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Straight Talk on Race: Challenging the Stereotypes in Kids' Books

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By *Mitali Perkins* -- *School Library Journal*, 04/01/2009

As a teenager, I lived in two worlds: the traditional Bengali heritage inside our home and the contemporary California of my suburban peers.

Sometimes the gap between those two worlds seemed huge. Apple pie? Didn't taste it till I got to college. Our kitchen smelled of mustard-seed oil, turmeric, and cardamom. Bikinis? No way. A one-piece bathing suit felt too revealing (and still does). My mother never showed her legs in public, even when she eventually shelved her sarrees in favor of jeans and long skirts. Dating? Fuhgeddaboutit. My parents' marriage was arranged, and the clan expected the same for me.

I trudged back and forth between cultures, relying heavily on stories for insight into the secrets and nuances of North American life. But exactly what did those stories communicate about my place as a brown-skinned foreigner? And, in that mostly white suburb where I went to school, why can't I remember any educators who were bold enough to raise the issue?

The best-case scenario is that my teachers were consciously giving me freedom to experience the pleasure of reading without adult interference. But would it have diminished my enjoyment if an educator *had* raised questions about race in *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Secret Garden*, for example? Looking back, I don't think so. Especially if that educator had appreciated these stories as much as I did.



Illustration by Gene Luen Yang

The more obvious explanation for the omission is that my teachers and librarians never thought about those kinds of messages, or felt tense and ill-equipped to talk about race. Adult silence about an issue sends a powerful message to young people. In a 2000 essay called [Silence in the Classroom: Learning to Talk about Issues of Race](#),¹ Jeanne Copenhaver, of Ohio State University at Mansfield, writes, "The social stigma attached to candid discussions of racial themes creates a silence preventing explicit talk about race, and this silence leads to further, subtle segregation even within multiethnic, otherwise harmonious classrooms."

These days, it doesn't make sense to steer clear of the subject. We serve a generation of young people who experience race differently from how we grown-ups did. Today's teens are more diverse than we were at their age. The *New York Times* recently reported that the enrollment of Hispanic and Asian students in American schools has increased by more than 5 million since the 1990s.² In 1993, there was a 52 percent chance that two

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million since the 1990s." In 1993, there was a 52 percent chance that two students selected at random would be members of a different ethnic group. By 2006, that likelihood had risen to 61 percent.

An increased mixing and mingling isn't occurring only in school, but also in youth pop culture. Tune in to this generation's artifacts—the music, television programs, movies, and video games they enjoy. Listen to their jokes. One of the first things you'll notice is that the lines aren't drawn between *what* kids can or can't say when it comes to ethnic humor, but between *who* can say it.

This kind of freewheeling banter about race often makes adults uncomfortable, but we can't let that silence us. Here are five questions that'll help you and your students discern messages about race in stories. Try these in the classroom, and my guess is that you may end up engaging teens who had seemed reluctant to share their literary opinions.

One caveat: it was hard to cite books written by fellow authors as examples, especially those titles that are written beautifully and are popular with young readers. But my hope is to spur the children's book community to be more thoughtful and proactive about how and why we write, read, and talk about race. So here goes.

1. Are the nonwhite characters too good to be true?

Storytellers have often testified to the painful history of racism in North America. Nowadays, though, many are overcompensating for the longtime exclusion of nonwhite characters in books and movies. Many writers and filmmakers are still using race as a tool to shape young audiences' feelings about their characters. What's the formula? White characters are equated with bad, and nonwhite ones are equated with good.

With the noblest of intentions, writers sometimes fall into this trap by making it clear that a secondary character is a person of color. These nonwhite friends or acquaintances often serve as literary foils for a white protagonist. One example might be a wise elder who dispenses advice, like August Boatwright in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* (Viking, 2002). Another might be a victim of hatred who requires the protagonist's advocacy, like the mystical healer John Coffey in Stephen King's *Green Mile* (Scribner, 1996), a character who is often cited as the perfect example of a "magical Negro."

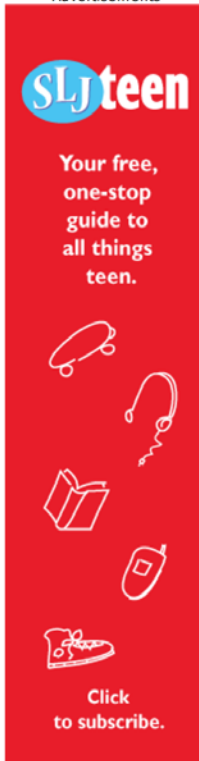
In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the American Literary Imagination* (Vintage, 1993), Toni Morrison described how white authors have used stock black characters to help a white protagonist spiritually and emotionally. The "magical Negro" archetype was lambasted by director Spike Lee during a talk he gave to a gathering of Yale undergraduates. "How is it that black people have these powers, but they use them for the benefit of white people?" Lee asked his audience.

