

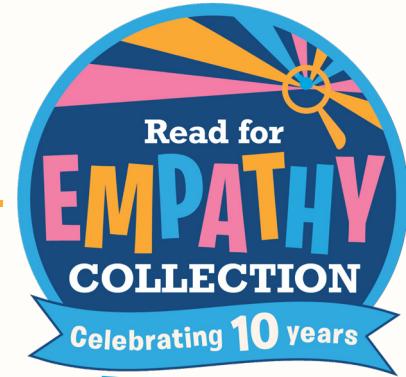


2026

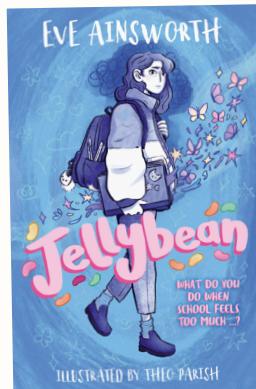
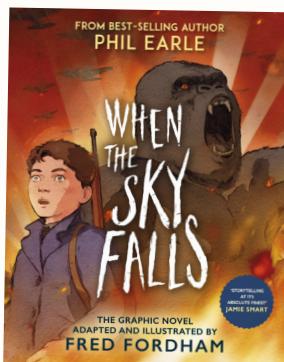
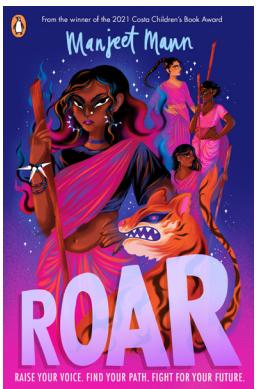
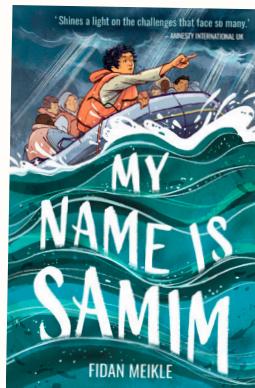
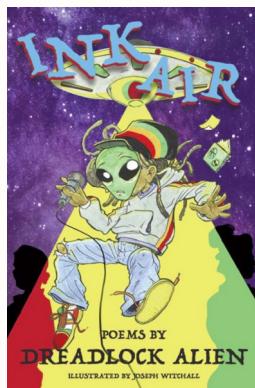
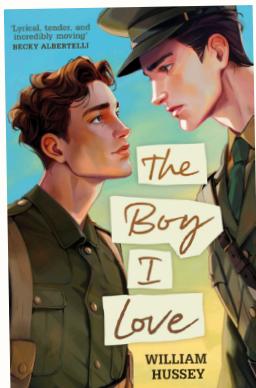
Read for

EMPATHY

Collection



A guide to empathy-building books for
young people aged 12–16+



25 titles selected by experts



Empathy
Lab

Jump into someone else's story

EmpathyLab's mission is to raise empathy-educated generations inspired to create a better world for everyone.

2026 marks 10 years of the **Read for Empathy collection**.

Stories, in all their forms, connect us - to ourselves, others and the planet.

GO ALL IN.

goallin.org.uk

During this National Year of Reading, let's **Go All In for Connection** and supercharge the power of reading to improve young people's wellbeing and build stronger relationships - enabling them to thrive now and in the future.

International research tells us that empathy plays an integral role in supporting individual and societal wellbeing.

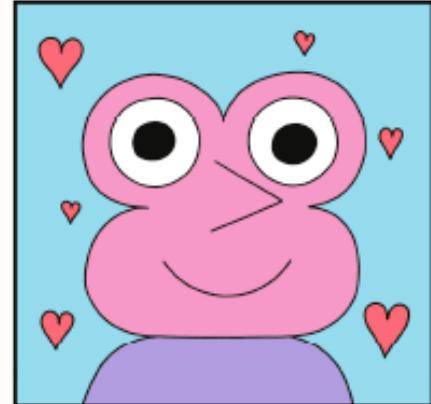
As impact partners of the University of Sussex, we recently shared new evidence of the intertwined nature of empathy development, reading engagement and reading ability.

The key findings from this research indicate that:

'Children who are better at understanding others' emotions become better readers'

If we wish to encourage more young people to read, the evidence is clear that having an empathy focus is a brilliant route into greater reading engagement.

