



# MISSING FROM THE SHELF

Book Challenges and Lack of  
Diversity in Children's Literature

**PEN  
AMERICA**

The Freedom  
to Write



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PEN America stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect open expression in the United States and worldwide. We champion the freedom to write, recognizing the power of the word to transform the world. Our mission is to unite writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible.

Founded in 1922, PEN America is the largest of more than 100 centers of PEN International. Our strength is in our membership—a nationwide community of more than 4,000 novelists, journalists, poets, essayists, playwrights, editors, publishers, translators, agents, and other writing professionals. For more information, visit [pen.org](http://pen.org)

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# INTRODUCTION

Reading is a formative part of childhood: educating, widening horizons, offering adventures and stoking imagination and creativity. Books for children and young adults are not often thought of as a free expression battleground in the United States—and yet every year, hundreds of demands to remove books from schools or libraries are made by parents, library patrons, school boards, and others because of concerns that a book’s subject matter is inappropriate or harmful to children. Children’s books are also a potent cultural bellwether, both reflecting and shaping attitudes on a wide range of social, political, and moral issues.

For many years, PEN America has served as a gathering place and a locus of reflection and mobilization for children’s book authors through our Children’s and Young Adult Book Committee. That committee has led our work on issues concerning children’s book challenges and our participation in the National Coalition against Censorship, urging schools and libraries across the United States to keep challenged books in circulation, allowing children and their parents to make individual choices about what material is appropriate while maintaining access to a broad and diverse range of material for students.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to this work, as well as to efforts by parents, young readers, teachers, librarians, and public officials to defend open access to children’s literature, many book challenges are ultimately unsuccessful.

While book challenges and bans have been an important focus for librarians and anti-censorship advocates including PEN America for several generations, PEN America’s mission to promote literature as a means to transcend boundaries, foster dialogue, and amplify unheard voices has compelled a broader focus for our work in the field of children’s books. Increasingly, our attention as an organization has focused on the importance of children’s literature as a vehicle to enable younger generations to reach new levels of understanding and inclusion across social divides, and on impediments to realizing the potential of children’s literature to serve as a catalyst for acceptance. For example, an examination of current patterns of challenges to children’s books reveals that a large portion relate to children’s and young adult books that are either authored by or are about people of color, LGBTQ people, and/or disabled people (referred to in this report as “diverse books”).<sup>2</sup> And even if a particular challenge fails, teachers and librarians are aware that diverse books may draw unwanted scrutiny, prompting some of them to avoid assigning these books or putting them into library circulation in the first place.

This restricts schoolchildren’s access to diverse books

*The benefits of broader inclusion and representation would redound not only to children of color and members of minority or marginalized groups, but to all children who look to literature as a mirror of the society in which they live.*

at a time when the U.S. is becoming more and more ethnically diverse as a country: Children of color now make up more than half of the kids in public schools in the United States, and their numbers continue to grow.<sup>3</sup> According to the United States Census Bureau, by 2020 more than half of all children in the United States will be non-white, and the U.S. population as a whole will become “majority minority” by 2044.<sup>4</sup> Yet several influential studies have documented the relative paucity of children’s literature that features characters and storylines reflecting the experience of people of color and other marginalized people and groups, and those who differ from the majority and mainstream. Population trends underscore the urgency to take steps to ensure better representation of particular minority groups in children’s literature. The benefits of broader inclusion and representation would redound not only to children of color and members of minority or marginalized groups, but to all children who look to literature as a mirror of the society in which they live. PEN has assembled several online dialogues through our Equity in Publishing roundtable series on the question of how to promote greater representivity in publishing, and presents this report in an effort to catalyze attention, debate, and action to enable children’s literature to help lead the way toward a more inclusive and equal society.



## OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

This report begins with an overview of book challenges and bans in the United States, detailing the extent to which books face challenges, the processes parents, teachers, librarians, and lawmakers go through when a book is challenged, and the broader impact of these challenges. The report then examines how these actions disproportionately affect books by or about people of color and LGBTQ people, limiting children's access to books that accurately reflect and depict a wide range of individual identities and experiences. It then discusses some of the reasons books by or about people of color are underrepresented in children's and young adult literature, including the publishing industry's relative lack of staff diversity. The report

continues with an overview of how social media has helped amplify and broaden the conversation about representation of people of color in children's and young adult books, and concludes with a presentation of suggestions from authors, readers, editors and other publishing personnel, and advocates on how to improve diversity in publishing and increase the availability of diverse books.

This report is based on a review of news and analytical reports on book challenges and bans, diversity in the publishing industry, and representation of people of color in children's and young adult books, as well as phone and email interviews with authors, editors, academics, advocates, and others focused on these topics.



## BANNING BOOKS IN THE UNITED STATES?

### Challenges and Withdrawals of Books in Schools and Libraries

While the notion of book banning tends to evoke a yellowed American past or faraway repressive regimes, hundreds of books are challenged or banned in the United States each year.<sup>5</sup>

The American Library Association (ALA) defines a book challenge as “a formal, written complaint, filed with a library or school requesting that materials be removed because of content or appropriateness.”<sup>6</sup> A book ban is the result when such a challenge succeeds and books are withdrawn from library or classroom shelves or circulation.<sup>7</sup> Book challenges are most often initiated not by state or local authorities, but by parents or concerned community members who believe a certain book is inappropriate for children, and seek to have it removed from a school or public library, or taken off a school reading list. Usually, the rationale proffered is an urge to protect children from themes, content, or language that is argued to be

age-inappropriate, although broader concerns about a book’s perceived worldview or ideology can also motivate a challenge. Parents may lodge challenges to a book because they do not want their children to be exposed to violent or sex-related content, or content that violates family religious beliefs.

For example, Robie H. Harris’s *It’s Perfectly Normal* (Candlewick), a sex education book for children ages 10 and older, has sold over a million copies, but is also “one of the most banned books of the past two decades.”<sup>8</sup> J.K. Rowling’s acclaimed Harry Potter series (Scholastic), the first book of which was published in 1997, was by 2000 the most challenged book series in the U.S., according to the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, which keeps a register of book challenges reported by librarians nationwide.<sup>9</sup> The Harry Potter books have been called pagan, Satanic, anti-religious, offensive, inappropriate, and dangerous—and were for a time emblematic of the fight for free expression in children’s literature.<sup>10</sup>

Contested books often challenge the way that people “like to think of childhood, as this sweet time,” says children’s author Meg Medina, whose book *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (Candlewick) has been frequently challenged.<sup>11</sup> Millie Davis, an English teacher who directs the Intellectual Freedom Center of the National Council for Teachers of English, thinks that book challenges risk

## Number of Challenged Books Recorded by Year<sup>12</sup>

Year	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
Challenged Books	275	311	307	464	326	348

depriving children of essential opportunities to learn to confront difficult and unfamiliar topics, with the guidance of their teachers. “It’s based on a real misunderstanding of kids and resiliency, and the need for kids to enjoy the world and learn about the world—even the really hard stuff—in safe places.”<sup>13</sup>

Parents are responsible for approximately half of the challenges against specific works of children’s literature.<sup>14</sup> About 45 percent of the demands for censorship are directed at material in school classrooms or school libraries, and most of the rest are aimed at public libraries.<sup>15</sup> The reasons most often cited for the challenge are offensive language, sexual explicitness, and general inappropriateness for a particular age group.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes when parents file a challenge, teachers, librarians, administrators, or school board officials resist the challenge, often by providing those who complain with an explanation of the reasoning behind making available the book in question. If complainants are satisfied with this explanation or fail to follow up, the book simply goes back on the shelf or remains in the curriculum.<sup>17</sup> Other times the book is withdrawn from availability. Many times, a challenge leads to a review process by school administrators or head librarians to determine whether a book is appropriate for readers in the intended age group.

