

**USING LITERATURE**  
to Support  
Children's  
Mental Health

*edited by* **KIM BECNEL** and **ROBIN A. MOELLER**

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# CONTENTS

Introduction vii

1	<b>Coping with Anxiety</b> Fantasy Bibliotherapy for Children Pauline Dewan	1
2	<b>Visualizing Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder</b> Graphic Novels to Support Middle Grade Readers Stephanie E. Mahar and Xuejiao Li	13
3	<b>Finding Hope in Death, Loss, and Grief</b> Deanna Day, Barbara A. Ward, and Terrell A. Young	27
4	<b>Bibliotherapy for Children with Relatives Experiencing Cancer</b> Sara Churchill, Cynthia Stogdill, and Christine Chasek	39
5	<b>Learning to Soar</b> Overcoming Challenges in Black Girlhood Literature Janaka B. Lewis	49
6	<b>Muslim Children's Mental Health</b> Understanding Religious Practices and the Challenges of Muslim Students Sadaf Siddique	59
7	<b>Relax. Breathe. Read a Graphic Novel.</b> Graphic Novels as a Format to Promote Mental and Emotional Well-Being Soline Holmes and Alicia Schwarzenbach	81

8

**No Missing Piece**

95

Using Children’s Literature to Support the Unique Needs  
of Autistic Mental Health

Chelsey Roos

9

**Navigating Unseen Borders**

109

Understanding the Mental Health Challenges of Young  
Latin American Migrants

Yoo Kyung Sung

About the Contributors 125

Index 129

FOR REVIEW ONLY

# INTRODUCTION

**OUR MENTAL HEALTH** is a vital part of our overall wellness, impacting our self-perception, ability to handle challenges, and capacity to connect with other people. This is true not only for adults but also, and perhaps especially, for children and youth who are in the process of developing mental frameworks and coping strategies that they will take with them into adulthood. Just as our physical health needs explicit care and attention, so too does our mental wellness. The global COVID-19 pandemic had such a devastating impact on the mental health of young people that it sparked national and global conversations, but experts say that the pandemic only exacerbated problematic trends already well underway.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, over the past two decades, there have been dramatic increases in the number of young people reporting feelings of hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, and anxiety. These troubling patterns are attributed to many different factors, such as difficulty in accessing appropriate mental health care in a timely way, increasing academic expectations, the impact of social media, and societal stressors such as climate change and gun violence. In a more positive interpretation of these trends, it has also been theorized that at least some of the increase we are seeing in mental health struggles of children is due to the fact that youth and the adults responsible for them may have a greater ability to recognize and willingness to report and seek help for mental health concerns.<sup>2</sup>

On top of all of this are the challenges wrought by the pandemic, including social upheaval, isolation, and loss of support networks, and, for many youth, loss of financial stability, access to mental health care, stable housing, and even family members due to illness. According to “Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory,” the pandemic brought significant mental health challenges and psychological distress to youth across the globe. Current studies “covering 80,000 youth globally found that depressive and anxiety symptoms doubled during the pandemic, with 25% of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety symptoms.”<sup>3</sup> The issue of mental health and

wellness is closely tied to social justice and equity as well. Children and youth who grow up in socioeconomically disadvantaged households are at a considerably greater risk of facing mental health challenges than youth who do not. Furthermore, children who identify with traditionally marginalized populations face greater risk; for example, the rate of suicide of Black children ages five–twelve is nearly twice that of their white peers.<sup>4</sup>

One small silver lining of the pandemic has been the opening up of this national and global conversation about the mental health and wellness of our youth. With this conversation comes the lessening of stigma and the search for resources to ameliorate identified problems and stave off new ones. The creative community and the publishing industry have responded to this resource need with the proliferation of new book titles with themes related to social and emotional learning, mental well-being, and specific mental health challenges. Meanwhile, librarians, educators, parents, counselors, caregivers, and other adults are seeking guidance on navigating this literature to find the resources that best meet the mental health needs of their families, students, and communities. As former public and school librarians, we want this collection of essays to fill a void by laying out the exciting landscape of current children’s literature offerings on issues related to mental health, and by providing helpful frameworks and strategies for adults to think about the evaluation, curation, and use of these books with young people.

Some of the chapters in this book touch on challenges that adults in caregiving professions regularly seek resources for, such as books dealing with anxiety or grief and loss. Examples include “Coping with Anxiety: Fantasy Bibliotherapy for Children,” which discusses the unique and effective ways that both classic and current fantasy books can help children to understand, process, and cope with anxiety-provoking situations in their lives. “Finding Hope in Death, Loss, and Grief,” on the other hand, offers many suggestions for books that can be used as excellent tools for children facing different types of loss, as well as practical suggestions of activities that can be paired with these titles to further assist children in the grieving and healing process.

Other chapters focus on particular populations and go beyond providing excellent recommendations for teachers and librarians by supplying important information and context that will help them to better understand

and serve these populations in their communities and schools. Chapters such as “Muslim Children’s Mental Health: Understanding Religious Practices and the Challenges of Muslim Students,” “Navigating Unseen Borders: Understanding the Mental Health Challenges of Young Latin American Migrants,” and “No Missing Piece: Using Children’s Literature to Support the Unique Needs of Autistic Mental Health” provide insights into the unique challenges faced by Muslim, migrant, and autistic communities, respectively, and as such will be helpful for any educators, counselors, or librarians who are trying to better support individuals in their communities who are part of these populations.

This volume will be useful to caregivers and professionals who dip into it in search of the guidance offered in particular chapters to address specific situations as they arise, as well as to those with a particular interest in the myriad ways that children’s literature can be leveraged to support young people’s mental and emotional well-being. The latter may find the whole volume useful, as they can not only use the book lists and accompanying descriptions provided here to help them to select and recommend titles, but they can also cultivate their ability to see children’s literature through the lens of mental well-being and come away better equipped to evaluate and choose the best among the new titles being published every day.