More common in popular young adult literature is a friend whose two main defining characteristics are (a) race and (b) success, like Olivia in Sarah Dessen's *Lock and Key* (Viking, 2008) or Radar in John Green's *Paper Towns* (Dutton, 2008). Yes, I'm glad that unlike their predecessors, today's best-selling authors are creating a diversity of characters. But when the race of a secondary character is defined in a book featuring a white hero, I hear a familiar ping of caution in my between-cultures brain. This friend of color is likely to be outstanding in some way and almost certain to speak a phrase of wisdom that affects the main character's choices and actions. Thankfully, Dessen and Green are both masterful writers and make Olivia and Radar so real that neither character serves merely as a foil.

Am I suggesting that a white author should never articulate clearly that a secondary character is not white? Not at all. I don't want to go back to the day when most novels for kids were mainly about white people, nor am I calling for a rule in storytelling that restricts us from creating characters who don't have the same racial makeup as we do. While I'd love to see our industry publish, promote, and nurture more emerging writers who aren't white, I agree with *Booklist* editor Hazel Rochman's now-classic 1995 *Horn Book* article, "**Against Borders**," on the issue of who can write for whom:

But what about those who say that an American can never write about Japan, that men can't write about women, that Chinese Ed Young cannot illustrate African-American folklore or that the African-American writer Virginia Hamilton

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African-American folklore or that the African-American writer Virginia Hamilton can't retell the story of the Russian witch Baba Yaga? In fact, some take it further. Only Indians can really judge books about Indians, Jews about Jews. And further still, you get the extreme, whites should read about whites, Latinos about Latinos, locking us into smaller and tighter boxes. What I hear echoing in that sort of talk is the mad drumbeat of apartheid speak.

I'm with Rochman—let the stories come. The more novels about a diversity of characters written by a diversity of authors and consumed by a diversity of readers, the better. All I'm asking is that we pay attention to *how* and *why* the race of characters is conveyed in a story, because implicit messages matter.

One note, though, when it comes to *who* tells the story: many, many books for kids about blacks and American Indians have been written and illustrated by white people. In pursuit of a richer literary selection, I'm eager to see and buy more stories and art created within those communities.

2. How and why does the author define race?

When race is explicit in a book, ask yourself and your students what would have been lost if a character's race hadn't been defined by the writer. Why *did* the author choose to define race? If the only answer you come up with is "maybe he wanted to show how open-minded he is" or "she could have been trying to move the world toward a better day," that's not good enough.

A better answer might be, "because the particular community where the action is set is diverse." Or, "because the protagonist knew how to make kimchee from scratch." The story and characters, not the author's best political intentions, should determine whether or not he or she defines race.

Alternatively, why *didn't* he or she let us know the race of the characters? Books for a generation of readers who regularly mix and explore race and ethnicity must express diversity lest we fall into the trap of the television show *Friends*, in which an all-white cast lived and worked in an apparently all-white New York City.

Sadly, in the children's book world we're not too far from portraying that kind of nonexistent America. Statistics show that 17 percent of students enrolled in American schools are African American. During 2008, however, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that among the 3,000 or so titles they received, only six percent had significant African or African-American content. While 20 percent of the country's students are Latino, only about two percent of all books reviewed by CCBC had significant Latino content.

When there's no description of race in a story, ask yourself if you imagined the characters as white. If so, why? If not, why not? Sometimes physical descriptors clue us in. Thanks to a residue of teen angst, I automatically translate long, straight hair as "not black" and big eyes as "not Asian." Tearing through Kristin Cashore's fantasy *Graceling* (Harcourt, 2008), for example, I paused when Katsa, the heroine, cut off her long hair. *Oh, she's definitely white then*, I remember thinking, because Cashore had given my imagination substantial freedom to cast the appearance of the characters, defining only the color of Katsa's eyes (one blue, one green) up to that point.

Of course, if a story's set in rural Minnesota or ancient Europe, most of the characters' cheeks *will* turn apple-red when they're embarrassed. The setting, characters, and story should take an active lead in deciding that everybody is white, not some passive white default mode that neither author nor reader realized was operational.

When the characters, plot, or setting requires an author to define race, how does he or she accomplish this? Is there a "Korean kid" or a "black girl"? The problem is that socially constructed race words like African American, black, Asian American, and Latina are typically used only for characters who *aren't* of European descent. North American authors conventionally don't use "European American" or "white" to describe characters because to label every character's race makes reading tedious. Why use any such labels at all, then? The best answer is because it made sense for a particular character or a first-person narrator to label people with those terms.

