

THREE

Reflecting Diversity

When they were four and seven, my eldest two daughters adored the book *Underpants Dance*, by Marlena Zapf. The story is both funny and sweet, celebrating a preschooler's socially inappropriate passion for showing off her "fancy, lacy, lovely underpants." What makes this book so beloved in our family is my girls' personal identification with the characters. Like my little Eleanor, the book's younger sister delights in being the center of attention. The book's older sister is much more serious, and easily embarrassed, just like my older daughter Josephine. Lynne Avril's illustrations of the two sisters—skinny with short, curly blonde hair—even look like my daughters. In fact, when I would read this book aloud at

bedtime, my daughters insisted that I replace the characters' names with their own. Though written as a story about Lily and Marigold McBloom, in our home it became a story about Ellie and Jozi Shaver.

From our family's perspective, *Underpants Dance* is a fantastic book, but what about for a different child? Of thirty people depicted in this book, all but four are white. This is quite a significant underrepresentation of America's diversity. Non-white and mixed-raced children are now a majority among children seven and under. In this story, however, none of the people of color are important enough to have names. They serve only as a sprinkling of color in the background. The book's settings and events also reflect a distinctly upper-middle-class lifestyle. The McBloom sisters play on a suburban lawn, ride in the family car, attend ballet lessons, visit an art museum, and try on new clothes as if they were a burden rather than a blessing. How would such a story be received by a child whose family struggles to meet basic needs?

Windows and Mirrors

There is nothing wrong with any single children's book being culturally specific to a white, upper-income, American experience. The problem is that this pattern is so strong that children's literature as a whole is systematically

less attractive or even alienating to children who do not fit that mold. Since 2012, most children born in America belong to a racial or ethnic minority group (Latino, African American, Asian, Native American, biracial, or multi-racial). Yet only 7.5 percent of children's books published that year prominently featured minority characters, according to the University of Wisconsin Cooperative Children's Book Center. The center began tracking such data in 1985, after its founder realized with shock that only eighteen out of twenty-five hundred children's books published that year had been written or illustrated by an African-American creator. For nearly three decades, progress in improving the diversity of children's book authors, illustrators, and characters was limited. After reaching an all-time high of 13 percent in 2007, the appearance of minority characters declined again for many years.

In a seminal survey of children's literature from the 1960s and '70s, *Shadow and Substance*, Professor Rudine Sims Bishop argued that stories about black Americans tended to fit three types. A first wave of "social conscience" books by white authors sought to educate white children in modern liberal values, yet often reinforced racial stereotypes. The next wave of "melting pot" books began to feature characters (either major or minor) who were incidentally black, but rarely reflected distinctly African-

American experiences. A third wave began to feature everyday experiences that black children can relate to, while celebrating cultural distinctiveness. This vein of “culturally conscious” children’s literature emerged in the 1970s, driven by a new generation of African-American authors.

Bishop’s theoretical framework and literary analysis powerfully informed the next several decades of scholarship, authorship, and publishing. This proved true not only for African-American children’s literature, but also for later-emerging genres of Native-American, Latino, and Asian-American children’s books. Today, Bishop’s framework has been extended to include children’s books reflecting diversity of disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and social class. Publishers, authors, teachers, and librarians still commonly invoke Bishop’s concept of “windows and mirrors” to express the idea that all children need and deserve to see both themselves and others in books. Bishop’s own poetic articulation of this concept deserves quoting at length:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination. . . . When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. 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.

As Bishop suggests, cultural diversity in children's literature is particularly important for the education of minority children, but also has an important impact on white children. Repeated exposure to media that sensitively depicts racial and cultural differences helps all children to empathize and identify across difference. Conversely, a media diet that systematically celebrates white characters as central, while marginalizing nonwhite characters, may reinforce ideologies of white supremacy in subtle but deeply problematic ways. Representation of gender, disability, sexual orientation, and social class in children's books has similar implications. As the African-American author Walter Dean Myers wrote for the *New York Times*: "Books transmit values. They explore our common humanity. What is the message when some children are not represented in those books?"

We Need Diverse Books

It began as a hashtag movement. In early 2014, BookCon launched as an annual meeting place for authors and fans of children's books. The authors announced as speakers and panelists were all white. Authors and readers of color were appalled. A group created #weneeddiversebooks in protest.

