus Giroux. GR 4–6.
- Kelly, L. (2019). *Song for a whale*. Delacorte Press. GR 4–7.
- LeZotte, A. C. (2021). *Set me free*. Scholastic. GR 5–8.
- Neal, R. (2022). *Astrid the astronaut: The astronomically grand plan* (T. Shipman, Illus.). Aladdin. GR 1–4.



**Gregorio, I. W. (2020). *This Is My Brain in Love*. Little, Brown and Company. 378 pp. GR 8–12. Realistic fiction/romance.**

This romance novel features two narrators—Will and Jos—who must work together to save Jos's family restaurant from financial failure. The two teens, both children of immigrants, fall in love while trying to rescue the Wus' Chinese restaurant from ruin. Mental health also plays a critical role in this story as Will has an anxiety disorder, whereas Jocelyn is beginning to show symptoms of depression. While Will has received therapy to learn how to cope with his anxiety and panic attacks, Jos must come to terms with her depression in light of the perceived stigma around mental illness with help from Will and her mother. This novel offers a thoughtful, often humorous, and nuanced examination of mental illness, culture, ethnicity, and class. In her author's note, Gregorio, one of the founding members of We Need Diverse Books, describes her personal experiences with mental health.

### Teaching Suggestions

- Since much of the story takes place in a Chinese restaurant, detailed descriptions of food appear throughout the book. Ask students to think of their favorite food and write a detailed description of that dish. Then ask students to discuss a comfort food, something they might eat when they feel anxious or depressed.
- One of the central conflicts of the story involves Jos's traditionally strict Chinese father and his attitude toward mental illness. Place students in small groups and ask them to compare and contrast Jos's father and Will's parents.
- Will and Jos work together on a social media campaign to increase sales at the restaurant. Place students in groups

and ask them to design an ad for a social media platform for the A+ Chinese Garden.

- Encourage students to think about the differences between Jos and Will. Discuss Will's symptoms and what techniques he uses to manage his anxiety disorder. Then discuss the symptoms of Jos's depression.

### Related Books

Allen, S. E. (2021). *Breathing underwater*. Farrar Straus Giroux. GR 5–8.

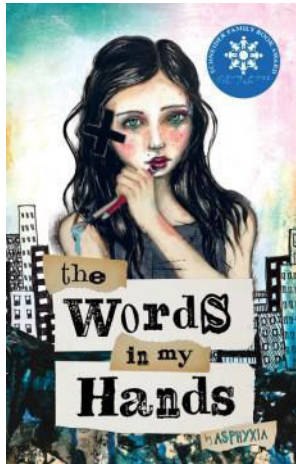
Callendar, K. (2022). *Moonflower*. Scholastic. GR 4–7.

Jensen, K. (Ed.). (2018). *(Don't) call me crazy: 33 voices start the conversation about mental health*. Algonquin Young Readers. GR 9–12.

Khorram, A. (2018). *Darius the Great is not okay*. Dial Books. GR 8–12.

Kramer, J. K. (2021). *The list of unspeakable fears*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers. GR 4–7.

Tomlinson, R. (2022). *A blue kind of day* (T.-J. Mordey, Illus.). Kokila. GR pre-K–2.



**Asphyxia. (2021). *The Words in My Hands*. Annick Press. 384 pp. GR 8–12. Speculative fiction.**

Written and illustrated by Deaf author and artist Asphyxia, this work of science fiction is set in a futuristic Australia rife with food insecurity, fuel shortages, disinformation and propaganda, political corruption, and censorship. Sixteen-year-old Piper lost her hearing as a young child and tells her personal story through the words and images within her journal. While she searches for her identity in this dystopian future, Piper shows

strength and determination by learning sign language and through her artwork, activism, and community garden.

### Teaching Suggestions

- Piper finds solace and indeed power through journaling. She draws, sketches, paints, and writes in her journal. Request that students take a few minutes to journal with images and words about recent events from their own lives. Then ask them to compare and contrast their journaling experience with Piper's.
- The use of propaganda, disinformation, and censorship by the government and corporations is central to the plot of this novel. Place students in small groups and ask them to locate five examples of propaganda, disinformation, and censorship in the story. In a large-group discussion, debate how those examples empower the government to control its citizens and what Piper and her friends do to fight back against that control.
- Piper's life changes when she meets Marley, the child of a deaf parent, and his deaf mother and begins to learn ASLAN, Australian sign language. Show this subtitled video with Asphyxia (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rObKOsTPsbk>) and ask students to watch as she signs. Ask students to compare and contrast Piper's character before and after she learned ASLAN. Also ask students why Piper's mother wanted her "to pass as hearing."
- *The Words in My Hands* is set in the near future and, as such, can be classified as a work of speculative fiction. Place students into small groups and ask them to create lists of technologies and social issues in Piper's world that are not currently present in our world. Ask students to then speculate which of the technologies and social issues are the most plausible for the future.

### Related Books

Gervais, A. (2019). *The silence between us*. Blink. GR 7–12.

Novic, S. (2022). *True biz*. Random House. GR 10–12.

Wong, A. (Ed.). (2021). *Disability visibility: 17 first-person stories for today*. Delacorte Press. GR 7–12. •

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