If labels aren't used, but you know a character is nonwhite, ask yourself and your students how the author communicated that fact. Check for tired food-related clichés about "coffee-colored" skin or "almond-shaped" eyes versus fresh, bold attempts to delineate race and culture in a story.

3. Is the cover art true to the story?

Like adaptations or book trailers, cover art can define the protagonist's race even when it's not specified in a story, hindering the reader's imagination from casting the characters. Sometimes, cover art can even contradict the content of a story when it comes to race or culture.

To sell more books, the main character may be portrayed on the cover as *less* foreign or "other" than he or she is in the actual story. Consider the advance reader's copy of Ursula Le Guin's *Powers* (Harcourt, 2007), released with a white model on the cover despite the protagonist's Himalayan ancestry. The final cover art was more in line with the story, but the change raised the question of whether the original model had been selected for wider sales appeal.

It's ironic that in 2004, three years before *Powers* was released, Le Guin discussed the problem of book covers and race at BookExpo America, the publishing industry's largest event: "Even when [my characters] aren't white in the text, they are white on the cover. I know, you don't have to tell me about sales! I have fought many cover departments on this issue, and mostly lost. But please consider that 'what sells' or 'doesn't sell' can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If black kids, Hispanics, Indians both Eastern and Western, don't buy fantasy which they mostly don't—could it be because they never see themselves on the cover?"

Sometimes books may be packaged with covers depicting a character as more foreign than he or she is described in the story. Nowhere in Cynthia Kadohata's novel *Weedflower* (S & S/Atheneum, 2006), for example, does 12-year-old Sumiko wear a kimono. But she does on the cover. For a story about the Japanese internment in North America during World War II, why did the powers-that-be make an American protagonist appear more culturally Japanese than American, especially when a girl in jeans behind barbed wire would have been more historically accurate? Perhaps they were trying to tap into a fascination with all things foreign, amping up the exotic factor so that those looking for a book about "faraway cultures" might buy this one.

Overexoticizing a nonwhite character to appeal to white readers can happen inside a story as well as on a cover. Take my book *The Sunita Experiment* (Little, Brown, 1993), the story of an eighth grader whose California home becomes much more traditional when her grandparents visit from India.

After the novel was published, a reviewer chastised me for the "unnecessary exoticization" of my protagonist. Here's how I ended the story, with Sunita championing her South Asian heritage by trying on a sari and modeling it for the guy she likes:

"You look... just like I thought you would, Sunni," he whispers when she reaches him. "Are you sure you're still Sunita Sen and not some exotic Indian princess coming to cast a spell on me?"

"I'm sure, Michael," she tells him, giving him one of her trademark smiles just to prove it.

I fumed, but, dang it, the reviewer was right. *Exotic Indian princess?* What was I thinking? Enduring a twinge of shame, I moved on and tried to learn from my mistake.

When my publisher decided to reissue the book in 2005, I was asked if I wanted to make any changes. "Yes!" I shouted, pumping my fist.

Here's how the book, renamed *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen*, ends now:

"You look... just like I thought you would, Sunni," he whispers when she reaches him. "Are you sure you're still the same Sunita Sen? The California girl?"

“

“I'm sure, Michael,” she tells him, giving him one of her trademark smiles just to prove it.

Thank goodness for second chances.

4. Who are the change agents?

It also matters who solves the problem in a story. From Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves* to Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai* to Hilary Swank in *Freedom Writers*, Hollywood has often relied on a messianic outsider to save the day and pump up the box office. A white hero, producers seem to believe, might convince our nation's moviegoers to see a film they might otherwise have overlooked.

Is that also true of books? Is it easier for young white readers to connect to a story about poverty or suffering in a nonwhite culture if a white character helps solve the problem? Can you find an example of such a book on your bookshelves or in your classroom?

I can. My own. In *Monsoon Summer* (Delacorte, 2004), Jazz, an Indian-American girl, travels to India with her family and helps Danita, an orphan, find a way out of marrying an unwanted suitor.

I was startled to discover this thread in my own book, but apart from some tweaking, I wouldn't readjust the plot if given the chance. I believe North Americans should be involved in the global fight against poverty. The question again is *how* and *why*. In *Monsoon Summer*, I sought to create an authentic friendship between the two girls and introduced the idea of microcredit as an empowering alternative to handouts. I hope, though, that educators use the book to raise the “outside savior” question by asking, “How does Danita ‘save Jazz? How does Jazz ‘save Danita? Which girl is the more powerful helper and why?”

