

FEATURE

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

Recent Developments
in Children's Literature

Debbie Reese

dreese.nambe@gmail.com





IT IS A COLLISION OF MEDIA, BUT IT IS ALSO A COLLISION OF THE POINT OF VIEW AND CRITICAL LENS THAT NATIVE PEOPLE AND PEOPLE OF COLOR BRING TO OUR ANALYSES OF CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE. AND IT IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE.

Something unprecedented is happening in children's and young adult literature. Within the space of a year, three different publishers recalled books that were criticized on social media. Within that same period, second printings of several other books were revised, and two children's literature review journals took action to address the way they write reviews. Additionally, writers and editors for several journals, as well as bloggers at those journals' online sites, wrote about issues specific to diversity.

I see these developments as worlds colliding. In short: Native people and people of color are using social media and content-area blogs to review books that misrepresent us. This effort is, in essence, more than one kind of collision. It is a collision of media, but it is also a collision of the point of view and critical lens that Native people and people of color bring to our analyses of children's and young adult literature. And it is making a difference.

Book Recalls and Revisions

In late August 2016 the University of Minnesota Press recalled *Sky Blue Water: Short Stories for Young Readers* (edited by Peterson and Morgan 2016) days before its launch date because its foreword included a paragraph with the line "Columbus discovered America." Shannon Gibney, one of the authors who has a story in the collection, took a photo of the page with that line, put it on her Facebook page, and wrote to the editors. Within a few days, the four thousand copies of the book

were recalled, and the book will be reprinted without that line (Hertzel 2016).

On August 4, 2016, an editor at Candlewick sent out an e-mail stating that *When We Was Fierce* would not be released as scheduled on August 9, 2016 (Barack 2016). During the summer months, librarian Edith Campbell and writer Jennifer Baker, both of whom are African American, had written extensive critical analyses of the depiction of African American youth in *When We Was Fierce*. According to the e-mail, the book's author, e. E. Charlton-Trujillo, and publisher are reflecting on the critiques. It is unclear if the book is being revised.

On January 17, 2016, Scholastic issued a statement that it was withdrawing its picture book *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* by Ramin Ganeshram. In the weeks prior to that decision, Scholastic had received a great deal of criticism for the book's whitewashing of the lives of the enslaved people in George Washington's home. The book will not be revised.

The next printing of Ashley Hope Pérez's *Out of Darkness* (Carolrhoda Lab 2015) will have a small but significant revision. Her story, set in 1937 in East Texas, is about two teens who fall in love. One of them is Black. On page 98 of the first printing, a character uses "low man on the totem pole" to refer to his status. Although that phrase is commonly used that way, it is a misrepresentation of totem poles

and their significance to the Native peoples who create them. Given our relationship (we worked together on an article for *Booklist*), I wrote to the author about the line and asked if it might be edited. Pérez responded immediately, and the line is not in the second printing of the book (Reese 2016).

In August 2016 Julie Murphy, author of *Dumplin'* (HarperCollins 2015), wrote that she is revising the passage in her book in which she used "spirit animal." This revision, she said, is in response to her lack of understanding of problems associated with use of that phrase (Murphy 2016).

In Murphy's and Pérez's books the problematic phrases can easily be revised because neither book is about Native peoples. As these authors realized, the same ideas can be communicated without using phrases that are microaggressions (seemingly innocuous phrases that denigrate or demean a person or culture of a marginalized community).

Review Journals Respond to Societal Change

On May 4, 2016, Vicky Smith, the book review editor at *Kirkus Reviews*, wrote about a recently instituted change. Her article "Unmaking the White Default" is aptly titled. Reviews in *Kirkus* now identify the race of all major characters, including white ones. Prior to this, the race of major characters was mentioned only if they were not white. Over the summer of 2016,

Diversity in Children's Books 2015

Percentages of books depicting characters from diverse backgrounds. Based on the 2015 publishing statistics compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pestats.asp

