IDENTITY & RESILIENCE
A GRAPHIC NOVEL READING LIST FOR TEENS

The Best We Could Do by Thi Bui
Exploring the anguish of immigration and the lasting effects that displacement has on a child and her family, Bui documents the story of her family’s daring escape after the fall of South Vietnam in the 1970s, and the difficulties they faced building new lives for themselves. At the heart of Bui’s story is a universal struggle: While adjusting to life as a first-time mother, she ultimately discovers what it means to be a parent—the endless sacrifices, the unnoticed gestures, and the depths of unspoken love. Despite how impossible it seems to take on the simultaneous roles of both parent and child, Bui pushes through. With haunting, poetic writing and breathtaking art, she examines the strength of family, the importance of identity, and the meaning of home.

Available at MPL

Numb to This by Kindra Neely
Kindra Neely never expected it to happen to her. No one does. Sure, she’d sometimes been close to gun violence, like when the house down the street from her childhood home in Texas was targeted in a drive-by shooting. But now she lived in Oregon, where she spent her time swimming in rivers with friends or attending classes at the bucolic Umpqua Community College.

And then, one day, it happened: a mass shooting shattered her college campus. Over the span of a few minutes, on October 1, 2015, eight students and a professor lost their lives. And suddenly, Kindra became a survivor. This empathetic and ultimately hopeful graphic memoir recounts Kindra’s journey forward from those few minutes that changed everything. It wasn’t easy. Every time Kindra took a step toward peace and wholeness, a new mass shooting devastated her again. Las Vegas. Parkland. She was hopeless at times, feeling as if no one was listening. Not even at the worldwide demonstration March for Our Lives. But finally, Kindra learned that—for her—the path toward hope wound through art, helping others, and sharing her story.

Available at MPL

Slip by Marika McCoola and Aatmaja Pandya
Right before Jade is about to leave for a summer art intensive, her best friend, Phoebe, attempts suicide. How is Jade supposed to focus on herself right now? But at the Art Farm, Jade has artistic opportunities she’s been waiting for her whole life. And as she gets to know her classmates, she begins to fall for whimsical, upbeat, comfortable-in-her-own-skin Mary. Jade pours herself into making ceramic monsters that vent her stress and insecurities, but when she puts her creatures in the kiln, something unreal happens: they come to life. And they’re taking a stand: if Jade won’t confront her problems, her problems are going to confront her, including the scariest of them all—if Jade grows, prospers, and even falls in love this summer, is she leaving Phoebe behind?

Available at MPL

¡Ay, Mija! by Christine Suggs
Sixteen-year-old Christine takes their first solo trip to Mexico to spend a few weeks with their grandparents and tía. At first, Christine struggles to connect with family they don’t yet share a language with. Seeing the places their mom grew up—the school she went to, the café where she had her first date with their father—Christine becomes more and more aware of the generational differences in their family. Soon Christine settles into life in Mexico, eating pan dulce, drawing what they see, and growing more comfortable with Spanish. But when Mom joins their trip, Christine’s two worlds collide. They feel homesick for Texas, struggle against traditions, and miss being able to speak to their mom without translating. Eventually, through exploring the impacts of colonialism in both Mexico and themselves, they find their place in their family and start to feel comfortable with their mixed identity.

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The Greatest Thing by Sarah Winifred Searle
It’s the first day of sophomore year, and now that Winifred’s two best (and only) friends have transferred to a private school, she must navigate high school on her own. But she isn’t alone for long. In art class, she meets two offbeat students, Oscar and April. The three bond through clandestine sleepovers, thrift store shopping, and zine publishing. Winifred is finally breaking out of her shell, but there’s one secret she can’t bear to admit to April and Oscar, or even to herself—and this lie is threatening to destroy her newfound friendships. Available at MPL

Welcome to St. Hell by Lewis Hancox
Lewis has a few things to say to his younger teen self. He knows she hates her body. He knows she’s confused about who to snog. He knows she’s really a he and will ultimately realize this... but she’s going to go through a whole lot of mess (some of it funny, some of it not funny at all) to get to that point. Lewis is trying to tell her this... but she’s refusing to listen. Available at MPL

Messy Roots by Laura Gao
After spending her early years in Wuhan, China, riding water buffalos and devouring stinky tofu, Laura immigrates to Texas, where her hometown is as foreign as Mars—at least until 2020, when COVID-19 makes Wuhan a household name. In Messy Roots, Laura illustrates her coming-of-age as the girl who simply wants to make the basketball team, escape Chinese school, and figure out why girls make her heart flutter. Available at MPL