“People wrote their own reasons, included photos of themselves, and posted on social media,” explains Nicole A. Johnson. The campaign triggered “a groundswell of interest and demand and advocacy around diversity in children’s literature.” Authors, illustrators, booksellers, publishers, librarians, teachers, and community leaders began to exchange book lists and advocacy strategies. The campaign went viral, led to an online fundraiser, and eventually became a registered nonprofit. Johnson, initially attracted by the social media campaign, now serves as the organization’s executive director.

Today, We Need Diverse Books works on a slim budget to raise consciousness through social media campaigns, book awards, classroom events, and programs to support diverse new authors, illustrators, editors, and other publishing professionals. The organization defines diversity broadly, including dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, and sexual orientation. Among the unique initiatives of the organization is an app named OurStory. The tool features a curated selection of diverse titles, searchable along any of these criteria. This enables librarians, teachers, and parents to easily identify books reflecting the experiences of any child.

“Every human being deserves to be able to see themselves in the stories they read,” affirms author Caroline

Tung Richmond, cofounder of We Need Diverse Books. As a child, young Caroline Tung never had that experience. In high school, however, her English teacher assigned passages from *The Joy Luck Club*. The novel resonated deeply with her own experiences growing up with parents and grandparents who had immigrated to the United States. “It was like Amy Tan had reached into my head and pulled out my own memories and put them in a book.” The experience was profound. “That moment was when I first felt seen and heard.”

Nicole Johnson, the organization’s executive director, tells a similar story. “I didn’t find my first book that I really connected with until college.” In an African-American literature class, she discovered authors whose books she truly related to, like Audre Lorde and Octavia Butler. “Especially J. California Cooper. Her characters really spoke in the voice of my family.” After college, Johnson ran summer reading programs in urban communities. The books chosen for use in the program reflected the ethnic identities of the participating children. “To introduce that to kids when they were five and six was just amazing.”

As an African-American parent of biracial children, Johnson views diverse books as particularly important to personal growth. “This includes racial diversity about people of color as sheroes and heroes, so young people can be

inspired by people in their community. There is also a turn among contemporary writers to create characters that build imagination and wonder,” Johnson continues. “Say a young African-American girl is a hero in the story, that is not necessarily a story about racial justice, but that still has a message of empowerment and growth.” Johnson believes these messages are especially important for children who experience discrimination on the basis of identity. “It signals to young people that you are not just your oppression. You are also an artist, a musician, you are bright and creative. You can be a princess; you can be Harry Potter.”

Richmond also emphasizes the power of seeing the world from someone else’s perspective. “Even if it’s a fictional character, it’s about understanding where that person is coming from, how that person grew up, how they act.” For this reason, diverse books can help bridge gaps of understanding between groups. Richmond points to the first recipient of the organization’s Walter Dean Myers award as an example: *All American Boys* is a work of young adult fiction that focuses on the problem of police brutality. The book was cowritten in two narratives, one told from the perspective of a white teenager, the other a black teenager. “It speaks to what is going on in America right now,” Richmond notes, “and it can help kids to find a personal angle to view it.”

Stories for All

First Book, the charitable book dealer profiled in the previous chapter, also strives to ensure that children's books better reflect the diverse readers they serve. "What we realized about the lack of diversity is that it's quite undermining to literacy," says Kyle Zimmer, chief executive of First Book. "Kids want to read about themselves, it gives them perspective on who they are, encourages them to be proud of their heritage. And it teaches all of us empathy and tolerance. All of us ought to be reading about all of us."

Indeed, when First Book surveyed its network of literacy organizations, 90 percent of respondents expressed a strong interest in more diverse books. Yet such books were difficult to find in most bookstores and on most publisher's lists. So First Book leveraged its unique position as a major buyer to channel the grassroots demand for diverse books. The charity pledged to purchase \$500,000 worth of books from the publisher that offered the best selection of diverse books at affordable prices. Twenty-six bids were entered. First Book ultimately selected two winners, spending \$1 million and adding 650 diverse new titles to its offerings. The effort also made an important point by drawing attention to First Book's market power and its preference for diverse content.

First Book also hand-picks particular titles from diverse authors who have yet to be published. For each “new voices” title selected, First Book purchases ten thousand copies. This advance purchasing commitment helps new authors launch their writing careers on a strong footing. It also helps publishers mitigate the risk involved in launching an unknown author. “By making those books viable at First Book, it allows the publishers to step out with more confidence,” says Zimmer. “They know some part of their baseline investment is covered. When they stick somebody out there and their books don’t sell, they take an economic hit.”

