

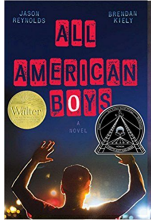
JUST SAY NO?: THE WAR ON DRUGS AND YA LITERATURE

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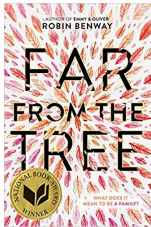
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Selected Recommended Books:

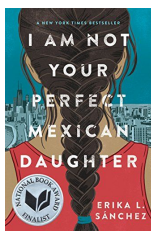


All American Boys (Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely): A brief conversation about drug use provides a launching point for thoughtful interrogation of the times in which drug use is (and isn't) connected to criminality and, more specifically, how those distinctions connect to the race of the person using drugs.



Dope Sick (Walter Dean Myers): Myers's slim novel empathetically portrays the various life circumstances that have led the protagonist to use and sell drugs, allowing for a nuanced discussion of the intersecting factors contributing to and implications of drug use and abuse.

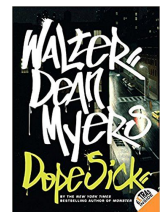
Far From the Tree (Robin Benway): By portraying both addiction (one protagonist's parent is an alcoholic) and more casual use of marijuana, Benway's National Book Award-winning text authentically draws distinctions between substance use and substance abuse.



The Hate U Give (Angie Thomas): After the protagonist's friend Khalil is killed by police officers, a narrative circulates that he had drugs in his car. Amongst other important topics, Thomas's book can spark conversations surrounding the effect of the War on Drugs on Black and Brown young people and the ways that narratives around drug use connect to the discourse around police violence.

I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter (Erika L. Sanchez): Whereas drug use is often first glorified and then demonized in books like *Go Ask Alice*, the portrayal of drug use in Sanchez's book addresses the potential positives, negatives, and neutralities of drug use. Further, the text plays with the stigma and shame around sex in ways that parallels stigma and shame around drug use, both of which can allow for thoughtful discussion of the dominant narratives around sex, drugs, and teenagers.

The Poet X (Elizabeth Acevedo): One of the many strengths in Acevedo's novel is the ways in which it refutes the idea that drug use amongst people of color is connected to criminality. The protagonist's boyfriend is a "good" guy who happens to smoke pot; however, he never pushes the protagonist to join him. In terms of both drug use and sexual conduct, Acevedo's verse novel offers a healthy portrayal of consent that can lead to important conversations that extend beyond "just say no."



Recommended further readings:

Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic (Sam Quinones): In this book-length work, Quinones explores the causes of the expanding opiate epidemic from over-prescriptions to the stigma of shame and silence around drug use that is reshaping the face of drug abuse in our nation. This text is particularly relevant to those who work with young adults because the author addresses the ways in which this epidemic is increasingly affecting younger and younger populations.

[Drug Policy Alliance](#): A non-profit organization based in New York that is attempting to change US drug policies. Their website offers a resource tab that is worth investigating.

The New Jim Crow (Michelle Alexander): This book gives the history and current context around the Mass Incarceration crisis in the United States, which is deeply connected to the policies of the US War on Drugs.

[Students for Sensible Drug Policy](#): International grassroots, student-led organization that is opposed to "war on drugs" policies and that advocates for an informed, comprehensive, realistic drug-education program. Their website has numerous helpful resources and encourages adolescent engagement in drug policies.

Questions to spark contextualized conversations:

- What are your assumptions around drug use? Who uses drugs? Who deals drugs? How did you arrive at these assumptions?
- What portrayals of drug use do you see on TV, in movies, etc.?
- Consider people you know who have used drugs (illegal drugs, legal drugs used in ways beyond their intended purpose). How do those experiences connect to what the fictional portrayals with which you are familiar?
- What are the underlying beliefs about drug use and addiction that undergird the way that drug use is depicted in the book?