ALA Great Stories Club
Empathy: The Cost of Choosing Sides
Supplemental Activities

The following supplemental activities were prepared by Allyson Dowds, Youth Technology Librarian for Teen Central at the Boston Public Library and Anna Mae Duane, Associate Professor of English at the University of Connecticut, to offer additional support for the “Empathy” series.

Reading/Activity 1: “Of Our Spiritual Striving”

**Background:** This brief essay explaining DuBois’s idea of double consciousness might be difficult for some readers on a first pass, but the time it takes to discuss and work through DuBois’s argument can pay huge dividends. This essay provides a vocabulary that many students may be looking for, and can provide a thematic touchstone for any of the books in the “Empathy” series. DuBois’s point about how painful it is to witness yourself through the eyes of hateful others also offers a valuable insight—by being able to move between other’s perspectives and your own allows for a better understanding of how all identities are a form of performance. That knowledge brings with it a certain sort of freedom, as we realize that we are there is one true “me” that we are forced to stick with—we are free to discard the judgments of others, even as we are aware of the damage they can do.

**Ice-breaker:** DuBois talks about being an outsider as a “gift of second sight.” How might being an outsider be a good thing? Can you think of an example (from your own life, comics, whatever) where being excluded allowed the outsider to see things differently? Perhaps to understand things that insiders don’t? What sort of things?

Reading/Activity 2: Forgiveness and the past

**Background:** “Forgiveness means abandoning all hope of a better past.” –attributed to the comedienne Lily Tomlin, but also has Buddhist resonances. In either case, the quote evokes the idea of time travel in ways that may be interesting to think about in relation to this GSC collection of books. It’s a funny idea, because of course, hoping for a better past is ridiculous. That’s not how time works. Rather the past continually becomes our future because we can’t come to terms with it—our anger, our denial, our shame—keep us attached to it as if somehow vengeance could reanimate the dead (as in the Ghost Dance featured in *Flight*).

**Ice-breaker:** Break into groups. If you had the power, what would you do to make a “better past”? You could choose an example from your own life, or from history. What would have to happen to make this past better? Who would benefit? Who might lose out? Why?
Reading/Activity 3: Gallery/graffiti walk
Background: This hands-on activity may be done using chalk, large pieces of paper, etc., but the idea is to create a walkway where teens write down words they’ve used or have been directed toward them that stereotype their race, gender, religion, etc. Once all responses are “on display”, have the group walk through these words together and discuss how they feel, why they may use these words, and how they can change these misrepresentations. In addition, ask teens to write down “I AM” statements to create a wall that rejects stereotypes and allows them to make a statement about identity to eliminate stereotypes and appreciate the differences in others. This may be useful alongside W.E.B.’s DuBois’s “Of Our Spiritual Striving” (see Reading/Activity 1).

Reading/Activity 4: Undoing Stereotypes
Background: Prior to meeting with the GSC group, the program leader identifies a certain number of specific character traits (e.g., gender, language spoken at home, birthplace, race, etc.) that distinguish a person. Then, the program leader can ask students/readers to break into small groups based on these characteristics. Teens can discuss what they like about this specific trait and what they want other people to know. Ask small groups to share their stories with the rest of the class/program. This may also be useful alongside the DuBois piece (see Reading/Activity 1).

Reading/Activity 5: Forgiveness
Background: Hand out three-by-five cards and ask the youth to write examples of situations where someone has offended, wronged, or angered them or a family member. Collect the cards, fan them out and have each youth draw a card. Divide into partners or small groups and read the cards together. Have the youth share with their group whether they would forgive this person and why or why not. Discuss whether each situation would be easy or difficult to forgive and why forgiveness is easier in some situations than others. This can relate to Reading/Activity 2, if desired.