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# INDEX

## A

- AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) devices, 104–105
- Abby, Tried and True* (Gephart), 44
- Abdul's Story* (Thompkins-Bigelow), 65, 74
- Abrego, Leisy J., 111
- acceptance, 99–101
- ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), 89
- adolescence, 54–56
- Agarwal, Veronica, 16–17, 89–90, 91, 92
- Ahmed Aziz's Epic Year* (Hamza)
- description of, 69, 70
  - recommended title list for Muslim students, 76
- Alabed, Bana, 75
- Ali, Sahar Kader, 75
- Ali-Karamali, Sumbul, 71, 76
- Alshalabi, Noor, 75
- Alvarez, Julia, 33
- Aly, Hatem, 74, 75, 76
- American Psychiatric Association, 63
- Amina's Voice* (Khan)
- Islamic Center in, 70–71
  - name issue in, 69
  - recommended title list for Muslim students, 76
- Amini, Mehrdokht, 74, 75
- Amira's Picture Day* (Faruqi), 66, 74
- Ansloos, Jeffrey, 102
- Ansloos, Shezza, 102
- “Anti-Black State Violence, Classroom Edition: The Spirit Murdering of Black Children” (Love), 57–58
- anxiety
- of autistic children, 95–96
  - bibliotherapy for helping readers, 1–2
  - chapters in book on, viii
  - children diagnosed with, 81
  - externalization of in graphic novels, 84, 86–87
  - graphic novels for emotional well-being toolkit, 88–90
  - of Latin American migrants, 112
  - middle grade books for Muslim students, 69
  - of Muslim students, 62, 63, 65
  - novels for helping readers with, 6–11
  - picture books for helping readers with, 2–6
  - seeking help for OCD, 23
  - symptoms of young people, vii–viii
- The Arabic Quilt* (Khalil), 65–66, 74
- Areli Is a Dreamer* (Morales)
- book cover of, 112
  - conclusion of, 119–120
  - overview of, 112
  - as story about goodbyes/hitting the road, 114, 115
  - as story about migrants trapped in legal violence, 117, 119
  - as story of journey/migrant travelers' solidarity, 116–117
- Arruda-Colli, Marina N. F., 28
- art therapy, 91
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), 89
- attitudes
- mental health literacy and, 14
  - positive, promotion of, 20–21
  - toward mental health, 23
  - toward difference, 90
- augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, 104–105
- authors
- autistic authors, 98
  - Black women authors, 49–50
  - creator's notes in graphic novels, 90–91
- autistic children
- books for mental health of, 95–96
  - positive autistic representation, 97–98
  - representation in children's literature, 96–97
  - unique challenges for autistic mental health, 99–105
  - as whole pictures, 105
- Ávila, Pilar López, 34
- Azim, Fahmida, 74
- Aziz, Susannah, 74

## B

- Badir and the Beaver* (Stewart), 68, 75
- banning, 56
- Bazlamit, Saffia, 74
- Becker, Aaron, 33
- behaviors
- See compulsions
- Behind the Scenes* (Keckley), 51
- belonging
- bibliotherapy for sense of, 41
  - politics of, 111
  - proactive steps for Muslim students, 72–73
- Best Friends* (Hale & Pham), 21



- Betsey Brown* (Shange), 52, 53
- Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from the Border* (Perkins)
- conclusion of, 120
  - on migrants trapped in legal violence, 117, 118–119
  - overview of, 112
- bibliotherapy
- for helping readers with anxiety, 1–2
  - novels for helping readers with anxiety, 6–11
  - picture books for helping readers with anxiety, 2–6
  - in practice, 42
- bibliotherapy, for children with relatives
- experiencing cancer
    - bibliotherapy, benefits of, 40–42
    - bibliotherapy in practice, 42
    - emotional needs of cancer-impacted children, 39–40
    - further readings, 45
    - suggested titles, 43–45
  - “Bibliotherapy for Children with Relatives Experiencing Cancer” (Churchill, Stogdill, & Chasek), 39–45
- Big Cat, Little Cat* (Cooper), 30
- Binford, Warren, 113, 114, 115–116, 117, 118
- bipolar disorder, 95
- Bishop, Rudine Sims, 82
- Bishop, Tracy Nishimura, 34
- Bitsy Bat, School Star* (Windness), 103
- Black girlhood literature
- further readings, 58
  - historical representations of Black girlhood, 50–53
  - literary representations for current time, 54–56
  - overview of, 49–50
  - reading Black girlhood in historical dramas, 53–54
  - recommended title list, 57
- Black women authors, 49–50
- Blue* (Seeger), 31
- The Bluest Eye* (Morrison)
- in “Growing Up in America” course, 54
  - Janaka B. Lewis on reading, 49
  - as recommended Black girlhood title, 57
  - representation of Black girlhood, 52–53
- book and activity pairs, 34–36
- book clubs, 101
- books
- for autistic children’s mental health, 95–96
  - early readers for Muslim children, 68–69
  - graphic novels for emotional well-being toolkit, 88–90
  - middle grade books for Muslim students, 69–72
  - recommended title list for Muslim students, 74–77
  - for representation/reflection for Muslim children, 64–72
  - See also children’s literature
- border issues
- impact on mental health of young Latin migrants, 109–110
  - legal violence in narratives of Latinx immigrants, 111
- “bordering,” 111
- Bow, Erin, 100–101
- Bowles, Davis, 112, 113, 117, 118
- Boy, Everywhere* (Dassu), 72, 76
- Boyce, Jo Ann Allen, 57
- Brandenburg, Lisa, 32
- Brian, Rachel, 88–89, 92
- Briseño, Stephen, 113, 114, 115, 117, 118
- Brooks, Gwendolyn, 52
- Brooks, Molly, 14, 18–19, 53, 57, 91, 92
- Brown Girl Dreaming* (Woodson)
- description of, 53
  - on dreams of Black girls, 56
  - as recommended Black girlhood title, 57
  - representation of Black girlhood, 52
- Brown v. Board of Education*, 53
- bullying
- middle grade books for Muslim students, 70
  - of Muslim children, 63, 73
- Burgess, Rebecca, 102
- Bushry, Ani, 75
- Button Pusher* (Page)
- creator’s notes in, 91
  - on recommended title list, 92
  - on therapy sessions, 89
- buzzing bee symbol, 18–19, 85–86
- C**
- CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations), 60, 63
- Can You See Me?* series (Scott & Westcott), 103
- cancer, bibliotherapy for children with relatives experiencing
- bibliotherapy, benefits of, 40–42
  - bibliotherapy in practice, 42
  - emotional needs of cancer-impacted children, 39–40
  - further readings, 45
  - suggested titles, 43–45
- cancer rates, 39
- Canva, 91
- The Cardinal’s Gift* (Heaney), 36
- Carruthers, Charlene, 54
- CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), 28
- Castellanos, Alexis, 88, 92

