



White Kids Need Diverse Books

The “We Need Diverse Books” movement has done much to increase awareness that young people need and deserve to see themselves reflected in books.

White teachers and librarians are increasingly trying to locate diverse materials for their diverse students, and some professional review sources are striving to meet this demand by explicitly naming the race of *all* characters to make selections easier.

Unfortunately, it is still common for some librarians to believe that they don't need to purchase diverse books if they serve largely white populations. Commonly given reasons include “We don't have those students here,” “I purchase quality materials, period, and would buy more diverse books if they had greater literary merit,” and “I support diverse books in principle, but my budget is limited, so I can't justify buying anything that will just sit on the shelves.”

We believe those misconceptions arise, in part, from a very narrow definition of “diversity” in literature, one that focuses on books that focus explicitly on oppression and suffering, often in a moralistic or didactic fashion. Diverse characters too often exist as objects of pity or as props that allow the white protagonist to shine and, in many instances, to save. When a diverse character does not exist primarily to teach readers about her cultural background, she may be viewed as “inauthentic,” or her culture may escape notice or mention altogether. In addition, white readers are often unaware of the limitations of the cultural lens they bring to their evaluation of diverse books, resulting in negative judgments they believe are objective but which prevent them from appreciating and promoting these titles.

We argue that white children urgently need to develop the cultural competency skills that will enable them to thrive and succeed in diverse schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces. Young people who are growing up deprived of first-hand experience with diversity can begin to acquire awareness of others through literature. This is a critical part of helping to support their racial awareness and cultural assumptions. Books by cultural insiders most reliably provide rich, subtle material that can be enjoyed purely for entertainment or to gain insight into another realm of experience. Because the authors are well-rounded people whose ethnic or racial background is simply one facet of their being, they create characters who likewise go far beyond caricature and tokenism.

Rather than list a lengthy bibliography, we incorporate a discussion of a few select titles as examples. There are numerous sources offering reading lists of diverse books, and any attempt to be exhaustive would be futile. Even the lightest of mainstream fiction can be used to dissect and determine cultural assumptions if examined in a critical light. Instead, we focus on a few recent works of middle grade and young adult fiction, mostly realistic,

that highlight the productive cultural work that is possible through a mindful engagement with each narrative. This article was born of many conversations over the course of several years. We offer our individual voices and perspectives as well as our collective analysis.

ALPHA DELAP

I came to young people's librarianship later in life after a professional journey in academia and the birth of two sons. My involvement in social justice work has been ever-present, whether it was as a pre-teen volunteering for a New York City chapter of S.O.S. Racism, a high school student developing political-art actions as a member of the CityKids Coalition, a college student working on a women's shelter hotline, or a mother demonstrating against racism with my family and other members of the Black Lives Matter movement. De-stabilizing stereotypes and creating space for all forms of difference are my life's work; however, I am in a continual state of becoming. I do not believe it is possible to be entirely “woke” and, therefore, prefer to provide models and maps rather than critique.

As a teacher-librarian in a school with an ethnically diverse but economically homogenous population, I find it especially important for our school library collection to reflect the lived experiences of our community members as well as the experiences of others whose understandings of the world are quite different. I find myself talking about various kinds of economic trajectories frequently, trying to give my students a sense of the world in its fullness and its limits. I can booktalk a narrative about growing up as a member of the working poor easily. I know this experience because I have lived it.

I find it increasingly important, however, as a white, cisgender librarian, to be able to collect and evangelize narratives that are distinct from my own because they teach me about alternate experiences but also because they teach me about myself. Narratives that veer from my reality allow me to clarify and contextualize my life, my relationships, my decisions, and, most importantly, my notions of what is and can be known.

One example is Rita Williams-Garcia's **One Crazy Summer** (Amistad, 2010). Highly lauded, this is a book about the Black Panthers, civil rights, and the search for socio-political justice in America. It is a loving story of sisterhood and the experiences of one family.



It is also about living a creative life and what it means to be a woman and an artist at the end of the twentieth century. **One Crazy Summer** reveals a maternal character who has rejected motherhood in ways that are complicated and important. Her rejection includes a desire for reconciliation that is on her own terms. Despite their pain and frustration, her children understand her quandary just as I, as the reader, understand the difficult decisions women often make to maintain/prop up societal expectations.

