



Book of the Month

Presented by ADL's Education Department

About the Book of the Month: This collection of featured books is from Books Matter: The Best Kid Lit on Bias, Diversity and Social Justice. The books teach about bias and prejudice, promote respect for diversity, encourage social action and reinforce themes addressed in education programs of [A World of Difference® Institute](#), ADL's international anti-bias education and diversity training provider. For educators, adult family members and other caregivers of children, reading the books listed on this site with your children and incorporating them into instruction are excellent ways to talk about these important concepts at home and in the classroom.

Sulwe

Lupita Nyong'o (Author), Vashti Harrison (Illustrator)

Sulwe has skin the color of midnight. She is darker than everyone in her family. She is darker than anyone in her school. Sulwe just wants to be beautiful and bright, like her mother and sister. Then a magical journey in the night sky opens her eyes and changes everything. This picture book creates a whimsical and poignant story to inspire children to see their own unique beauty.

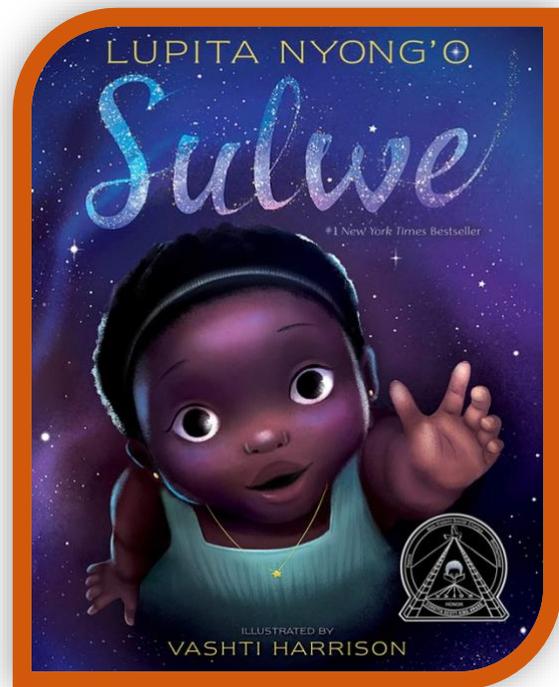
ISBN: 978-1534425361

Publisher: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers

Year Published: 2019

Age Range: 4–8*

**The book is geared towards ages 4-8. However, the book can provide a good opening to discuss the themes of bias, racism and colorism with upper elementary and middle school students.*



Book Themes

Race and Racism, Colorism, Family, Identity, Standards of Beauty, Self-Esteem

Key Words

Discuss and define these words with children prior to reading the book. Rather than focus on students' retention of all the words, make sure they understand the words enough to follow the story and remind children of the words' meanings as they come up in the book. You can also post the words and point out

to students when they appear in the story. For definitions that are differentiated for young children, see ADL's [Education Glossary Terms](#).

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|------------|------------|---------------|-----------------|
| ■ beaming | ■ darkness | ■ hurt | ■ rejoiced |
| ■ beauty | ■ dawn | ■ inseparable | ■ shade |
| ■ belonged | ■ dusk | ■ makeup | ■ shadows |
| ■ comfort | ■ elegant | ■ miracle | ■ shooting star |
| ■ comply | ■ fed up | ■ moonlight | |

Note to Teacher:

Sulwe explores the topic of colorism, which is an important issue in the Black community, as well as to other communities of color in the U.S. and globally. Here is a definition of colorism adapted from NCCJ's (National Conference for Community and Justice) definition:

A practice of discrimination by which those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin. This practice is a product of racism in that it upholds the white standards of beauty and benefits white people in the institutions of oppression (media, criminal justice system, medical world, etc.).

It is important to be sensitive when discussing this topic. Be mindful that students in your class, especially young students for whom this book is geared, may not talk about "colorism" in direct or explicit ways. However, it is likely that they unknowingly hold, have heard or have experienced the stereotypes about lighter skin being viewed and treated more positively than darker skin. This can happen through media images, celebrities that get highlighted and those that don't, and through messages from family and friends. Negative attitudes about darker skin (i.e., colorism) can also be internalized in similar ways to how *Sulwe* felt about herself as a dark-skinned girl. Describing oneself or others in terms of skin tone (e.g., light-skinned, brown-skinned, dark-skinned) is not inherently problematic because it is one aspect of a person's physical appearance. However, if skin complexion is used to tease, call names, hurt or bully others, it is concerning and will need to be addressed.

