This text set was developed to coincide with Virginia’s 11th grade curriculum based on the Standards of Learning enforced by the Virginia Department of Education. The unit is American literature, and students are expected to read, analyze, and interpret several American authors with relevance to voice, tone, themes, and motifs inherent in American literature. One common theme that is emphasized in this set is “coming-of-age.” Students reading these books can identify with the thoughts and feelings of the characters as they struggle to find their place in society as well. The text set expands the genre of American literature to include American writers with different cultural and/or socioeconomic backgrounds. I have also included a few foreign authors as I feel American students seldom read beyond a narrow milieu of American authors in school. This will expand the viewpoint and position presented to the students and in doing so, will expand their horizon and frame of reference when interpreting American literature in general.

The Text Set

1. *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri

   This book was written by an American whose heritage is Indian. She writes about the main characters struggling to come of age (a common theme in American literature) in a foreign society. While the society is not foreign to the students reading this, it will show a point of view they may not have considered before with regards to foreign students living in the United States.

   Students will be able to relate to Gogul, the main character, as he grows up in American society attending public schools. He struggles just as all American students struggle—to find themselves and find a place where they fit in and belong.

   Readability is based on the Flesh Kincaid grade level and registers at 13.01 on this scale. The book will be used for advanced readers in addition to the regular classroom text as an extra-credit project. Based on a Bader analysis, I feel that readability is fairly accurate. The vocabulary is accessible for younger and struggling students but some concepts, such as coming-of-age, may require a more advanced or mature reader. I would like all readers to be exposed to this book due to its multicultural outlook; however, I don’t think that is practical given the high readability level. The theme of coming-of-age often addresses issues of young people growing up and coming to terms with who they are in relevance to other people in their lives, finding their position in life, and realizing their dreams and goals as adults. Many ideas explored in this book are thoughts and emotions more common to young adults who have had more life experiences in general.

   This text would be used as a small group project—in groups of two or three, where each student reads the texts and the group formulates a presentation based on themes relevant to other common motifs in American literature.
2. **The Alchemist**, Paulo Coelho

   This book was written by a Brazilian author, and has been translated into numerous languages. While it is not technically the same genre, it is full of the same types of themes and motifs that are prevalent in American literature.

   Any student, advanced or struggling, can relate to the main character, Santiago. Santiago was a Sheppard in Spain and loved travelling and seeing new things. However, he reached a point in his life when he realized he would like to see and do more. There was nothing really holding him back except for his own inhibitions about the great unknown. Everyone can relate to this because we all dream. It may seem impossible to realize our dreams due to lack of money, position in society, family obligations, etc, but this book requires the reader to follow Santiago as he looks to his heart for the path that he must follow. In doing so, the book also provides for greater reflection into the reader’s own heart and come to terms with who they are and what they want out of life (coming of age).

   Readability for this book is based on the Flesh Kincaid grade level and registers at 6.68. The vocabulary is simple and the plot is easy to follow and progresses through an interesting and logical story. I recommend this book to struggling readers because the story is intriguing as you want to find out what Santiago’s treasure ultimately is, but it is easy enough to read that struggling students will not get lost in translation along the way. It is also an easy read for advanced readers because they can still relate to Santiago and his quest for his ultimate treasure.

   This would be a good book to read aloud to the class because it is not time consuming and not hard to follow or pick up after a day or two of not reading. It can also be used as silent reading for any additional down time in class.


3. **The Catcher in the Rye**, J.D. Salinger

   This book was written by an American author who grew up in New York City. I felt Salinger was a relevant author to include in this text set because he wrote in a narrative style unique to American literature at the time. This book was included in this text set due to its popularity with adolescents, especially adolescent boys. I feel that it is an eye-opening book into the mind of an adolescent and would be good for students to see what is going on in someone else’s head their age as it is a narrative about Holden Caulfield. In the book, Holden has many issues with school, his parents, teachers, etc. As the story progresses, he is forced to come to terms with many issues in life that include growing up and taking responsibility for his actions.

   Readability for this book is based on the Flesh Kincaid grade level and registers at 5.06. The vocabulary is fairly easy to understand, however this book is not usually introduced into public school curriculum until around 9th or 10th grade due to the more advanced concepts surrounding Holden’s mental state at the time of his narrative. I recommend this book to struggling 11th grade readers due to the face that the vocabulary is at a lower level but there is some language and concepts that are more suitable for older students.

This would be a great book to assign reading homework, then quiz and discuss themes each day in class to make sure everyone follows Holden’s realization of himself.


4. Coming of Age in America, Faith Adiele and Mary Frosch

This is a great collection of shorter stories written by authors from around the world. The underlying theme in this is that coming of age is a universal trait, not just a western or American ideology. I like to include this, and the companion book listed below in the text set because many of these authors, such as Guadalupe Dueñas, are popular in their respective countries, but have not been widely read in America. The stories and their characters offer a unique perspective on the problems and issues of growing up and finding a place to fit in, and how no matter where a person lives and what the situation, we can all relate to this in some way.