- Celej, Zuzanna, 34
- Center for Cartoon Studies, 88, 92
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- on anxiety disorders among children, 1
  - on mental health, 81, 82
- characters
- autistic characters in children's literature, 95, 96–97
  - bibliotherapy for children with relatives experiencing cancer, 41–42
  - bibliotherapy for helping readers with anxiety, 1–2, 11
  - in Black girlhood literature, 50
  - children identifying with, 28
  - externalization of mental states/emotions in graphic novels, 84–87
  - OCD representation in graphic novels, 14–18
  - positive autistic representation in children's literature, 97–98
  - recognition or identification with, 42
  - universality of graphic novels, 83–84
- Chasek, Christine
- "Bibliotherapy for Children with Relatives Experiencing Cancer," 39–45
  - information about, 125
- Chayka, Doug, 74
- Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model, 29
- Children and Teens' Grief Awareness Month, 34–35
- children's literature
- for autistic mental health, 95–105
  - autistic representation, history of, 96–97
  - autistic representation, positive, 97–98
  - bibliotherapy for helping readers with anxiety, 1–2
  - on death/loss/grief, 28–29
  - on death/loss/grief, evaluation criteria, 29, 30
  - death/loss/grief, telling truth *vs.* preserving innocence, 27–28
  - graphic novels for emotional well-being toolkit, 88–90
  - graphic novels for graphic medicine, 82
  - graphic novels for mental health/emotional well-being, 83
  - on mental health, overview of chapters on, viii–ix
  - Muslim children, books for representation/reflection, 64–72
- children/young people
- anxiety as disorder among, 1
  - autistic children as whole pictures, 105
  - autistic children, books for mental health of, 95–96
  - autistic mental health, challenges for, 99–105
  - bibliotherapy for children with relatives experiencing cancer, 39–45
  - bibliotherapy for helping readers with anxiety, 1–2
  - death of child, titles about, 34
  - death/loss/grief, book and activity pairs about, 34–36
  - death/loss/grief, relationship to, 27–28
  - Latin American migrants, 109–110
  - mental health of, 59
  - mental health trends for, vii–viii
  - mental health/emotional well-being of, 81–82
  - moving, stress of, 115
  - novels for helping readers with anxiety, 6–11
- children/young people (*cont'd*)
- OCD among, 13–14
  - picture books for helping readers with anxiety, 2–6
  - See also* Muslim children's mental health
- Childress, Alice, 52, 57
- Christmas, Johnnie, 86–87, 92
- Churchill, Sara
- "Bibliotherapy for Children with Relatives Experiencing Cancer," 39–45
  - information about, 125
- clinical bibliotherapy, 42
- Coelho, Joseph, 35
- cognitive behavioral therapy, 1
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 28
- collection
- autistic mental health, challenges for, 99–105
  - death/loss/grief, recommended titles for collection, 29–33
  - graphic novels for emotional well-being toolkit, 88–90
  - positive autistic representation in children's literature, 97–98
  - titles for bibliotherapy for children with relatives experiencing cancer, 43–45
- Collins, Peggy, 75
- color, 87–88
- The Color Purple* (Walker), 55
- comics
- for graphic medicine, 82
  - text containers in, 87
  - young readers creation of their own comics, 91
- communication, 104–105
- Comport, Sally Wern, 76
- compulsions
- in *Growing Pangs* (Ormsbee), 15, 21–22
  - in *Just Roll with It* (Agarwal & Durfey-Lavoie), 16–17

- compulsions (*cont'd*)  
 as OCD characteristic, 13  
 in *Real Friends* (Hale & Pham), 17–18  
 symbolism in *Growing Pangs* (Ormsbee), 19
- conclusion, of Latin American migrant stories, 119–121
- Cooper, Abby, 43–44
- Cooper, Anna Julia, 49
- Cooper, Elisha, 30
- “Coping with Anxiety: Fantasy Bibliotherapy for Children” (Dewan)  
 bibliotherapy for helping readers, 1–2  
 conclusion about, 11  
 novels, 6–11  
 overview of, viii  
 picture books, 2–6
- Coraline* (Gaiman), 6–7
- Cornelison, Sue, 74
- A Corner of the Universe* (Martin), 96
- Cosgrove, Kate, 104–105
- Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), 60, 63
- COVID-19 pandemic  
 disruption of learning for Black children, 54  
 impact on mental health of young people, vii–viii
- Craft, Ellen, 49
- Craft, William, 49
- creator’s notes, 90–91
- Crescent Moons and Pointed Minarets* (Khan), 66, 74
- cross-racial relationships, 53
- Crowley, Ashley, 34
- Cry, Heart, but Never Break* (Ringtved), 33
- D**
- Dance Like a Leaf* (Irving), 33
- The Dark* (Snicket), 2–3
- Dassu, A. M., 76
- Davies, Diane, 43
- Davies, Nicola, 34
- Day, Deanna  
 “Finding Hope in Death, Loss, and Grief,” 27–37  
 information about, 125
- A Day with No Words* (Hammond), 104–105
- De la Peña, Matt, 27
- Dear Star Baby* (Newsome), 34
- death/loss/grief  
 book and activity pairs, supporting families/children with, 34–36  
 children’s relationship to, 27  
 evaluation criteria for titles, 29, 30  
 finding hope, 36–37  
 middle grade books for Muslim students, 69  
 picture books, recommended, 33–34  
 recommended titles for collection, 29–33  
 social-emotional learning, children’s books for, 28–29  
 telling truth *vs.* preserving innocence, 27–28
- Dee, Noor H., 65, 74
- depression  
 among autistic children, 95  
 children diagnosed with, 81  
 depressive symptoms of young people, vii–viii
- detention centers  
 Latin American migrant stories, conclusion of, 120  
 narratives about Latin American migrants, 110  
 stories about migrants trapped in legal violence, 118–119
- developmental bibliotherapy, 42
- Dewan, Pauline, 125
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Third Edition (DSM-III) (American Psychiatric Association), 96
- DiCamillo, Kate, 28
- dice, 16–17, 20
- discrimination  
 Islamophobia, impact of, 63–64  
 against Latin American migrants, 109–110  
 middle grade books for Muslim students, 70–72  
 against Muslims, 59–60  
*See also* racism
- discussion questions, based on graphic novels, 25
- diversity, 98
- dreams  
 of Black girlhood, 50, 55–56  
 of Latin American migrants, 119–121
- Dumais, Sandra, 4
- Durfey-Lavoie, Lee, 16–17, 89–90, 92
- E**
- early readers  
 for Muslim children, 68–69  
 recommended title list for Muslim students, 75–76
- Echo’s Sister* (Mosier), 45
- Eid festival, 61, 66
- emotional well-being  
 graphic novels for, 91–92  
 graphic novels for emotional well-being toolkit, 88–90  
*See also* mental health/emotional well-being
- emotions  
 bibliotherapy for children with relatives experiencing cancer, 41–42  
 of children with relatives experiencing cancer, 39–40