[Research](#) demonstrates that colorism is present in U.S. classrooms and schools and manifests in a variety of ways (favoritism, discipline, curriculum, books, other media). Therefore, it is important to be aware of how this form of both implicit and explicit bias can take place among educators, parents and students. Consider how students may be treated differently based on skin color. When you reflect on the diversity of the books, other media and images around your classroom, also consider the diversity of skin complexions.

As you read and discuss *Sulwe*, be mindful that African-American children and other children of color may identify strongly with the themes of the book. This can cause a range of feelings including relief, embarrassment, pride, fear, sadness, trauma, joy or other feelings. Watch for cues of strong feelings that may arise, acknowledge those feelings and take appropriate actions that you see fit, if necessary.

To learn more, read [The Difference Between Racism and Colorism](#) by Lori L. Tharps.

Discussion Questions

Before reading the book aloud, ask some or all of these pre-reading questions:

- What is the title of the book?
- Who do you see on the cover of the book? What is that person doing?
- What do you think the book might be about?

As you read the book aloud, ask a few discussion questions periodically throughout reading to check for comprehension and keep the students engaged. Below are some sample questions that correlate to specific page numbers.

Note: While you are reading the book, explain/ elicit what melanin is. Explain that **melanin** is pigment (color) that gives skin, hair and eyes their color. Everyone is born with and has melanin in different quantities. Dark-skinned people have more melanin in their skin than light-skinned people.

- In what way does Sulwe look different than other members of her family? (page 5)
- What does the name Sulwe mean? (page 13)
- How are the pet names for “day” and “night” different? (page 25)

After reading the book aloud, ask some or all of the following discussion questions:

- What is the book about?
- What do you learn about Sulwe when you first meet her?
- Why does Sulwe dream of being the same color as her sister?
- How does Sulwe try to become the same color as her sister? How did you feel as you read about this?
- How does Sulwe feel about her dark complexion? How do you know?
- What does her mother do to try to make Sulwe feel better? Do you think it works? Please explain.
- What did Sulwe learn from the dream that she has about the sisters, Night and Day? How does the story relate to Sulwe?
- What does Sulwe learn or discover through the story of Night and Day? What did you learn from their story?
- How does Sulwe feel when she wakes up the next morning? How do you know?
- Can you relate to Sulwe? If so, how?
- Have you ever been teased or excluded because of a part of your appearance? What happened? How did you feel?
- How does the book end? What do you think will happen next?
- What did you learn from the book?
- If you could summarize the book in one sentence, what would it be?

Extension Activities

Below are activities for students that can extend learning from the book.

1. Imagine and draw or write what happens next in the book

Remind students how the book ends by re-reading pages 37–43. Ask students: *What happens at the end of the book?* Remind students about what Sulwe learned about darkness and lightness from her dream and how she felt when she woke up (“beautiful inside and out”). Ask students: *What do you think happens when Sulwe starts feeling beautiful both inside and outside? What happens when she goes to school? How do you think Sulwe and her sister will play together? What do you think will change for her now that she feels beautiful in all ways?* Have students imagine what might happen if the book continues for a few more pages by brainstorming some ideas. Then, have them apply their ideas to writing and/or drawing the next few scenes and pages, as they imagine the book continuing. When completed, students can share their pages with the rest of the class by posting them on the wall and moving around the room gallery-style to see all the ways in which students imagined the story continuing. You can also invite parents and family members in for a whole class reading of the book and include the students’ additional pages.

2. Self-Portraits and Poems

Remind students that the book explores an aspect of identity. Define **identity** as the qualities, beliefs, etc. that make a particular person or group different from others. Ask what aspect of identity is explored in the book and elicit that appearance and specifically skin color/complexion are addressed in the book. Ask: *In reading Sulwe, what did you learn about appearance and skin color?*

Then, brainstorm different aspects of appearance by having students look at you (the teacher) and list characteristics of appearance such as: skin color; hair texture, color and style; eye shape and color; shape of face; body shape or size; and other characteristics like birth marks, freckles, etc. Then have students look in mirrors and/or work in pairs to create descriptions of their physical appearance. Using art supplies (i.e., crayons, markers, paint—making sure that you have colors that represent all children’s hair, complexion, eye colors, etc.), have students create self-portraits.

