

# Mirrors & Windows: Why Diversity Must Be Better Represented in Children's Fiction

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Children's literature and film has been unbalanced in terms of its representation of diverse cultures. Fiction geared towards children in the United States should include more protagonists from minority culture backgrounds in order for children to grow into adults who value their own culture as well as the cultures of others. This essay explores how children's fiction can help combat cultural and racial prejudice in American adults by shaping their worldview as children.

*Literature is a powerful medium. Through it, children construct messages about their cultures and roles in society. (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 810)*

For many children in the United States, engaging in a story with a parent is a familiar bedtime activity. Through story, children are able to partake in an adventure, walking alongside the characters, empathizing with them when they fall, and joining in the celebration when they rise victoriously above their opposition. Naturally, parents easily identify the benefits of story time for their children: it entertains the children, calms them down before sleep, and provides an opportunity for the parent and child to bond over a shared experience before ending their day. Moreover, fictional stories can be educational for children by illustrating various social settings which provide a window into other people's minds, allowing the audience to "see how emotions, and relationships, and other people's beliefs [...] play[...] out in these complicated social situations" (Barnes qtd. in Varathan, para. 6). Children, observing from these windows, apply to their own lives what they learn from the fictional characters' behavior in

these scenarios (Hladíková, 20). However, despite the numerous educational and relational benefits of engaging in story, most parents are not aware of certain dangers. What fiction—such as in literature and film—teaches children about society remains with them well into their adult years, shaping their worldview. Although this long-term effect stories have on a child's worldview is one of the greatest developmental benefits of story, it may also be one of the greatest dangers. If children are exposed to a wide variety of perspectives, cultures, and ideas through their stories, they may grow into informed adults embracing the beauty of diversity. However, if children are presented with stories which illustrate the perspective of only the dominant cultures in society, they may grow into adults prejudiced against other cultures and lacking a sense of the worth of their own culture. Thus, fiction geared towards children in the U.S. should include more protagonists from minority culture backgrounds in order for children to grow into adults who value their own culture as well as the cultures of others.

Although half of the population of school-age children in the United States are now children of color, children's stories representing diverse cultures

constitute less than 10% of annually published children's literature in the U.S. (Nel, 2; Zygmunt, 25). If this percentage remains constant and if the 2012 projections of U.S. population growth are in fact realized, these percentages may grow even more disproportional with children of color reaching 62% of the population of children in the U.S. by the year 2050 (Zygmunt, 25). This deficit of diverse cultures represented in children's literature has major ramifications for future generations. For as Rudine Sims Bishop, author of *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature*, indicates, "books, as art forms, reflect the social and cultural contexts in which they are created" (Bishop, 85). Children learn about society and culture from these reflections in their books. In fact, Christopher Myers, *New York Times* writer of "The Apartheid of Children's Literature," reveals that the mission of major publishers is "to create opportunities for children to learn about and understand their importance in their respective worlds" (Myers, para. 5). However, if children of diverse backgrounds do not see themselves represented in published literature, they miss out on the opportunity to discover their valuable role in society. Furthermore, they may even miss out on the joy of reading, for "[a] history of omission and ridicule" in mainstream children's literature has caused it to become "a source of as much pain as pleasure" for many children of color (Bishop, 85). The absence of protagonists of color in children's books damages the worldview of children of color by communicating to them that their culture is not valued enough to be represented in a story.

Seeing our own culture represented in a story is an experience more significant than we may realize. Several authors have defined this phenomenon as "the mirror experience." In her article, *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors*, Bishop demonstrates how books can either be windows, offering unfamiliar views of the world; sliding glass doors, allowing readers to step in with their imagination and join the story; or mirrors, if the lighting is just right.

Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes

a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Bishop, 1990, para. 1)

However, in order for all readers to share in this mirror experience, children of all backgrounds "need to see clear and authentic representations of their cultures" (Zygmunt, 26). Not only is the mirror experience a means of self-affirmation, but studies have also found "that children recall information more directly when they have a cultural connection to the characters of the story (Smith & Lewis, 1985)" (Zygmunt, 25). Noting the difference between an authentic cultural connection and merely a similar skin-tone is important. For example, results have shown that,

When African American children's literature incorporated Afro-centric themes of respect, [...] communication, [...] spontane[ity], [...] and [...] social interaction, children's recall and comprehension were significantly higher than when a story had African American characters, but a more Euro-centric theme. (Zygmunt, 26)

Thus, the significance of relating to fictional characters is evident: Bena R. Hefflin and Mary Alice Barksdale-Ladd, co-authors of an article in *The Reading Teacher*, suggest that "[w]hen readers frequently encounter texts that feature characters with whom they can connect, they will see how others are like them and how reading can play a role in their lives" (810); consequently, a love of reading will result.

Unfortunately, literature with authentic representations of characters with whom children of color can relate is seldom found in the classroom, potentially resulting in a lack of engagement from students of color. As Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd indicate,

From the time they enter school, most African American children read literature that seldom offers messages about them, their past, or their future. All too often books used in primary classrooms contain too few African American characters, or they include characters who are

African American in appearance only. Many of these stories say little about African American culture, or they present only the history of African Americans as slaves without including any “non-slavery” or modern representations. In short, today’s African American children often cannot find themselves in the literature they are given to read. (Hefflin, 810)

Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd report on several interviews that were held with African American third-graders who shared their preference for more books with black characters. “I like seeing people in the book that are my same color,” expressed one child named Keisha. “I like reading about my heritage and...I would like to see more black people in stories,” expressed another child named LaVon. Evidently, children deeply resonate with characters who look like them.

Tracey, Robin, and Tyrone—three African American adults who were also interviewed—shared their experiences with reading as young children. As minority children in American classrooms, they were presented with books that had characters who they struggled to relate to because they did not look like them, speak like them, or act like them. The interviewees expressed the difficulty they faced as children with engaging in class readings. For example, Tyrone states, “I didn’t feel a strong connection between my world and classroom-related literature experiences. My learning experiences did not speak to me because people who looked like me weren’t in literature” (811). Tyrone explains that he did not value his experiences with literature as a young student because he did not resonate with the characters in the books he was required to read. The absence of diverse characters in children’s literature communicates to children of color that “books have little to offer them that is personal, relevant, and affirming (Harris, 1993; Sims-Bishop, 1987)” (Hefflin, 811). Accordingly, for minority students to become disinterested in school is understandable as they do not see themselves or their cultures represented in their assigned readings.

However, many disagree that seeing oneself or one’s culture represented in fiction is necessary for a child’s development. Marley Dias, an ambitious teenager activist, feminist, and author who launched

the campaign called, “#1000BlackGirlBooks,” alludes to the expression “How can you be it if you can’t see it?” “Meaning, if the examples of black characters [...] don’t exist in fiction or in the movies or on TV, then how would we even know it was a possibility, an option, to be any of those things ourselves?” (Dias, 27). As it happens, Dias only partially agrees with the statement that children need to physically see themselves in a role before being able to imagine themselves in that career. Her point is that she believes “the power of our imagination and intelligence” can “create something where there was nothing before” (Dias, 28). Similarly, an article in the *New York Times*, titled “Diversity in Kids’ Books,” is compiled of several authors’ responses to this same issue. Most of these authors agree that children’s books should include more diversity; however, they believe that children should not have to rely on the character’s appearance in order to relate to them and learn from their story. The examples they gave of stories they themselves read when they were young strengthen their argument that readers do not need to relate to a character’s culture or physical appearance in order to glean from the story. For example, one author, B. Lynch Black, mentions that although she was not a young Jewish girl, she still learned from *The Diary of Anne Frank*. She was not “a musketeer or the Count of Monte Cristo either,” and yet this did not prevent her from “enjoying these books, and many others like them” (Black qtd. in Glass). Black’s critique of the claim that children need to see themselves represented in fiction, then, is this: “A well-written book should not be ignored or found wanting simply because it doesn’t represent every ethnic or racial background. It should represent humanity, and readers should be able to find something of themselves in it — no matter the protagonists’ background or color” (Black qtd. in Glass). Therefore, while some are of the opinion that representation of diversity in children’s fiction is not absolutely necessary, it is still extremely important (Dias, 28).