In this increasingly divided world, it's more important than ever that we nurture this ability and particularly consider the perspectives of those we disagree with, or who live very different lives to our own.



You deserve love and you deserve happiness.

Illustration from *How To Love* © Alex Norris

An expert panel has selected these 25 brilliant books for young people aged 12-16+.

They have been specifically chosen for their power to boost empathy for, and understanding of, other people's feelings and life experiences.

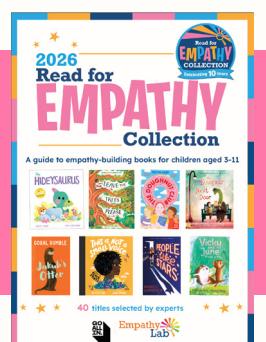
At EmpathyLab we want every young person to benefit from a powerful reading-based empathy education, at home and school - anywhere where stories and young people come together.

Explore practical ways to do this by joining our FREE online learning event



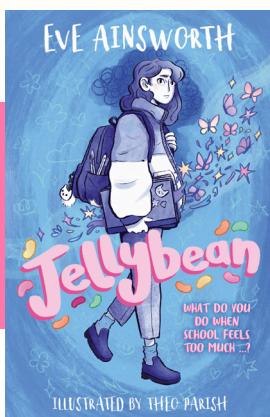
on 12 February taking part in our Schools Programme, or use our handy 'how to' guide *We've Got This* by Rashmi Sirdeshpande (Quarto).

A Read for Empathy collection guide for 3-11-year-olds is also available.



Novels

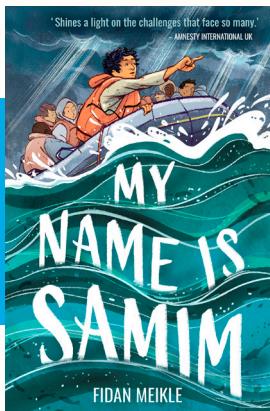
A * symbol indicates titles that are more suitable for older readers and books with themes that may need to be introduced with caution.



Jellybean

Eve Ainsworth, illustrated by Theo Parish
This is the story of Ellie, who develops deep anxiety about school. Ellie's physical and emotional responses are beautifully depicted, debunking the 'school refuser' label and showing the courage that Ellie needs to return to school. An issue seldom addressed in children's fiction.

Barrington Stoke



My Name Is Samim

Fidan Meikle

It has never been more important to help young people understand the experience of people forced to flee their homes. This story is inspired by a true event. Samim is a boy carrying unimaginable trauma, so thank goodness for the compassion of the new family and friends who fight for him and help him heal.

Floris

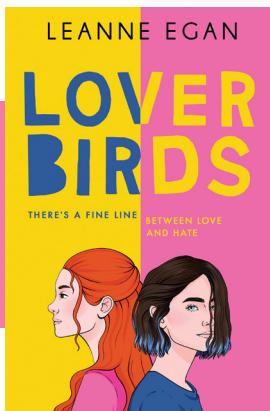


Phoenix Brothers

Sita Brahmachari

Mo and Amir arrive in the UK as refugees. Two friends trying to make sense of new lives while dealing with loss. They react differently – Mo is angry, Amir is quiet and fearful. But through people who open their hearts to the boys, they finally find hope and joy.

Oxford University Press



Lover Birds*

Leanne Egan

A new girl arrives at school, disrupting Eloise's life and creating emotional turmoil. This story is all about relationships. It explores female friendships, falling in love and coming out, misogyny and the challenges faced by a young person with ADHD. An uplifting story with experiences many readers will recognise.

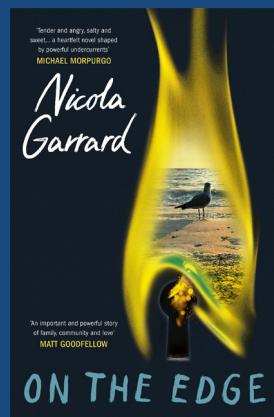
HarperCollins

On the Edge*

Nicola Garrard

Champion surfer Rhys and his younger brothers live in Devon. Mourning the loss of his mother and trying to keep his family together, Rhys falls in with campaigners who are taking immense risks. A lyrical story told with heart, from a writer drawing on her own past.

Old Barn Books



The Boy I Love*

William Hussey

Reading this beautifully written story is heart-wrenching. Set amid the appalling trench warfare of the First World War, two young men fall in love. It is utterly ironic that while they are courageously doing their duty, they must hide such an essential aspect of their humanity.

