

**Tough Topics in Middle Grade Literature:  
Providing Windows and Mirrors for Young Readers**  
Elizabeth York Children's Literature Festival 2018  
Jenn Bishop

CDC-Kaiser Permanente ACE study  
<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>

Books Between Podcast on ACEs  
<https://mgbookvillage.org/2018/04/30/supporting-students-w-aces-a-conversation-with-varian-johnson-books-between-episode-48/>

Joining Forces for Children (OH, IN, KY)  
<http://www.joiningforcesforchildren.org>

## Bibliography

### Emotional and Physical Abuse

Bradley, Kimberly Brubaker. *The War That Saved My Life*.

A young disabled girl and her brother are evacuated from London to the English countryside during World War II, where they find life to be much sweeter away from their abusive mother.

Schmidt, Gary D. *Okay For Now*.

As a fourteen-year-old who just moved to a new town, with no friends, an abusive father, and a louse for an older brother, Doug Swietek has all the odds stacked against him until he finds an ally in Lil Spicer--a fiery young lady. Together, they find a safe haven in the local library, inspiration in learning about the plates of John James Audubon's birds, and a hilarious adventure on a Broadway stage.

Wallace, Brandon. *Wilder Boys*.

To evade their mother's abusive boyfriend, brothers Jake, thirteen, and Taylor, eleven, venture from the suburbs of Pittsburgh toward the wilds of Wyoming in search of the father they haven't seen in four years, using their wilderness skills to survive against both natural and human dangers.

### Sexual Abuse

Abbott, Tony. *The Summer of Owen Todd*.

In touristy Cape Cod, eleven-year-old Owen faces a dilemma when his best friend Sean is sexually abused by a trusted adult, but warns Owen not tell anyone what is happening.

Weeks, Sarah. *Jumping the Scratch*.

After moving with his mother to a trailer park to care for an injured aunt, eleven-year-old Jamie Reardon struggles to cope with a deeply buried secret.

Woodson, Jacqueline. *I Hadn't Meant To Tell You This*.

Marie, the only black girl in the eighth grade willing to befriend her white classmate Lena, discovers that Lena's father is doing horrible things to her in private.

### Domestic Violence

Bauer, Joan. *Close to Famous*.

Twelve-year-old Foster McFee and her mother escape from her mother's abusive boyfriend and end up in the small town of Culpepper, West Virginia, where they use their strengths and challenge themselves to build a new life, with the help of the friends they make there.

Coman, Carolyn. *What Jamie Saw*.

Having fled to a family friend's hillside trailer after his mother's boyfriend tried to throw his baby sister against a wall, nine-year-old Jamie finds himself living an existence full of uncertainty and fear.

Mullaly Hunt, Lynda. *One For the Murphys*.

After heartbreaking betrayal, Carley is sent to live with a foster family and struggles with opening herself up to their love.

### Substance Abuse in the Household

Holm, Jennifer L. and Matthew. *Sunny Side Up*.

Sunny Lewin is sent to live with her grandfather for the summer in Florida, where she befriends Buzz, a boy completely obsessed with comic books, and faces the secret behind why she is in Florida in the first place.

Messner, Kate. *The Seventh Wish*.

Unsure of how to get her family's attention, Charlie comes across the surprise of her life one day while ice-fishing ... in the form of a floppy, scaly fish offering to grant her a wish in exchange for its freedom.

Mason, Simon. *Moon Pie*.

Eleven-year-old Martha tries to keep her family together after her mother's death as her father struggles with alcoholism.

### Mental Illness in the Household

Baldwin, Cindy. *Where The Watermelons Grow*.

Twelve-year-old Della Kelly of Maryville, North Carolina, tries to come to terms with her mother's mental illness while her father struggles to save the farm from a record-breaking drought.

Keller, Tae. *The Science of Breakable Things*.

Middle schooler Natalie's year-long assignment to answer a question using the scientific method leads to truths about her mother's depression and her own cultural identity.

