

# Teaching Challenged Texts: *The Prince and the Dressmaker*

This teacher collective saw and reacted to the conservative forces that have increased the persistent vitriol foisted on books written by and about marginalized communities. We saw the attempts to remove books that students were actively engaged with and learning from as a direct attack on the teaching profession. As a response we developed a set of teaching guides to help teachers center banned and challenged books - not because of these challenges, rather because these books deserve to be centered in the curriculum.

**THIS PROJECT GREW** out of a research study I started in the middle of the pandemic school closings. I wanted teachers to have a place—even if it was only on Zoom—to be able to wrestle with works of hard, critical theory. After the study was over, some of the teachers wanted to keep meeting, and they wanted to do more than learn. We approached this project as a collective—each person bringing her expertise and passion to it. We wanted to produce something that was helpful for teachers who wanted to bring banned and challenged books into the curriculum in ways that focus on the literary and literacy merits of the work. —*Laura M. Jiménez*

## THE COLLECTIVE (ALPHABETICAL BY LAST NAME)

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These resources are authored by largely cis, white, middle- to upper-class women. We do not claim to be experts on what it means to grow up as a member of a marginalized community. We recognize that our privileged lives have impacted the way these resources are written. If you identify areas of the guide that perpetuate biases and injustice, we invite you to contact us so that we can correct and publicly acknowledge the problems.

Our goal in creating this guide is to help you get those books “off the shelf” and integrated as part of instruction. Each guide provides a variety of information about some of the most commonly challenged books in the US, including:

- ▣ Introduction to the book including themes and “heads up content” (see below for definition)
- ▣ Ways to integrate the book into classroom instruction including skills, discussion topics, vocabulary, activities, paired texts, and further resources
- ▣ Evidence of educational value using both the Common Core Standards and the Social Justice Standards from Learning for Justice that can be shared with parents, administrators, and others

This guide is not a lesson plan, pacing guide, or fully developed unit plan. It will not prepare you to teach the text next week or next month. It is a starting place for teachers to develop lessons that will best suit the students in their school community.

We spent hours talking through the ways we wanted to help teachers think about these books. One item that took much longer than anyone expected was the “heads up content.” We all agreed we didn’t like the traditional idea of referring to characters’ identity as something to be warned about. Instead, we wanted to turn that idea on its head and talk about the real danger to the kids who share those marginalized identities. For example in *The Prince and the Dressmaker* we originally used the term “content warning” and listed all the reasons the book has been banned and challenged: drag, cross dressing, questioning gender roles.

But were those really the issues that the book is dealing with? Why is questioning gender roles something to warn students about? Why is the act of questioning a dangerous thing to do? Especially in a classroom, where questioning and critical thinking should be encouraged. Instead, we talked through it and we landed on the fact that, given the likelihood that a student would be or would know someone who was questioning their gender presentation or sexual orientation, maybe the issue was the homophobia and transphobia that the prince feared. Was the problem we needed to address the oppressive stance adults are taking? And so, we renamed the section “heads up content” to give teachers something to think about, not something to fear.

All of the guides will include a glossary of important terms, a summary of the book, and most importantly, themes and essential questions from our own teaching experiences with the books. Some of us used the essential questions as writing prompts; others used them as discussion questions.

There are also “tools for teaching and learning” for many of the books. These are ideas to help teachers highlight the kinds of literacy work we need to center in all of our classes. Often the pushback for including books about marginalized characters and experiences is that we need to “cover the standards.” We wanted to provide teachers with evidence of how we used these books effectively in our own teaching. We also gave examples of some of the activities we did with our own students in the “suggested activities” section. When we were able, we provided some of our students’ work to give teachers an idea of the kinds of work they can expect.

For some of us, the best part of the guides was writing the “extension activities” and finding the “paired text and media” resources. For those of us who had *not* taught the book, this was an area where we could really

shine! We had a great time bringing the resources back to the group and discussing the merits and possible issues relative to specific grades.

Lastly, we thought about teachers who hadn’t had the chance to be in a learning group like this. How could these guides support teacher learning about topics and ideas they might not be familiar with or may have never brought into the classroom? So we found the state standards that they should be thinking about (that they could provide to administrators, if needed).