- color use to show, 88
- creator's notes in graphic novels, 90–91
- of death, loss, grief, 28–29
- emotional needs of cancer-impacted children, 39–40
- externalization of in graphic novels, 84–87
- graphic novels for emotional well-being, 91–92
- of Latin American migrant children, 121–122
- text containers in graphic novels, 87
- empathy
  - graphic novels for building, 90
  - MHL and, 14
- Escape from Aleppo* (Senzai), 72, 76
- evaluation criteria, for death/loss/grief titles, 29, 30
- examination of issues in book, 42
- externalization, 84–87
- F**
- fairy tales, 2
- family
  - cancer, bibliotherapy for children with relatives experiencing, 39–45
  - death/loss/grief, book and activity pairs about, 34–36
  - of Latin American migrants, 109–110
  - legal violence in narratives of Latinx immigrants, 111
  - middle grade books for Muslim students, 69
- family separation
  - Latin American migrant stories about, 121
  - of Latin American migrants, 110, 111
- fantasy bibliotherapy
  - fantasy stories for, 2
  - novels for helping readers with anxiety, 6–11
  - picture books for helping readers with anxiety, 2–6
- Faruqi, Reem, 66, 74, 77
- Faruqi, Saadia, 62, 63, 64, 69, 70, 75–76, 77
- fasting, 61, 66
- fear
  - of the dark, 2–3
  - in *The Hobbit (or There and Back Again)* (Tolkien), 7–8
  - of Latin American migrant children, 121
  - OCD symptoms, 13–14
  - Scaredy Squirrel* (Watt), 5–6
  - in *Winnie-the-Pooh/The House at Pooh Corner* (Milne), 10–11
- fiction
  - bibliotherapy for helping readers with anxiety, 1–2
  - titles for children with relatives with cancer, 43–45
- Field, Sabra, 33
- Fight Back* (Dassu), 70, 76
- “Finding Hope in Death, Loss, and Grief” (Day, Ward & Young), viii, 27–37
- The Fix-It Man* (Powell), 34
- Flying Over Water* (Senzai & Hitchcock), 71, 72, 76
- food, 36, 61
- Forsdick, Charles, 111
- Four Feet and Two Sandals* (Williams & Mohammed), 67, 74
- Franklin, Ashley, 74
- freedom, 55–56
- French Toast Sundays* (Spielman), 36
- Friend or Fiction* (Cooper), 43–44
- Friends Forever* (Hale & Pham), 21, 23–24
- friendship
  - in *Growing Pangs* (Ormsbee), 14–16
  - positive social relationships/acceptance for autistic children, 99–101
  - in *Real Friends* (Hale & Pham), 17–18, 21
- Fritzzy Finds a Hat* (Hamilton), 43
- From Ant to Eagle* (Lyttle), 45
- The Funeral* (James), 31
- Fung, Rosena, 84, 92
- further readings
  - for bibliotherapy for children with relatives experiencing cancer, 45
  - Black girlhood literature, 58
  - Muslim children's mental health, 77
- G**
- Gaiman, Neil, 6–7
- The Garden of Hope* (Otter), 34
- Gauri, Manglik, 77
- Gaza
  - Israeli offensive in, 60
  - My Garden Over Gaza* (Musa), 74
  - picture books about, 67
- gaze-based relationships, 117
- Geddy, Iman, 77
- Gendron, Sabrina, 75
- Gephart, Donna, 44
- girlhood
  - See Black girlhood literature
- Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns* (Khan), 66, 74
- The Golden Hour* (Smith), 87–88, 92
- Good Different* (Kuyatt), 99
- Good Little Deeds* series (Dee), 65
- The Goodbye Cancer Garden* (Valiant), 43
- goodbyes, Latin American migrant stories about, 114–116
- Grandmother's Visit* (Quan), 33
- grandparents
  - death of, 27, 36

- grandparents (*cont'd*)  
 death/loss/grief, book and activity pairs for, 35–36  
 titles about death of grandparent, 33–34  
*Grandpa's Stories: A Book of Remembering* (Coelho), 35  
 graphic medicine, 82  
 graphic novels  
 color, use of, 87–88  
 conclusion about, 91–92  
 creator's notes, 90–91  
 elements of, 83–88  
 externalization, 84–87  
 graphic medicine, 82  
*Growing Pangs* (Ormsbee), 14–16  
*Just Roll with It* (Agarwal & Durfey-Lavoie), 16–17  
 for mental health/emotional well-being of children, 81–82, 83  
 for mental/emotional well-being toolkit, 88–90  
 OCD, recognizing through symbolism, 18–20  
 OCD discussion questions based on, 25  
 OCD representation in, 14–18  
 OCD symptoms in, 21–22  
 positive attitudes about OCD, 20–21  
*Real Friends* (Hale & Pham), 17–18  
 recommended title list, 92  
 seeking help for OCD, 22–24  
*Stars Are Scattered* (Jamieson & Mohamed), 71  
 text containers, 87  
 universality of, 83–84  
 Greves, Julie, 44  
 grief  
 chapters in book on, viii  
 emotions in process of, 28–29  
*See also* death/loss/grief  
 Grief Awareness Day, 34–35  
 grief notebook, 35  
 Grimes, Nikki, 34  
 “grounding your body” exercise, 89  
*Growing Pangs* (Ormsbee)  
 author on writing, 90–91  
 externalization in, 85–86  
 on graphic novels recommended title list, 92  
 OCD, recognizing through symbolism, 18–19  
 OCD representation in, 14–16  
 OCD symptoms in, 21–22  
 positive attitudes, promotion of, 20  
 recommendation of, 24  
 seeking help in, 22–23  
 “Growing Up in America” course, 54  
*Growing Up Muslim: Understanding Muslim Beliefs and Practices* (Ali-Karamali), 71, 76  
**H**  
 Haggag, Duaa  
 on discrimination against Muslim children, 63–64  
 on pressures on Muslim students, 62  
 role-playing with students, 73  
 halal food, 61  
*Halal Hot Dogs* (Aziz), 66, 74  
 Hale, Shannon, 17–18, 21, 23–24, 87, 92  
 Hamilton, Scott, 43  
 Hammond, Tiffany, 104–105  
 Hamza, Nina, 76  
 Hannigan, Katherine, 44  
 Harris J., 75  
 hate crimes, 60  
*The Hate U Give* (Thomas)  
 description of, 54  
 in “Growing Up in America” course, 54  
 as recommended Black girlhood title, 57  
 representation of Black girlhood, 52  
 Heaney, Carole, 36  
*Hear My Voice* (Binford et al.)  
 book cover of, 112  
 conclusion of, 120  
 overview of, 113  
 as story about goodbyes/hitting the road, 114, 115–116  
 as story about migrants trapped in legal violence, 117, 118  
 help  
 in *Growing Pangs* (Ormsbee), 20  
 for OCD, in graphic novels, 22–24  
 Hest, Pimm van, 32  
*Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race* (Shetterly), 57  
*Hidden Figures: The True Story of Four Black Women and the Space Race* (Shetterly), 57  
*Hidden Figures, Young Readers' Edition* (Shetterly), 57  
 Highmark Caring Place, 35  
 hijab  
 middle grade books for Muslim students, 70  
 picture books about, 66–67  
 worn by Muslim girls, 61  
 in *Yasmin* series, 68  
 Hijabi Librarians, 72, 77  
 Hill, Amanda Rawson, 35  
 historical dramas, Black girlhood in, 53–54  
 historical representations, of Black girlhood, 50–53  
 Hitchcock, Shannon, 71, 72, 76

*The Hobbit (or There and Back Again)*  
(Tolkien), 7–8

holidays

Islamic, 72

observation of by Muslim students, 61

Holmes, Soline

information about, 125–126

“Relax. Breathe. Read a Graphic Novel:

Graphic Novels as a Format to Promote

Mental and Emotional Well-Being,” 81–92

hope

in conclusion of Latin American migrant  
stories, 119–120

finding, 36–37

wall of hope, 35

*The House at Pooh Corner* (Milne), 10–11

Hrab, Naseem, 34

human zoos, 111

## I

*I Say As-Salamu ‘Alaykum* (Dee), 65, 74

*I Say Mashallah* (Dee), 65, 74

*Ian’s Walk: A Story About Autism* (Lear), 97

*Ida, Always* (Levis), 33

*Ida B. and Her Plans to Maximize Fun, Avoid  
Disaster, and (Possibly) Save the World*  
(Hannigan), 44

identity

books for representation/reflection, 64,  
65–67

early readers for Muslim children, 68–69

middle grade books for Muslim students,  
69–72

of Muslim students, 62

of Muslims, 59–60

illness, 69

See also death/loss/grief

immigrant Muslims

mental health challenges of, 59–60

middle grade books for Muslim students,  
71–72

picture books for, 67

immigrants

See Latin American migrants, young

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by  
Herself* (Jacobs), 49, 50–51, 57