A stunning read!

Andersen

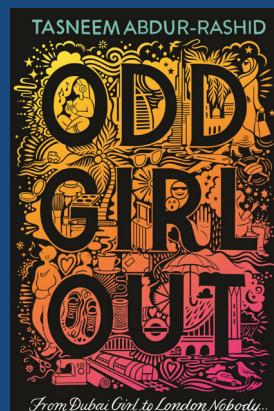


Odd Girl Out

Tasneem Abdur-Rashid

When Maaryah's parents split up, she moves to the UK with her mum. This novel deals with bullying, racism across diverse cultural communities, homesickness and the impact of parental separation. An emotional read, which ultimately celebrates the power of friendship and creativity.

David Fickling



Wish You Were Her

Elle McNicoll

Allegra Brooks is the teenage film star many young people dream of being. But in this romantic novel, Elle McNicoll sheds light on the hidden price of celebrity and the pressures this can create, especially for someone who is neurodivergent. Light-hearted but thought-provoking.

Macmillan

Novels



Twenty-Four Seconds From Now*

Jason Reynolds

An intimate and innovative narrative structure, depicting the different phases and stages of a relationship, as seventeen-year-old Neon prepares to have sex with his girlfriend for the first time. Intimate and innovative, it reflects a gentle, positive and respectful side to male sexuality.

Simon & Schuster

The Five*

Edited by Elgan Rhys, translated by Mared Roberts
Five interrelated stories about a small friendship group, each character different and grappling with their own demons. There are themes of LGBTQ+, misogyny, rape, cancer, bereavement, depression and autism. An engaging and involving read, full of empathy for the characters as they work through life's challenges.

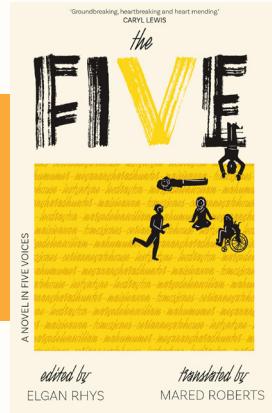
Firefly

What Happens Online

Nathanael Lessore

A story exploring grief and how it affects a whole family in different ways, while also looking at online activity and how things can spiral out of control. Fred makes many mistakes, plays with people's feelings and ultimately learns about being true to himself and valuing real friendship.

Hot Key Books



Graphic novels



Ditching Saskia

John Moore & Neetols

An emotionally complex and heartfelt graphic novel with a supernatural element, which addresses trauma, grief, friendship and sibling relationships, as well as tentative first love and the challenges of relationships. An unusual novel with strong, relatable characters.

Flying Eye

When the Sky Falls

Phil Earle & Fred Fordham

Uniquely, this story is making a return appearance in the collection. This time in spectacular graphic novel format. It is the story of troubled Joseph's relationship with a silverback gorilla during the Second World War, and how this connection helps him to care and feel again.

Andersen



Mismatched*

Anne Camlin & Isadora Zeferino

A lively queer retelling of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Charismatic and popular Evan decides to make shy new girl Natalia his 'project', but his matchmaking spectacularly backfires. Evan learns about the complexity of relationships and that he cannot control others, even with the best intentions.

Andersen

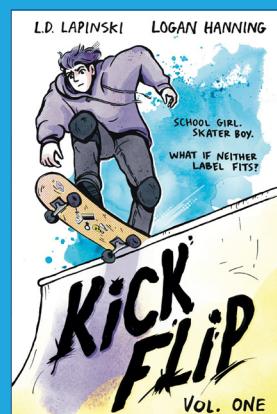


Kickflip Vol. 1

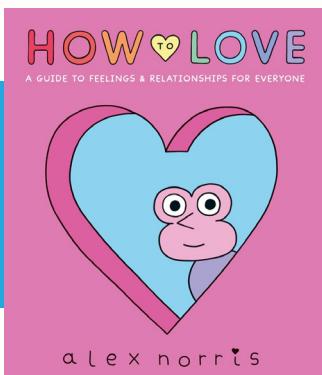
L.D. Lapinski & Logan Hanning

A graphic novel exploring identity, self-discovery and friendship. Elliot doesn't fit in at school, but is welcomed and accepted at the skate park. As Elliot begins to accept their non-binary identity, they have to find the courage to share with friends. Moving and memorable.