Patricia McCormick's novel *Sold* (Hyperion, 2006), an exploration of sexual trafficking in Nepal and India, is a good choice to spark discussion about this issue. Let me confess my reluctance to criticize anything about *Sold* because it inspires such a desire among readers—including myself—to battle exploitation and injustice. But I did pay attention when 13-year-old Lakshmi, McCormick's main character, described her eventual deliverer as “The American.” A savvy educator might ask, “If Lakshmi had been rescued by an Indian character instead of by a Westerner, how would that change your view of the story?” Or, “Was it important to make her rescuer a foreigner because those who engage in sex trafficking are often outsiders?”

5. How is beauty defined?

Standards of physical beauty have historically been related to racial characteristics. Lest you think we've moved beyond the cultural correlation between attractiveness and whiteness, head over to [Media That Matters](#) and view a seven-minute film made in 2005 by teenager Kiri Davis called *A Girl Like Me*. It's worth showing in your classroom or library.

Davis repeated an experiment conducted in the 1940s that led to the desegregation of public schools. She presented black kindergartners with two dolls—a black one and a white one. Then, as in the original experiment, she asked which they would prefer, and which doll they thought was “nice” and which was “bad.” Sixty years or so later, most of the black children still picked the white dolls and identified the black dolls as “bad.”

“In the black community, those who have more European features are put on pedestals,” says Davis. “People with straighter hair or lighter skin are often considered beautiful, while those with more African features are considered not beautiful.” It's true within Asian cultures as well, where skin-bleaching cream is a best-selling beauty product and comments about the “fairness” of skin are flaunted in marriage ads.

More Asian and Asian-American young women are pursuing eyelid surgery, a choice explored in An Na's *The Fold* (Putnam, 2008). In China, a crowd of students underwent this surgery last summer, the *Nanfeng Daily* reported.

–Dozens of school children have come daily to our hospital since the beginning of July,” said Chen Jianfei, one of the doctors. –The youngest case I have seen is a 13-year-old girl.”

Novels can inspire discussion about such cultural views of beauty. Take *Pretties*, *Uglies*, and *Extras* (Simon Pulse), for example, a gripping sci-fi trilogy by Scott Westerfeld. The aesthetic ideal in that futuristic society includes straight hair that isn't kinky (subtext: not African) and wide eyes that aren't squinty (subtext: not Asian). Does this mean race is eradicated? How does Westerfeld explore and resolve the problem of defining one standard of beauty in his novels?

Finally, let me know if you find hot male fictional heroes who are Asian, like Jacob in Justina Chen Headley's *North of Beautiful* (Little Brown, 2009). The documentary *Slanted Screen* by Jeff Adachi explores the history of Asian men in American movies and television. In a *Washington Post* review of the film, Jose Antonio Vargas wrote:

[*Slanted Screen*]... talks about the revised ending for the action movie *Romeo Must Die*, a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*, where the R&B star Aaliyah plays Juliet to the Chinese actor Jet Li's Romeo. The original ending had Aaliyah kissing Li, a scenario that didn't test well with an –urban audience.” So the studio changed it. The new ending has Aaliyah giving Li a tight hug.... Which makes you wonder: When was the last time, on an American TV show or movie, you saw an Asian-American man as the object of attraction?

Some of you might be wondering: Can't a young reader simply enjoy a story without exploring messages about race? Will the proactive discussions I've suggested suck the pleasure out of reading McCormack's poignant *Sold*, Green's entertaining *Paper Towns*, Dessen's memorable *Lock and Key*, Cashore's enthralling *Graceling*, Westerfeld's suspenseful trilogy, or my own pretty good *Sunita Sen*?

On the contrary. I enjoyed reading all of the books mentioned in this article and will continue to recommend them to teens. When I first encounter a story, I willingly suspend disbelief for the sake of entertainment, as poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge recommended. Even with my adolescent baggage in tow, I ignore the between-culture pings for later processing. It's only when I *like* a story that I set aside the time for a critical reread to explore themes of race, culture, and gender.

In fact, we could have used almost any novel published for teens and subjected it to our questions. Try it. Pick up a novel you like (if you're an author, grab one of your own books) and expose it to one or more of the five questions. My hunch is that you'll notice something new, and that this differently angled reconsideration might actually enrich your appreciation of the book. Best of all, asking questions like these as an educator breaks the silence in the classroom about race. It can engage even reluctant readers, who are often thoroughly intrigued by issues of race and culture.

Our calling as educators and authors is to pay attention, both to the young people we serve and to the books they're reading, and to ask questions with them. Great stories, like their human counterparts, are beautiful yet flawed, and discussing them in community can strengthen their power to enlighten, inspire, and let justice roll down.

Author Information

Mitali Perkins's latest novel for young adults is *Secret Keeper* (Delacorte, 2009). You can visit her at [mitaliblog](#).

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