

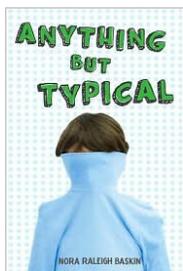
## Novel Experiences — Bridges to Understanding

*“Literature is one of the best bridges among us. Books, stories, poems that encourage a deepened empathy and respect for one another—especially for those ‘others’ whom one might have imagined to be unlike ourselves—serve a great purpose.”*

—Naomi Shihab Nye, author

Reading and discussing books about characters that are different from who we are gives us the opportunity to apply comprehension skills as well as social and emotional skills like the ones taught in Open Circle. The novels in this article do just that, helping us build bridges of understanding with stories about recognizing and managing feelings, responding to conflict, facing societal challenges like discrimination or injustice, and examining the perspective of others to gain a greater understanding of ourselves and others.

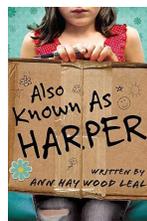
In a teacher-guided discussion of these books, students can reflect on their own feelings and beliefs and then compare their ideas with those of the story characters and each other. Through role-plays, writing activities, or conversations that relate to each book and its characters, students practice taking the perspective of someone else. The following books provide strong bridges to carry students toward greater understanding of themselves and others.



***Anything but Typical***, by Nora Raleigh Baskin. Simon & Schuster, 2009. Ideal for grades 4-6. 2010 Schneider Family Book Award for books that embody an artistic expression of the disability experience.

Jason is not a typical sixth grader. In third grade, Jason was diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder. This is his story, in his own words.

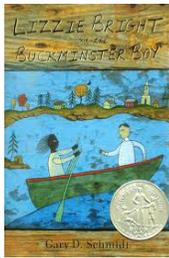
Students in Jason’s class describe him as “weird” when he rocks randomly back and forth, but Jason explains, “I feel off balance, like I’m going to fall. I need to shift my weight back and forth, back and forth, rock to stabilize myself.” Some readers may find it strange that Jason does not make eye contact with other people. From Jason’s point of view, eye contact is an impediment to understanding what someone is saying. Deciphering social cues and facial expressions are a struggle for him, and physical contact is painful, but he is a gifted writer. He finds comfort sitting at his computer to work on a creative writing website. It is through this website that he connects with Rebecca and considers the frightening possibility of a friendship.



***Also Known as Harper***, by Ann Haywood Leal. Henry Holt, 2009. Ideal for grades 4-6.

Harper Lee Morgan knows that life will never be the same when she comes home from school and finds her family’s furniture strewn around her front yard. Since Harper’s dad left, money has been a big problem. When Harper’s mother cannot pay the rent, they are evicted from their house and must move into a motel. All Harper wants to do is go to school so that she can enter the poetry contest, but she must stay home to take care of her little brother while her mother is at work.

This book takes the reader into the lives of characters who struggle with poverty, some mean-spirited neighbors, and the related indignities of their situation. Harper and her vulnerable family find a supportive, unusual community at the motel and start to build a new life with courage and hopefulness.



***Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy***, by Gary. D. Schmidt. Clarion Books, 2004. Ideal for grades 4-6.

When young Turner Buckminster and his family move to a coastal town in New England, Turner must behave according to expectations for “the new minister’s son.” Turner feels isolated and miserable when his new classmates are cruel and unwelcoming. Then he meets and befriends Lizzie Bright Griffin, an independent-minded, high-spirited resident of nearby Malaga Island, home to descendants of former slaves. But not everyone is as friendly with the residents of Malaga Island: when Turner’s father discovers the friendship, he forbids it based on his pre-conceived notions of the island’s residents. When the town leaders decide to turn their village into a tourist destination, they force the Malaga families to leave their modest, life-long homes. Though Lizzie and Turner lead a courageous effort to rescue the Malaga families from this injustice, they soon learn painful lessons about human nature.

*Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* is based on a tragic piece of history. Students could research the events of 1912 in Phippsburg, Maine that inspired this novel. Students will gain a new perspective on history when they connect their emotions provoked by the book to an actual time and place.

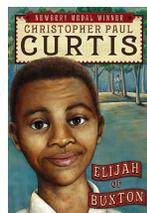
Here are a few more novels that will help students to build a bridge of understanding between one another by taking the perspective of other people:



***The Liberation of Gabriel King***, by K.L. Going. Puffin Books, 2005. Ideal for grades 4-6.



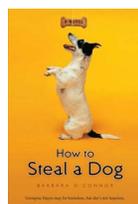
***Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key***, by Jack Gantos. HarperCollins, 2000. Ideal for grades 4-6.



***Elijah of Buxton***, by Christopher Paul Curtis. Scholastic Press, 2007. Ideal for grades 5-6.



***Penny from Heaven***, by Jennifer Holm. Perfection Learning, 2007. Ideal for grades 5-7.



***How to Steal a Dog***, by Barbara O'Connor. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007. Ideal for grades 4-7.



***Rules***, by Cynthia Lord. Scholastic Press, 2006. Ideal for grades 4-7.