

SHAKE UP YOUR SHELVES

WHY AN INCLUSIVE BOOKSHELF IS IMPORTANT AND HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

We know that children learn a lot about the world through the books that they read. When the stories they hear do not reflect the reality of the world we live in, young people develop a warped view of society, of its members, and of themselves. As children grow into adults, they subconsciously hold onto biases and assumptions that they've seen and that they've read. This becomes dangerous. When teachers and librarians share books where characters from marginalized communities are dismissed, nonexistent, or stereotyped, they reinforce those harmful views.

We have known for decades that children's books overall do not accurately reflect our diverse nation. In 1965, Nancy Larrick published her landmark article, "The All-White World of Children's Books," where she showed that children of color are severely underrepresented in literature, a fact that Black artists and communities already knew. This bias was and is harmful to all children. When readers continuously see white characters centered and uplifted in the stories they read, it teaches them that white people are and should be the center of the world outside those stories, while every other culture and identity is less important. These messages perpetuate racism in our society, whether we are aware of it or not.

In 2009, novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spoke on the dangers of the "single story" as a purveyor of stereotypes, which, by definition, are incomplete. Pointing out that "how [stories] are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power," Adichie stresses the

importance of creators of color telling their own stories as a crucial step in breaking down the influence of stereotypes.

The mission of We Need Diverse Books reiterates a long-standing call to offer our children a realistic view of the diverse world in which we live. Data from the Cooperative Children's Book Center shows we have a lot of work to do: in 2018, the number of children's books published featuring non-human characters surpassed the number of children's books featuring all children of color and Indigenous people combined. Every collection and curriculum serving young people should include diverse books as "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors," as Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop wrote, so that all children can see themselves accurately reflected in books and can look into and step into the experiences of people of different backgrounds. Diverse books harness the power of literature to develop empathy and understanding, attributes sorely needed among today's global citizens.

With diverse books, teachers and librarians have an opportunity to help young people understand themselves and others. We encourage you to look critically at the books you're sharing with your students and patrons. Shake Up Your Shelves by retiring books that are offensive or outdated, and by adding titles that reflect the experiences of more underrepresented groups. Here we offer you some first steps that you can take to remix your collection and your curriculum.

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REMIX YOUR CURRICULUM • REMIX YOUR COLLECTION

These questions can help teachers and librarians decide when it is time to retire a book:

- Does this book contain offensive/outdated language or disparaging descriptions of underrepresented groups?
- Are cultures other than white, middle-class American culture represented as substandard, laughable, pitiable, or otherwise lacking?
- Does this book normalize white supremacist values by whitewashing colonialism, imperialism, genocide, and/or segregation, or by employing white savior tropes?
- Are BIPOC characters objectified through a white gaze, stereotyped, or characterized only to serve a white character's development and agency?
- What are the power dynamics on the page? Who controls the narrative? Who makes the decisions? Who speaks? Who is silenced? Who acts? Who is acted upon? Who looks? Who is observed? (see Lissa Paul's *Reading Otherways*)

When seeking to add new books to your collection, consider these questions, among others:

- Does the author and/or illustrator identify as a member of the group(s) represented in the book, especially the main character?
- Does the book disrupt the “single story” (Adichie, 2009) that is most often told about this group?
- Was the book well-received by people in the underrepresented group with which the main character identifies? Does the narrative assume the reader is white or a cultural outsider?
- Overall, does your collection reflect the population you serve? Should it? If your population is diverse, every child should be able to find a variety of books that accurately reflect their experiences. If your population is homogeneous, your collection should still be diverse, so as to accurately represent the wider world, with books that are “windows and sliding glass doors.” (Rudine Sims Bishop, 1990)
- Overall, does your collection reflect contemporary experiences of underrepresented groups, not just historical experiences?
- Overall, does your collection include books that depict people of color as empowered and joyful, rather than only in situations of trauma and struggle?

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FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

“The All-White World of Children’s Books” by Nancy Larrick

<http://www.longwood.edu/staff/miscecjm/384larrick.pdf>

“The Danger of a Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript

“Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop

<https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

We Need Diverse Books <https://diversebooks.org/>

A non-profit and grassroots organization of children’s book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people.

See What We See / Social Justice Books <https://socialjusticebooks.org/about/see-what-we-see/>

Multicultural books for children, YA, and educators.

The Brown Bookshelf <https://thebrownbookshelf.com/>

The Brown Bookshelf is an initiative designed to push awareness of the myriad Black voices writing for young readers.

The Open Book Blog <https://blog.leeandlow.com/>

A blog on race, diversity, education, and children’s books.

Cooperative Children’s Book Center

<https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/>

Diversity resources on multicultural literature.



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FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Latinxs in Kidlit <https://latinosinkidlit.com/>

Exploring the world of Latinx YA, MG, and children's literature.

American Indians in Children's Literature

<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>

Provides critical analysis of Indigenous peoples in children's and young adult books.

Hijabi Librarians <https://hijabilibrarians.com/>

Four Muslim librarians blogging about children's and YA books featuring Muslim characters.

Reading While White Blog <http://readingwhilewhite.blogspot.com/>

"Working for racial diversity and inclusion in books for children and teens"

Our Stories app from We Need Diverse Books <http://www.diversebooks.org/ourstory/>

Discover diverse books and access materials for curriculum and programming.

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/>

A peer-reviewed, open-access, online journal.



ABOUT THE EDUCATOR

Autumn Allen is an educator, a writer, a reviewer of books for children and young adults, and an independent scholar of children's literature. She holds an MA-MFA in children's literature and writing for children from Simmons, a master's degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she studied cultural psychology, and a B.A. in literature from Yale. Her graduate studies and her practice as an educator in community settings inform her interest in children's literature as a tool of cultural transmission and as a potential site of cultural transformation. Visit her online at autumnallenbooks.com