



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Lived Religion in Contemporary Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

At the Manhattan high school where I work, teachers across the curriculum are collaborating around a vision where all students view themselves as readers, know what they like to read, and spend time reading what they like. However, teachers often struggle to engage reluctant readers in books when students themselves do not have reading experiences that are positive, engaging and culturally relevant.

This project is an annotated list of Young Adult (YA) novels, graphic novels, and nonfiction books that speak to the experiences of diverse faith communities. It is not a specific lesson or unit plan. The texts can be used to engage adolescent readers in a wide variety of ways. Some suggestions are:

- Compare a protagonist's lived religious experience with the "official" information about that religion.
- Read as a class, and compare a protagonist's lived religious experience with the textbook definition of a religious experience.
- For independent reading, use religious identity as a way to connect students with texts that run deeper than their surface-level interests. For example, an avid gamer may have no interest in reading about video games, but may be drawn to stories that reflect deeper cultural affiliations, such as their religious tradition.

About the List

The following list was crowdsourced through online forums where passionate readers of Young Adult literature congregate, such as Reddit and Goodreads, and with input from a librarian in NYC schools. The chart includes Lexile scores (where available), so that teachers have the tools that they need to connect students with readings at an appropriately challenging level.

A few disclaimers about the list:

- Virtually all of the books are from 2020 or after.
- The list does not claim to be exhaustive of all available texts – it’s just a starting point.
- The list does not claim to be exhaustive of all religious traditions. It includes texts touching on the following traditions: Judaism, Christianity (including Latter-Day Saints), Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Native American spirituality, and African diaspora religious traditions
- Much like in life, the process of organizing each text into distinct faith categories was imperfect.
- Texts do not all uniformly or explicitly explore the protagonist’s religious experiences.
- Where they do, texts should not be taken to represent the entirety of a religious tradition.
- This list mostly focused on non-graphic texts, as a result of recommendations received.
- Lexiles are provided where applicable. HL indicates “high-low” – high interest texts that should be accessible to most readers.

***For information about the Religious Worlds of New York
summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching
on religious diversity, visit www.religiousworldsnyc.org.***

The List

Title	Author	Summary	Lexile / Age
Orisha Traditions			
<i>Children of Blood and Bone</i>	Tomi Adeyemi	Zélie Adebola remembers when the soil of Orisha hummed with magic. Burners ignited flames, Tiders beckoned waves, and Zélie's Reaper mother summoned forth souls. But everything changed the night magic disappeared. Under the orders of a ruthless king, maji were targeted and killed, leaving Zélie without a mother and her people without hope. Now Zélie has one chance to bring back magic and strike against the monarchy. With the help of a rogue princess, Zélie must outwit and outrun the crown prince, who is hell-bent on eradicating magic for good.	HL670L 14 - 17
<i>The Black God's Drums</i>	P. Djèlí Clark	In an alternate New Orleans caught in the tangle of the American Civil War, the wall-scaling girl named Creeper yearns to escape the streets for the air--in particular, by earning a spot on-board the airship Midnight Robber. Creeper plans to earn Captain Ann-Marie's trust with information she discovers about a Haitian scientist and a mysterious weapon he calls The Black God's Drums.	NA / 12-18
Haitian Vodou			
<i>American Street</i>	Ibi Zoboi	On the corner of American Street and Joy Road, Fabiola Toussaint thought she would finally find une belle vie—a good life. But after they leave Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Fabiola's mother is detained by U.S. immigration, leaving Fabiola to navigate her loud American cousins, Chantal, Donna, and Princess; the grittiness of Detroit's west side; a new school; and a surprising romance, all on her own. Just as she finds her footing in this strange new world, a dangerous proposition presents itself, and Fabiola soon realizes that freedom comes at a	HL690L / 14-17

