



# Beyond the Secret Garden #ReflectingRealities & #OwnVoices

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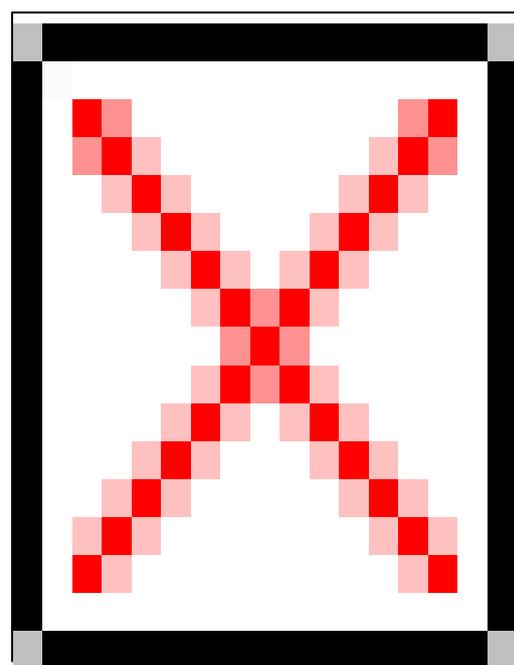
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Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor examine representations of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic voices in children's books

The latest in **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor's** series looking at representations of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic voices in children's books.

The recent report published by the **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education**, 'Reflecting Realities - A Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature 2017' included some startling statistics. Only 1% of children's books published in 2017 for the 3 -11 year-old age group included a main character from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background. For books containing any BAME characters (including secondary or background characters) the figure rose only to 4%.



This compares to 14% of the population of England and Wales self-reporting as being from BAME backgrounds, according to the 2011 census. However the disproportionality is even starker when we focus in on the target demographic for children's books. The Department for Education reported in 2017 that 32.1% of pupils of compulsory school age were of minority ethnic origins. Whilst there appears to be growing awareness that children's publishing in the UK has lacked diversity at all levels historically, the CLPE report offers evidence that calls into question the common claim that things are improving in that regard. Additionally, these numbers only indicate what

was first published (or newly re-published) during 2017; how long these books will stay in print depends not just on the quality of the book, but on the marketing and commitment by publishers to keep books in print, and on booksellers, librarians, and schools getting and keeping the books on shelves. In an age of tight margins for publishers and high focus on testing in schools, a book has to prove its 'salability' quickly if it is to remain available for kids to read.

Some might suggest that the statistics improve if books for young adults (12-18 years old) are included; the last five years have seen the publication of several award-winning novels by YA writers from BAME backgrounds such as Alex Wheatle, Patrice Lawrence, Kiran Millwood Hargrave and Catherine Johnson. However, a recent paper by Dr Melanie Ramdarshan Bold of University College London notes that despite the spate of diversity initiatives (aimed at authors and publishing professionals), authors of YA fiction from BAME backgrounds accounted for fewer titles in 2016 than they did in 2006. 'There are many reasons that contribute to this dearth of authors of colour - for example, structural inequalities, unconscious biases in the publishing industry, the struggle to earn a living as an author, and (ironically) the lack of author role models' Ramdarshan Bold comments. She explores these issues further in her forthcoming book, **Inclusive young adult fiction: authors of colour in the United Kingdom, 2006-2016**.

The call to publish more writers from BAME backgrounds, or writers of colour as is more commonly used, is one aspect of the social media movement that has coalesced around the hashtag #OwnVoices. The term 'Own Voices' was originally coined by YA author Corinne Duyvis through a Twitter hashtag #OwnVoices which encourages recommendations of books with a marginalised protagonist by YA and children's authors who share their identity. The hashtag, which Duyvis started in 2015 'to recommend kidlit about diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group' (Duyvis, tweet posted September 6, 2015) has spread to cover all types of literature for all ages. One thing that this suggests is that people involved with children's literature, and particularly authors of colour, have the power to steer the conversation in good ways about and for authors and characters of colour.