The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the ALA keeps statistics on the numbers of children’s books that have been challenged and the outcomes of these challenges. In 2015, the ALA tracked 275 book challenges, 27 of which resulted in books being removed from circulation, as well as nine books removed from required reading lists and three books removed from optional reading lists.<sup>18</sup> The ALA has tracked over 11,300 book challenges since 1982, and James LaRue, director of the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, estimates that the actual number of books challenged could be four or five times greater, since the ALA believes that it learns about only a fraction of cases.<sup>19</sup>

Challenges are also hard to track because there may not be any formal records; often, when a parent protests to a school official, a book simply disappears. “If someone complains to the principal, and the principal comes in and takes the book off the [school library] shelf and walks out the door with it, there’s not much the librarian can do without fearing the loss of her job,” says LaRue.<sup>20</sup>

Librarians and teachers, often the only line of defense against book challenges, are not always well placed to resist

a challenge. Across the United States, teachers were laid off during the last recession, and school librarians have been cut back as the use of digital platforms for research has expanded. Teachers and librarians who take a stand to protect a book have received phone calls in the middle of the night, become the targets of social media campaigns, and had their tires slashed, say representatives of teachers, librarians, and groups that track book challenges. LaRue recalls one instance in Colorado, when the people of one small town shunned the librarian so uniformly that grocery store clerks refused to speak to her—because she had purchased and defended the Harry Potter books.<sup>21</sup> In some cases, librarians who resist book challenges fear that they may pay with their jobs. The threat is real: the ALA has a special fund, the LeRoy C. Merritt Humanitarian Fund, which, among other things, provides living expenses for librarians who lose their jobs due to battles over books.<sup>22</sup> LaRue says the ALA makes support grants from this fund on a regular basis.<sup>23</sup> “The ones that fight are the gritty ones,” says Millie Davis, the director of the Intellectual Freedom Center of the National Council of Teachers of English.<sup>24</sup>

When those gritty teachers and librarians face a challenge to a book, they may contact the ALA or the Kids Right to Read Project of the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), a consortium of more than 50 national non-profit groups—including PEN America—who work together to mount a rapid response to book challenges and other attempts to restrict public access to books, art, and music.

When a new call regarding a book challenge comes in, staff at the ALA have a protocol, says LaRue. They ask if the librarian or teacher would like them to make a public complaint or keep the conversation confidential. They ask relevant school officials to describe local policies in play—including state law and school district policy. Is the principal following the policy? “Often they do have good policies in place, but the principal sidestepped them,” says LaRue.<sup>25</sup> The policy might require a review committee to convene, including some combination of librarians, teachers, parents, students, and administrators, all tasked with reading the book in whole. In weighing the pedagogical and literary value of the book against the objections, sometimes school districts consider how widely the book has been assigned in other districts, critical reviews, and any awards the book has won.<sup>26</sup>

NCAC’s multi-pronged approach to a book challenge includes grassroots activism, public education, and legal

## WHAT KINDS OF BOOKS GET CHALLENGED? A Sampling of Frequently Challenged Books from 2014-2015<sup>27</sup>

### Looking for Alaska

By John Green (Dutton Children's Books, 2005)  
The 2006 winner of the "Michael L. Printz Award," *Looking for Alaska*, tells the story of a young boy's experience at boarding school after he meets Alaska, an outgoing and alluring girl.<sup>28</sup>

**Challenged for:** Offensive language, sexually explicit, and unsuited for age group.<sup>29</sup>

### I Am Jazz

By Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings (Penguin, 2014)  
*I Am Jazz* is an autobiographical picture book about Jazz Jennings, a 15 year old transgender girl and LGBTQ activist.<sup>30</sup>

**Challenged for:** Inaccurate, homosexuality, sex education, religious viewpoint, and unsuited for age group.<sup>31</sup>

### Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out

By Susan Kuklin (Candlewick Press, 2014)  
*Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*, a 2015 Stonewall Honor Book, is a collection of stories and pictures chronicling the lives of six transgender or gender-neutral teenagers.<sup>32</sup>

**Challenged for:** Anti-family, offensive language, homosexuality, sex education, political viewpoint, religious viewpoint, unsuited for age group, and other ("wants to remove from collection to ward off complaints").<sup>33</sup>

### The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime

By Mark Haddon (Knopf Doubleday, 2004)  
*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* tells the story of Christopher, an autistic boy, and his journey of solving a local mystery and discovering the truth about his family.<sup>34</sup> The book is the winner of the Whitbread Book Award, the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, and The Guardian's Children's Fiction Prize.<sup>35</sup>

**Challenged for:** Offensive language, religious viewpoint, unsuited for age group, and other ("profanity and atheism").<sup>36</sup>

### Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan

By Jeanette Winter (Beach Lane Books, 2009)  
*Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan* is based on a true story of a girl who enrolls in a secret girl's school in Afghanistan under the Taliban, when it was forbidden for girls to be educated.<sup>37</sup> It won the Jane Addams Children's Book Award for Younger Children in 2010.<sup>38</sup>

**Challenged for:** Religious viewpoint, unsuited to age group, and violence.<sup>39</sup>

### Two Boys Kissing

By David Levithan (Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2013)  
*Two Boys Kissing* chronicles the lives of seven gay teenage boys navigating their sexuality, centered around two teenage boys attempting to set the world record for longest kiss.<sup>40</sup>

**Challenged for:** Homosexuality and other ("condones public displays of affection").<sup>41</sup>

### The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

By Sherman Alexie (Thorndike Press; Little, Brown, 2007)  
*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a National Book Award for Young People's Literature winner and tells the story of a teenage Native American boy who moves from a reservation to an all-white school.<sup>42</sup>

**Challenged for:** anti-family, cultural insensitivity, drugs/alcohol/smoking, gambling, offensive language, sex education, sexually explicit, unsuited for age group, violence, "depictions of bullying".<sup>43</sup>

### It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health

By Robie H. Harris (Candlewick Press, 1994)  
*It's Perfectly Normal* is a sex education book for children ages 10 and up, complete with pictures, diagrams, and information on sex, puberty, and the teenage body.<sup>44</sup>

**Challenged for:** nudity, sex education, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group, "alleges it[s] child pornography".<sup>45</sup>

### And Tango Makes Three

By Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (Simon and Schuster, 2005)  
Based on a true story of two male penguins in the Central Park Zoo, *And Tango Makes Three* is a picture book depicting the love between these penguins and their experience as fathers.<sup>46</sup>

**Challenged for:** Anti-family, homosexuality, political viewpoint, religious viewpoint, unsuited for age group, "promotes the homosexual agenda".<sup>47</sup>

### Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood

Marjane Satrapi (Pantheon, 2004)  
*Persepolis* is a graphic novel that tells the story of Marjane Satrapi's childhood during the Iranian Revolution and her experience with the changing culture of Iran.<sup>48</sup>

**Challenged for:** gambling, offensive language, political viewpoint, "politically, racially, and socially offensive," "graphic depictions".<sup>49</sup>



advocacy. According to Executive Director Joan Bertin, NCAC staff work closely with local parents, teachers, students and other concerned residents to encourage them to become actively engaged in censorship debates. “When community members speak up, the vast majority oppose censorship, support the freedom to read, and understand the educational value of reading widely.”<sup>50</sup> The Coalition supports community efforts with joint letters co-signed by member organizations that explain the legal and educational arguments against censorship and schools’ legal obligation to rely on education criteria, rather than parental preferences, in making curricular decisions.<sup>51</sup>

If there is no local policy in place governing book challenges, the ALA or NCAC might help the teacher or librarian to find advocates—the head of the PTA, a teacher, an especially articulate student—who might speak up at a school board meeting and suggest the adoption of such a policy. The ALA or NCAC might also send a letter to the principal, the superintendent, or the review committee, urging officials to follow sound educational and constitutional principles.<sup>52</sup> The letters often include references to relevant First Amendment case law, including the Supreme Court’s 1982 decision in *Board of Education v. Pico*, a case challenging the decision of a local school board in New York to remove several books from the junior high and high school libraries because they saw the books as “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy.”<sup>53</sup> Although the Court emphasized that “local school boards have broad discretion in the management of school affairs,” it held that students’ First Amendment rights had been violated by the removal of the library books:

[T]he right to receive ideas is a necessary predicate to the recipient’s meaningful exercise of his own rights of speech, press, and political freedom...such access prepares students for active and effective participation in the pluralistic, often contentious society in which they will soon be adult members.<sup>54</sup>

The Court also noted the particular importance of libraries for students’ personal growth and development:

