

FOR DIVERSITY IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: Printed in Black and White, Read in Color



BY PHIL JAGO

As a reader and lover of books, it is with some regret that I admit that the concept of young adult literature (YA Lit.) passed me by as I navigated the treacherous waters of adolescence. By the age of thirteen, I was devouring adult novels without any thought that there may have been authors writing specifically about the sorts of issues I struggled to deal with by myself. A recent summer course has opened my eyes to the possibilities available to young adult readers in this “golden age” of YA Lit. More than ever, teenagers and even those in their early 20s can access books that have lessons to teach them about life without appearing overly didactic in their content. This is a vast improvement from my own experiences a mere ten years ago, but as with most things in this world, there is always room for improvement.

Despite missing out on YA Lit. the first time around, during the course of that summer class and my research, I have been able to delve into the rich amount of literature that is out there and make valid and personal connections to the protagonists and plots. I have been able to look back on my own teenage years and reflect on how useful it would have been to read these books when I needed them. However, I do not think that all adults have the same luxury of hindsight; neither do I think that all young adults can take the same comfort and guidance from the books that are being published for their generation. I am a white, Western male: a member of the most privileged demographic in the world. Society is designed for me to succeed, and literature is produced for me to enjoy. As in society, literature is a place where many people find themselves and their interests, their history, and their stories, marginalized. It can be argued that those people not favoured by society, who do not have the same opportunities in life, have a far greater need than the white middle class for literature that addresses them and

validates their issues and experiences. This is not a new issue. Indeed, Yokota (2015) traces the discussion of white domination in children’s books all the way back to 1965 (p. 19). Historically this makes sense, as it would place the debate in the context of desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement. There seems to be a similar movement in this country right now, in the wake of a growing number of publicized instances of police violence against people of color, and it could be argued that just as in 1965, there is still a paucity of literature written for young adults from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Oppression is no longer chains and manacles; it is nuanced and insidious. As Yancy (2015) explains, the comments made by Daniel Handler after Jacqueline Woodson received a national book award for her book *Brown Girl Dreaming* were incredibly racist and damaging, even if they were not meant in that spirit (p. 5). By generalizing Woodson and reducing her to a racial stereotype, Handler effectively made the point that she was the exception to the rule when it comes to black people enjoying watermelon, and that only an exceptional black woman could write an award-winning book. This is clear proof that the entire national psyche of this country needs to change. This is unlikely to happen anytime soon on a nationwide scale, and so there is a greater need than ever for people from diverse backgrounds to have access to literature that speaks to them and for English teachers to provide opportunities for students of all backgrounds to read diverse literature, striving to encourage those students to have a broader, more multicultural worldview. This paper will provide a synthesis of contemporary literature on the subject, and also include personal opinions and suggestions regarding the importance of an increase in diverse books being made available to young adults.

One of the issues present in a review of the literature regarding diverse books for young people has simply to do with the numbers. Boyd, Cause and Galda (2015)

state that despite ethnic minorities making up 28% of the American population (according to the 2010 census), only 5% of books published for children and young adults centre on characters/events that are from ethnic minority backgrounds (p. 380). This in itself is alarming in what is an increasingly global society, but what makes it more worrying still is that it becomes a vicious cycle. In the same article, Boyd et al. (2015) profile an award-winning Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Adichie, who describes her childhood experiences of writing. All of her stories featured white, western protagonists, who “played in the snow, ate apples, and talked about the weather a lot” (p. 378). Adichie could only write stories that reflected the type of books she was reading, which were all about white, middle class children. It is an accepted truth that you write about what you know, and yet as a child, Adichie felt compelled to write about things she had read. If we are to encourage our young adults of all races and backgrounds to write about what they know, we also have to allow them to read about what they know. I personally enjoyed *Brown Girl Dreaming*, but I couldn’t relate personally to much of the subject matter. I am not black or female, nor did I grow up in the southern United States. However, as someone who strives to broaden my cultural horizons and understand life from the perspective of others, I got a lot out of the book. I can only imagine how useful this book would be to a black girl with aspirations to be a writer, and as an educator I would recommend this book to all middle grades teachers. We should not segregate our books; everyone can learn something from any book.

The benefits for people from ethnic minority backgrounds reading books situated in their own culture are obvious, particularly for young adults. Identity is something that all adolescents struggle with and search for, and the cultural codes and cues embedded in books and other types of literature can provide some kind of compass to help guide teenagers in forming their identity. As there are fewer YA Lit. choices that focus on ethnic minorities and their stories and experiences, these students are at a disadvantage when attempting to find identity in literature. A study on a culturally situated reader response theory by Brooks and Browne (2012) showed that when interacting with a text, young readers do so from four distinct perspectives; that of their ethnic group, their community, their peer group, and their family (p. 78). These four lenses are crucial to the young reader making meaning and finding identity in their reading material, and this shows just how disadvantaged ethnic minorities can be when reading works written by white authors as a way of constructing identity.