Orion



Non-fiction

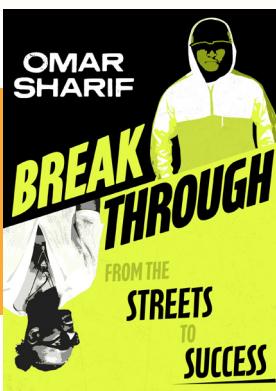


How to Love

Alex Norris

Empathy is key to relationships, and this illustrated guide uses humour, wisdom and empathy to steer young teenagers through the complexities and uncertainties of first love and the sometimes overwhelming emotions that come with it. A compassionate and engaging read.

Walker



Breakthrough: From the Streets to Success

Omar Sharif

A hard-hitting true account of how a shift in one young man's thinking helped him escape life in a gang. The author is very open and honest about his feelings and shares his six ingredients for success – strategies to develop and grow. Also highlights the lives of many young people, giving a greater understanding of how to resist peer pressure and reach their potential.

Wren and Rook



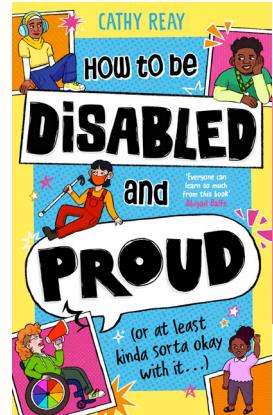
Illustration from One Day: A True Story of Courage and Survival in the Holocaust © Benjamin Phillips

How to Be Disabled and Proud

Cathy Reay

This is a great, informative book. Laid out in a way that isn't overwhelming, it covers a range of topics and issues with clarity and empathy. Explores aspects of disability that are not often highlighted, so feels fresh and dynamic.

Puffin

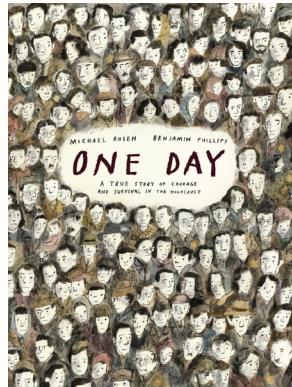


One Day: A True Story of Courage and Survival in the Holocaust

Michael Rosen, illustrated by Benjamin Phillips

This picture book for older readers tells the true story of Eugène and Oscar Handschuh, a father and a son who escaped transportation to Auschwitz and joined the resistance. A story of human endurance and courage and a reminder of the intense cruelty that follows when empathy is lost.

Walker

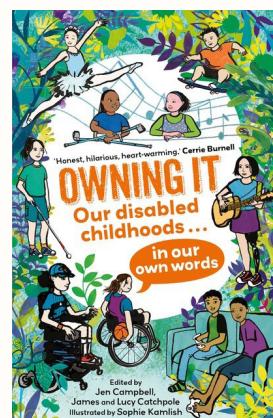


Owning It: Our Disabled Childhoods... In Our Own Words

Edited by Jen Campbell, James Catchpole & Lucy Catchpole, illustrated by Sophie Kamlish

The editors have drawn together twenty-two true stories, where the authors describe events from their childhoods. There is a painful honesty in the stories, as well as humour and joy. Through the stories, readers will explore different perspectives on the world and deepen understanding.

Faber



Make Good Trouble

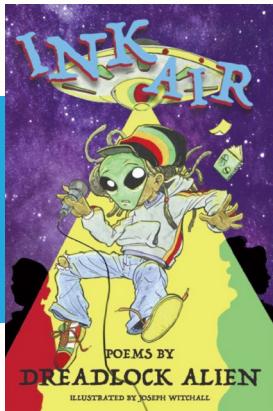
Jamia Wilson, illustrated by Devon Blow

An important and timely book exploring dissent, agitation and resistance for social justice and social change. Includes well-known activists like Malala, but also less familiar stories from the US, UK and Europe.

Dorling Kindersley



Poetry and verse novels



Ink Air

Dreadlock Alien, illustrated by Joseph Witchall

Poetry charting the life of a young man of mixed heritage. The emotional significance of knowing you are valued and that you belong is beautifully and profoundly expressed. This collection is both eye-opening and reflective of universal human experiences.