		cost. Trapped at the crossroads of an impossible choice, will she pay the price for the American dream?	
<i>Dear Haiti, Love Alaine</i>	Maika and Maritza Moulite	Alaine Beuparlant has heard about Haiti all her life. But the stories were always passed down from her dad—and her mom, when she wasn't too busy with her high-profile newscaster gig. But when Alaine's life goes a bit sideways, it's time to finally visit Haiti herself. What she learns about Haiti's proud history as the world's first black republic (with its even prouder people) is one thing, but what she learns about her own family is another. Suddenly, the secrets Alaine's mom has been keeping, including a family curse that has spanned generations, can no longer be avoided.	NA / 12-18
Judaism			
<i>Color Me In</i>	Natasha E Diaz	Growing up in an affluent suburb of New York City, sixteen-year-old Nevaeh Levitz never thought much about her biracial roots. When her Black mom and Jewish dad split up, she relocates to her mom's family home in Harlem and is forced to confront her identity for the first time. Only when Nevaeh stumbles upon a secret from her mom's past, finds herself falling in love, and sees firsthand the prejudice her family faces that she begins to realize she has her own voice. And choices. Will she continue to let circumstances dictate her path? Or will she decide once for all who and where she is meant to be?	950L / 12-18
<i>The Life and Times of Hoodie Rosen</i>	Isaac Bloom	Hoodie Rosen's life isn't that bad. Sure, his entire Orthodox Jewish community has just picked up and moved to the quiet, mostly non-Jewish town of Tregaron, but Hoodie's world hasn't changed that much. He's got basketball to play, studies to avoid, and a supermarket full of delicious kosher snacks to eat. The people of Tregaron aren't happy that so many Orthodox Jews are moving in at once, but that's not Hoodie's problem. That is, until he meets and falls for Anna-Marie Diaz-O'Leary—who happens to be the daughter of the headstrong mayor trying to keep Hoodie's community out of the town. And things only get more complicated when Tregaron is struck by a series of antisemitic crimes that quickly escalate to deadly violence.	NA / 12-17

<i>Yes No Maybe So</i>	Becky Albertalli	Jamie Goldberg is cool with volunteering for his local state senate candidate—as long as he’s behind the scenes. When it comes to speaking to strangers (or, let’s face it, speaking at all to almost anyone) Jamie’s a choke artist. There’s no way he’d ever knock on doors to ask people for their votes...until he meets Maya.	560L / 9-13
<i>Spinning Silver</i>	Naomi Novik	Miryem is the daughter and granddaughter of moneylenders, but her father’s inability to collect his debts has left his family on the edge of poverty—until Miryem takes matters into her own hands. Hardening her heart, the young woman sets out to claim what is owed and soon gains a reputation for being able to turn silver into gold. When an ill-advised boast draws the attention of the king of the Saryk—grim fey creatures who seem more ice than flesh—Miryem’s fate, and that of two kingdoms, will be forever altered. She will face an impossible challenge and, along with two unlikely allies, uncover a secret that threatens to consume the lands of humans and Saryk alike.	NA / 12-17
<i>It's a Whole Spiel: Love, Latkes, and Other Jewish Stories</i>	Katherine Locke, Laura Silverman, eds.	From stories of confronting their relationships with Judaism to rom-coms with a side of bagels and lox, <i>It's a Whole Spiel</i> features one story after another that says yes, we are Jewish, but we are also queer, and disabled, and creative, and political, and adventurous, and anything we want to be. You will fall in love with this insightful, funny, and romantic Jewish anthology from a collection of diverse Jewish authors.	850L / 12-18
<i>The Wolf and the Woodsman</i>	Ava Reid	In the vein of Naomi Novik’s New York Times bestseller <i>Spinning Silver</i> and Katherine Arden’s national bestseller <i>The Bear and the Nightingale</i> , this unforgettable debut— inspired by Hungarian history and Jewish mythology—follows a young pagan woman with hidden powers and a one-eyed captain of the Woodsmen as they form an unlikely alliance to thwart a tyrant.	NA / 12-18