[I]n the school library, a student can literally explore the unknown, and discover areas of interest and thought not covered by the prescribed curriculum... The student learns that a library is a place to test or expand upon ideas presented to him, in or out of the classroom.<sup>55</sup>

In addition, several appellate courts have held that parents do not have a right to demand that schools shield students from particular educational material, suggesting that book challenges brought by parents are unlikely to pass constitutional muster.<sup>56</sup> The First Circuit, considering a lawsuit brought by parents challenging a mandatory sex

education program at their children’s school, ruled:

If all parents had a fundamental constitutional right to dictate individually what the schools teach their children, the schools would be forced to cater a curriculum for each student whose parents had genuine moral disagreements with the school’s choice of subject matter. We cannot see that the Constitution imposes such a burden on state educational systems, and accordingly find that the rights of parents [to choose a private school or specific educational program] do not encompass a broad-based right to restrict the flow of information in the public schools.<sup>57</sup>

One of the highest-profile recent book challenges has played out over the last few years in Virginia. Laura Murphy was upset when her son, a senior in high school in Fairfax County, was assigned to read the novel *Beloved* (Vintage) by Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison. *Beloved*, set after the Civil War, is about a woman haunted by the ghost of the daughter she killed to protect her from being violated by white slaveholders.<sup>58</sup> Murphy’s son said he had nightmares after reading the book, which he found “disgusting and gross.”<sup>59</sup> *Beloved* is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, but Murphy told *The Washington Post* the book’s literary merits did not matter—it should automatically be disqualified from the curriculum because it contains bestiality, infanticide, and gang rape.<sup>60</sup> After Murphy tried and failed in 2013 to have the Fairfax County School Board remove the book from Fairfax County classrooms, she appealed to the state Board of Education to amend the regulations regarding parental control over reading material.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, she lobbied state legislators to write a new law.<sup>62</sup>

The bill that emerged would have required teachers from kindergarten to grade 12 to notify parents of classroom materials with “sexually explicit content” ahead of time so they could opt out and request an alternate assignment.<sup>63</sup> The bill was unanimously passed in the Virginia House in February 2016 without debate.<sup>64</sup> The Senate passed the bill in a split vote, 22 to 17.<sup>65</sup> The bill’s sponsor, Representative R. Steven Landes (R), argued that parents should have the opportunity to make decisions about what their children are exposed to in the classroom, just as they do to decide what movies they watch or video games they play.<sup>66</sup> Senator Janet D. Howell (D) voted against the bill. “Great literature is great because it deals with difficult human conditions, not because it’s easy,” she said.<sup>67</sup> A coalition of organizations, including PEN America, urged Governor Terry McAuliffe to veto the bill, arguing that it would undermine the education of students in the state and raise constitutional concerns.<sup>68</sup>

Governor Terry McAuliffe vetoed the bill. In his veto message, he argued that the bill was unnecessary because the state Board of Education was already considering the issue,

and also stated that decisions on public school reading material are best left to local school boards, which “are best positioned to ensure that our students are exposed to those appropriate literary and artistic works that will expand students’ horizons and enrich their learning experiences.”<sup>69</sup> McAuliffe’s veto message also noted that “[n]umerous educators, librarians, students, and others involved in the teaching process have expressed their concerns about the real-life consequences of this legislation’s requirements,” which could have resulted in works being labeled “sexually explicit” and thus subject to parental approval based on a single scene without consideration of broader context.<sup>70</sup> Among others, the ALA’s James LaRue noted his concern that “The focus of this effort might be to discourage the use of this book altogether—and that’s the chilling effect.”<sup>71</sup>

Laura Murphy argued that the material contained in *Beloved* was inappropriate for a high schooler. The incidents depicted in the book are indeed deeply troubling, including the rape of female slaves by their owners, extreme violence, and many other forms of depravity. The harshest

material in *Beloved* is grounded in historical facts from the era of slavery, underscoring the role that books like it can play in helping students come to grips with one of the most shameful periods of American history. There are no bright lines when it comes to the age at which students are ready to confront disturbing subject matter; students mature at different rates, and grappling with difficult material may have a different effect on a younger student than an older one. Teachers, school administrators, and local school boards make considered judgments that exposing children to particular material can benefit them in their intellectual, academic, and social development. Insisting that an entire school or even state school system defer to the subjective judgments of individual parents about what material can appropriately be taught in the classroom is a recipe for lowest-common-denominator curricula that put the avoidance of controversy ahead of the imperative of a broad and challenging education. Such parental demands are also likely unconstitutional, as noted above.

Schools have a responsibility to educate students about

## LGBTQ REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN’S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Although much of the conversation around “diverse books” focuses on race, the need for broader inclusion and representation in children’s publishing is not limited to books by or about people of color. One of the primary roles of children’s books is to provide a reflection and affirmation of kids’ identities and worlds, which encompass not only ethnicity and race, but also gender and sexuality. Unfortunately, children’s and young adult books exploring the experiences of LGBTQ people are scarce. Author Malinda Lo, who has tracked LGBTQ young adult titles on her blog Diversity in YA, found that although the numbers of such books have risen fairly steadily from 1969 onwards, there are still very few published each year—29 in 2013, and 47 in 2014, or about only 1 percent of all young adult titles.<sup>77</sup> Of the 47 LGBTQ books published in 2014, only half were published by major commercial publishers, which have wider distribution channels and make the books available to mass markets.<sup>78</sup>

Of the LGBTQ titles that do make it to libraries and bookstores, many face challenges by parents who deem the content inappropriate for children and fight to ban the books from public venues. *And Tango Makes Three* (Simon and Schuster), a children’s book based on a true story about two male penguins who raise an adopted chick together, has consistently been featured on the American Library Association’s top ten list of most frequently challenged books since 2006.<sup>79</sup> Justin Richardson, who authored the book with Peter

Parnell, responded to allegations that the book promotes homosexuality, stating “We wrote the book to help parents teach children about same-sex parent families. It’s no more an argument in favor of human gay relationships than it is a call for children to swallow their fish whole or sleep on rocks.”<sup>80</sup>

*My Princess Boy* (KD Talent), a children’s book which explores gender identity and expression, faced similar attacks at a public library in Texas. The book, written by Cheryl Kilodavis and illustrated by Suzanne DeSimone, tells the story of a boy who likes to wear clothing typically associated with girls.<sup>81</sup> When it was featured in the children’s section of Hood County Library in Granbury, Texas, the author and the librarian came under fierce attack by parents who claimed the book (and another book in the library, *This Day in June*, which features an LGBTQ pride parade) “program[med] children with the LGBTQ agenda” and encouraged “perversion.”<sup>82</sup> Granbury City Councilwoman Rose Myers said that the books should be removed from the children’s section because they weren’t age-appropriate: “Can a 4-year-old understand the content of this book without the help of an adult? In my opinion, no.”<sup>83</sup> Yet the content of *My Princess Boy* is inspired by the author’s own son, a toddler who likes to wear dresses, jewelry, and high heels.<sup>84</sup> In response to the controversy, the library’s director Courtney Kincaid said, “We’re here to serve the entire community, not just certain religious groups or political groups. Lesbians and gays are in

the darker sides of U.S. history, and literature can be one of the most effective vehicles for introducing upsetting subject matter in a space where students can discuss it with peers and teachers, as well as with their families, as part of their education. Preventing students from reading about such topics does not prevent those harsh facts from being true, and does young people a disservice by depriving them of opportunities to develop the skills to grapple with difficult issues, something they will inevitably need to do as adults. Speaking on a panel about diversity in children's and young adult literature, writer Daniel José Older noted, "People of color don't have the luxury of being able to sugarcoat history to our children...The role of literature is to tell us the difficult truths...to arm us for the world in all of its ugliness."<sup>72</sup> Author Christopher John Farley, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* about the value of addressing dark subject matter in children's literature, argued that "Novels can help provide kids with a moral architecture to house ideas about the world. If they are steered away from books that deal with issues they may

face in school or on the playground, they may be denied the intellectual tools to deal with vexing problems."<sup>73</sup> The 2016 fight over *Beloved* in Virginia also suggests another troubling aspect of many book challenges. Books that address issues of race or that depict people of color are more likely to be targeted in book challenges than those that do not. In an analysis of the American Library Association's annual "Ten Most Challenged" list of titles from 2000 to 2014, young adult author Malinda Lo found that more than half of the ten most challenged books each year involved issues of race, sexuality, or disability, or included characters who are people of color, LGBTQ, or have disabilities—other cultural fault lines.<sup>74</sup> In 2015, eight out of ten of the most challenged titles dealt with such themes.<sup>75</sup> The trend is especially concerning given the relative paucity of children's and young adult books by or about people of color or representing other types of diversity, which this report addresses below. In this sense, book challenges are part of larger cultural battles. The message is clear, Lo wrote: "Diversity is actually under attack."<sup>76</sup>

this community and they deserve to have some items in this collection."<sup>85</sup> The library board and the county's board of commissioners ultimately ruled to allow the book to remain on library shelves, after the county attorney stated that removal would constitute "unlawful censorship."<sup>86</sup>