Readability for this book is based on the Flesh Kincaid grade level and registers at 12.45. This is obviously a little more advanced than the 11th grade targeted audience as far as readability goes. The stories are great with rich language and subject matter, but some of the concepts and vocabulary may require stronger and/or more mature readers. I believe that the subject matter is at a level that most 11th graders could handle the stories maturely. The only problem I would have with this text would be the actual mechanics of the writing. There are many different styles of writing and rhetoric represented in this book, and I feel that it would take a stronger reader to adapt to the different styles and vocabulary usage throughout the entire collection in order to gain the full benefit from reading this book.

I think this would be a fun book to use as a class. If there was time for the students to read the entire book, they could pick out their favorite story or author, using that as a springboard for a larger project or paper. If they are able to choose their favorite story, they will be more likely to become more intellectually involved in the story and the final product. I would probably recommend this book for honors students (AP) or as a guided activity for average students.


**Another book by the same editors is Coming of Age Around the World: A Multicultural Anthology.**

5. To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee

This novel follows Scout and Jem Finch as they play and grow up in their neighborhood. Through their adventures they learn such lessons as alienation, community, and how prejudice is a fact of life for everyone, regardless of race.

Scout and Jem’s role model in the book is their father Atticus. He is a prominent lawyer who defends a black man who is innocent against a couple of dishonest white people. The Finch kids learn some valuable lessons about community and humanity, which everyone must learn as they grow up. This book deals with the very real issue of race relations, but largely from the point of view of the children, which is what makes this a great addition to the text set.

Readability for this book is based on the Flesh Kincaid grade level and registers at 8.52. Because of the fairly basic vocabulary, the book is technically accessible for younger readers, but the concepts of racism, alienation, and coming of age are intended
for and more appropriate for older students. Because we still deal with racism today, and students come from such diverse backgrounds, this is a great book that displays that alternative perspective prevalent in this text set.

It would be a fun activity to do read alouds with this, or literature circles. The students could interact and discuss the themes along the way, while also making sure that comprehension is up to par for all readers, especially those who may be struggling.


I included this essay in the text set because it represents a whole different side of American literature. This particular essay speaks to women of color and was written by a Chicano writer who spent a great part of her life trying to find her place in society as an “outsider.” She comes from a multi-racial background and never quite fit in with either of her parents’ races. Her adult life has been spent as a lesbian-feminist activist reaching out to others who can’t seem to fit into one identity or the other.

Readability for this book is based on the Flesh Kincaid grade level and registers at 8.21. I did get slightly higher readings at various points in the essay at about one grade level higher than this average. While it is accessible at around the 8th grade level, I feel it is a more challenging text for several reasons. Because of the advanced concepts and material (such as racism and lesbianism) I would only recommend this to mature and advanced readers. Another aspect that makes this reading slightly difficult is the fact that there are many Spanish words interspersed throughout the writing. There are also several quotes by other authors as well as short poems included in this text. This makes some of the reading slow, but rewarding in the message it delivers. It is an eye-opening essay that displays a completely different viewpoint than most kids are ever exposed to in high school.

I think this essay would be good for advanced students in conjunction with a lesson on diversity and tolerance as it shows the other side of the coin of racism and prejudice. Since it is a shorter piece, I think it would be feasible to read this in class. As much as people speak against read alouds, I think the language is rich enough that it would be beneficial for the students to hear the essay out loud. It could also be used in small groups to take the pressure off the students for reading out loud. This essay is great for all students, no matter what their background. It would even be good for students of diverse backgrounds to know that they are not the only ones searching for meaning in their identity.

7. **Thicker Than Water: Coming-of-Age Stories by Irish & Irish American Writers**, Gordon Snell

This is an amazing collection of short stories written by Irish and Irish-American writers about the trials and tribulations of coming-of-age. The stories in here run the gamut of divorce of parents, teen pregnancy, depression, and a feeling of being lost, or between identities. This is yet another perspective from another culture, but many of the stories are written by Americans of Irish decent. In this way, this book is similar in theme to *The Namesake*, as the characters are technically American, but their cultural heritage pulls them in very different directions as they seek to find their place in society.

Readability for this book is based on the Flesh Kincaid grade level and registers at 10.01. While the reading level seems to be accessible to average 11th graders, I believe that struggling readers could enjoy this book as well. It is targeted for “young adults,” as far as comprehension goes. Some of the stories are rather adult, but I don’t believe any of the material is anything that these students haven’t experienced in their family lives. In fact, because the stories in this book are written by young adults, students might connect with them more than if they were stories written by adults looking back on their youth. The language is rich but also youthful, so student can relate better.