To achieve real change, Zimmer argues, you have to appreciate the economics of book publishing. “Publishing is a consignment-based industry,” she explains. “The retail price of books is artificially elevated, because the publishers have to cover all the books that are going to come back to them.” A premium picture book retails for fifteen to twenty dollars in the United States. “The people who can afford on a regular basis to buy those books are about the top 5–10 percent of the socioeconomic ladder,” Zimmer continues. “In the U.S. right now, the profile of those people is white. That is the reality in the market today.” Publishers that are trying to introduce new voices and perspectives in the marketplace, Zimmer

says, “are trying to break through into a monolithic consumer base.” For a commercial publisher, this mission conflicts with the profit motive. “The color that the publishers care most about is green.”

Nicole Johnson of We Need Diverse Books expresses a differing view. “I think to just rest the cause on economics is to avoid a real conversation about who’s running the industry. Where is the diversity among booksellers? Where are the diverse voices within [literacy nonprofits]? We should be placing questions of racism and poverty at the center of the conversation.” She also bemoans the assumption that a book written by an African-American author about an African-American character would appeal only to African-American readers. “There is an implicit bias there that says these books are not worthy, they are not welcome, and therefore the people that wrote them and read them are not welcome.” She points out that publishers specializing in diverse books have found it sustainable and viable to do so. “Within the publishing industry there are very successful examples of how placing racial diversity and identity at the center of your work can actually be sustainable. It depends on publishers being more intentional about what they create and curate” and how they invest in marketing it.

Her colleague Caroline Tung Richmond goes on to point out other ways in which social and structural racism

contribute to low diversity in publishing, tied to a different sort of economics. “It’s an apprentice-based industry. An editorial assistant will be lucky to get paid \$30,000 a year, but they have to live in New York City.” Early in a publishing career, she points out, junior professionals “need help from a partner or family who can subsidize their rent, their utilities, their transportation. Only a narrow slice of the population can afford to break into the industry and stay in it.” Recognizing this problem, We Need Diverse Books created a grant program for diverse publishing interns “to give them a boost that their counterparts might be getting from their family.” Interns may work as editors, marketing associates, or in sales. The program also helps to raise awareness in the industry of the need for more diversity in hiring. To participate in the internship program, publishing partners must also commit to pay their interns. Johnson points out: “Our award is supplement to the salary they receive for the summer. That is a structural shift in how the publishers manage interns. That goes beyond our work, that opens the door for many more people to enter the field.”

The two organizations’ combination of awareness raising, market influence, and talent development has had a noticeable impact, according to more recent data from the University of Wisconsin’s Cooperative Children’s

Book Center. Between 2012 and 2018, the portion of U.S. children's books written or illustrated by creators of color went from 6.3 percent to 22.9 percent of all new titles. Books prominently featuring characters of color also more than tripled, going from 7.5 percent to 27.4 percent of new children's titles. These dramatic results over just a six-year period demonstrate the potential for well-designed nonprofit efforts to push commercial publishers in a new direction.

PJ Library

While *First Book* and *We Need Diverse Books* take a broad approach to diversity, PJ Library occupies a specific niche. This charity follows a fundraising and distribution model based on Dolly Parton's *Imagination Library*. Each year, the organization distributes about 2.2 million books to more than 200,000 children across the United States and Canada. PJ Library is pleased to have a positive impact on literacy in young children. Its primary motivation, however, is to preserve and promote Jewish cultural traditions. The PJ Library selection committee asks some of the same questions any publisher or librarian of children's books would ask: Is this story suitable to the age group? Is it engaging for both children and parents? Will children want to enjoy this book over and over? They also

ask questions that are unique to the content-based mission of the organization: “Is the content appropriate to the PJ Library mission, and does the book contain a message of strong Jewish values?” “Does the book reflect historical Jewish life, contemporary Jewish life, or some valuable aspect of the Jewish experience?” and “Will this book prompt family discussions about Jewish topics and lead families to make Jewish choices?”

The organization uses a variety of strategies to source books meeting these criteria. Because there is already a significant tradition of Jewish children’s publishing in the United States, PJ Library is able to choose many appropriate titles from trade publishers’ existing lists. The charity has also commissioned new editions of at least twenty out-of-print titles. Kar-Ben Publishing specializes in Jewish children’s titles, with a backlist of more than 750 such books. “They are a fifth of our list,” reports PJ Library’s Samara Klein. “And it’s a very symbiotic relationship. They publish what we need and we buy what they publish.” The organization also maintains strategic partnerships with more than 50 other publishers, both big and small.