Therefore, we can certainly put forward the argument that books about more diverse areas of society are needed in our classrooms. It is not enough, however, to select just any books that feature diverse protagonists or settings. These characters, plots and settings have to be authentic. Think back to the somewhat cheesy videos children are subjected to in school to teach them about smoking, drugs, etc. The dialogue from the proverbial villains is a poor, censored version of how people actually speak

in those situations. Students are perfectly aware of the fact these videos are not wholly accurate, and so they will be when reading literature about a certain area of society that is not wholly accurate. Katrina Willard Hall (2008) provides some excellent advice on the selection of authentic diverse literature. Although her article is about the selection of texts for younger children, the concepts can certainly be scaled up to the middle grades and the high school classroom. She advises teachers to reflect on whether the genders, races, and ages of the characters are authentic and do not just follow stereotypes (p. 82). Sharing literature with our students that portrays characters from diverse backgrounds in negative, caricature-like ways would be incredibly harmful to both students from diverse backgrounds and white students who may already have misconceptions about certain ethnic groups. We need to provide our students from diverse backgrounds with positive and authentic representations of characters that reflect who they are, to help them both construct identities and relate to a wide range of literature.

This raises the question of how much diverse literature is enough. To reference society again, alongside the Black Lives Matter movement, there is an ugly, clumsy White Lives Matter hashtag, and the seemingly more innocuous but just as damaging, All Lives Matter. The same reaction can probably be witnessed in school board meetings across the nation when discussing literature selection. If the majority of students in a school are white, why shouldn’t the students only read white books? This is a ridiculous question, symbolic of the kind of individualist culture that has created this issue in the first place. Reading diverse books will benefit all students, both from a literary perspective, in terms of broadening their cultural horizons, and creating more awareness of the divisive nature of American culture. Canonical works of literature, predominantly by white, male authors, are not at risk. They are not going anywhere. This is what Lafferty (2015) calls “The power of inertia” (p. 18). Many, even most, English teachers enjoy the canonical works; they even feel honor-bound to pass them on to their students as their own high school English teachers passed them down to them. Neither I nor anybody in the “We Need Diverse Books” movement is claiming that we should do away with the classics and give our students books written exclusively by non-white authors. Indeed, Meminger (2011) warns against just this kind of affirmative action:

No one wants to be told, “here, read this— it’s good for you,” like, “eat your spinach, it’ll make you healthy.” Reading books featuring people of color, LGBTQ protagonists, differently abled or sized main characters, or other marginalized voices should not be something anyone should be made to feel they have to do— whether out of a sense of obligation, duty, or guilt. Books about marginalized teens are not medicine or antidotes, and I don’t blame young people, or adults, for that matter, for having an aversion to books presented in this way. (p.10)

As Meminger articulately explains, we are not on some moral crusade to force our students to read diverse books

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and diverse books alone but rather to read a broad range of literature that covers a variety of subjects and issues. It is just that these more diverse books have been severely underrepresented for a long time. This is the same argument that dispels the myth that Black Lives Matters equals White Lives Don't Matter. Of course all lives matter, just as all books matter, but neither all lives, nor all books, are currently being represented and treated equally in this world.

The value of including diverse books in the classroom is enormous, just as the value of the classics is understood to be enormous. However, diverse books teach our students to explore and appreciate both the similarities and the differences between different contemporary social and ethnic groups, and this is something that the classics cannot do. Rather than preaching the humanistic, naive doctrine that it is correct to not see color, we should encourage our students to not only see it but also celebrate it. I worked at an inner-city school in Birmingham, UK, where approximately 70 different languages were spoken. This allowed me and other teachers to both teach and learn about a wide range of cultures and religions, and encourage tolerance and cooperation. We celebrated Christmas, Eid, Diwali, Vaisakhi and more, ensuring that all students felt that their cultural background was valued. However, our English curriculum was still dominated by white, Western authors, and when we taught a book by a minority author, it had the uncomfortable feeling of being a token inclusion. Hyland (2010) explains the damaging effect this type of inclusion of a diverse book or author can have in an early years classroom, and I can see it being just as much of a problem in the high school classroom with events such as Black History Month:

Presenting an occasional book about a racial or ethnic group when the majority of the books and images are based on Whites or White norms reinforces the idea that groups other than Whites are the exception, not the norm, and communicates to children that some groups are seen as more valuable than others. (pp. 3-4)

This perspective adds weight to the argument that diverse books deserve an equal standing in the curriculum, otherwise we run the risk of making our students from diverse backgrounds feel even more marginalized. Nobody wants to feel that his or her culture and heritage have been added to a curriculum in order to merely tick a box or fill a quota; they want to feel valued equally in a diverse and tolerant society. This is the challenge that teachers face in bringing diverse books into their classrooms.

