



scbwi
society of children's book writers & illustrators

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18

CHRIS BROWNE



24

KIM GEYER



22

DT WALSH

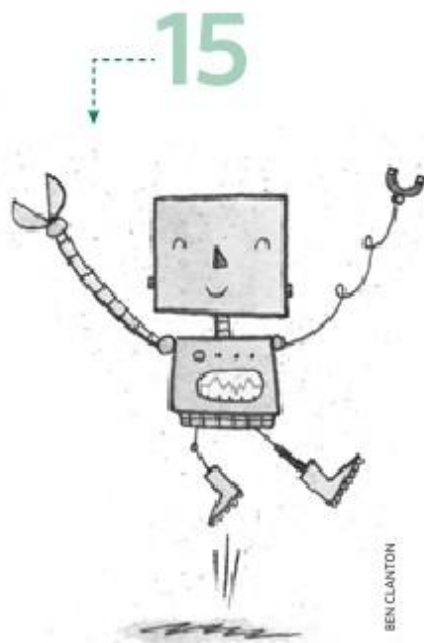


16

LESLEY VAMOS

features

- 9 National Public Radio's Backseat Book Club · *Chelsea Mooser*
- 15 Writing on the Go . . . with Your Cell Phone · *Lisha Cauthen*
- 16 Far-Reaching Outlets for Your Book in Print · *Amy N. Thomas*
- 18 Vernacular Ain't Necessarily Wrong · *Carol Baldwin*
- 20 The 2012 Golden Kite & Sid Fleischman Award Winners · *Lee Wind*
- 22 Diversity: Everybody in the Pool! · *Suzanne Morgan Williams*
- 24 Prime Time and Picture Books · *Shutta Crum*



departments

- 4 News & Notes
- 6 The Truth about School Visits
- 7 Art Spot
- 8 Book Review
- 10 Art Tips
- 11 The Illustrator's Perspective
- 12 Illustrator Profile
- 14 Here, There & Everywhere
- 26 To Market
- 27 People
- 30 Regional Events
- 34 Publisher's Corner
- 35 Legally Speaking



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Diversity: Everybody in the Pool!



DT WALSH

BY SUZANNE MORGAN WILLIAMS

MORE THAN 90 percent of children's/YA books published in the United States in 2010 were by white authors and illustrators and about white protagonists, while the population in that year was 65 percent Caucasian/non-Hispanic. The reasons behind this statistic and the ways to change it need to be the subject of much discussion. Having a broader ethnic/racial base of published authors and illustrators as well as characters will benefit us all.

Our youngest children's experiences are limited, and so they create generalizations from what is presented to them. Leena Khan-Farooqui, a writer with a Pakistani background, says, "I wish for my children to see themselves represented in mainstream media, especially books, and find role models that look like them without feeling self-conscious." Nikki Shannon Smith, an African-American picture book author, says, "When my daughter was about two, I bought her *Shades of Black: A Celebration of Our Children* by Sandra L. and Myles C. Pinkney. The first time we read it, she said, 'Mommy, that's me!' It became her favorite book." How beautiful when any child makes that connection, and how sad if one of their earliest perceptions is that people like themselves are somehow invisible or not important enough to be included in the picture books they read.

Older readers are looking for adventure, emotional connections, or subjects that interest them. Writer and blogger Cynthia Liu says, "Many adults expect us to represent what it must be like for 'us' through one book. That's an impossible task. Every person's experience, regardless of racial or ethnic background, is unique. Sixty books a year featuring Asian Americans doesn't feel like enough in the grand scheme of things to show the diversity within our diverse culture." Alvina Ling, editor at Little, Brown, says that as a young reader, "I was always searching for Asian American characters whose lives reflected mine in some way . . . A lot of the books I've acquired and edited are books I wish I could have read as a child."

The connections readers find in books, of course, are not only along racial or ethnic lines. Cherokee writer and blogger Cynthia Leitch Smith says, "I had a boy come up to me with a tattered copy of *Tantalize* and tell me it was the first book he'd ever finished. I don't know if it mattered that he was African-American or that the girl on the cover is a fair-skinned redhead. But I do believe there's a book that can make every child a reader, and I wish people weren't so quick to make assumptions about which ones might fit." Rita Woods, an African-American physician and writer, says, "I was fortunate enough to go to a school where literature was encouraged and I was introduced to Richard Wright and James Baldwin, but those books left me sad and a little frightened. Growing up protected and middle class, I felt I had less in common with Bigger Thomas than with Nancy Drew."

So, while remembering that every reader is unique, are there special concerns for writers/illustrators of color or anyone who writes a non-mainstream protagonist? Aspiring picture book writer, cultural psychologist, and Asian American Amy G. Lam writes, "For many people of color in the United States, the reality is that celebrating diversity also means understanding the struggles

and difficulties people of color have experienced growing up as minorities in America. Part of authentic voice for many people of color is to speak to these experiences of isolation and marginalization. We must allow for these voices to be heard though it may make some of us uncomfortable, nervous, and scared. These stories must be shared if we want to truly create healing and understanding among different ethnic/racial groups."

Cynthia Liu says, "I feel young children don't care what race or ethnic background the main character is so long as it's a great story. Adults in the industry continue to publish the same kinds of stories featuring diverse characters. Eventually children learn that

Having a broader ethnic/racial base of published authors and illustrators as well as characters will benefit us all.

a book with a diverse character is going to be 'one of those kinds of books.'"

It seems that creating and publishing a breadth of stories—enough that all children might find themselves emotionally, physically, or culturally between the pages—is important. For this, we need the greatest pool of book creators. Everyone needs to come to the party. But your words and pictures will have lasting results, so proceed with caution and respect.

Ojibwe/Metis writer Carole Lindstrom says, "There wasn't anything about Metis people I came across as a child, and anything relating to American Indians was typically stereotypical or marginalized," while writer Margarita Engle says of her childhood reading, "English books did not include any

believable Latino characters. Fortunately, my mother had Spanish books from her native Cuba."

Award-winning Pakistani-Canadian author Rukhsana Khan speaks on this topic. "Stories were my lifeline growing up. There came a time when I got frustrated and started looking for stories that represented my point of view, so I gravitated to those set in African-American and Native American cultures." Eventually "came stories set in my 'cultural territory' written by white authors that on the surface seemed sympathetic but in fact dealt with my culture in a condescending way." After she became a writer, she says, "I had to move away from the idea of having an agenda or correcting cultural stereotypes. Let's tell some better stories!"

Which brings us back to Leena Khan-Farooqui. "It wasn't until college that I discovered a book I could finally relate to—*Dahling, If You Luv Me, Would You Please, Please Smile* by Rukhsana Khan, about a middle-school girl growing up in a Canadian city. I felt so delighted to read a book about me and wished I'd had that connection growing up in middle school."

That is why we need to embrace multiracial/ethnic books, authors, and illustrators enthusiastically in the children's book world. Let's be sure everyone is welcomed, and every child has the possibility of finding themselves in our pages.

Continue the conversation. All members, and particularly those with an interest in multicultural topics, are invited to e-mail their thoughts to Steve at stephenmooser@scbwi.org or Suzanne 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.*