Moulton, Erin E. *Chasing the Milky Way*.

Lucy Peevey, twelve, and her best friend Cam are perfecting the robot that could win a competition, a scholarship, and a way out of Sunnyside Trailer Park when Lucy's mother goes off her medication and her manic-depressive disorder goes out of control.

### Parental Separation or Divorce

Graff, Lisa. *The Great Treehouse War*.

Fifth-grader Winnie, with notes from her friends, writes of turning her treehouse into an embassy after her newly-divorced parents become unreasonable, where she is joined by nine others with complaints.

Payne, C.C. *The Thing About Leftovers*.

Fizzy struggles to find her place in her blended family after her parents' divorce, hoping her entry in the Southern Living Cook-Off will show them she is more than just a leftover kid.

Rhuday-Perkovich, Olugbemisola and Audrey Vernick. *Two Naomis*.

When Naomi Marie's mom and Naomi Edith's dad get serious about dating, each girl tries to cling to the life she knows and loves.

Snyder, Laurel. *Bigger Than a Breadbox*.

Devastated when her parents separate, twelve-year-old Rebecca must move with her mother from Baltimore to Gran's house in Atlanta, where Rebecca discovers an old breadbox with the power to grant any wish--so long as the wished-for thing fits in the breadbox.

### Having an Incarcerated Parent

Baskin, Nora Raleigh. *Ruby on the Outside*.

Eleven-year-old Ruby Danes has a real best friend for the first time ever, but agonizes over whether or not to tell her a secret she has never shared with anyone--that her mother has been in prison since Ruby was five--and over whether to express her anger to her mother.

Connor, Leslie. *All Rise for the Honorable Perry T. Cook.*

Perry was born and raised by his mom at the Blue River Co-ed Correctional Facility in tiny Surprise, Nebraska, but when a new district attorney discovers the truth, Perry is removed from the facility and forced into a foster home.

Woodson, Jacqueline. *Harbor Me.*

When six students are chosen to participate in a weekly talk with no adults allowed, they discover that when they're together, it's safe to share the hopes and fears they have to hide from the rest of the world.

### Neglect

O'Connor, Barbara. *Wish.*

A story about a girl who, with the help of the dog of her dreams, discovers that family doesn't always have to be related--they are simply people who love you for who you are

Schmatz, Pat. *Bluefish.*

Everything changes for thirteen-year-old Travis, a new student who is trying to hide his illiteracy, when he meets a sassy classmate with her own secrets and a remarkable teacher.

Tyre, Lisa Lewis. *Hope in the Holler.*

Upon her mother's death, Wavie Conley, eleven, must go live with a scheming aunt in the Kentucky town her mother left behind.

### Death of a Family Member

Bishop, Jenn. *The Distance to Home.*

Baseball player and superfan Quinnen must struggle to deal with her older sister's death in a story that unfolds between two summers.

Knowles, Jo. *See You At Harry's.*

Twelve-year-old Fern feels invisible in her family, where grumpy eighteen-year-old Sarah is working at the family restaurant, fourteen-year-old Holden is struggling with school bullies and his emerging homosexuality, and adorable, three-year-old Charlie is always the center of attention, and when tragedy strikes, the fragile bond holding the family together is stretched almost to the breaking point.

Moore, David Barclay. *The Stars Beneath Our Feet.*

Unable to celebrate the holidays in the wake of his older brother's death in a gang-related shooting, Lolly Rachpaul struggles to avoid being forced into a gang himself while constructing a fantastically creative LEGO city at the Harlem community center.

### Having a Household Member with a Life-Threatening or Chronic Illness

Ehrlich, Esther. *Nest*.

On Cape Cod in 1972, eleven-year-old Naomi, known as Chirp for her love of birds, gets help from neighbor Joey as she struggles to cope with her mother's multiple sclerosis and its effect on her father and sister.