When completed, post them around the room and have students move around the room gallery-style to look at all the self-portraits. Then engage them in a discussion about the self-portraits, being sure to affirm all the children’s beauty and unique physical characteristics. Ask: *What are some of the similarities you see among your classmates’ portraits? What are some differences? Do you think our classroom self-portraits reflects our community, country, world? Why or why not? What is unique about each of us? What do you think makes your own self-portrait beautiful?*

Note: Be mindful that students may have negative associations with different aspects of appearance. When commenting on students’ self-portraits, make sure to affirm different aspects of beauty and be careful not to unknowingly invoke or trigger negative associations. In concluding the activity, make sure to convey the message that we are all unique and beautiful in a variety of ways.

If time permits, extend the learning about self-portraits and have them create acrostic poems based on physical appearance and other aspects of their identity. Here is an example for someone named Jaden:

Jaden’s hair is short and black
Almond shaped
Dark
Eyes
Neck and rest of skin is brown

3. Appearance, Prejudice and Acting as an Ally

Ask students if they are familiar with the author, Lupita Nyong'o. You can show the photo of her from the book or online. If students don't know, explain that she is a famous actress who has been in movies such as *Black Panther*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Us*, *Star Wars* and more. Read aloud the "Author's Note" in the back of the book (page 45). If you are able, show this video: [Lupita Nyong'o shares powerful story behind new children's book, 'Sulwe.'](#) Then talk with students about how the author's experience shaped the book. Ask: *Why do you think Lupita Nyong'o wrote the book? How does the book relate to her life?*

Next, elicit/explain a definition of **prejudice** as judging or having an idea about someone or a group of people before you actually know them. Prejudice is often directed toward people in a certain identity group (race, religion, gender, etc.).

Ask: *What kind of prejudice is being discussed in Sulwe?* Explain that Sulwe is the target of skin complexion prejudice, which is called "colorism" (bias about skin color that says lighter skin is better than darker skin). Have students share examples of prejudice they have heard about, seen or experienced themselves. It can be about colorism, appearance or any other form of prejudice. Explain that when we see others being targeted for bias, we can act as an ally to them.

Elicit/explain a definition for **ally** as someone who helps or stands up for someone who is being bullied or the target of bias (or prejudice). Have students talk in pairs to share about a time they acted as an ally, someone acted as an ally for them or they saw someone acting as an ally. If time permits, have students create posters about that experience. They can draw a picture and then under it write: "When I saw prejudice, I acted as an ally (or will act as an ally in the future) by _____," filling in the blank. Have students share their posters with the class.

ADL Resources

The following are curriculum and educational resources on race, identity and bias.

Curriculum Resources

Casting of 'The Little Mermaid' Brings Pride and Prejudice, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/casting-of-the-little-mermaid-brings-pride-and-prejudice.

Diverse Books Matter, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/diverse-books-matter.

Dolls Are Us, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/dolls-are-us.

Role Models and Stereotypes: Misty Copeland's Story, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/role-models-and-stereotypes-misty-copelands-story.

Who Am I? Identity Poems, www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/who-am-i-identity-poems.

Websites

6 Ways to Be an Ally

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/6-ways-to-be-an-ally-en-espanol

Some simple things a student can do to be an ally to targets of name-calling and bullying. (Also in Spanish.)

Black History Month

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/black-history-month

Since 1976, every U.S. president has officially designated the month of February as Black History Month. Here are some lesson plans and resources to help you teach about Black history in your classroom and at home.

Establishing a Safe Learning Environment

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/establishing-a-safe-learning-environment

Here are some tips for establishing an environment in which young people can discuss sensitive issues safely and productively when challenged to explore and articulate their personal feelings about sensitive topics in the classroom.

How Should I Talk about Race in My Mostly White Classroom?

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/how-should-i-talk-about-race-in-my-mostly-white-classroom

Strategies for discussing race and racism in classrooms of predominately white students.

Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism

www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/race-talk-engaging-young-people-in-conversations-about

As a society, public conversations about race and racism have increased in volume and intensity. Here are some suggestions and strategies for having classroom conversations with young people about these issues.

Children's Books

Below are links to lists of recommended anti-bias and multicultural books for the indicated category.

People, Identity and Culture: Biracial/Multicultural, Black, African American, Caribbean,
[www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid\[204\]=204&tid\[205\]=205&tid\[207\]=207&tid\[0\]=215&page=1](http://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid[204]=204&tid[205]=205&tid[207]=207&tid[0]=215&page=1)

Race & Racism, [www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?childrens-lit-select-all-8=1&tid\[217\]=217&tid\[218\]=218&tid\[219\]=219&tid\[220\]=220&tid\[221\]=221](http://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?childrens-lit-select-all-8=1&tid[217]=217&tid[218]=218&tid[219]=219&tid[220]=220&tid[221]=221)