PJ Library’s existence is also shaping the operation of for-profit publishing in the niche of Jewish children’s books. In particular, there are books of more marginal interest to the for-profit market that PJ Library’s exist-

ence helps to bring to print. A book on a lesser-known Jewish holiday, for example, might not be financially viable otherwise. Publishers sometimes contact PJ Library to find out if it would be interested in a title before deciding whether to sign an author.

PJ Library also encourages authors to submit manuscripts directly to its selection committee. If the committee likes a title, its chair will act as an agent for the book to find a publisher. The selection committee may give editorial suggestions to the author as part of this process. PJ Library also maintains a list of suggested concepts for books that can be consulted by potential authors. In these ways, PJ Library is performing the role typically performed by publishers, selecting which books will be published and editing those works for publication. PJ Library also performs an essential marketing role traditionally performed by publishers. PJ Library works to identify the audience for a particular book, and to inform that audience of that book's existence.

As PJ Library expands internationally, it finds itself pushed even further into the role of publishing original content. The organization's director of international publishing, Samara Klein, explained that as it enters other countries, such as Mexico and Russia, the North American model required adaptation. "In the Spanish market they

are simply not publishing Jewish children's books. There are really none, that I can find," Klein explains. To meet the need, PJ Library commissions translations. Using books PJ Library has already distributed in English, selected titles are sent to the Hebrew University in Mexico for review, where a local selection committee chooses which books will work best for nearby communities. A linguist in Argentina double-checks the translations, in part to ensure that the Spanish is sufficiently international, so that the books will work throughout Latin America.

As the organization expanded to Russia, the model required tweaking yet again. "The communities are so different in each of these countries that the books can't be the same really," Klein cautions. "The books that will work in Mexico are not necessarily the books that will work in Russia." The literary culture also differs. "In Russia, there are already Jewish children's books. It is not completely lacking. They have the largest collection of any country that we have explored." Yet the scale of locally written works is not yet sufficient. The model of translating English-language books still seems to be an important component of the approach. This solution, however, did not prove as satisfactory to the Russian partners as it was to the Mexican partners. "It's important to the community there to have Russian-originated books,"

Klein relates. “To bring in solely American-authored translated books is not perceived as well there.”

The international exchange of titles now goes in both directions. PJ Library’s Israeli program, Sifriyat Pijama, has published in Hebrew and Arabic for more than ten years. “Children’s literature is a more respected profession in Israel,” notes international lead Lian Kimia. “Your top fiction writers on the adult side also write children’s books, it’s really honored. The way that children’s literature plays a role in society and history-building and sharing knowledge is strong, although there is not the culture of owning tons and tons of books.” Several titles originally published in Hebrew have found their way to American publishers through PJ Library’s efforts.

The Chameleon That Saved Noah’s Ark, by Yael Mochadsky, is one example. At the book’s core is a story familiar across many cultures, to which a modern author has added a novel twist. The book’s historical setting avoids elements that might make the story too culturally specific to any modern country. Illustrator Orit Bergman further globalizes the illustrations by depicting Noah’s family as multiracial, with skin tones ranging from dark brown to light pink. Although Israeli children do not necessarily expect a colorful and detailed picture on every page, Bergman’s work satisfies even the high expectations of

the American market. All of these elements help the book to work well for nationally and ethnically diverse readers.

Diversity by Design

The three organizations highlighted in this chapter share a common motivation to promote diversity in children's literature, but pursue it in different ways. We Need Diverse Books follows a more classic advocacy model, waging social media campaigns, offering trainings, speaking out, and engaging professional networks. First Book sees itself as adopting a more market-driven approach, offering the prospect of massive purchases to encourage publishers to take greater risks. PJ Library gets more closely involved in the details of editorial decisions, playing a significant role in shaping the commercial publishing market within its niche.

Importantly, all three organizations see themselves as partnering closely with existing commercial publishers. They serve as consumer advocates, an intermediary between commercial publishers and their target communities. Based in the United States, these organizations happen to find themselves at the center of the world's largest publishing industry. They purchase from existing offerings, they push the publishers they buy from to develop new offerings,

and they support those efforts by serving as an important source of income.

As the example of PJ Library illustrates, reflecting cultural diversity in book publishing is not just a national challenge, but also an international one. Organizations working to serve readers in the developing world, especially in Asia and Africa, face very similar challenges in sourcing culturally relevant books. These are complicated, however, by an even more basic challenge: overcoming the desperate shortage of books in most of the world's languages.