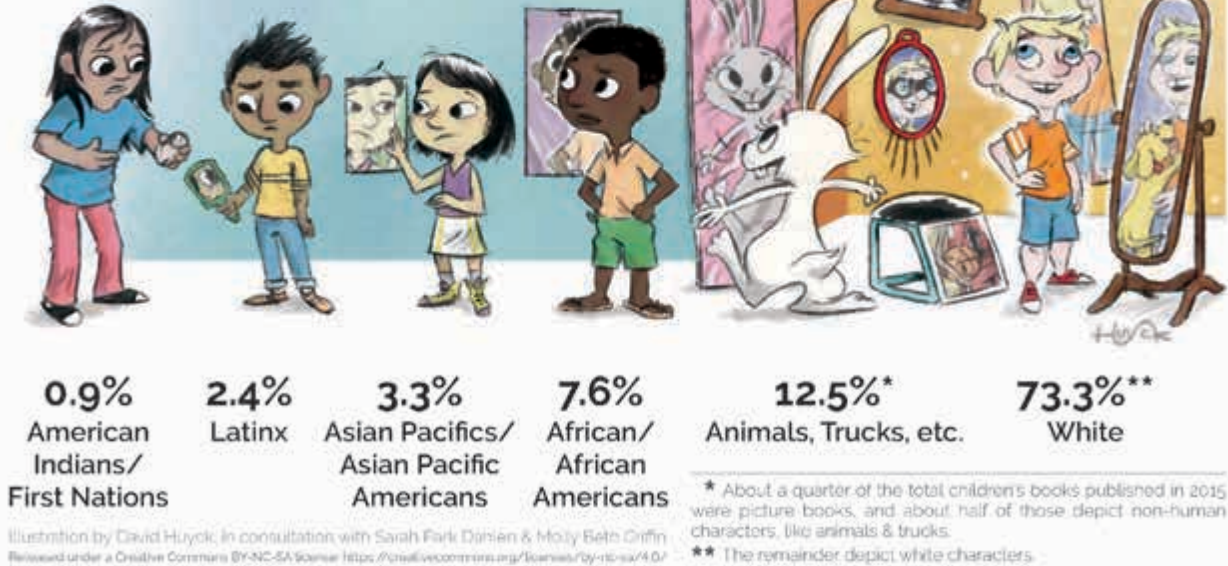


Figure 1. Characters in children's books less diverse than children in U.S. population. (Illustration credits: Sarah Park Dahlen, Molly Beth Griffin, and illustrator David Huyck)

Kiera Parrott of *School Library Journal* offered its reviewers an eight-week course designed to increase their awareness of issues specific to depictions of marginalized peoples and how reviewers can improve their skills in describing and reviewing books (Miller 2016).

After several online discussions of Lane Smith's picture book *There Is a Tribe of Kids* (Roaring Brook Press 2016), *School Library Journal* ran a story on the differing positions people have taken about it (Barack 2016). I had seen the cover of Smith's book, but it was Sam Bloom's 2016 review of it at *Reading While White* that prompted me to take a look at the ways the children are depicted adorned in leaves. Some

This effort is, in essence, more than one kind of collision. It is a collision of media, but it is also a collision of the point of view and critical lens that Native people and people of color bring to our analyses of children's and young adult literature. And it is making a difference.

THE **RACIAL** AND **CULTURAL**

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE UNITED STATES ARE CHANGING. IT FOLLOWS, THEREFORE, THAT THE CONTENT OF BOOKS WILL CHANGE, TOO.



suggest it is harmless play, while Sam and I argue that the children are playing Indian; debates related to the picture book occurred on multiple online discussion forums. In the article Barack (2016) cited librarians who felt that, in their defense of the book on the Association of Library Service to Children (ALSC) online discussion list, their “neutral” point of view was being attacked. Uncomfortable with the discussion, one librarian decided not to renew her membership in ALSC and the American Library Association. Her decision is, of course, unfortunate; however, the stories and art in books we give to children are not neutral or apolitical. If a book’s agenda aligns with one’s own, it is seen as neutral or the norm. What those who are uncomfortable are experiencing is a collision in which their worlds are being challenged in ways they’ve not seen before.

Librarians’ Perspectives

In 2015 ALSC revised its “Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries” to include competencies related to diversity. In section I, “Commitment to Client Group,” the first two items are about respect for diversity and the need to recognize “racism, ethnocentrism, classism, heterosexism, genderism, ableism, and other systems of discrimination and exclusion,” and to interrupt those systems by providing culturally competent services (ALSC 2015).

Resources That Provide a Critical Lens for Evaluating Children’s and Young Adult Literature

Most librarians use the major review journals to select and deselect materials, but as recent developments show, their reviewers may not have the critical lens to identify problematic content. For that critical lens, see the resources listed below.