Representation of diversity in fiction is important not only for children of color, providing them with a mirror experience, but also for white children, providing them with a window experience. Although some people tend to assume ‘diversity’ is a synonym for ‘different skin colors,’ diversity is actually a

much broader concept; it is different points of view, backgrounds, and ideas. As Sharron McElmeel, one of the authors whose response is featured in “Diversity in Kids’ Books,” demonstrates, “children need both mirrors and windows. Many children of color see the world only through windows, and they need mirrors. And other children only see mirrors and they need to see the world through windows” (McElmeel qtd. in Glass). McElmeel continues on to emphasize the importance of seeing a familiar face in a book, “but also the faces of [...] friends and those who are not yet [...] friends” (McElmeel qtd. in Glass). Reading about the traditions of other cultures and not just one’s own culture provides a glimpse into another style of living. The more we are exposed to cultures other than our own, the better we are able to overcome barriers of hostility and prejudice by befriending and empathizing with people of all cultures.

Although engaging in stories of all cultures is important and extremely beneficial both to white and non-white children, one danger to be cautious of when creating or reading stories of other cultures is what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian novel author, defines as the ‘single story.’ A single story is created by “show[ing] a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become” (Adichie, 09:25). This creates stereotypes, “and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (Adichie, 12:57). For example, Adichie describes her experience of moving to the U.S. after having grown up in Nigeria; she found that many of her peers in the U.S. had only a single view of the entire continent of Africa and were completely shocked when they heard Adichie’s own experiences contradicting the stories of Africa they have heard their whole lives. Although the stereotypes they had grown accustomed to may not have all been false, they were nonetheless incomplete perspectives on an entire continent of people. Single stories such as this have a dangerously high potential to hurt individuals of cultures other than our own. Evidently, stories do matter—trivial though they may seem. “Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of

a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity” (Adichie, 17:36).

Stories are repairing broken dignity not only in books, but also in “a set of works we would not normally consider literature but that nonetheless has strong ties to children’s literature” (Clark, 168). This genre is film. Although the stories available to children in the U.S.—whether illustrated literature or film—have primarily centered around white protagonists for decades, efforts have been made by various production teams in more recent years to incorporate more diversity into their stories. For example, Walt Disney studios, beginning in the 1950s with its first full-length animated feature, created stories with characters who were almost completely white—unless they were animals or personified inanimate objects. Later, in the mid 1980s to late 1990s, Disney began to feature characters with darker skin tones—such as Aladdin and Mulan. However, these stories failed to represent the culture accurately. Many Arab and Chinese communities were upset with how Disney had handled their own culture’s stories and made them more “white”—such as with Caucasian features and voices. However, in the past few years, Disney has slowly made progress in accurately basing more of their stories on diverse cultures with recent films such as *Moana* and *Coco*. These films each had a significant impact on the communities they were portraying. *Moana*, the first Polynesian Disney Princess, for example, is popular among young Polynesian girls not only for her similar physical appearance, but also for “the portrayal of her heritage and the familiar cultural values” (Bath, 2017). *Coco*, the first Pixar film to feature a minority character in the lead role, was highly successful among both Latino and non-Latino audiences alike for its celebration of the Latino culture and the “story’s universal themes of family legacy and solidarity” (Ugwu, 2017). In addition to these stories being deeply meaningful to Polynesian and Latino communities, respectively, they also greatly benefit the white audience members as a window into cultures different from their own, providing an opportunity for them to learn and have a greater appreciation for all cultures.

Although the bedtime stories parents read to their child may seem insignificant, they can actually



be highly influential in the child's development into an adult member of society. What children read when they are young shapes them deeply because children "are still very much in the process of becoming. That is why children's literature is one of the most important arenas in which to combat prejudice" (Nel, 202). Stories can shape how individuals and communities "are perceived, and how they are respected and valued or silenced and dehumanized" (Acevedo, 16). Thus, with children's fiction featuring more protagonists from minority culture backgrounds, subsequent generations may have less racial prejudice as the children of today become adults who value their own culture as well as the culture of others.

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