Hinduism			
<i>Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating</i>	Adiba Jaigirdar	Everyone likes Humaira "Hani" Khan—she's easy going and one of the most popular girls at school. But when she comes out to her friends as bisexual, they invalidate her identity, saying she can't be bi if she's only dated guys. Panicked, Hani blurts out that she's in a relationship with a girl her friends absolutely hate—Ishita "Ishu" Dey.	NA / 12-18
<i>Afterworlds</i>	Scott Westerfield	Darcy Patel has put college and everything else on hold to publish her teen novel, <i>Afterworlds</i> . Arriving in New York with no apartment or friends she wonders whether she's made the right decision until she falls in with a crowd of other seasoned and fledgling writers who take her under their wings... Told in alternating chapters is Darcy's novel, a suspenseful thriller about Lizzie, a teen who slips into the 'Afterworld' to survive a terrorist attack. But the Afterworld is a place between the living and the dead and as Lizzie drifts between our world and that of the Afterworld, she discovers that many unsolved - and terrifying - stories need to be reconciled. And when a new threat resurfaces, Lizzie learns her special gifts may not be enough to protect those she loves and cares about most.	HL690L / 14-17
<i>The Night Diary</i>	Veera Hiranandani	It's 1947, and India, newly independent of British rule, has been separated into two countries: Pakistan and India. The divide has created much tension between Hindus and Muslims, and hundreds of thousands are killed crossing borders. Half-Muslim, half-Hindu twelve-year-old Nisha doesn't know where she belongs, or what her country is anymore. When Papa decides it's too dangerous to stay in what is now Pakistan, Nisha and her family become refugees and embark first by train but later on foot to reach her new home.	700L / 8-12
<i>Star Daughter</i>	Shveta Thakrar	The daughter of a star and a mortal, Sheetal is used to keeping secrets, pretending to be "normal." But when an accidental flare of her starfire puts her human father in the hospital, Sheetal needs a full star's help to heal him. A star like her mother, who returned to the sky long ago.	NA / 13-17

		Sheetal's quest to save her father will take her to a celestial court of shining wonders and dark shadows, where she must take the stage as her family's champion in a competition to decide the next ruling house of the heavens—and win, or risk never returning to Earth at all.	
<i>Sisters of the Snake</i>	Sarena Nanua & Sasha Nanua	Princess Rani longs for a chance to escape her gilded cage and prove herself. Ria is a street urchin, stealing just to keep herself alive. When these two lives collide, everything turns on its head: because Ria and Rani, orphan and royal, are unmistakably identical. A deal is struck to switch places—but danger lurks in both worlds, and to save their home, thief and princess must work together. Or watch it all fall into ruin.	NA / 13-17
<i>Climbing the Stairs</i>	Padma Venkataraman	During World War II and the last days of British occupation in India, fifteen-year-old Vidya dreams of attending college. But when her forward-thinking father is beaten senseless by the British police, she is forced to live with her grandfather's large traditional family, where the women live apart from the men and are meant to be married off as soon as possible. Vidya's only refuge becomes her grandfather's upstairs library, which is forbidden to women. There she meets Raman, a young man also living in the house who relishes her intellectual curiosity. But when Vidya's brother makes a choice the family cannot condone, and when Raman seems to want more than friendship, Vidya must question all she has believed in.	750L / 12+
Buddhism			
<i>All Thirteen: The Incredible Cave Rescue of the Thai Boys' Soccer Team</i>	Christina Soontornvat	On June 23, 2018, twelve young players of the Wild Boars soccer team and their coach enter a cave in northern Thailand seeking an afternoon's adventure. But when they turn to leave, rising floodwaters block their path out. The boys are trapped! Before long, news of the missing team spreads, launching a seventeen-day rescue operation involving thousands of rescuers from around the globe. As the world sits vigil, people begin to wonder: how long can a group of ordinary kids survive in complete darkness, with no food or clean water?	1020L / 10+