Expounding Rudine Sims Bishop's windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors metaphor (<http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/LA/0852-nov07/LA0852Profiles.pdf>), books with protagonists who live alternative socio-cultural realities offer me a new kind of lens. This lens, perhaps, we can think of as a pair of glasses enabling me to read myself more granularly and to deconstruct my established expectations and presumptions. These glasses allow me, as a young people's librarian, to engage students in ways they never expected and to de-stabilize their notions of "natural" and "normal." These glasses open the world and allow readers to make connections and clearly articulate multi-dimensional differences. Latina author Meg Medina writes,



"I think if you're in a school that doesn't have Latino students, you probably need my books more than anyone else. Because that may be the best chance those students have to meet and consider a story through the eyes of somebody who's different than they are. Nothing blocked me from loving **Charlotte's Web** (Harper, 1952). I was there in Queens, I didn't know anything about pigs or buttermilk or state fairs. I loved it because it was a friendship story, and a story about loyalty. I believe that children can identify with someone named Piddy Sanchez or Nora Lopez just as easily." (<https://megmedina.com/>)

These glasses allow readers to see the commonalities and differences in experience, thereby creating true space for diverse voices.

I grew up in six different places before I was seven years old. I had a strange "hippie" name, little self-confidence, and often was the target of bullies. Like Jimmy McClean in Joseph Marshall, III's **In the Footsteps of Crazy Horse** (Harry N. Abrams, 2015), I felt like an outsider. Unlike Jimmy, I did not have to prove my cultural authenticity nor was my history purposefully buried and left out of mainstream textbooks and public consciousness. Marshall's recent middle grade historical narrative is about an adolescent boy learning about himself and his community's devastating experience of "westward expansion," deftly introducing readers to the details of Crazy Horse's life and his influence on Lakota culture. In addition, Jimmy and his Grandfather Nyle's road trip allows Jimmy to develop a more nuanced sense of himself and his own possibilities based both on tradition and not.



Using my new glasses, I am able to see Marshall's ability to both challenge and embrace being a Lakota man in the twenty-first century. Moving away from the desire to identify with Jimmy, my reading practice functions as an act of witnessing, acknowledging, and learning. I, too, sat on the prairies of Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska, and South Dakota listening to Grandfather Nyle's stories, and I see how Marshall helps his reader interrogate the

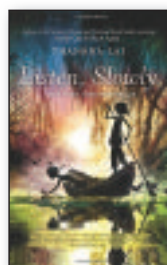
notion that certain tribal members are "not Indian enough." He creates a space for Jimmy to be Lakota in his own way. He allows for a tracing of history without remaining in a space of trauma and regret. Jimmy's grandfather focuses on communal resilience and the strength and creativity of Tasunke Witko, known as Crazy Horse, as a model for manhood in the present.

LAURA SIMEON

The child of a Japanese-American woman from an impoverished rural background—the first in her family to attend college—and a Greek-American son of immigrants to New York City, I was born the year after *Loving v. Virginia* legalized interracial marriage in the United States. It often felt like growing up behind a one-way mirror: I couldn't help but get to know the dominant culture, but we were invisible to the majority. I dealt with internalized racism—and external racism too—not to mention being utterly invisible in the towers of books I brought home from our weekly public library visits. I would not trade my awareness of the impact of culture and race for anything. I've learned that it's not a matter of knowing it all or never putting a foot wrong (unattainable goals), but of being aware that there are differences worthy of notice in the first place, of not being under the illusion that my norm is simply "normal" and that everyone else's is "other."

Librarians can have a powerful impact by reading, purchasing, and promoting diverse literature that gives voice to respectful, well-rounded portrayals of different communities. As Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en). The only story about people of color in too many American books for young people has long been that difference makes you a victim and is a troublesome burden to be borne until you are rescued by a white person or by adopting their enlightened values.

The Sun Is Also a Star by Nicola Yoon (Delacorte, 2016) is notable in that the primary relationship centers on two teens of color—Natasha, an undocumented immigrant from Jamaica, and Korean-American Daniel. Mainstream white culture is in the background, throwing their experiences as racial minorities into relief, but it does not co-opt their story. Yoon shows the painful toll that striving to assimilate and succeed on others' terms can take on individuals and family relationships, and offers sympathetic insights into the behaviors of immigrant parents who may seem inexplicable to those who don't understand the whole context. The book is just as much a universal story of an artsy romantic falling for a skeptical scientist. This book is a delightful romance that will easily appeal to the legions of John Green and Sarah Dessen fans, but along the way, these readers will absorb humanizing information about people from groups they may not have encountered before, whether on paper or in real life.



Mai, the protagonist in Thanhha Lai's **Listen, Slowly** (HarperCollins, 2015) is a Vietnamese-American girl who finds herself visiting a "homeland" that is surprisingly foreign, yet deeply familiar. She is a delightful and utterly believable blend of Southern California and Vietnam: loyal to her family, genuinely striving to be an obedient and grateful daughter and granddaughter, but also (at first) blindly

accepting of many American values that are only thrown into relief when she arrives in Vietnam and struggles to explain them. Readers are shown (not lectured about) collectivist versus individualistic values, with neither being labelled in a simplistic way as “better” or “correct.” Mai’s warm and loving mom and dad are also a refreshing contrast to the usual two-dimensional stereotypes of Asian parents. The pervasive humor and natural, accessible voice of the narrator make this story highly attractive and readable. Mai is bewildered at times, trying to figure out who she is, but what adolescent doesn’t share those feelings? The source of Mai’s confusion may differ from those of a white student who has never needed to integrate two cultures, but it’s handled in a way that serves to make Mai more relatable rather than objectifying her by evoking pity.

