We argue in this column that the words and perspectives of peers offer students what Ellen Tremer (1989) has called a “felt presence.” To that end, we gathered first-person accounts of actual events—the “voices” of adolescents who draw readers in close. In effect, when young readers are offered times, places, and issues by a contemporary, they may choose to attend, persist, and . . . understand. Each recommended text encourages readers to consider the evidence the narrator has related, and why the voice of an age-mate seems relevant, compelling, and meaningful.

Three recurring themes emerged: (a) voices of youth who chose to take action; b) voices of youth as victims of social upheaval; and c) voices of youth determined to expose and overturn stereotypes. Close reading will ferret out what lies beneath each affecting account.

Voices of Youth Who Took Action

Cynthia Levinson’s award-winning *We’ve Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children’s March* (2011) gathers interviews from four adults who, between the ages of 9 and 16, took part in the children’s march for civil rights known as the Children’s Crusade. Their voices resound with the determination and resilience of the times as they recall joining nearly 4,000 other black students intent on “filling the jails” in peaceful protest. Discussions will likely center on power, equality, and the ramifications of taking a stand. Accompanying photos, documents, and other resources also deserve close inspection.

*¡Sí, Se Puede!/Yes, We Can!: Janitor Strike in L.A.* by Diana Cohn (2005) depicts the impact of inequitable pay on working-class families in Los Angeles, 2000, as narrated by Carlitos, the proud son of a building custodian. Carlitos’s dilemma is how to show solidarity with his *mamá*; his decision results in the collective action he and his classmates take to support the strikers. This bilingual picturebook supports finding evidence of unfair working conditions within historical and contemporary accounts.

In her biographical text written with Christina Lamb, 16-year-old Pakistani Malala Yousafzai tells the story of the Taliban’s violent attempt to silence her activism for girls’ education (*I Am Malala*, 2013). But her story is much more than her brave advocacy: Through Malala’s voice, readers come to understand her love of family, country, and religion, as well as her passionate message that the Taliban represents neither Pakistani culture nor Islam. Students will be drawn to the power of youth standing up for what is right—even at high cost.

Marjane Satrapi’s memoir in graphic novel form, *Persepolis* (2003), chronicles her life from the ages of 10 to 14 during the Islamic Revolution, as she tussles with her family’s history and develops her own political identity. As Marji explores her faith, questions the media, rejects and reclaims her national pride, and comes to understand her femininity under the Shah’s oppressive dictates, readers can build an understanding of a complex time and place. Marji’s perspectives in-
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spire close attention to the historical context and to today’s international politics.

We Were There, Too!: Young People in U.S. History by Phillip Hoose (2001) offers accounts of children who were present at history’s significant events—or were themselves a part of history, whether “through sweat, bravery, luck, talent, imagination [or] sacrifice” (p. vii). Hoose gathers the voices from journals, letters, and other primary sources. For example, 11-year-old Harriet Hanson, leader of a walkout of nineteenth-century oppressed millworkers, claimed, “As I looked back on that long line that followed me, I was more proud than I have ever been since.” (p. 84)

Voices of Youth in Upheaval

Thanhha Lai’s Inside Out and Back Again (2011), a National Book Award winner, is a memoir-like account in verse relating 10-year-old Hà’s escape from 1975 Saigon and resettlement in Alabama. The challenges of a strange language and culture are described with such immediacy, candor, and grace that readers must slow to take in the narrator as she confides her loneliness, confusion, and hope.

Deborah Ellis also offers readers the words of youth who speak to the fears, deprivation, and disruption that war inflicts on their lives. In her Children of War: Voice of Iraqi Refugees (2009), 16-year-old Iraqi Hibba, awaiting asylum in the United States, expresses a solution: “To make peace, I would not let anybody make money from selling tanks and guns” (p. 25). In a logical companion text, Off to War (2008), Ellis gives voice to children of American and Canadian soldiers deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively. Khayla, age 12, a child of Michigan reservists, explains: “I’ve heard some people are against the war and . . . they protest about it. I think they don’t understand that the soldiers are saving our country” (p. 40). In Kids of Kabul (2012), 12- to 17-year-olds share from lives spent entirely in war’s upheaval. Students who read segments of the texts can carefully select representative quotes, juxtaposing the speakers’ voices and perspectives and interpreting them through oral performance (Readers’ Theater).

The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child by Francisco Jiménez (1997) recounts in short stories the author’s journey, without citizenship papers, into the United States to follow the crops. In an unadorned style, Jiménez reveals his family’s resourcefulness, aspirations, closeness, and fears. The near stand-alone chapter “To Have and To Hold” affords students opportunity to pinpoint Francisco’s values for literacy and learning, as well as the discoveries he makes about himself, family, community, and society.

Voices to Overturn Stereotypes, Stretch Understandings

In Growing Up Muslim: Understanding the Beliefs and Practices of Islam (2012), Sumbul Ali-Karamali draws from her experiences and studies to explain in a friendly and informing voice practices of her faith that made her friends ask questions—beginning with food, prayer, and fasting. Ali-Karamali directly counters the perception of Islam as an oppressive religion that denies women’s rights, while also deepening middle school readers’ understanding of the history, faith, worship, and variant customs of Muslims.

This Star Won’t Go Out: The Life and Words of Esther Grace Earl (2014) gives stage to the life of a young writer, including her battle with the thyroid cancer that claimed her at age 16. In John Green’s introduction, he writes, “Esther was uncommon not because she was sick but because she was Esther, and she did not exist so that the rest of us could learn Important Lessons about Life” (p. 9). Through the words, drawings, emails, letters, and voices of friends and family, readers will construct and understand Esther beyond her disease.

The photo-essay No Place for Children: Voices from Juvenile Detention (Liss, 2005) provides a glimpse inside the juvenile detention center in Laredo, Texas. Powerful black-and-white photographs are central to the emotionally challenging content. Liss presents dialogue (in script)
between detainees and wardens, as well as soliloquies of family members reflecting on their own journeys—segments that warrant close reading for what is left unsaid.

We hope students will read closely and inquire genuinely as they walk alongside peer narrators—thinking and caring more deeply as they go.

References
Hoose, P. M. (2001). We were there, too!: Young people in U.S. history. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.