This, however, is easier said than done. If it was a straightforward process, this paper would not have been written, and neither would the many research articles that concern the inclusion of diverse books. Kuo and Alsup (2010) undertook a qualitative study where they interviewed middle grade and high school teachers about the difficulty of teaching diverse books. These interviews uncovered some broad reasons that are inhibiting teachers from successfully teaching literature not from the canon, including “lack of cultural knowledge,” “creating relevancy

for the text,” and “lack of parental support” (para. 8). It is reasonable to accept that a teacher cannot have a profound understanding of the cultural norms of every single one of their students, but it is also reasonable to expect that a teacher can attempt to educate themselves. If you must teach a history unit about something you do not know about, you take the time to learn about it. I am sure that professional development for English teachers relating to diverse books takes place, but it appears that perhaps more needs to take place. Landt (2013) provides some helpful criteria that teachers can use to aid them in their selection of diverse literature:

- What are the author's qualifications to write about this culture?
- From whose perspective is the story told?
- What do the illustrations say about the characters?
- What are the illustrator's qualifications to depict this culture?
- What connections might the students make to this story?
- Are the characters part of society and not depicted as outsiders?
- Are the characters portrayed as individuals, not generic representations of the culture?
- Are the situations realistic and not perpetuating stereotypes?
- Are problems and conflicts solved by individuals from within the culture rather than by individuals from outside it?
- Is the plot respectful of all cultures involved? (pp. 23-24)

By using these criteria, teachers should be able to think more openly and sensitively about books with diverse themes, rather than falling into the trap of selecting “token” works.

It appears then, despite the odds, that it is not all doom and gloom. With a little work and a trusting school board, there is no reason that teachers cannot incorporate a wide range of diverse literature into their curriculum. The criteria above can be a useful tool to aid teachers in their selection process, but we all have an even more valuable resource in our classrooms: the students themselves. In a pupil-centered classroom, student choice should not be overlooked, and when it comes to choosing texts that minority ethnic teenagers will relate to, it seems sensible to ask some minority ethnic teenagers about which texts to select. Powell (2011) conducted a qualitative case study with her students at a high school in Arizona. She concluded that students who identify themselves as non-readers (and many students from ethnic minority backgrounds did so in her study) make great strides academically when they have some choice in the texts that they read in school (p. 50). She also proposes an evolutionary curriculum that addresses the needs of the students as they emerge, but she acknowledges that this is unlikely to be approved by the kind of school administrators who want to see a whole academic year mapped out in advance (p.50). Although this was a small

case study, and the results would be difficult to generalize to a wider population, it does add weight to the idea voiced by many progressive educators that we need to consider the interests of our students when we are crafting the lessons we will deliver to them. The world is changing, and literature is changing.

The graphic novel, for instance, has come a long way from being merely a comic book, and it is now an established and celebrated form of literature. There has been research into the increased diversity represented in this form of literature, and how representations of ethnic minorities in graphic literature have changed over the years. Historically, there have been some issues with incredibly racist and offensive portrayals of people of color, but with the increasing sophistication of the graphic novel as a vehicle for narrative, this is changing. Royal (2007) explains how rather than reinforce stereotypes, graphic novels can help us to dispel these myths.

Because of its foundational reliance on character iconography, comics are well suited to dismantle those very assumptions that problematize ethnic representation, especially as they find form in visual language. They can do this by particularizing the general, thereby undermining any attempts at subjective erasure through universalization.(p. 9)

Royal (2007) goes on to discuss what he calls the “paradoxical effect of ethnic identification in comics” (p. 10). He argues that the more nondescript the illustration, the more easily the reader can project him or herself onto the character and develop empathy. Therefore, depending on how detailed or photo-like the graphic representation is, the race, gender or sexuality of the protagonists in a graphic novel will not prevent a reader from a different group relating to them. This has some positive implications for classroom application, as we encourage our students to identify all the subtle elements that make up a plot, rather than focus on the basic characteristics of the protagonists. It also implies that graphic novels could be an excellent way to incorporate diverse literature into the classroom without appearing to be doing so for the awkward, quota-based reasons discussed above.

We are at an important moment in the history of this country. People of color are fighting for their rights and civil liberties, as they have done for many years. They do not wish to dominate society; they merely wish for equality and for their voices to be heard. This is equally true in the world of literature. Story is how we pass on our traditions, our customs. We tell stories of our past to our children so that they may tell them in the future; this is one way a community's value system is passed on. However, as Helton (2015) remarks, “Sadly, the values and histories of many peoples in the United States are forced to clash, and those in society whose lifestyles are normalized dominate the narrative that will be passed on to the society's children” (p. 42). We have the power to change this; and through initiatives such as “We Need Diverse Books,”

people with real influence in the publishing industry and further afield are able to bring this issue to the fore. We learn to empathize from reading books. We learn about other cultures from books. We learn about ourselves and our own culture from books. We gain a perspective into the lives of others through reading books. It is my hope that by allowing our students to read more diverse books, we will prepare them to live in a more diverse world, to be more reflective about themselves and others, to find and make meaning, and to construct strong identities, which can only be a good thing.

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