Of the American Library Association's top ten most frequently challenged books of 2015, in three of the cases the grounds for the challenges center on subject matter relating to sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>87</sup> One such title is Susan Kuklin's award-winning young adult book, *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* (Candlewick).<sup>88</sup> A collection of true stories, *Beyond Magenta* follows the emotional and physical journeys of six transgender or gender-neutral teenagers as they find and learn to express their gender identity.<sup>89</sup> When it was first published, the book was celebrated by advocates for transgender rights for its honest and in-depth examination of the complexities of being transgender, and was named the 2015 Stonewall Honor Book, as well as one of Publishers Weekly's Best Young Adult Books of 2014.<sup>90</sup> Kuklin has said that she wasn't even aware that her book was so frequently challenged until she came across the information online.<sup>91</sup>

In an interview with CBS News, Kuklin ascribed the backlash against LGBTQ books to a climate of fear: "This is dangerous knowledge. It's scary to people because they don't understand it. Once you get to understand it, it's no longer

frightening. But there's that period before it happens, where there's so much pushback and so much fear."<sup>92</sup>

As LGBTQ books continue to be challenged in schools and public libraries, access to these titles is also diminishing rapidly in private bookstores. In the past few years, a number of major LGBTQ bookstores have shut down due to poor sales. New York's Oscar Wilde Bookshop shut down in 2009, and since then, Lambda Rising in Washington D.C., A Different Light in San Francisco, and Outwrite Bookstore and Coffeehouse in Atlanta have met the same fate.<sup>93</sup> Recently, Giovanni's Room, the oldest gay bookstore in America, also closed its doors.<sup>94</sup> Little shelf space for LGBTQ books remains, and as a result, children and young adults are denied proper representation of their identities and their worlds.

These endangered books play a significant role as safe havens for the LGBTQ community, creating characters and settings with which children and teens can identify. Jeffery Self, author of the young adult book *Drag Teen* (Scholastic), explained the importance of LGBTQ representation: "I think there's something about owning identity and an irreverent look and subverting what we're expected to be in the norm of culture...it's important that we teach young queer people that this community is far bigger than what the mainstream might tell them and show them."<sup>95</sup> When LGBTQ books disappear from shelves, so too do the mirrors and windows that reflect the diversity of experiences and identities in our society.

# SOFT CENSORSHIP

## The Books That Never Make It to School Shelves

Direct challenges to books have a broader impact than just targeting one book for removal from a library or course syllabus. Librarians' and teachers' awareness that a book may raise objections creates a chilling effect. Some children's and young adult books are not challenged because they never even make it to a classroom or in a school's library. The work of Kiera Parrott, the reviews director at *School Library Journal*, has put her in contact with hundreds of librarians who write reviews of children's books, and often confide in her about their own soft censorship—"that dirty little secret," she calls it.<sup>96</sup> Many librarians, teachers, and school administrators freely admit that they decline to order certain books out of fear that someone might find the content objectionable. Or they order the books, but keep them in special sections, locked cabinets, behind the librarian's desk, or put stickers on the covers to show they belong to a special category, acknowledge Parrott, LaRue, and several authors PEN America spoke with who have found their books so categorized.

In 2009, *School Library Journal* surveyed 654 school libraries and found widespread reports that librarians were avoiding books on sensitive themes, including sexual content, adult language, violence, LGBTQ identity, racism, and religion.<sup>97</sup> Some 70 percent of respondents said they would not buy controversial books for fear of a negative reaction from parents. They also feared the response of administrators (29 percent), the community (28 percent), and students (25 percent). Some 23 percent of respondents said their own personal objections to controversial topics would stop them from ordering a book.<sup>98</sup> And half of those surveyed had experienced a book challenge.<sup>99</sup> *School Library Journal* recently conducted another similar survey, but at time of writing, had not released the results. The National Council of Teachers of English at time of writing was surveying thousands of teachers about censorship, including asking whether they had ever decided against using particular instructional materials to avoid controversy.

No matter how acclaimed the book, even a single word that may raise objections can prevent it from even being ordered for a school library. Author and former librarian Susan Patron won the 2007 Newbery Medal, one of the most prestigious children's literature awards, for her book, *The Higher Power of Lucky* (Simon and Schuster).<sup>100</sup> On the first page of the book, a character says that he saw a rattlesnake bite his dog on the "scrotum." Elementary school librarians proclaimed all over listservs and social media sites that because of this word, they would not order the book—either because they personally felt it was

inappropriate, or because they expected parents to feel that way, *The New York Times* reported.<sup>101</sup>

That level of sensitivity continues today, several teachers and librarians say—especially when the book also deals with sexuality or race. Meg Medina, whose book *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (Candlewick) is about bullying, says that school librarians have often told her that because of the word "ass" in the title, they keep her book in a special section rather than in general circulation, or ask students to bring permission slips to read it.<sup>102</sup>

African-American young adult author Coe Booth, whose prizewinning book *Tyrell* (Scholastic) is about a homeless teenager in the Bronx, says she often gets notes from teachers explaining that they love her book but can't teach it because it includes the slur word "nigger."<sup>103</sup> "I'm a white teacher, my students are mostly black and Latino, and I'm just uncomfortable with the N-word," one teacher wrote.<sup>104</sup> Booth responded, "It's ok to be uncomfortable, you should be uncomfortable with that word. You can be uncomfortable and still teach, and discuss why you're uncomfortable with the students."<sup>105</sup>

Book challenges have made teachers and librarians into unofficial moral referees—with little training, protection, or power. One librarian told *School Library Journal* that he finds ordering books inordinately stressful. "I literally think about it every day," said Joel Shoemaker, a junior high school librarian in Iowa City. "I've had friends who've lost their jobs, had their marriages destroyed, developed mental and physical illnesses due to the stress of having their collection-development decisions challenged formally, informally, or even merely questioned."<sup>106</sup>

Publishing houses are attuned to teachers' and librarians' worries that a book will spark controversy. "Teachers are our gateway to the kid," says Dick Robinson, the president and CEO of Scholastic.<sup>107</sup> "Schools are our gateway to the kid. We need to be sensitive to the fact that teachers don't want to be caught in between parents being angry about some topic and the school getting upset about some theme in the book."<sup>108</sup>

No author sets out to get banned, but ironically, book challenges can generate press and public attention, sometimes galvanizing support for a book that can drive sales. *And Tango Makes Three* (Simon and Schuster), a children's picture book by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell about two male penguins raising a chick, shot up Amazon's best-seller list after the ALA named it the most challenged book of 2008 due to parental complaints about its "homosexual undertones."<sup>109</sup> Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis* (Pantheon), an autobiographical account of Satrapi's life in Iran, was banned by Chicago Public Schools CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett for "graphic language and images"—after which it experienced a boost in sales at local bookstores.<sup>110</sup>

With soft censorship, in contrast, there's no public discussion and no opportunity to provoke a flood of support—books just quietly disappear from view.



## ABSENT STORIES

### A Dearth of Children's and Young Adult Books about People of Color

That diverse books are disproportionately targeted in book challenges, and school libraries and classrooms may be less likely to order some books written by or about people of color to begin with, compounds the problem of limited access to diverse books for all children. The relative scarcity of these books deprives children of valuable learning experiences and, especially for children of color, may dampen their enthusiasm for reading, because they rarely encounter characters who look or live like them.