<i>The Astonishing Color of After</i>	Emily X.R. Pan	Leigh Chen Sanders is sixteen when her mother dies by suicide, leaving only a scribbled note: 'I want you to remember'. Leigh doesn't know what it means, but when a red bird appears with a message, she finds herself traveling to Taiwan to meet her maternal grandparents for the first time. Leigh is far away from home and far away from Axel, her best friend, who she stupidly kissed on the night her mother died - leaving her with a swell of guilt that she wasn't home, and a heavy heart, thinking she may have destroyed the one good thing left in her life. Overwhelmed by grief, Leigh retreats into her art and into her memories, where colors collide and the rules of reality are broken. The only thing Leigh is certain about is that she must find out the truth. She must remember. With lyrical prose and magical elements, Emily X.R. Pan's stunning debut novel alternates between past and present, romance and despair, as one girl attempts to find herself through family history, art, friendship, and love.	HL670L / 12+
Islam			
<i>All My Rage</i>	Sabaa Tahir	Tahir (the Ember in the Ashes series) explores heavy themes, including grief, racism, financial need, trauma, and substance abuse, in a far-reaching novel that follows a working-class Pakistani American family across two generations.	NA / 14+
<i>Ms. Marvel</i>	by G. Willow Wilson , Sara Pichelli, et al.	Marvel Comics presents the all-new Ms. Marvel, the groundbreaking heroine that has become an international sensation! Kamala Khan is an ordinary girl from Jersey City - until she is suddenly empowered with extraordinary gifts. But who truly is the all-new Ms. Marvel? Teenager? Muslim? Inhuman? Find out as she takes the Marvel Universe by storm! As Kamala discovers the dangers of her newfound powers, she unlocks a secret behind them as well. Is Kamala ready to wield these immense new gifts? Or will the weight of the legacy before her be too much to handle? Kamala has no idea either. But she's comin' for you, New York!	GN420L / 11-17
<i>City of the Plague God</i>	Sarwat Chadda	Thirteen-year-old Sikander Aziz has to team up with the hero Gilgamesh in order to stop Nergal, the ancient god of plagues, from	NA / 11+

		wiping out the population of Manhattan in this adventure based on Mesopotamian mythology.	
<i>Love from A to Z</i>	S.K. Ali	From William C. Morris Award Finalist S.K. Ali comes an unforgettable romance that is part <i>The Sun Is Also a Star</i> mixed with <i>Anna and the French Kiss</i> , following two Muslim teens who meet during a spring break trip.	NA / 14+
<i>Hana Khan Carries On</i>	Uzma Jalaluddin	Hana Khan's family-run halal restaurant is on its last legs. So when a flashy competitor gets ready to open nearby, bringing their inevitable closure even closer, she turns to her anonymously-hosted podcast, and her lively and long-lasting relationship with one of her listeners, for advice. But a hate-motivated attack on their neighborhood complicates the situation further, as does Hana's growing attraction for Aydin, the young owner of the rival business. Who might not be a complete stranger after all...	NA / 12-18
Christianity (including Latter-Day Saints – last two entries)			
<i>The Poet X</i>	Elizabeth Acevedo	Xiomara Batista feels unheard and unable to hide in her Harlem neighborhood. Ever since her body grew into curves, she has learned to let her fists and her fierceness do the talking. But Xiomara has plenty she wants to say, and she pours all her frustration and passion onto the pages of a leather notebook, reciting the words to herself like prayers—especially after she catches feelings for a boy in her bio class named Aman, who her family can never know about. With Mami's determination to force her daughter to obey the laws of the church, Xiomara understands that her thoughts are best kept to herself. So when she is invited to join her school's slam poetry club, she doesn't know how she could ever attend without her mami finding out. But she still can't stop thinking about performing her poems. Because in the face of a world that may not want to hear her, Xiomara refuses to be silent.	HL800L
<i>18 Hours to Us</i>	Krista Noorman	When Natalie Rhodes left her house early that fateful morning to catch the bus to her senior class trip, she never expected to end up in	NA / 13 - 18