We hope you agree that readers of all backgrounds deserve access to a range of engaging, nuanced, respectful stories about diverse protagonists who grapple with challenges, both specific and universal, and who are allowed to be fully-realized human beings, *no more defined solely by their race than is any white person*. Through these books, young people who do not have personal experience of cultural diversity can notice both commonalities as well as differences.

Through searching for and reading these books, librarians can develop their own appreciation of different cultural perspectives, sensitivity to crude stereotypes and lazy shortcuts, and ability to confidently evaluate and select materials. It may take a bit more thoughtful effort than picking up a book by someone who has the same cultural perspective as you do, but since when is reading about avoiding effort? Why not step outside yourself and try on someone else’s glasses? You don’t need to agree with their perspective, only to attempt to understand it, and, thereby, to more clearly be able to articulate your own cultural lens.

The first step to true cultural awareness is recognizing that culture isn’t just something that other people have. As you read, notice what surprises or puzzles you. What values do you see expressed? How do they contrast with your own? How are your values adaptive and useful in your life? How might the characters in the book answer this question? If you are unsure, consider the historical and present-day context of their community, e.g., its relationship to institutions and other social groups, as well as differences *within* that community (religion, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation). Consider how values and beliefs are expressed through actions which may have a very different meaning than you expect. Practice wondering rather than judging. Turn the spotlight on your own culture: What assumptions about human values and behavior is the white author making? How would you explain it to an outsider? Become comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty rather than rushing to conclusions. Some discomfort is a natural part of learning anything new, cultural competency skills included. In fact, being able to tolerate, even embrace, novelty and discomfort will do much to benefit your students as they go forward into this rapidly globalizing world.

Once you have some carefully selected books in hand, how do you sell them to students? To gravitate towards the familiar and comfortable is understandable. We can’t blame young people, especially reluctant readers, for looking askance at a book they

may think has nothing to say to them. We also know that “You’ll learn *so much* from this story!” is not a pitch that will make titles fly off the shelves. That is when looking for the universal matters. Look beyond the characters’ cultural background to what is central and human about their story, what will resonate with your students, what will be a gateway to discovery. To do this, you will need to read books from cover to cover rather than a review summary.

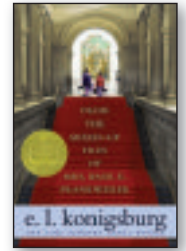
As a little girl in Honolulu, Hawaii, I was enchanted by E. L. Konigsburg’s **From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler** (Atheneum, 1970) and, to this day, I can evoke

the sense of visceral wonder that book conjured in me although the characters were demographically utterly different from me. I was able to make the imaginative leap into their world because the story was so gripping. The world of diverse books for young people is increasingly making room for stories other than problem novels, which is not to say that there isn’t a need and place for those, too, but they should not be the only stories we have to offer about the lives of the diverse youth who now form the majority of young Americans. What if “difference” was not a problem to be solved but an experience to be celebrated and held with both hands?

As independent school librarians, our annual budgets for new resources are vastly different than most of the school libraries in the country. All students have needs, blind spots that, as educators, we address

as best we can, given our various constraints. In a country more socio-economically divided than ever, we face the challenge of cultivating awareness of and empathy for this sensitive and complex topic with our overwhelmingly financially privileged students. Even with a limited budget, it is possible to select and promote fiction that expands cultural boundaries without forfeiting quality or readability.

It is our shared mission as librarians to awaken our students’ awareness about different experiences of the world. We hope that this article provides inspiration and guidance for making tangible efforts to move toward meeting our students where they are and nudging them forward on the path to maturity and global citizenship. ■



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Alpha DeLap is a preK-8 independent school librarian, the co-chair of the Sasquatch Book Award (Washington Library Association), social media lead for the School Library Division (Washington Library Association), and a member of the Bechtel Fellowship Committee (American Library Association).

Laura Simeon is a K-8 independent school librarian and diversity coordinator in the Seattle, Washington, area; formerly served on a VOYA Top Shelf Middle School Fiction committee; a member of the Coretta Scott King Book Award Committee; an occasional guest blogger for Lee & Low; and a member of the U.S. Selection Committee of the United World Colleges (international high schools committed to building a more peaceful and sustainable future).



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