The missing stories of children and young adults of color have a profound impact on all children, says Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, an assistant professor of literacy in the education school at the University of Pennsylvania and an expert on race in children's literature. White kids often cannot imagine the experience of children of color—and kids of color often do not see a reflection and affirmation of their own rich imaginative worlds. She calls it an "imagination gap."<sup>11</sup>

The problem is not a new one. In 1965, just over a decade after the Supreme Court's landmark desegregation

decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* Nancy Larrick published an article entitled "The All-White World of Children's Books" in the *Saturday Review*.<sup>12</sup> The piece was inspired by a question by a 5-year old black girl who asked why all the stories she read were about white children. At the time, Larrick chronicled, during the previous three-year period, just four-fifths of one percent of works examined included contemporary black American characters. Larrick commented, "Across the country . . . 6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them."<sup>13</sup>

Several authors have spoken eloquently about the importance of seeing yourself reflected in books.

Walter Dean Myers:

I realized that this was exactly what I wanted to do when I wrote about poor inner-city children – to make them human in the eyes of readers and, especially, in their own eyes. I need to make them feel as if they are part of America's dream, that all the rhetoric is meant for them, and that they are wanted in this country...Books transmit values. They explore our common humanity. What is the message when some children are not represented

in those books?...Where are black children going to get a sense of who they are and what they can be?"<sup>14</sup>

Junot Díaz:

You guys know about vampires? You know, vampires have no reflections in a mirror? There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn't see myself reflected at all. I was like, "Yo, is something wrong with me? That the whole society seems to think that people like me don't exist? And part of what inspired me, was this deep desire that before I died, I would make a couple of mirrors. That I would make some mirrors so that kids like me might see themselves reflected back and might not feel so monstrous for it."<sup>15</sup>

Access to diverse books is not just important for children of color, of course. For all children, a crucial part of education is learning about differences, learning to value other cultures, histories, and experiences, and understanding the breadth of experiences that comprise both our own society in the U.S. and the wider world. Education can also help children to see truths about society. A book collection that misrepresents the world children see around them presents a skewed view of the world and does children a disservice. For children being raised in a majority minority nation and in an increasingly globalized world, navigating diversity will be an essential life skill.

Some librarians and teachers reportedly decline to order books about people of color for their schools not because the subject matter is objectionable but because they believe these books will be of less interest to predominantly white student populations. Children's literature analysts say this is a longtime problem. Rudine Sims Bishop, a scholar of multicultural children's literature who is a professor emerita at Ohio State University, has written, "...historically, children from parallel cultures had been offered mainly books as windows into lives that were different from their own, and children from the dominant culture had been offered mainly fiction that mirrored their own lives. All children need both."<sup>16</sup>

Several authors who write about characters of color say they are well aware that some schools, especially those whose student body is comprised primarily of white, middle-class kids, shy away from their work. One teacher told African-American author Coe Booth, whose main character in the book *Tyrell* (Scholastic) is a black, homeless boy in the Bronx, "Our kids won't relate to it." The teacher said, "We only have two ethnic students in our

school district, why should we have your books in our district?"<sup>17</sup> In a panel held at the Bank Street College of Education during an April 2016 conference on children's literature and censorship, Booth added that her books are often displayed, if at all, only during Black History Month.<sup>18</sup>

Even beyond the need to traverse this imagination gap, the dearth of diverse books perpetuates the pernicious presumption that white narratives have more value than narratives of other cultures, ethnicities, or colors. Exposure to diverse books not only does children the service of preparing them to navigate a more diverse world, but helps enable them to put their own life experiences in perspective by recognizing from an early age that their cultures, behaviors and norms are not universal.

Assuming that white, well-off kids will not be interested in stories about poor, black kids risks perpetuating these gaps. It also makes the mistake of assuming that white children will not find common ground in stories about children who are different from them, authors of color say.

"I grew up in the Bronx, my whole school was black and Latino," says Booth. "We read *The Great Gatsby*, *The Catcher in the Rye*. It's not seen as important for the white kids to read books about the brown people." But white kids do read her books, Booth says. "I get a lot of letters from students saying, 'I'm not supposed to connect with this, but I do,'" says Booth. "*I'm a white kid from Ohio but my dad is in jail*. Kids can see thematically," Booth says. "They connect with it, in a different way than we'd think. It's a limited vision of what people are interested in."<sup>19</sup>

Even when teachers and librarians go looking for books about kids of color, they can be hard to find. More than 50 years after Nancy Larrick's historic call to action in the *Saturday Review*, relatively few children's books about children of color, or written by authors of color, are published at all. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) has conducted an annual survey of diversity in children's literature since 1985. Of about 2,500 books published in 1985, only 18 were written or illustrated by African-Americans.<sup>20</sup> By the early '90s, the number had gone up to about 100 books a year, and years of research by the center show that the number of children's books created each year by African-Americans has bounced around a bit, but remained roughly flat ever since, averaging 85 books per year.<sup>21</sup> "We seem to have plateaued," says Kathleen Horning, the director of the center.<sup>22</sup>

In 2015, the most recent year for which the CCBC has published data, of 3,400 books tracked, books by African-Americans numbered 106 (3 percent), books about African-American characters or content 269 (8 percent), books by Latino authors numbered 58 (1.7 percent) and books about Latino characters or content numbered just 82 (2.4 percent of total books surveyed).<sup>23</sup> The level of under-representation is severe in terms of the population of public elementary and secondary school students.

***“As I discovered who I was, a black teenager in a white-dominated world, I saw that these characters, these lives, were not mine,” wrote author Walter Dean Myers. “What I wanted, needed really, was to become an integral and valued part of the mosaic that I saw around me.”***

In 2013, the most recent year for which data is available from the National Center for Education Statistics, black students comprised 16 percent of the school population, Latinos 25 percent, and Asians, Native Americans and multiracial students made up another 9 percent of the population—adding up to 50 percent of students in public schools.<sup>124</sup> Today, children of color form approximately half of all public school students, and they will soon comprise a majority of the children growing up in the United States.<sup>125</sup> As the CCBC put it in an essay that described its most recent findings, “Are the numbers where we’d like them to be? Where they should be after so many people have been calling attention to the need for diversity for years? No. Not even close.”<sup>126</sup>

In recent years, authors of color have started a more robust public conversation about the abysmal levels of diversity in children’s literature. The celebrated children’s and young adult author Walter Dean Myers, whom the Library of Congress named the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature for 2012, published an op-ed in *The New York Times* in 2014 called “Where Are the People of Color in Children’s Books?”<sup>127</sup> He described his own adolescence, spent escaping his problems by voraciously reading books—all about white people. “As I discovered who I was, a black teenager in a white-dominated world, I saw that these characters, these lives, were not mine,” he wrote. “What I wanted, needed really, was to become an integral and valued part of the mosaic that I saw around me.”<sup>128</sup>

His son and collaborator, the author and illustrator Christopher Myers, wrote a companion piece published the same day in the *Times*, in which he argued that children of color he knows turn to books as they are “searching for their place in the world...deciding where they want to go.” The characters who look like them often only appear in books about specific race-related subjects, he says. These are characters in “historical books that concern themselves with the legacies of civil rights and slavery”—but they never “traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination or personal growth.”<sup>129</sup>

Meanwhile, the books published by and about people

of color often hew to certain stereotypical themes—for instance, for African-American authors, “civil rights, basketball, and jazz singers,” according to Horning.<sup>130</sup> Several children’s authors of color said they wanted to see more books in which the character’s race is incidental to the plot. “Even when I was a kid, there were so few books that had black characters, and they were always a lesson. It was never a fun book—it was, “Now we’re gonna learn about slavery,” says Coe Booth. “I wanted to be the black Judy Blume, writing about growing up, boyfriends, first bras. We do those things! We grow up! We get our first bras!”<sup>131</sup>

Dick Robinson is well aware of the changing demographics and the growing numbers of children of color in schools. Most of Scholastic’s sales take place in schools—through book clubs, book fairs, and sales to teachers and librarians. “Those are the children we’re trying to reach to get them to buy books and read books,” he says. “From a sales point of view, you need to reach that population if you’re going to continue to publish books for children,” says Robinson.<sup>132</sup> “It is critical,” Robinson elaborates, “to present stories and characters with everyday life experiences that all children share.”<sup>133</sup>

If children’s publishers recognize that they too need diverse books—not only on principle, but also to support their bottom line—why are they still publishing so few of them? Part of the answer may be found in the demographics of the publishing industry.