Because this is a book not far from grade level, it would probably be best used in a guided reading activity. I like the idea of giving the students questions at the end of each story to get them to reflect on the implications of events that went on and whether or not they could relate to or understand the writer of the story.


8. **The Wednesday Wars**, Gary D. Schmidt

This story chronicles the adventures of Holling Hoodhood at Camillo Junior High. He is forced to read Shakespeare plays Wednesday afternoons when the other students are out getting “religious instruction.” This story follows Holling as he searches for his place in life and the motivation to embrace his destiny. I included this story in the text for two main reasons. First, this is a great story for kids of all ages because he is still looking for that niche of his own, and all readers have been there, no matter what the age. Second, I love the kinship that develops between Holling and Mrs. Baker as he learns more from her assigned Shakespeare and discussion than from the religious instruction everyone else gets. It really promotes a good feeling between students and teachers, and hopefully gets students to think that maybe teachers aren’t so bad after all. I also like the narrative style, like *Catcher in the Rye*, that this book is written in. Again, I think students can connect better with a text that is written by their peer rather than a “boring adult.” It is an all-around great story.

Readability for this book is based on the Flesh Kincaid grade level and registers at 5.80. While this is a little lower than I would like for 11th graders, it is very easily accessible to struggling readers, while still maintaining a decent storyline. The Gunung Fog index puts it at 7.39, which brings it up at least into the middle school range. There are humorous points, sad parts, and moments of great inspiration throughout the book. The vocabulary and structure of the narrative are arranged so that this book can be used on an independent level.
I feel that this would be a great book for students to read in a program called SOAR. Every day before class begins, but after school officially starts, students read silently for twenty minutes and write about their reading in a log or journal. This book is an easy read and accessible for almost all students. It is also easy to get back into after not reading for a few days (over a weekend or holiday, for example).


Anya Ulinich is a relatively new author who was born in Moscow, Russia. She immigrated to the United States when she was seventeen, and after pursuing painting for a short time, she started writing and *Petropolis* is her first novel. It is an amazing story about Sasha, a biracial Jew from Siberia. She escapes Russia by way of mail-order-bride and comes to America in search of her father. This book is included in this text set because it offers yet another viewpoint about growing up and searching for one’s self and it was written by a Russian-American to boot.

Readability for this book is based on the Flesh Kincaid grade level and registers at 6.79. The Gunning Fog index places it at 8.01. I was surprised that the readability level was so low because even the first chapter has many hurdles that I think struggling readers may have problems with. For example, because the story takes place in Russia in the beginning, there are some Russian words included in the text. In addition to that, there are also references to many political and social ideas eighth graders might not be familiar with. The story also talks about racism, cross-cultural confusion, religion, sex, and class conflict, among other potent issues. Because of this, I think the text is perfect for average eleventh graders, and because the readability is at a lower level, it is still accessible to struggling readers as well. It is well written and easy to follow once you get used to the author’s style and flow.

I think this is a great addition to the theme “coming-of-age.” Sasha is a likeable character with feelings that every reader can relate to, especially young adults. I believe it would be a great novel to study as a class, as it offers that unique multi-cultural perspective and exposes students to concepts and ideas they may not otherwise find in “regular” American literature.


10. The Infinite Plan, Isabel Allende

Isabel Allende is an amazing author who usually writes books set in other countries, namely Peru and Spain. She has lived in the United States since 1988, after marrying an American. I included this book in the text set because a great portion of the text is about a boy’s childhood and the various people who influence him, which students could relate to. I also wanted to introduce this author to students because it is a shame that she is not more widely read in the United States (even though two movies have been made based on her books).

This is a great story that follows a boy named Gregory who lives a nomadic and poor lifestyle for much of his childhood as he follows his parents around the American west. Later, they are forced to settle down in a Spanish barrio outside of Los Angeles, where he meets people that will forever influence the direction of his life. I think the
story really speaks to young adults and shows how friends and various people in their lives can really have an enormous impact on their lives.

Readability for this book is based on the Flesh Kincaid grade level and registers at 9.38. The Gunning Fog index places it at 10.47. While it appears to be a ninth grade level book, I think the Gunning Fog indicator is more accurate in that a tenth or eleventh grader would be more able to read and comprehend the book. For struggling readers, I would use it on an instructional level because they may be reading three or four grade levels behind eleventh grade, so it would be important to make sure they understood everything and didn’t get frustrated with the text. I do believe based on subject matter, vocabulary, and sentence structure that an average eleventh grader could independently read and work with this text.

For struggling readers, I think literature circles or read-alouds would be sufficient in the beginning until the instructor was sure everyone could handle the text. This is another novel other than that, that I believe would be a good novel to study as a class with independent reading at home or during a study period.