But why is it important to have #OwnVoices authors or #ReflectingRealities books? One thread of 'Beyond the Secret Garden' has been identifying how historically many representations of BAME children written by white British authors have been shaped by, and shaped, racial stereotypes. The re-edits of Enid Blyton's work have been important in the continued marketing of her books. We are now far less likely to find **The Three Golliwogs** in classroom reading corners than, say, the 1970s. Similarly, Helen Bannerman's **Little Black Sambo** is rarely seen, though **The Boy and the Tigers** and **The Story of Little Babaji**, both rewrites credited to Bannerman remain popular. There is clearly more to white writers depicting BAME people than avoiding the names 'Mumbo' and 'Jumbo' as contemporary versions of Bannerman's classic do. However, even in books that contain BAME characters almost universally regarded as positive, a white author's view of the world can colour (no pun intended) the way that character places her- or himself in a world dominated by whiteness.

Written in 1991 by Mary Hoffman, with illustrations by Caroline Binch, **Amazing Grace** is perhaps the most enduring picture book with a BAME main character authored by a white writer. The book can be read as a story about challenging racism. Grace's classmates, whilst not racially hostile towards her, do not believe that she can play the lead character in the class production of Peter Pan. The story's conclusion 'that in actuality she can' is a message of empowerment, but of a particular kind. Canonical literature, in the shape of Barrie's **Peter Pan**, Longfellow's **Hiawatha** and Kipling's **Jungle Books**, are all shown as narratives that Grace can perform. Yet, they are all stories that have drawn criticism for their depiction of people of colour by white writers. Paul Fox, for example, discusses the depiction of American Indians (called by Barrie the 'Picaninny tribe') in **Peter Pan** as 'embodying every conceivable racial stereotype of the primitive' (**Other Maps Showing Through**, Children's Literature Association Quarterly 32.3, 257). Patrick Brantlinger argues in **Dark Vanishings** (2003) that the ending of Longfellow's **Hiawatha** indicates that 'the explanation for . . . the future sad fate of all the Indians is the advent and spread of white civilizations' (60). And one only has to read Hanif Kureishi's **The Buddha of Suburbia** to understand fully the problematic nature of 'performing' Kipling's Mowgli, particularly by a person of colour.

Hoffman and Binch do include a depiction of Grace acting out **Anansi** stories also, but their examples are otherwise canonical European stories plus the inclusion of Aladdin within mention of the English tradition of pantomime. One of

the popular versions of the Aladdin pantomime includes a character named Wishee-Washee, a 'joke' version of a Chinese name that recalls the 'joke' names in **Little Black Sambo**. These characters do not, therefore, support Grace's identity as a person of colour, but as someone who has learned how to succeed in a white- and male-dominated world.

The message that black girls can play white boys in school plays isn't one we would want to resist. Rather, we'd want to ask, 'can they also play black girls?' Girl characters like Malorie Blackman's Hurricane Betsey or Girl Wonder would make excellent subjects for a curious, active girl like Grace to act out. Blackman's series about these two girls first appeared in the 1990s, and were re-released with new illustrations by Janie Smith while Blackman was Children's Laureate in 2014. However, unlike many of Blackman's novels for older readers, these beginning chapter books for middle grade readers are rarely found on bookstore shelves. A girl like Grace who 'loves stories' and is Black British would have to have a good library, independent bookshop, or motivated adult around for her to find Blackman's books, where she might just see herself reflected.

In response to **Amazing Grace**, our asking whether black girls can also play black girls in school plays prompts a shift from a focus on the imagination of readers to the imagination of authors, and this shift is vital if white authors are to join BAME authors in reflecting realities of Britain today.

**Karen Sands-O'Connor** is professor of English at SUNY Buffalo State in New York. She has, as Leverhulme Visiting Professor at Newcastle University, worked with **Seven Stories**, **the National Centre for the Children's Book**, and has recently published **Children's Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015** (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

**Darren Chetty** is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip hop culture. He is a contributor to **The Good Immigrant**, edited by Nikesh Shukla and published by **Unbound**, and tweets at @rapclassroom.

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