In 2015 Lee & Low Books, a 25-year-old New York City-based publishing company that specializes in multicultural children’s literature, conducted a groundbreaking Diversity Baseline Survey that put some hard numbers on the demographics of the publishing industry. Lee & Low surveyed 34 publishing houses and eight book review journals (not specifically focusing on children’s literature). The survey found that 82 percent of editorial staff at publishing houses are white, and only 2 percent are African-American. Another 4 percent are Latino, 7 percent Asian, 1 percent Native American, 1 percent Middle Eastern, and 3 percent biracial or multiracial.<sup>134</sup> About 84 percent are women, 86 percent identify as heterosexual, and 92 percent say they don’t have a disability.<sup>135</sup> Jason Low, the publisher

at Lee & Low, sees his survey as a step toward change. “Now that we have numbers, we can use them to track efforts toward improving representation,” Low says.<sup>136</sup> “If it doesn’t happen, economically it will affect the future of publishing,” he says. “It should be about growing and being a vibrant industry.”<sup>137</sup>

Those numbers can affect how many diverse books make it to publication, and which stories are selected. Chris Jackson, the African-American publisher and chief editor of Random House’s One World imprint, remarked in the *New York Times*, “For writers who are trying to challenge the pandering of the white gaze, if you have to go through a series of gatekeepers who are uniformly white, you’re going to end up with something that’s”—Jackson paused—“it’s going to be tough to preserve the integrity in the end.”<sup>138</sup>

Multiple factors drive the lack of diversity in the publishing industry. Unpaid and low-paid jobs are the most common points of entry into the field. Aspiring editors often take unpaid internships and jobs with low starting salaries as a way in the door. “It’s great if you’ve got a family that can help subsidize your early career in the literary arts, but if you don’t, it closes that door and makes that career choice sketchy,” says author Meg Medina.<sup>139</sup> The publishing industry has traditionally recruited its editorial staffs from elite universities, whose graduates have options for much higher pay. Several current editorial assistants at major publishing houses in New York City told PEN America they earned a starting salary of \$33,000 or \$34,000, figures that also appeared on the self-reporting job information site GlassDoor.<sup>140</sup> In a recent survey of the publishing industry, editorial employees overall had a median salary of just under \$54,000, and some 68 percent of respondents said low pay was their top complaint.<sup>141</sup> That makes the career path less desirable for well-qualified graduates who need to support themselves, save for the future, and may have student debt to retire. That the industry is heavily centered in New York City, one of the United States most expensive metropolises, compounds the problem. Commenting on the Lee and Low survey’s findings, Molly McArdle, *Brooklyn Magazine*’s books editor, noted: “Unmeasured in the survey is class, but the anecdotal evidence is vast. People who work in books make very, very little—and at the beginning of their careers too little to even live in the city of their employment. This one-two punch of there-is-no-one-here-like-you and you-literally-cannot-afford-to-take-this-job results in an industry that is, to its own detriment, made up of very much the same people.”<sup>142</sup>

Even when low salaries are not a barrier to entry, the hiring process may pose other hurdles for applicants from diverse backgrounds. The pathway to becoming an editor often involves working first as an editor’s assistant, and many editors choose assistants who are similar to themselves. As Alvina Ling, vice-president

**“You’re not supposed to identify with the character,” author Daniel José Older told editors. “Because you’re a 30-year-old white woman, and the character’s a 16-year-old brown woman.”**

and editor-in-chief for Little, Brown Books for Young Readers told the PEN America Roundtable on Equity in Children’s and Young Adult Book Publishing:

One of the greatest obstacles to creating a diverse workforce and publishing diverse titles is the fact that publishing has historically been a passion industry...And, it’s only natural that editors will have their own biased tastes. And because publishing, especially editorial, is an apprenticeship, we are often hiring assistants with the right ‘fit’ and looking for assistants who share our literary tastes, which only furthers the homogeneity of the industry.<sup>143</sup>

The lack of diversity in the publishing industry also impacts the likelihood that diverse books will be picked up for publication, according to some editors and publishing executives.

While multiple sets of eyes may read a manuscript, they do not necessarily reflect a diversity of interests, sensibilities or viewpoints. Since editors can only accept a few books, “most editors have to rely on acquiring the books they absolutely love,” according to Ling. That powerful connection might be less likely when editors and authors come from different backgrounds.<sup>144</sup> As Meg Medina argues, “This is not to say that a white woman can’t acquire amazing literature by people of color, but it would happen more with staff with connections to these communities.”<sup>145</sup>

The writer hears, “This isn’t right for our list,” leaving little room for argument, several writers told PEN America. The manuscript for Daniel José Older’s young adult book *Shadowshaper* was rejected 40 times, he says. “The editors said, ‘We don’t identify with the main character.





But it's such great writing.' I said, 'You're not *supposed* to identify with the character. Because you're a 30-year-old white woman, and the character's a 16-year-old brown woman.'"146 *Shadowshaper* was eventually picked up by an imprint of Scholastic, and became a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year.

Scholastic's Dick Robinson says he knows this disconnect is a problem, and that white editors should not make decisions solely from their own life experience. "They're not representing just people like themselves," Robinson says. "They have to publish for the kids who are out there."<sup>147</sup> Moreover, Robinson added, there is a need for more diverse editors.<sup>148</sup>

Books about people of color can run into other difficulties on their way through the publishing house's process. In 2009, an Australian author named Justine Larbalestier was preparing for the release of the U.S. edition of her YA book *Liar* (Bloomsbury) when she saw the planned cover. The main character is a short-haired black girl. But the art department produced a cover featuring a white girl with long, straight hair. "I have been hearing anecdotes from every single house about how hard it is to push through covers with people of color on them," the author wrote on her blog. "Editors have told me that their sales departments say black covers don't sell. Sales reps have

told me that many of their accounts won't take books with black covers. Booksellers have told me that they can't give away YAs with black covers."<sup>149</sup> The plan for the cover created a firestorm of online protest. "My teens would find the cover insulting and we can't purchase it," wrote one woman to the author.<sup>150</sup> Bloomsbury, the U.S. publisher, responded to the criticism and changed the planned cover image to a light-skinned black girl.<sup>151</sup> "I am extremely happy to have a North American cover that is true to the book I wrote," wrote Larbalestier on her blog. "I also hope we can prove (again) that it's simply not true that a YA cover with a black face on the cover won't sell."<sup>152</sup>

Seven years later, the problem persists. An author of color who wishes to remain anonymous but was interviewed by PEN America for this report, says that the cover art has presented problems for each of her several recent books. The art department wanted to make her heroine pale-skinned with straight hair for one book, even though the manuscript explicitly described her as dark-skinned with an afro. As the art staff presented new drafts of the cover, the author had to fight shade by shade for darker skin tone, and curl by curl for more African hair—and the skin never got as dark or the hair as tightly coiled as she had envisioned.<sup>153</sup>

# DRIVING THE CONVERSATION FORWARD

## Making Change and Challenging Offensive Representations of People of Color

Many stakeholders in the publishing industry are by now aware of the industry's shortcomings when it comes to representation in children's literature, thanks to the tireless efforts of many authors, agents, and publishing staff of color who have worked for years to bring attention to the lack of diversity in publishing houses, as well as the lack of representation of people of color in children's literature.

One inspiring model for how the publishing industry can advance in ensuring diverse representation in literature comes from the United Kingdom. After a 2004 survey highlighted the lack of ethnic diversity in the UK publishing industry, the Diversity in Publishing Network was formed to address the concerns of groups traditionally underrepresented within the industry. Years later, the group launched the Publishing Equalities Charter, an initiative whereby Charter members commit to promoting equality and diversity in publishing.<sup>154</sup> The Publishing Equalities Charter is one example of a proactive approach towards addressing the lack of diverse voices in the industry, but more such approaches are still needed—and are being actively demanded by families and communities.