American Indians in Children’s Literature <<https://americanindian-sinchildrens-literature.blogspot.com>>

Crazy Quilt Edi: Promoting Literacy for Teens of Color, One Book at a Time <<https://campbele.wordpress.com>>

DeColores: The Raza Experience in Books for Children <<http://decoloresreviews.blogspot.com>>

Disability in Kidlit <<http://disability-inkidlit.com>>

Latinxs in Kidlit: Exploring the World of Latinx YA, MG, and Children’s Literature <<https://latinosinkidlit.com>>

Reading While White: Allies for Racial Diversity & Inclusion in Books for Children & Teens <<http://readingwhilewhite.blogspot.com>>

Rich in Color <<http://richincolor.com>>

The guidelines for some of ALA's award committees were also revised in 2015, and, in a meeting with committee chairs, Kathleen T. Horning (2015) recommended that committee members recognize their personal and experiential limitations and seek out content-area blogs like mine (*American Indians in Children's Literature*), *Latinxs in Kidlit*, and *Rich in Color* to improve their competency in examining books under consideration for ALA awards. See the sidebar for resources that provide a critical lens for evaluating children's and young adult literature.

Moving Forward

All of the developments I've described are significant. The racial and cultural demographics of the United States are changing. It follows, therefore, that the content of books will change, too. Native children and children of color deserve the mirrors that white children have had for literally hundreds of years (see figure 1). I'm using social media to create new understandings among writers, editors, reviewers, teachers, professors, librarians, and parents. As this glimpse into worlds colliding shows, others are here to do that, too.



Photo credit: Della Noh

Debbie Reese, a former elementary school teacher and assistant professor in *American Indian Studies*, publishes the blog *American Indians in Children's Literature*. Tribally enrolled at Nambe Pueblo, her book chapters and articles are taught in university classrooms in English, education, and library science across the U.S. and Canada. She is frequently invited to deliver keynote lectures and workshops at major universities and for tribal associations and organizations.

Works Cited:

- Association for Library Services to Children. 2015. "Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries." <www.ala.org/alsc/edcareers/alsccorecomps> (accessed September 9, 2016).
- Barack, Lauren. 2016. "'When We Was Fierce' Pulled as Demand Grows for More #OwnVoices Stories." *School Library Journal* (August 12). <www.slj.com/2016/08/diversity/when-we-was-fierce-pulled-as-demand-grows-for-more-ownvoices-stories> (accessed September 8, 2016).
- Bloom, Sam. 2016. "Reviewing While White: There Is a Tribe of Kids." *Reading While White* (July 8). <<http://readingwhilewhite.blogspot.com/2016/07/reviewing-while-white-there-is-tribe-of.html>> (accessed September 10, 2016).
- Hertzel, Laurie. 2016. "UM Press Pulls Copies of 'Sky Blue Water,' Postpones Launch Party." *Star Tribune* (September 1). <www.startribune.com/um-press-pulls-copies-of-sky-blue-water-postpones-launch-party/391797031> (accessed September 8, 2016).
- Horning, Kathleen T. 2015. "ALSC Awards and Diversity Discussion." <<https://soundcloud.com/alsc-658268146/alsc-awards-and-diversity-discussion>> (accessed September 9, 2016).
- Miller, Rebecca T. 2016. "The Power of Words: Answering the Call to Action on Inclusion." *Library Journal* (June 16). <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2016/06/opinion/editorial/the-power-of-words-answering-the-call-to-action-on-inclusion-editorial/#_> (accessed September 10, 2016).
- Murphy, Julie. 2016. "When You Don't Get It Right (or That Time I Appropriated Spirit Animal)." *And I'm Julie* (August 15). <<http://andimjulie.tumblr.com/post/148995659582/when-you-dont-get-it-right-or-that-time-i>> (accessed September 8, 2016).
- Reese, Debbie. 2016. "Ashley Hope Pérez's *Out of Darkness*." *American Indians in Children's Literature* (August 12). <<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/2016/08/ashley-hope-perez-out-of-darkness.html>> (accessed September 8, 2016).
- Scholastic. 2016. "New Statement about Picture Book 'A Birthday Cake for George Washington'." *On Our Minds* (January 17). <<http://oomscholasticblog.com/post/new-statement-about-picture-book-birthday-cake-george-washington>> (accessed September 11, 2016).
- Smith, Vicky. 2016. "Unmaking the White Default: Writing about Race." *Kirkus* (May 4). <www.kirkusreviews.com/features/unmaking-white-default> (accessed September 10, 2016).