innocence, 27–28

Institute for Social Policy and Understanding,  
63

Iput, 74

Irving, A. J., 33

*Isla to Island* (Castellanos), 88, 92

Islam

Islamic phrases, books about, 65

Islamophobia, impact of, 63–64

Muslims as followers of, 59

religious practices of Muslims, 60–61

therapy for Muslim students and, 73

Islamophobia

impact of, 63–64

middle grade books for Muslim students,

70–72

*It’s Ramadan, Curious George* (Khan), 66, 74

*Izzy at the End of the World* (Reynolds), 101

## J

Jacobs, Harriet, 49, 50–51, 57

Jaleel, Aaliya, 74

James, Matt, 31

Jamieson, Victoria, 77

*Jeannie Ann’s Grandma Has Breast Cancer*  
(Davies), 43

Jemison, Mae, 50

Jenkins, Ward, 75

*Jeremy Draws a Monster* (McCarty), 3–4

Johnson, Katherine, 50

Johnston, Nicky, 34

journal

in *Friend or Fiction* (Cooper), 43–44

for therapy, 91

journeys

Latin American migrant stories about,  
116–117

Latin American migrant stories about  
goodbyes/hitting the road, 114–116

Latin American migrant stories, conclusion  
of, 119–121

*Just Roll with It* (Agarwal & Durfey-Lavoie)

creator’s notes in, 91

in emotional well-being toolkit, 89–90

on graphic novels recommended title list, 92

OCD representation in, 16–17

OCD symptoms in, 22

positive attitudes, promotion of, 21

recommendation of, 24

seeking help in, 22–23

symbolism for OCD in, 20

juxtaposition, 42

## K

Kapit, Sarah, 105

Kazemi, Nahid, 34

Keckley, Elizabeth, 51

Keller, Tae, 9–10

Kent, Paul M., 39–40

Khalil, Aya, 74

Khan, Hena, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70–71, 74,  
75, 76

Khan, Saffa, 74

Kim, Seo, 32

Klassen, Jon, 2–3

Kuntz, Doug, 74

Kuo, Christopher, 39–40  
Kuyatt, Meg Eden, 99

**L**

*Laila's Lunchbox: A Ramadan Story* (Faruqi), 66, 74  
*Last Week* (Richardson), 33  
Latin American migrants, young  
border issues, impact on mental health of, 109–110  
conclusion about, 121–122  
legal violence in narratives of Latinx immigrants, 111  
methodology for legal violence study, 111–112  
picture books about, 112–113  
realistic conclusion telling of hopes, dreams, wants, wishes, 119–121  
stories about journey/migrant travelers' solidarity, 116–117  
stories behind goodbyes/hitting the road, 114–116  
trapped in legal violence but staying supportive, 117–119  
Le Guin, Ursula, 2  
Lear, Laurie, 97  
“Learning to Soar—Overcoming Challenges in Black Girlhood Literature” (Lewis), 49–58  
Leduc, Emilie, 33  
legal violence  
methodology for legal violence study, 111–112  
in narratives of Latinx immigrants, 111  
stories of characters trapped in, 117–119  
stories of migrants trapped in, 117–119  
Lerner, Jarrett, 91  
*Let's Talk About It: A Graphic Guide to Mental Health* (Center for Cartoon Studies)  
for emotional well-being toolkit, 88  
on graphic novels recommended title list, 92  
therapy addressed in, 89  
letter writing, 35  
Levine, Gail Carson, 8  
Levis, Caron, 33  
Levy, Debbie, 57  
Lewis, Janaka B.  
information about, 126  
“Learning to Soar—Overcoming Challenges in Black Girlhood Literature,” 49–58  
*Light and Legacies: Stories of Black Girlhood and Liberation*, 57  
Li, Xuejiao “Judy”  
information about, 126  
“Visualizing Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: Graphic Novels to Support Middle Grade Readers,” 13–25

librarians, viii–ix  
Lies, Brian, 32

*Light and Legacies: Stories of Black Girlhood and Liberation* (Lewis), 50, 57

*Like the Moon Loves the Sky* (Khan), 65, 74

Lin, Grace, 9

Lincoln, Abraham, 51

Lincoln, Mary Todd, 51

literary representations, of Black girlhood, 54–56

*Living with Viola* (Fung), 84, 92

Lord, Cynthia, 96–97

loss

chapters in book on, viii

children's experiences of, 27

children's literature on, 28–29

healing from, 36–37

See also death/loss/grief

*Lost and Found Cat: The True Story of Kunkush's Incredible Journey* (Kuntz & Shrodes), 67, 74

*Lost in the Clouds* (Tinn-Disbury), 34

Love, Bettina L.

“Anti-Black State Violence, Classroom

Edition: The Spirit Murdering of Black Children,” 57–58

*We Want to Do More Than Survive:*

*Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, 55, 57

Lucas, Carla Vale, 42

Lyttle, Alex, 45

**M**

Mahar, Stephanie E.

information about, 126

“Visualizing Obsessive-Compulsive

Disorder: Graphic Novels to Support Middle Grade Readers,” 13–25

*The Many Mysteries of the Finkel Family* (Kapit), 105

*A Map into the World* (Yang), 32

Martin, Ann M., 96

Martínez, Claudia Guadalupe, 113, 144, 155, 120–121

*Marya Khan* series (Faruqi), 69, 75

*The Masjid That Kamal Loves* (Franklin), 66, 74

“masking,” 102–104

Matthies, Janna, 43

*Maud Martha* (Brooks)