Social media has allowed parents, young readers, children's and young adult authors, and others to communicate directly about the importance of diversity in publishing and representation in children's books, pushing this conversation forward and insisting that the publishing industry pay attention. In 2014, Ellen Oh, a young adult author, was preparing to attend BookCon, a public event associated with the publishing convention BookExpo America. The organizers had invited dozens of authors to appear on panels, but not a single person of color.<sup>155</sup> Oh, who was active on Twitter, shot off some tweets with the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks, inviting people to tweet about why they felt diversity in kids' books was important. Thousands responded.<sup>156</sup> Since then, BookCon has organized annual programs on diversity in publishing, and We Need Diverse Books has constituted itself as an organization that provides scholarships, internships, mentorships, and awards for authors who address diversity in kids' books.<sup>157</sup>

In the fall of 2015, Marley Dias, an 11-year-old girl who said she was tired of reading at school about white boys

and dogs, set a goal of collecting a thousand books about black girls. As she explained:

While I have books at home about black girls, the books at school were not diverse. Children do most of their reading in schools or because of schools. Teachers assign books that you must read. If those books are not diverse and do not show different people's experiences then kids are going to believe that there is only one type of experience that matters.<sup>158</sup>

As Marley gained media attention with the hashtag campaign #1000blackgirlbooks, she received books from authors, booksellers, and private donors.<sup>159</sup> To date, she has collected over 4,000 titles, which the Grassroots Community Foundation has catalogued in a searchable online database as a resource for schools, libraries, parents, and young readers.<sup>160</sup>

Social media platforms have also made possible a broader, and sometimes heated, conversation about representations of people of color that many people find troubling or offensive. African-American parents and other observers have recently mounted social media campaigns to directly confront authors, editors, and publishers about two picture books that they felt sanitized slavery, *A Fine Dessert* (Schwartz & Wade), and *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* (Scholastic).

*A Fine Dessert* was created by author Emily Jenkins and illustrator Sophie Blackall, both of whom had published a number of successful children's books and are well-regarded in the field. The book presents four different families making the same dessert, blackberry fool, across four centuries.<sup>161</sup> One of the families is an enslaved mother and daughter making dessert for their owners in an 1810 South Carolina kitchen. The girl is pictured smiling as she picks blackberries, and later, after she and her mother serve their owners at table, they hide in a wardrobe to sneak a taste of their creation—they "licked the bowl clean together. Mmmmm. Mmmmm. Mmmmm. What a fine dessert!"<sup>162</sup> Many readers noted on social media that since the story does not otherwise discuss or depict the institution of slavery, it leaves the impression that it might have been fun, and places the girl and her mother into the fictional category of "happy slaves." "I wonder if this author was enslaved would she delight in her and her enslaved child making dessert for her slave masters!" noted a reader in an Amazon review.<sup>163</sup> "These candy coated images of slavery aren't about teaching your kids reality, they are about you dodging reality," wrote Mikki Kendall, an African-American writer on Twitter.<sup>164</sup> Debbie Reese, whose blog "American Indians in Children's Literature" is influential in the children's book world, said that the story "provides children with a glossy view of this country and its history that is, in short, a lie about that history."<sup>165</sup>

**“The fight for representation has been a battle for many people for a very long time,” says Ellen Oh of *We Need Diverse Books*, “but it can sometimes feel like you’re inside a fishbowl yelling at people on the outside who can’t hear you.”**

The author said the furor caused her to reconsider the story, and she ultimately apologized in a comment on the blog “Reading While White” in November 2015.<sup>166</sup> She wrote, “I have come to understand that my book, while intended to be inclusive and truthful and hopeful, is racially insensitive,” wrote Jenkins. “I own that and am very sorry.” She said she had donated her author’s fee to *We Need Diverse Books*.<sup>167</sup>

Kiera Parrott of the *School Library Journal* said the book and the controversy surrounding it helped her understand her own blind spots and those of her industry. Parrott, who is white, had initially written a glowing review of *A Fine Dessert*. “Simply delectable,” she called it.<sup>168</sup> She was challenged on Twitter. “At first, I didn’t understand,” she told a panel on censorship at the Bank Street College of Education, because she had not considered how differently a person of color might react to the story.<sup>169</sup> But she listened. “I’ve been following all of these conversations with deep interest,” she wrote on Twitter. “Sometimes with a burning face. Sometimes with confusion.”<sup>170</sup> “I’ve come to see what I was blind to,” she continued. “What I saw as a conversation starter, others experienced as a slap in the face to a history they live with every day.”<sup>171</sup> It was a lesson for her, she said, as a white person in a largely white industry focused on qualitative judgments: “what I find ok, or comfortable, is not necessarily how everyone else interprets this.”<sup>172</sup>

Soon afterward, she helped create a new online diversity training course for reviewers at *School Library Journal* to help them recognize and reconsider their own assumptions when evaluating books. Parrott thinks such training should be undertaken industry-wide to alert white decision-makers to important questions. “If they all look a lot like me, where are our blinders, what are we not seeing, what kind of cultural literacy do we need to see and determine these elements.”<sup>173</sup>

Following the controversy over *A Fine Dessert*, a new outcry erupted with the publication of *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*, another book about enslaved people making dessert for their owners. The book, by Ramin Ganeshram, illustrated by Vanessa Brantley-Newton, and edited by Andrea Davis Pinkney, one of the most respected black editors in children’s literature, depicts an

enslaved man named Hercules and his daughter, Delia, preparing a birthday cake for their owner, President George Washington, and dealing with a small problem: running out of sugar.<sup>174</sup> Both the illustrations and the story drew criticism. A *School Library Journal* review noted:

Brantley-Newton’s colorful, cartoon-style double-page illustrations, combined with the light tone of the text, convey a feeling of joyfulness that contrasts starkly with the reality of slave life. One spread depicts dancing feet and the hems of fancy dresses and shoes of the white revelers at the very top of the page. Hercules, Delia, and the other slaves are seen in the kitchen below, smiling with glee as they work on the cake, evoking a strangely cheerful and exuberant scene reminiscent of a Disney film.<sup>175</sup>

The book’s historical omissions and misrepresentations include that the real Hercules lived largely separated from his children, including his young daughter, who was kept on Washington’s plantation in Virginia, according to a deeply researched series about Hercules in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.<sup>176</sup> Washington was in the habit of rotating his Philadelphia slaves back to Virginia to skirt a Pennsylvania rule that allowed slaves owned by citizens of other states to be kept for only six months before they could claim their freedom. The real Hercules was forced into hard labor in Virginia not long after the birthday in question—and ran away from the Virginia plantation on Washington’s birthday the following year. Later, his daughter was asked by a visitor if she was upset that she might never see him again. She replied, “Oh! Sir, I am very glad, because he is free now.”<sup>177</sup>

Leslie Mac, a Black Lives Matter organizer, led a chorus of voices against the book. She talked about it on her podcast and began the hashtag campaign #Slavery-WithASmile. She wrote on Twitter, “Our goal is simply to provide a mechanism & platform to ensure that @Scholastic hears from those most affected by the decisions they make.”<sup>178</sup> Critics, sensitized by the controversy over *A Fine Dessert*, also panned the book. “A troubling depiction of American slavery,” wrote Kiera Parrott in the

*School Library Journal* review. “Not recommended.”<sup>179</sup>

Days after the book’s release, Scholastic decided to pull it from circulation. The book “made the mistake of showing children who appeared to be happy in what could have been an unhappy situation, being a slave,” says Scholastic CEO Dick Robinson.<sup>180</sup> “There wasn’t room in the book to explain the background of slavery and why it was an evil thing. You could very easily draw the wrong conclusion from looking at this book if you were a young child,” Robinson said, “That goes against our standards of appropriate presentation of subject matter.”<sup>181</sup>

The author of the book, who is of Trinidadian and Iranian descent, disagreed. In an article she wrote for *The Huffington Post*, Ganeshram said that in stopping publication, “the publisher silenced the story” of Hercules. She said her story was “twisted and misconstrued as a defense of slavery,” and noted she had raised concerns prior to the book’s publication about its illustrations and jacket copy with Scholastic, but “like most picture book authors, I had no authority to approve them.”<sup>182</sup>

PEN America joined a statement from the National Coalition against Censorship that acknowledged the book’s problematic content, but criticized the decision to withdraw it from circulation. As the statement argued, “There are books that can—and should—generate controversy. But those who value free speech as an essential human right and a necessary precondition for social change should be alarmed whenever books are removed from circulation because they are controversial.”<sup>183</sup>