## *The Prince and the Dressmaker* by Jen Wang

### GLOSSARY OF IMPORTANT TERMS

- Belonging—Feelings shared by members of a community that include responsibilities toward individuals and the group, safety, and security.
- “Heads-up Content”—Text that needs to be mindfully addressed and integrated into instruction (versus completely avoided or ignored).
- Identity—According to Facing History & Ourselves (<https://www.facinghistory.org>), “Social identity refers to your sense of who you are based on your membership in certain groups. While there are many different social groups, some of the main ones include ability, age, economic class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, language, race, religion, and sexual orientation.”
- Marginalized—People who have been denied or have limited access to resources and power due to their identity/ies.

### SUMMARY

Through both the plot and author/illustrator Jen Wang’s illustrations, *The Prince and the Dressmaker* explores the relationship between Frances, a dressmaker, and Sebastian, a prince, in a fairytale-esque setting. Their story begins when Frances is noticed by Sebastian for her unconventional dresses. Sebastian takes note of these designs because he harbors a secret: although he is known as Prince Sebastian by day, he becomes Lady Crystallia at night, dressing in lavish gowns and feeling freedom and strength in her identity. (Note: Lady Crystallia and Prince Sebastian are one character. When referring to the character as Lady Crystallia, she/her pronouns will be used. When referring to the character as Prince Sebastian, he/him pronouns will be used. These pronouns are consistent with those used in the text.) Sebastian/Lady Crystallia and Frances quickly form a close friendship as Lady Crystallia becomes a fashion icon, but the secrets they keep and competing desires threaten to pull them apart.



## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Acceptance of all identities
- The fluidity of gender
- Managing parental and societal expectations
- Protecting yourself versus helping others
- Forms of self-expression

## VOCABULARY

Concept Vocabulary	Text Vocabulary
Panel	Seamstress (p. 5)
Frame	Volition (p. 11)
Bleed	Aristocrat (p. 24)
Gutter	Disown (p. 37)
Closure	Conservative (p. 47)
Palette	Aesthetic (p. 95)
Saturation	Muse (p. 117)
Transition	Languish (p. 172)
Subject-to-subject	Betrothal (p. 177)
Action-to-action	Obliged (p. 209)
Scene-to-scene	

## POSSIBLE EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Create [Starburst Identity Charts](#) for main characters Sebastian and Frances. After, students can write a short reflection on the charts they created.

Prompt: Based on what you've learned about one of the main characters' identities, explain the difference between how the character views themselves versus how others view them. Then, analyze the significance of these differences for the characters' development.

## PAIRED TEXT AND MEDIA

- [Forbes interview](#) with Jen Wang
- MFA Boston Exhibition: [Gender Bending Fashion](#)
- Other graphic novels about belonging and identity
  - American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang
  - Dare to Disappoint* by Ögze Samanci
  - Pashmina* by Nidhi Chanani
  - The Cardboard Kingdom* by Chad Sell
- Current event about gender identity (e.g., [Many teens wish for a more inclusive prom experience](#))

## STANDARDS

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3 Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text,

including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE STANDARDS

- ID.6-8.1 I know and like who I am and can comfortably talk about my family and myself and describe our various group identities.
- ID.6-8.3 I know that overlapping identities combine to make me who I am and that none of my group identities on their own fully defines me or any other person.
- DI.6-8.7 I can accurately and respectfully describe ways that people (including myself) are similar to and different from each other and others in their identity groups.
- JU.6-8.14 I know that all people (including myself) have certain advantages and disadvantages in society based on who they are and where they were born.
- AC.6-8.16 I am concerned about how people (including myself) are treated and feel for people when they are excluded or mistreated because of their identities.
- AC.6-8.17 I know how to stand up for myself and for others when faced with exclusion, prejudice and injustice.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

## PROFESSIONAL TEXTS

- *Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ-Inclusive Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom* by Caitlin L. Ryan and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth
- *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud

## FURTHER READING FOR EDUCATORS

- *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe
- *Beyond the Gender Binary* by Alok Vaid-Menon

## MEDIA AND MORE

- *POSE* (tv show)
- Christian Siriano (fashion designer)
- Jonathan Van Ness/Getting Curious Podcast (S1:E3: "Can We Say Bye-Bye to the Binary") ■

*The Collective* are a group of teachers who want to be active agents of change—especially around providing students with the opportunity to engage with marginalized voices in the literature they read in class. They can be contacted at [jimenezl@bu.edu](mailto:jimenezl@bu.edu).