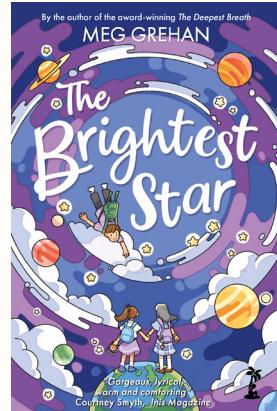
Caboodle

The Brightest Star

Meg Grehan

A story about friends starting secondary school. We first met Stevie in *The Deepest Breath* and here she is again, growing up, more confident in her identity and ready to navigate the complexities of adolescent relationships. A warm-hearted verse novel with brilliant relatable characters.

Little Island

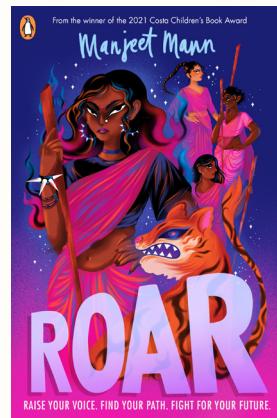


Roar*

Manjeet Mann

An unsettling verse novel about the devastation that befalls a young woman who transgresses in her community. Intersectional issues around misogyny, class, caste, gender and power create an explosive story highlighting the terrifying consequences for a community that refuses to listen.

Penguin



The First Year

Matt Goodfellow, illustrated by Joe Todd-Stanton

Nate is eleven, starting secondary school and beginning to question who he is. The sudden appearance of his dad is emotionally disruptive. This wonderful follow-up to *The Final Year* offers a sensitive insight into the pain experienced by a child let down by those they want to trust.

Otter-Barry



How to order the books in this guide

- Find your local independent bookshop booksellers.org.uk
- Order online via EmpathyLab's Bookshop.org page:
uk.bookshop.org/shop/empathy-lab
- 10% supports our mission to bring empathy education to 1 million young people every year
- Contact your usual book supplier
- Borrow the books from your local library



TOP TIPS on reading for empathy

- 1. Choose diverse stories** Share books that allow young people not only to see their own life experiences reflected, but also introduce them to books set in other countries and with characters of different cultures and facing different experiences. Jump into the story of someone you may never meet in real life and see the world through their eyes.
- 2. Talk about characters** Focus on the characters and their feelings, more than the plot. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers! Wonder together about what the characters are thinking or feeling and what they might do next.
- 3. Help recognise feelings** Use lots of different emotion words when discussing stories. This will help young people to understand their own and other people's feelings and why they behave in certain ways.
- 4. Listen deeply** Listening is a crucial part of empathy. Give your full attention as young people explore how they feel about the characters.
- 5. Don't forget the pictures** Picture books can be readily used with young people as illustrations are especially good for 'reading' other people - what do the pictures tell us about how the character feels?
- 6. Put empathy into action** Could a book help inspire young people to take action to help others at home, in school or their local community? Even small actions can make a huge difference.



Illustration from *The First Year* © Joe Todd-Stanton

Join the Empathy Education movement

Whether you're a teacher, librarian, caregiver or community champion, there's a way for everyone to get involved! EmpathyLab gives you the tools to turn empathy into action and nurture a love of reading.

Help us grow

If, like us, you believe that empathy is the bedrock from which all positive change springs – whether social, political or environmental, join the Empathy Education movement, and support us to:

- Reach and benefit 1 million children and young people every year
- Train more teachers, librarians, parents and caregivers to supercharge shared reading
- Campaign for empathy development to be included within formal education



Illustration from *How To Be Disabled and Proud* © Jaleel Hudson

Donate today

For less than a cup of coffee per month, together we can make the world a better place for everyone.

Stay up-to-date

To find out more and be the first to hear about our latest news, events and training, sign up to our mailing list [empathylab.uk](https://www.empathylab.uk)



Take part in the Empathy Day Festival

4-11 June 2026

Join a world-class line-up of authors and illustrators to jump into someone else's story.

Featuring empathy-themed creative activities, live and on-demand digital events, toolkits, and much more. From early years to teens, take part for FREE in your school, home or community setting.

Become an EmpathyLab School

Our evidence-based programme helps schools embed empathy as a core value, practiced through reading. Schools report lasting improvements in wellbeing, social and emotional development, community cohesion and reading enjoyment.

Primary, secondary and SEND settings in England, Scotland and Wales are all part of our learning community.