Many others saw it differently. Daniel José Older wrote a rebuttal to the National Coalition against Censorship statement in which he argued:

“Pulling a book because it’s historically inaccurate and carries on the very American tradition of whitewashing slavery is classified as ‘censorship,’ while maintaining an ongoing majority white industry that systematically excludes narratives of color is just business as usual. Under that selective reasoning, those of us who don’t want children to be exposed to heinous caricatures of people of color or whitewashed versions of history must be content to sit on the sidelines...Books are dangerous; that’s why we love them. Stories matter, and the stakes are higher in children’s literature.”<sup>184</sup>

Meanwhile, Leslie Mac’s campaign evolved into a broader call for more and better representation of children of color, using the hashtag #StepUpScholastic. Mac has collected comments from schoolchildren on an associated Tumblr blog. “Why are all the kids who look like me enslaved?” asked a fifth grader. And one first grader

told Scholastic, “We looked at your magazines and we saw mostly white people and animals.”<sup>185</sup>

“The fight for representation has been a battle for many people for a very long time,” says Ellen Oh of We Need Diverse Books, “but it can sometimes feel like you’re inside a fishbowl yelling at people on the outside who can’t hear you.” Mobilization through social media channels have allowed activists to amplify their calls, she says. “Now we can’t be ignored.”<sup>186</sup>

While Scholastic defended its position to pull the book, the company says that it has been listening to the feedback of #StepUpScholastic has sought to reflect the objective of more diverse books as part of its business strategy. “I think now the balance may have shifted so in some of these communities, the parents are extremely demanding of improved schools, more resources for their children in the schools, more books, and more books about people of color,” says Dick Robinson. He said that this creates “a positive momentum for matching our children’s needs with a better flow of diverse books.”<sup>187</sup>

There are some signs that frustration over the paucity of diverse books has led to a rising threshold for the acceptability of children’s and young adult literature on diverse topics by authors who are not personally from the group depicted in the book. In one recent case, a critically lauded book, *When We Was Fierce* (Candlewick) by author e. E. Charlton-Trujillo, was postponed for publication after concerns over the use of a made-up dialect along with what some deemed as stereotypical characters.<sup>188</sup>

Jennifer Baker, Minorities in Publishing podcast creator and member of We Need Diverse Books, found Charlton-Trujillo’s novel “glaringly offensive.”<sup>189</sup> “When We Was Fierce was highly problematic from the inaccuracies to this very arm’s length approach, [and] the stereotyping of black characters specifically,” she said. “The made up dialect the author used was so egregious, it is horrible.”<sup>190</sup>

In another recent case, the picture book *There is a Tribe of Kids* (Roaring Brook), by Lane Smith has generated controversy around connecting the word “tribe” with images of children in lush natural surroundings with feathers in their hair, which, some critics say, evoke stereotypes.<sup>191</sup> Whereas anti-censorship advocates have raised concern that the tenor and substance of these controversies could result in censorship of sensitive works, activists on behalf of diverse literature maintain that the books, wittingly or not, risk feeding pernicious stereotypes. Against the backdrop of wider discrepancies in the availability of diverse literature, controversies over individual books have taken on increasing importance, and stoked passions on more than one side.

# MOVING FORWARD

## Best Practices and Approaches to Consider

As an organization dedicated to the safeguarding of free expression, PEN America will continue to work with its partners to ensure that book challenges do not threaten children's access to books that include diverse perspectives and characters. Presented here are several recommendations for authorities, parents, and community members who wish to uphold freedom of expression in the world of children's literature.

For librarians, teachers, and school administrators:

- Ensure that your school or local library has known, clear review policies in place for evaluating and deciding upon a book challenge. Such procedures should be designed with an eye towards upholding students' First Amendment rights, protecting the literary contributions of diverse books, and providing a transparent process so that books cannot be unilaterally banned by any one person. For further guidelines for appropriate review policies, download the National Coalition Against Censorship Toolkit: <http://ncac.org/resource/book-censorship-toolkit>
- Upon assigning or shelving books which may be uncomfortable for some, be prepared with an explanation for why the books have merit and should be made accessible.
- Consider participating in the annual Banned Books Week, organized by the Banned Books Week Coalition, or arranging other events to highlight the issue of book challenges and freedom of expression.

For parents, teachers, or librarians who are concerned that a book has been challenged within their community:

- Contact and inform groups like the American Library Association, the the National Coalition Against Censorship, and the Intellectual Freedom Center of the National Council of Teachers of English for assistance in responding to book challenges.<sup>192</sup> Contacting these groups to inform them of a book challenge, furthermore, helps ensure that data on book challenges is accurate.

Overall, PEN America underscores that, while parents' decisions over appropriate literature for their children is a matter of choice, teachers, principals, administrators, librarians and others must take a firm, united stand

against depriving entire populations and communities of books that may be uncomfortable for some.

But, as this report shows, much more is needed. It is not enough that children's books with literary merit are recognized for their value and protected from book challenges. The world of children's literature must also do more to encourage the publication of diverse books and create a pipeline that fosters much such books for the future.

Most decision-makers in the children's book world agree they need many more editors, marketers, agents, authors, illustrators, and publishers of color. Publishers have piloted projects or invested in specific programs to try to address these issues over the years, and some shared these with PEN America in interviews. Other editors, writers, and publishers participated in PEN America's roundtable discussion on equity in children's publishing and proposed their own ideas. We present some of the ideas here as a resource for people who are grappling with these efforts.

### For everyone:

- Take the Reading Without Walls Challenge, posed by National Ambassador for Young People's Literature Gene Luen Yang.<sup>193</sup>
  1. Read a book about a **character** who doesn't look like you or live like you.
  2. Read a book about a **topic** you don't know much about.
  3. Read a book in a **format** that you don't normally read for fun. This might be a chapter book, a graphic novel, a book in verse, a picture book, or a hybrid book.
- Set personal goals to help promote access to diverse books, especially if you are involved in the bookselling or publishing industry in some way. For example, booksellers can set a goal that every second or third book they recommend be diverse, and librarians can decide that a certain percentage of books in every display will focus on people or authors of color.<sup>194</sup>

### For publishing houses:

- Familiarize yourself with the many resources available to connect publishers and editors with writers of color and those who write about characters of color, and promote these among editorial staff. These resources include but are not limited to: the Asian American Writers Workshop, CantoMundo (a national organization of Latina/o poets), Cave

Canem (an organization for African American poets), Kimbilio Fiction (an organization for fiction writers of the African diaspora), Kundiman (a national organization for Asian American creative writing), Lambda Literary (an LGBTQ literary organization), Letras Latinas (the literary initiative at the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame), Kweli Journal (an online journal by and for writers of color), Writers of Color, VIDA: Women in the Literary Arts, and VONA Voices (a multi-genre workshop for writers of color).<sup>195</sup>

- Invest in efforts to diversify publishing staff, including:
  - Make sure job openings are posted widely and asking diversity organizations like those listed above and others to publicize the job openings to their memberships/social media followers.
  - Ensure that employees of color receive adequate mentoring opportunities.
  - Provide paid internships in the publishing industry, and programs to provide people from communities underrepresented in publishing with training, connections, and funding support to break into the industry.<sup>196</sup>
- Sponsor aspiring writers of color to attend writing

workshops, MFA programs, and other opportunities for development.

- Conduct diversity training for editors, teaching them to question their own assumptions and points of view and examine the hurdles to greater receptivity to stories with diverse characters and plotlines. Make clear that top leaders in the company prioritize greater diversity in books published.
- Promote transparency about diversity within the industry by participating in surveys about diversity in all its forms (including staff diversity), make such publicly available.
- Ensure that individuals with both personal and professional expertise review books on sensitive subjects regarding diversity prior to publication.
- Pool resources with fellow publishers on marketing and selling diverse books.
- Develop an accountability pact or charter whereby publishing houses pledge to take significant steps to improve how they develop, purchase, edit, and market more diverse books for children and young adults. The United Kingdom's Publishers' Association Equality in Publishing Charter could serve as a model.<sup>197</sup>

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