reading Black girlhood in, 53

as recommended Black girlhood title, 57

representation of Black girlhood, 52

Maunders, Kathryn, 41

*Maybe Dying Is Like Becoming a Butterfly* (Van Hest), 32, 35

- McCarty, Peter, 3–4  
 McCloud, Scott, 83–84  
 McKean, Dave, 6–7  
 McNicoll, Elle, 100  
*Me and Sam-Sam Handle the Apocalypse*  
 (Vaught), 103  
 media, 109–110  
 medical trauma, 40  
 memory box, 36  
*The Memory Box: A Book About Grief*  
 (Rowland), 36  
 Menjivar, C., 111  
 mental health
  - autistic mental health, children's literature
    - for, 95–105
    - education for Muslim children, 73
    - of Muslims, 59–60
    - OCD among children, 13–14
    - of young Latin American migrants, 109–110
    - of young people, pandemic's impact on, vii–viii
  - mental health literacy (MHL)
    - meaning of, 14
    - OCD, recognizing through symbolism, 18–20
    - positive attitudes, promotion of, 20–21
  - mental health of Muslim children
    - books as source of representation/reflection, 64–72
    - further readings, 77
    - Islamophobia and, 63–64
    - Muslim mental health concerns, 59–60
    - pressures on Muslim students, 62
    - proactive steps for sense of belonging, 72–73
    - recommended title list, 74–77
    - religious practices of Muslims, 60–61
  - mental health provider, 42
  - mental health/emotional well-being
    - graphic medicine, 82
    - graphic novels, elements of, 83–88
    - graphic novels for, 81–82, 83
    - graphic novels for toolkit for, 88–90
    - recommended title list, 92
  - MHL
    - See mental health literacy
  - middle grade books
    - for Muslim students, 69–72
    - for Muslim students, recommended title list, 76–77
  - migrants
    - See immigrant Muslims; Latin American migrants, young
  - Milne, A. A., 10–11
  - mirrors
    - bibliotherapy for children with relatives experiencing cancer, 41–42
    - books as mirrors for Muslim children, 64
    - literature for autistic children as, 105
  - Mirza, Manal, 75  
*Missing Mommy* (Cobb), 36  
 Mohamed, Ahmed, 70  
 Mohamed, Omar, 77  
 Mohammed, Khadra, 74  
 Mok, Carmen, 33  
*Mom's Sweater* (Perkin), 32  
 monsters, 3–4  
 Montgomery, Paul, 41  
 Morales, Areli, 112, 114, 115, 117, 119–120  
 Morrison, Toni, 49, 52–53, 54–55, 57  
 Mosier, Paul, 45  
 moving, 115–116  
 Muhammad, Ibtihaj, 70, 75, 77  
 Musa, Sarah, 67, 74  
 Muslim Ban, 60, 63  
 Muslim children's mental health
    - books as source of representation/reflection, 64–72
    - further readings, 77
    - Islamophobia and, 63–64
    - Muslim mental health concerns, 59–60
    - pressures on Muslim students, 62
    - proactive steps for Muslim students, 72–73
    - recommended title list, 74–77
    - religious practices of Muslims, 60–61
  - "Muslim Children's Mental Health: Understanding Religious Practices and the Challenges of Muslim Students" (Siddique), ix, 59–77  
 Muslims, religious practices of, 60–61  
*Muslims in Story: Expanding Multicultural Understanding Through Children's and Young Adult Literature* (Gauri & Sadaf), 72, 77  
*Must Love Pets* series (Faruqi), 69, 75–76  
*My Brother Otto and the Birthday Party* (Raby & Pallmer), 100  
*My Garden Over Gaza* (Musa), 67, 74  
*My Grandma's Photos* (Sunar), 34  
*My Mommy's Khimar* (Thompkins-Bigelow), 66, 74  
*My Mosque* (Yuksel), 66, 74  
*My Name Is Bana* (Alabed), 67, 75  
*My Rainbow* (Neal & Neal), 103–104  
*My Two Border Towns* (Bowles)
    - book cover of, 112
    - overview of, 113
    - stories about migrants trapped in legal violence, 117, 118



**N**

- Nair, Kamala, 34
- names  
   of Muslim students, identity issues, 69  
   personal names of Muslim children, 65
- narratives  
   about autistic characters, 96–97  
   about Latin American migrants, 110, 121  
   graphic novels as multimodal, 83  
   legal violence in narratives of Latinx immigrants, 111
- National Alliance on Mental Illness, 81
- Navarro, Claudia, 33
- “Navigating Unseen Borders: Understanding the Mental Health Challenges of Young Latin American Migrants” (Sung), ix, 109–122
- Neal, DeShanna, 103–104
- Neal, Trinity, 103–104
- Nepveu-Villeneuve, Maude, 4
- Newman, Lesléa, 34
- Newsome, Malcolm, 34
- Night of the Moon: A Muslim Holiday Story* (Khan), 66, 75
- “No Missing Piece: Using Children’s Literature to Support the Unique Needs of Autistic Mental Health” (Roos), ix, 95–105
- Nobens, CA, 43
- The Notebook Keeper: A Story of Kindness from the Border* (Briseño)  
   as story about goodbyes/hitting the road, 114, 115  
   as story about migrants trapped in legal violence, 117, 118  
   storyline of, 113
- novels, for coping with anxiety  
   *Coraline* (Gaiman), 6–7  
   *The Hobbit (or There and Back Again)* (Tolkien), 7–8  
   *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* (Levine), 8  
   *When the Sea Turned to Silver* (Lin), 9  
   *When You Trap a Tiger* (Keller), 9–10  
   *Winnie-the-Pooh and The House at Pooh Corner* (Milne), 10–11
- Nuurali, Siman, 76

**O**

- obsessions, 13
- obsessive thoughts  
   in *Growing Pangs* (Ormsbee), 15–16, 85–86  
   *Growing Pangs*, seeking help in, 22–23  
   symbolism for, 18–19
- obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)  
   among autistic children, 95  
   characteristics of, 13  
   conclusion about, 24  
   discussion questions based on graphic novels, 25

- graphic novels for emotional well-being toolkit, 89–90
- in *Growing Pangs* (Ormsbee), 85–86
- help, seeking, 22–24
- positive attitudes, promotion of, 20–21
- representation in graphic novels, 14–18
- symbolism, recognizing OCD through, 18–20
- symptoms, identifying in graphic novels, 21–22
- symptoms of, 13–14
- occupation, children living under, 67
- O’Keefe, Mary, 74
- Olivia Wrapped in Vines* (Nepveu-Villeneuve), 4
- One Sun and Countless Stars* (Khan), 66, 75
- One Wave at a Time* (Thompson), 34
- Ormsbee, Kathryn, 14–16, 18–19, 20, 21–22, 22–23, 24, 85–86, 90–91, 92
- Other Words for Home* (Warga)  
   on civil war in Syria, 72  
   hijab in, 70  
   on recommended title list, 77
- Otter, Isabel, 34

**P**

- Padilla, Amber, 92
- Page, Tyler, 91, 92
- Painter, Clair, 111–112
- Paisley, Brad, 43
- Pakistani Americans, 68
- Palestinians, 67
- Pallmer, Elisa, 100
- Pardi, Charlotte, 33
- parents  
   cancer, bibliotherapy for children with relatives experiencing, 39–45  
   titles that discuss death of parent, 34  
   *See also* family
- Parker, Lindsey Rowe, 102
- Paschkins, Julie, 75
- Pawis-Steckley, Joshua Mangeshig, 102
- Percival, Tom, 4–5
- Perkin, Jayde, 32
- Perkins, Mitali, 112, 117, 120
- pets, 33
- Pham, LeUyen, 17–18, 21, 23–24, 92
- phobias, 8
- picture books  
   about Latin American migrants, 112–121  
   autistic characters in children’s literature, 97  
   on death/loss/grief, 33–34, 36–37  
   on death/loss/grief, recommended titles, 30–33  
   for helping readers with anxiety, 2–6  
   for Muslim children, 64–67, 74–75  
   picture books, for coping with anxiety  
   *The Dark* (Snicket), 2–3