		a car with Colton Daynes - the guy she's had a crush on since first grade, the guy who has no idea who she is. But when Colton's irresponsible driving causes them both to miss the bus, the unlikely pair set off on a road trip from Michigan to Virginia Beach to catch up with their classmates.	
<i>Heretics Anonymous</i>	Katie Henry	Put an atheist in a strict Catholic school? Expect comedy, chaos, and an Inquisition. The Breakfast Club meets Saved! in debut author Katie Henry's hilarious novel about a band of misfits who set out to challenge their school, one nun at a time. Perfect for fans of Becky Albertalli and Robyn Schneider.	730L / NA
<i>Blankets</i>	Craig Thompson	Blankets is the story of a young man coming of age and finding the confidence to express his creative voice. Craig Thompson's poignant graphic memoir plays out against the backdrop of a Midwestern winterscape: finely-hewn linework draws together a portrait of small town life, a rigorously fundamentalist Christian childhood, and a lonely, emotionally mixed-up adolescence. Under an engulfing blanket of snow, Craig and Raina fall in love at winter church camp, revealing to one another their struggles with faith and their dreams of escape. Over time though, their personal demons resurface and their relationship falls apart. It's a universal story, and Thompson's vibrant brushstrokes and unique page designs make the familiar heartbreaking all over again. This groundbreaking graphic novel, winner of two Eisner and three Harvey Awards, is an eloquent portrait of adolescent yearning; first love (and first heartache); faith in crisis; and the process of moving beyond all of that. Beautifully rendered in pen and ink, Thompson has created a love story that lasts.	NA / 14-18
<i>Let's Call it a Doomsday</i>	Katie Henry	Ellis Kimball is a sixteen-year-old Mormon girl with severe anxiety. Her biggest fear is the end of the world and to cope with her anxiety, she's become a "prepper." At her therapist's office, Ellis meets Hannah, a girl from her school who claims to know when the world will end. Here begins Ellis's first adventure, weeks before the apocalypse.	NA / 13+

<i>Beyond the Mapped Stars</i>	Rosalyn Eves	Seventeen-year-old Elizabeth Bertelsen dreams of becoming an astronomer, but she knows such dreams are as unreachable as the stars she so deeply adores. As a Mormon girl, her duty is to her family and, in a not too far away future, to the man who'll choose to marry her. When she unexpectedly finds herself in Colorado, she's tempted by the total eclipse of the sun that's about to happen--and maybe even meeting up with the female scientists she's long admired. Elizabeth must learn to navigate this new world of possibility: with her familial duties and faith tugging at her heartstrings, a new romance on the horizon, and the study of the night sky calling to her, she can't possibly have it all...can she?	830L / 12+
Native American Spirituality			
<i>Elatsoe</i>	Darcie Little Badger	A Texas teen comes face-to-face with a cousin's ghost and vows to unmask the murderer. Elatsoe—Ellie for short—lives in an alternate contemporary America shaped by the ancestral magics and knowledge of its Indigenous and immigrant groups. She can raise the spirits of dead animals—most importantly, her ghost dog Kirby. When her beloved cousin dies, all signs point to a car crash, but his ghost tells her otherwise: He was murdered.	HL610L / 11-17
<i>Firekeeper's Daughter</i>	Angeline Boulley	As a biracial, unenrolled tribal member and the product of a scandal, Daunis Fontaine has never quite fit in—both in her hometown and on the nearby Ojibwe reservation. When her family is struck by tragedy, Daunis puts her dreams on hold to care for her fragile mother. The only bright spot is meeting Jamie, the charming new recruit on her brother's hockey team. After Daunis witnesses a shocking murder that thrusts her into a criminal investigation, she agrees to go undercover. But the deceptions—and deaths—keep piling up and soon the threat strikes too close to home. How far will she go to protect her community if it means tearing apart the only world she's ever known?	HL720L / 14-18
<i>Race to the Sun</i>	Rebecca Roanhorse	Lately, seventh grader Nizhoni Begay has been able to detect monsters, like that man in the fancy suit who was in the bleachers at her basketball game. Turns out he's Mr. Charles, her dad's new boss at the oil and gas company, and he's alarmingly interested in Nizhoni and her brother, Mac,	680L / 9-13