The Magic Fish by Trung Le Nguyen
Tien and his mother may come from different cultures—she’s an immigrant from Vietnam still struggling with English; he’s been raised in America—but through the fairy tales he checks out from the local library, those differences are erased. But as much as Tien’s mother’s English continues to improve as he reads her tales of love, loss, and travel across distant shores, there’s one conversation that still eludes him—how to come out to her and his father. Is there even a way to explain what he’s going through in Vietnamese? And without a way to reveal his hidden self, how will his parents ever accept him? Available at MPL

Maybe an Artist by Liz Montague
When Liz Montague was a senior in college, she wrote to the New Yorker, asking them why they didn’t publish more inclusive comics. The New Yorker wrote back asking if she could recommend any. She responded: yes, me. Those initial cartoons in the New Yorker led to this memoir of Liz’s youth, from the age of five through college—how she navigated life in her predominantly white New Jersey town, overcame severe dyslexia through art, and found the confidence to pursue her passion. Funny and poignant, Liz captures the age-old adolescent questions of “who am I?” and “what do I want to be?” with pitch-perfect clarity and insight.
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Hey Kiddo by Jarrett J. Krosoczka
In kindergarten, Jarrett Krosoczka's teacher asks him to draw his family, with a mommy and a daddy. But Jarrett's family is much more complicated than that. His mom is an addict, in and out of rehab, and in and out of Jarrett's life. His father is a mystery -- Jarrett doesn't know where to find him, or even what his name is. Jarrett lives with his grandparents -- two very loud, very loving, very opinionated people who had thought they were through with raising children until Jarrett came along. Jarrett goes through his childhood trying to make his non-normal life as normal as possible, finding a way to express himself through drawing even as so little is being said to him about what's going on. Only as a teenager can Jarrett begin to piece together the truth of his family, reckoning with his mother and tracking down his father.
Available at MPL

Displacement by Kiku Hughes
Kiku is on vacation in San Francisco when suddenly she finds herself displaced to the 1940s Japanese-American internment camp that her late grandmother, Ernestina, was forcibly relocated to during World War II. These displacements keep occurring until Kiku finds herself "stuck" back in time. Living alongside her young grandmother and other Japanese-American citizens in internment camps, Kiku gets the education she never received in history class. She witnesses the lives of Japanese-Americans who were denied their civil liberties and suffered greatly, but managed to cultivate community and commit acts of resistance in order to survive.
Available at MPL

Anya's Ghost by Vera Brosgol
Anya, embarrassed by her Russian immigrant family and self-conscious about her body, has given up on fitting in at school but falling down a well and making friends with the ghost there just may be worse.
Available at MPL, BAB

Home by Julio Anta, Anna Wieszczyk, and Lisa Sterle
After being separated from his mother at the US border, a young Guatemalan immigrant must learn to harness emerging superhuman abilities while being hunted by the Federal Government.
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Why is Everybody Yelling? by Marisabina Russo
It’s 1950s New York, and Marisabina Russo is being raised Catholic and attending a Catholic school that she loves—but when she finds out that she’s Jewish by blood, and that her family members are Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, her childhood is thrown into turmoil. To make matters more complicated, her father is out of the picture, her mother is ambitious and demanding, and her older half-brothers have troubles, too.

American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang
Meet three apparently unrelated characters: Jin Wang, who moves to a new neighborhood with his family only to discover that he’s the only Chinese-American student at his new school; the powerful Monkey King, subject of one of the oldest and greatest Chinese fables; and Chin-Kee, a personification of the ultimate negative Chinese stereotype, who is ruining his cousin Danny’s life with his yearly visits.
Available at MPL, BAB

Almost American Girl by Robin Ha
For as long as she can remember, it’s been Robin and her mom against the world. Growing up as the only child of a single mother in Seoul, Korea, wasn’t always easy, but it has bonded them fiercely together.
So when a vacation to visit friends in Huntsville, Alabama, unexpectedly becomes a permanent relocation—following her mother’s announcement that she’s getting married—Robin is devastated.
Overnight, her life changes. She is dropped into a new school where she doesn’t understand the language and struggles to keep up. She is completely cut off from her friends in Seoul and has no access to her beloved comics. At home, she doesn’t fit in with her new stepfamily, and worst of all, she is furious with the one person she is closest to—her mother.
Then one day Robin’s mother enrolls her in a local comic drawing class, which opens the window to a future Robin could never have imagined.
Available at MPL