



scbwi
society of children's book writers & illustrators

BULLETIN
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Supporting *Diversity,* Supporting **ALL** Our Children

BY SUZANNE MORGAN WILLIAMS

EVERY YEAR THE Cooperative Center for Children's Books at the University of Wisconsin reports the number of books they receive from US trade and small publishers and how many are written by authors of various backgrounds. Again, in 2010, more than 90 percent of books for children and young adults in the United States were written by white authors about white protagonists. What does this mean for the almost 40 percent of US children who come from different backgrounds? How often do they see their faces reflected in picture books, read about a superhero who happens to be African-American, or a Latina who is anticipating her Quinceañera? Do Caucasian kids come to believe the whole world is like theirs? What does this mean to the children's book community and to the SCBWI?



MICHELE HENNINGER

Children's Books By and About People of Color Published in the United States in 2008–2010:

Year	Total Number of Books Published (Est.)	Number of Books Received at CCBC	African / African-Americans		American Indians		Asian Pacifics/ Asian Pacific Americans		Latinos	
			By	About	By	About	By	About	By	About
2010	5,000	3,400	102	156	9	22	60	64	55	66
2009	5,000	3,000	83	157	12	33	67	80	60	61
2008	5,000	3,000	83	172	9	40	77	98	48	79

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See www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/pcstats.asp

Looking at 2010 US Census data, we see that:

	African / African-Americans		American Indians		Asian Pacifics/ Asian Pacific Americans		Latinos		Caucasian and not-Hispanic	
	By	About	By	About	By	About	By	About	By	About
% of US Population, 2010	14%		1.5%		6%		16%		63%	
% of books received by CCBC	2%	4.5%	.02%	.06%	1.7%	1.8%	1.5%	2%	95%	91%

By S. M. Williams



MICHELLE HEININGER

SCBWI Executive Director Lin Oliver says, "It is essential that children learn, from the earliest age, that the human race is diverse and appreciation of each other's differences is the key to a peaceful future. The best way to do this is by encouraging writers and artists of diverse backgrounds to create authentic views of their cultures so that all children may benefit and find themselves in the pages of their books.

"The SCBWI hopes to play an increasingly active role in fostering opportunities of people of diverse backgrounds to create and publish a body of children's literature that reflects an appreciation and acceptance of our differences."

And SCBWI President Stephen Mooser says, "I've always believed that people who travel extensively, especially those who step off the beaten path, develop an appreciation for other cultures, as well as an understanding that all of us, under our outward appearances and customs, share the same universal desire to lead a peaceful existence among friends and family. Those many who can't afford the luxury of travel can still experience others through literature, and the younger the reader, the more profound the experience. For that reason the SCBWI is dedicated to

being an important advocate not just for diversity in books for children but of diversity in those who aspire to write for young audiences."

Cherokee-Irish author/illustrator Linda Boyden tells of a little American Indian girl holding out her book, *The Blue Roses*, and saying, "You know why I love this book? The girl looks like me." Advocating for diversity is advocating for children, one at a time.

SCBWI events feature speakers from all backgrounds, and the organization wants to support a diverse and inclusive membership, but look around at an SCBWI event and you'll see the statistics from the CCBC reflected in the room. We are producing the books now that the next generation of children will read. What does it mean that so few of those books are by and about people from minority cultures? Why is this? It's time to listen, think, and talk.

My multicultural research has allowed me to learn from many wonderful people. For me, having meaningful, often hard, conversations across cultural and racial lines has been one of the most important and satisfying experiences of my life. But this can get emotionally charged, so I suggest we start with listening to one another. In the last few weeks I've sent interviews to two dozen African-American, Latino, South Asian, American Indian, and Asian American colleagues. They include some of the stars of our industry as well as aspiring authors and illustrators. The idea is to start the conversation by asking them about their experiences as readers and as book creators.

So far, the responses are as different as the people answering them. But there are some common themes. 1) They were avid readers as children. 2) They want to write what they want, without being restricted by their race or ethnicity, although many choose to write about their own backgrounds. 3) They have concerns about the publishers needing to make profits to stay in business, and yet they see this as limiting the viability of books that aren't about white kids. 4) Some feel that when books about non-whites are published, they may not get

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the exposure that other books do. You'll see more of their responses in an article in the next Bulletin.

In the meantime, the SCBWI wants to hear from the membership. Do you have ideas about what else the SCBWI could do? Do you have thoughts on diversity in publishing? About multicultural writing and illustrating? Some suggestions:

- Think outside that well-known box. Part of the difficulty in reaching diverse groups of people may be current habits. What can we try that's totally new?
- Don't be afraid of disagreements. If we all think alike, changes may not be significant. But state your case kindly.
- And please, don't turn the discussion to terminology. In the US we have a history of stopping communication because we are offended by terms.

Terms for diverse groups of people change regionally and generationally. I've asked interviewees to use the terms they prefer, and you'll find black, African-American, people of color, Asian, Asian-American, Indian, native, and Native American, as well as references to national origin, in their responses.

We are all well-meaning people who want the best for our children, the most inclusive community of book creators, the richest collection of stories, and the books that will turn every child into a reader. They are all worth it.

E-mail your thoughts to Stephen Mooser at stephenmooser@scbwi.org. Or, if you are a writer or illustrator with a multicultural background and would like to receive a short e-interview and have your answers passed on to Lin and Steve or to comment off the record, you can e-mail me at suzannemorganwilliams@charter.net

*Suzanne Morgan Williams is the author of eleven nonfiction books, with a specialty in multicultural topics. Her most recent books are *China's Daughters: Women Who Shaped Chinese History* and the middle-grade novel *Bull Rider*. She is a frequent speaker at schools and conferences and is an RAE for the Nevada region.*