		<p>their Navajo heritage, and the legend of the Hero Twins. Nizhoni knows he's a threat, but her father won't believe her. It will take more than weapons for Nizhoni to become the hero she was destined to be . . . Timeless themes such as the importance of family and respect for the land resonate in this funny, fast-paced, and exciting quest adventure set in the American Southwest.</p>	
Zoroastrianism			
<i>Darius the Great is Not Okay</i>	Adib Khorram	<p>Darius Kellner speaks better Klingon than Farsi, and he knows more about Hobbit social cues than Persian ones. He's about to take his first-ever trip to Iran, and it's pretty overwhelming—especially when he's also dealing with clinical depression, a disapproving dad, and a chronically anemic social life. In Iran, he gets to know his ailing but still formidable grandfather, his loving grandmother, and the rest of his mom's family for the first time. And he meets Sohrab, the boy next door who changes everything.</p>	HL710L / 12-17
<i>A Girl Like That</i>	Tanaz Bhathena	<p>Sixteen-year-old Zarin Wadia is many things: a bright and vivacious student, an orphan, a risk taker. She's also the kind of girl that parents warn their kids to stay away from: a troublemaker whose many romances are the subject of endless gossip at school. You don't want to get involved with a girl like that, they say. So how is it that eighteen-year-old Porus Dumasia has only ever had eyes for her? And how did Zarin and Porus end up dead in a car together, crashed on the side of a highway in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia? When the religious police arrive on the scene, everything everyone thought they knew about Zarin is questioned. And as her story is pieced together, told through multiple perspectives, it becomes clear that she was far more than just a girl like that. This beautifully written debut novel from Tanaz Bhathena reveals a rich and wonderful new world to readers; tackles complicated issues of race, identity, class, and religion; and paints a portrait of teenage ambition, angst, and alienation that feels both inventive and universal.</p>	890L / 14-18

Sikhism

<i>How Maya Got Fierce</i>	Sonia Charaipotra	Ever since she was little, farmer's daughter Maya Gera has known what her future holds. The heiress to a mini garlic empire in the heart of Gilroy, California, she's meant to be a good Indian girl -- which means agriculture school, an MBA, and settling down with a suitable Sikh boy. But when Maya gets kicked out of camp after an expensive accident -- yes, it involves a boy -- she scrambles to save face and keep her parents from finding out. Hard to do when she owes the school thousands of dollars.	NA / 14-18
<i>The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters</i>	Balli Kaur Jaswa	The Shergill sisters never needed each other--until they did. Rajni, Jezmeen and Shirina Shergill have never been close but when their mother dies, she has only one request: that they take a pilgrimage across India to carry out her final rites. While an extended family holiday is the last thing they want, each sister has her own reasons to run away from her life. Rajni is the archetypal know-it-all eldest but her son dropped a bombshell before she left and, for the first time, she doesn't know what the future holds. Middle sister Jezmeen, always a loudmouth, has translated her need for attention into life as a struggling actress. But her career is on the skids after an incident went viral and now she's desperate to find her voice again. Shirina, the golden child, has confounded expectations by having an arranged marriage and moving to the other side of the world. But her perfect life isn't what it seems and time is running out to make the right choice. As the miles rack up on their jaunt across India, the secrets of the past and present are sure to spill out.	NA / 13+