- Jeremy Draws a Monster* (McCarty), 3–4  
*Olivia Wrapped in Vines* (Nepveu-Villeneuve), 4  
*Ruby Finds a Worry* (Percival), 4–5  
*Scaredy Squirrel* (Watt), 5–6  
*The Wolves in the Wall* (Gaiman), 6
- Pinkney, Brian, 34  
 Pinkney, Jerry, 34  
 Pixar, 91  
*A Place at the Table* (Faruqi & Shovan), 69, 70, 77  
*Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (Wheatley), 57  
*The Pond* (Davies), 34  
 positive attitudes, 20–21  
 Powell, Dimity, 34  
 prayers, 61  
 protagonists  
   See characters  
 “Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory” (Office of the Surgeon General), vii, 82  
*Proud: Living My American Dream* (Muhammad), 70, 77  
*The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family* (Muhammad & Ali), 67, 75  
 publishing industry, viii  
*Punished for Dreaming* (Love), 55  
*Push* (Sapphire)  
   in “Growing Up in America” course, 54  
   as recommended Black girlhood title, 57  
   representation of Black girlhood, 52
- Q**  
 QAG (quiet Asian girl), 10  
 Quan, Betty, 33  
 questions  
   evaluation questions for death/loss/grief titles, 30  
   OCD discussion questions based on graphic novels, 25  
 quietness, 9–10  
 quilting, 36  
 Quraishi, Ibrahim, 75  
 Qureshi, Soumbal, 77
- R**  
 Raby, Meg, 100  
 racism  
   Black girlhood in historical dramas, 53–54  
   middle grade books for Muslim students, 70–72  
   against Muslims, 59–60, 63–64  
   See also discrimination  
 radical creativity, 55  
*Rainbow Jordan* (Childress), 52, 57  
 Ramadan  
   books for Muslim children, 68  
   fasting during, 61  
   picture books about, 66  
 reading  
   graphic novels as graphic medicine, 82  
   literary representations of Black girlhood, 54–56  
   in *Winnie-the-Pooh* (Milne), 10–11  
*Real Friends* (Hale & Pham)  
   on graphic novels recommended title list, 92  
   OCD, recognizing through symbolism, 18  
   OCD representation in, 17–18  
   OCD symptoms in, 22  
   positive attitudes, promotion of, 21  
   recommendation of, 24  
   seeking help in, 23–24  
   text containers in, 87  
 recommended title list  
   Black girlhood literature, 57  
   for children with relatives experiencing cancer, 43–45  
   graphic novels for mental health/emotional well-being, 92  
   for Muslim children’s mental health, 74–77  
 reflection, 64  
 refugee Muslims  
   mental health challenges of, 59–60  
   middle grade books for Muslim students, 71–72  
   picture books for, 67  
   pressures on Muslim children, 62  
 refugees, Latin American migrants, 117–119  
 Reiter, Xee, 34  
 relationships, 99–101  
   See also friendship  
 “Relax. Breathe. Read a Graphic Novel: Graphic Novels as a Format to Promote Mental and Emotional Well-Being” (Holmes & Schwarzenbach), 81–92  
 religious practices  
   Muslim holy days, picture books about, 66  
   Muslim mental health concerns, 59–60  
   of Muslims, 60–61  
*Remembering Ethan* (Newman), 34  
 representation  
   of autistic children in children’s literature, 95–97  
   of Black girlhood, 50  
   of Black girlhood, for current time, 54–56  
   of Black girlhood, historical, 50–53  
   of Muslim children, books as source of, 64–72  
   of OCD in graphic novels, 14–18  
   positive autistic representation in children’s literature, 97–98  
 Rewse, Katie, 34  
 Reynolds, K. A., 101  
 Riaz, Nez, 75

Richardson, Bill, 33  
 Ringtved, Glenn, 33  
 rituals  
     *See* compulsions  
 Robbins, Rose, 105  
*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor)  
     description of, 53  
     as recommended Black girlhood title, 57  
     representation of Black girlhood, 52  
 Roos, Chelsey  
     information about, 126  
     “No Missing Piece: Using Children’s Literature to Support the Unique Needs of Autistic Mental Health,” 95–105  
 Rose, Tiffany, 74  
*The Rough Patch* (Lies), 32  
 Rowland, Joanna, 36  
*Ruby Finds a Worry* (Percival), 4–5  
*Rules* (Lord), 96–97  
 rumination, 13–14  
*Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (Craft), 49

**S**

Sadaf, Siddique, 77  
*Sadiq* series (Nuurali), 68, 76  
*Salam Alaikum: A Message of Peace* (Harris J.), 65, 75  
*Salat in Secret* (Thompkins-Bigelow), 65  
 Santoso, Charles, 33  
 Sapphire, 52, 54–55, 57  
*Scaredy Squirrel* (Watt), 5–6  
 school librarians, 42  
 Schwarzenbach, Alicia  
     information about, 126–127  
     “Relax. Breathe. Read a Graphic Novel: Graphic Novels as a Format to Promote Mental and Emotional Well-Being,” 81–92  
 Scott, Libby, 103  
*The Secret Garden on 81st Street* (Weir), 90, 92  
 Seeger, Laura Vacarro, 31  
 self-application, 42  
 self-esteem  
     Islamophobia, impact of, 63  
     of Muslim children, 62, 64  
     stories for Muslim children for, 67  
 self-help strategy, 23  
 Semirdzhyan, Anait, 74  
 sensory processing  
     of autistic people, 101–102  
     “masking” and, 102–104  
 Senzai, Naheed, 62, 63, 64, 71–72, 76, 77  
 September 11, 2001 (9/11)  
     discrimination against Muslims after, 60  
     hijab-wearing after, 70

    Islamophobia after, 63  
     Muslim students and, 73  
 Shah, Binay, 40  
 Shaikh, Ahsan, 62  
 Shamsi, Shirin, 75  
 Shange, Ntozake, 52, 53  
*The Shared Room* (Yang), 34  
 sharing, 89  
 Shepard, Ernest H., 10–11  
 Shetterly, Margot Lee, 57  
*Shooting Kabul* (Senzai), 71–72, 77  
 Shovan, Laura, 69, 70, 77  
*Show Us Who You Are* (McNicoll), 100  
 Shrodes, Amy, 74  
 Siddique, Sadaf  
     information about, 127  
     “Muslim Children’s Mental Health: Understanding Religious Practices and the Challenges of Muslim Students,” 59–77  
 sign language, 104–105  
 Silver, Erin, 34  
*Simon Sort of Says* (Bow), 100–101  
 Singh, Parwinder, 74  
*Sitting Shiva* (Silver), 34  
*Sitti’s Key* (Ali), 67, 75  
 Skaltsas, Christos, 76  
*A Sky Blue Bench* (Rahman), 67, 75  
*Small Things* (Tregonning), 84–85, 92  
 Smith, Niki, 92  
 Snicket, Lemony, 2–3  
 Soares, L., 42  
 social network, 99–101  
 social-emotional learning, 28–29  
 Somali Americans, 68  
*Some Days* (Wernicke), 33  
*The Sour Cherry Tree* (Hrab), 34  
 speech, 104–105  
 Spielman, Gloria, 36  
 Sriram, Merra, 36  
*Stars Are Scattered* (Jamieson & Mohamed), 71, 77  
 stereotypes  
     of Muslims, 63–64  
     picture books for Muslim children and, 65  
 Stewart, Shannon, 75  
 stigma, viii  
*Still Dreaming / Seguimos Soñando* (Martínez)  
     conclusion of, 120–121  
     overview of, 113  
     as story about goodbyes/hitting the road, 114, 115  
     as story of journey/migrant travelers’ solidarity, 116  
 stimming, 101–102