Reynolds, Jason. *Patina*.

A newbie to the track team, Patina "Patty" Jones must learn to rely on her family and teammates as she tries to outrun her personal demons.

Sovern, Maggie Jean. *The Meaning of Maggie*.

Eleven-year-old Maggie Mayfield is an A-plus student with big plans for herself, but at this moment she is also facing a lot of problems--like starting middle school and figuring out how to help her father who is out of work and in a wheelchair.

### Surviving a Natural Disaster or Life-Threatening Accident

Bishop, Jenn. *14 Hollow Road*.

Seventh-grader Maddie is consumed by her long-term crush on classmate Avery until a tornado destroys her home and her family must move in with his.

Blake, Ashley Herring. *Ivy Aberdeen's Letter to the World*.

Twelve-year-old Ivy Aberdeen's house is destroyed in a tornado, and in the aftermath of the storm, she begins to develop feelings for another girl at school.

Lamana, Julie T. *Upside Down in the Middle of Nowhere*.

At the end of August 2005, ten-year-old Armani is looking forward to her birthday party in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, where she and her extended family live, but Hurricane Katrina is on the way, bringing destruction and tragedy in its wake.

Rhodes, Jewel Parker. *Ninth Ward*.

In New Orleans' Ninth Ward, twelve-year-old Lanesha, who can see spirits, and her adopted grandmother have no choice but to stay and weather the storm as Hurricane Katrina bears down upon them.

### Witnessing Abuse in the Home or Neighborhood

Chase, Paula. *So Done*.

When best friends Metai and Jamila are reunited after a summer apart, their friendship threatens to combust from the pressure of secrets, middle school, and looming auditions for a potentially life-changing new talented-and-gifted program.

Kreller, Susan. *You Can't See the Elephants*.

When she suspects that her young neighbors are being abused by their father, one brave girl takes a stand to protect them.

Williams-Garcia, Rita. *No Laughter Here*.

In Queens, New York, ten-year-old Akilah is determined to find out why her closest friend, Victoria, is silent and withdrawn after returning from a trip to her homeland, Nigeria.

### Extreme Economic Hardship

Braden, Ann. *The Benefits of Being an Octopus*.

Seventh-grader Zoey Albro focuses on caring for three younger siblings and avoiding rich classmates at school until her fascination with octopuses gets her on the debate team and she begins to speak out.

Jacobson, Jennifer Richards. *Paper Things*.

Ever since Ari's mother's death four years ago, she's been couch-surfing with her older brother Gage.

O'Connor, Barbara. *How to Steal a Dog*.

Living in the family car in their small North Carolina town after their father leaves them virtually penniless, Georgina, desperate to improve their situation and unwilling to accept her overworked mother's calls for patience, persuades her younger brother to help her in an elaborate scheme to get money by stealing a dog and then claiming the reward that the owners are bound to offer.

### Discrimination

Dumas, Firoozeh. *It Ain't So Awful, Falafel*.

Eleven-year-old Zomorod, originally from Iran, tells her story of growing up Iranian in Southern California during the Iranian Revolution and hostage crisis of the late 1970s.

Johnson, Varian. *The Parker Inheritance*.

Twelve-year-old Candice Miller is spending the summer in Lambert, South Carolina, in the old house that belonged to her grandmother, who died after being dismissed as city manager for having the city tennis courts dug up looking for buried treasure--but when she finds the letter that sent her grandmother on the treasure hunt, she finds herself caught up in the mystery and, with the help of her new friend and fellow book-worm, Brandon, she sets out to find the inheritance, exonerate her grandmother, and expose an injustice once committed against an African American family in Lambert.

Yang, Kelly. *Front Desk*.

As recent immigrants from China ten-year-old Mia Tang's parents are desperate for work and money, so they take a job managing a rundown motel in Southern California, where Mia works the front desk and tries to cope with demanding customers and other recent immigrants.