- Stogdill, Cynthia  
 "Bibliotherapy for Children with Relatives Experiencing Cancer," 39–45  
 information about, 127  
*A Stone for Sascha* (Becker), 33  
 stories  
   about person who has died, 36  
   behind goodbyes/hitting the road, 114–116  
   journey/migrant travelers' solidarity, 116–117  
   literary representations of Black girlhood, 54–56  
   in *When the Sea Turned to Silver* (Lin), 9  
*The Story of Hurry* (Williams), 67, 75  
 stress  
   of children with relatives experiencing cancer, 40  
   of Latin American migrants, 112, 115–116, 118, 119  
   mental health/emotional well-being and, 81–82  
   of Muslim children, 64–65  
   of Muslim refugee children, 67, 71  
 students  
   bibliotherapy in practice, 42  
   literary representations of Black girlhood for current time, 54–56  
   Muslim students, pressures on, 62  
   Muslim students, Islamophobia and, 63–64  
   Muslim students, proactive steps for, 72–73  
   religious practices of Muslims, 60–61  
 suicide, vii, viii  
 Sunar, Özge B., 34  
 Sung, Yoo Kyung  
   information about, 127  
   "Navigating Unseen Borders: Understanding the Mental Health Challenges of Young Latin American Migrants," 109–122  
 support, 34–36  
*Swim Team* (Christmas), 86–87, 92  
 symbolic language, 2  
 symbolism  
   in *Growing Pangs* (Ormsbee), 85–86  
   recognizing OCD through, 18–20  
 symptoms  
   of obsessive-compulsive disorder, 13–14  
   of OCD, identifying in graphic novels, 21–22  
   OCD symptoms, seeking help for, 22–24  
 Syria, civil war in, 72
- T**  
*Talking Is Not My Thing* (Robbins), 105  
 Taylor, Mildred D., 52, 53, 57  
 Tenhulzen, Katy, 44  
 text containers, 87
- Theodore, Michelle, 34  
 therapy  
   graphic novels as window to, 89  
   for Muslim students, 73  
   seeking help for OCD, 22–24  
 thinking  
   See thoughts  
*This Promise of Change: One Girl's Story in the Fight for School Equality* (Boyce & Levy), 57  
 Thomas, Angie, 52, 54–55, 57  
 Thompkins-Bigelow, Jamilah, 62, 64, 65, 66, 74, 75  
 Thompson, Holly, 34  
 thoughts  
   bibliotherapy for, 1–2  
   externalization of in graphic novels, 85–87  
   obsessions of people with OCD, 13–14  
   obsessive, symbolism for, 18–19, 20  
   obsessive thoughts of people with OCD, 15–16  
   OCD symptoms in graphic novels, identifying, 21–22  
   in *Ruby Finds a Worry* (Percival), 5  
*Thunder and the Noise Storms* (Ansloos & Ansloos), 102  
 Tinn-Disbury, Tom, 34  
 title list  
   See recommended title list  
 Tolkien, J. R. R., 7–8  
 Tolley-Stokes, Rebecca, 81  
 trauma  
   active engagement with death, loss, grief and, 28  
   of children with relatives experiencing cancer, 40  
   mental health/emotional well-being and, 81–82  
   of Muslim refugees, 71–72  
*A Trauma-Informed Approach to Library Services* (Tolley-Stokes), 81  
 Tregonning, Mel, 84–85, 92  
 truth, 27–28  
 Twink, Art, 103–104  
*The Two Princesses of Bamarre* (Levine), 8
- U**  
*Under My Hijab* (Khan), 66, 75  
*Understanding Comics* (McCloud), 83  
 universality, 83–84  
*Unsettled* (Faruqi)  
   on fitting in, 71  
   hijab in, 70  
   miscarriage in, 69  
   recommended title list for Muslim students, 77

- Unsworth, J. R. Martin, 111–112  
 Unsworth, Len, 111–112  
*Upside Down and Backwards: A Sibling's Journey Through Childhood Cancer* (Greves, Tenhulzen, & Wilkinson), 44  
 Urgan, Senta, 34  
 Uribe, Luisa, 75  
 U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, 1  
 U.S. Surgeon General  
   on mental health challenges of young people, 91  
   on pandemic's impact on mental health of young people, vii  
   on urgent issue of mental health of children, 82
- V**
- Valiant, Kristi, 43  
 Vaught, Susan, 103  
 Vega, Silvia Rodriguez, 111  
 violence  
   anti-Muslim violence, 60  
   literary representations of Black girlhood, 54–55  
 “Visualizing Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: Graphic Novels to Support Middle Grade Readers” (Mahar & Li), 13–25  
*A Voice from the South* (Cooper), 49
- W**
- A Walk in the Woods* (Grimes), 34  
 Walker, Alice, 55  
 wall of hope, 35  
 wants, 119–121  
 Ward, Barbara A.  
   “Finding Hope in Death, Loss, and Grief,” 27–37  
   information about, 127  
 Warga, Jasmine, 70, 72, 77  
 Watt, Mélanie, 5–6  
*We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Love), 55, 57  
 Weir, Ivy Noelle, 90, 92  
*The Well: David's Story* (Taylor), 57  
 well-being  
   See mental health/emotional well-being  
 Wernicke, María, 33  
 Westcott, Rebecca, 103  
 Wheatley, Phillis, 49, 52, 56, 57  
*When the Sea Turned to Silver* (Lin), 9  
*When You Trap a Tiger* (Keller), 9–10  
*Where Do They Go?* (Alvarez), 33  
*Wiggles, Stomps, and Squeezes Calm My Jitters Down* (Parker & Burgess), 102  
 Wilkinson, Fred, 44  
 Williams, Emma, 75  
 Williams, Karen Lynn, 74  
 Windness, Kaz, 103  
*Winnie-the-Pooh* (Milne), 10–11  
 Wiseman, Angela M., 28  
 wishes, 119–121  
*With a Butterfly's Wings* (Ávila), 34  
*The Wolves in the Wall* (Gaiman), 6  
 Woodson, Jacqueline, 52, 53, 56, 57  
 worry  
   *Coraline* (Gaiman), 6–7  
   *Olivia Wrapped in Vines* (Nepveu-Villeneuve), 4  
   *Ruby Finds a Worry* (Percival), 4–5  
   *The Wolves in the Wall* (Gaiman), 6  
*The Worry (Less) Book: Feel Strong, Find Calm, and Tame Your Anxiety* (Brian)  
   characters in, 83  
   on graphic novels recommended title list, 92  
   overview of, 88–89  
 writing  
   in *Friend or Fiction* (Cooper), 43–44  
   letter writing/grief notebook, 35  
   in *Winnie-the-Pooh* (Milne), 10–11
- Y**
- Yang, Kao Kalia, 32, 34  
*Yasmin* series (Faruqi), 68, 76  
*The Yellow Suitcase* (Sriram), 36  
 Yolen, Jane, 2  
*You'll Find Me* (Hill), 35  
 Young, Terrell A.  
   “Finding Hope in Death, Loss, and Grief,” 27–37  
   information about, 127  
 young people  
   See children/young people  
*Your Name Is a Song* (Thompkins-Bigelow), 65, 75  
 Yuksel, M. O., 74  
*Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero* (Faruqi)  
   description of, 70  
   name change in, 69  
   on recommended title list for Muslim students, 77
- Z**
- Zahra's Blessing: A Ramadan Story* (Shamsi), 66, 75  
*Zain's Super Friday* (Khan), 66, 75  
*Zayd Saleem* series (Khan), 68, 76  
 zero-tolerance policy, 110