

Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?

By Walter Dean Myers

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Photo credit: Christopher Myers

Of 3,200 children's books published in 2013, just 93 were about black people, according to [a study](#) by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin.

Reading came early to me, but I didn't think of the words as anything special. I don't think my stepmom thought of what she was doing as more than spending time with me in our small Harlem apartment. From my comfortable perch on her lap I watched as she moved her finger slowly across the page. She probably read at about the third grade level, but that was good enough for the True Romance magazines she read.

I didn't understand what the stories were about, what "bosom" meant or how someone's heart could be "broken." To me it was just the comfort of leaning against Mama and imagining the characters and what they were doing.

Later, when my sisters brought home comic books, I got Mama to read them to me, too. The magazines and comics pushed me along the road of the imaginative process. When I got my first books — "The Little Engine That Could," "Bible Stories for Every Day," and "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" — I used them on the same journeys. In the landscape of my mind I labored as hard as I could to get up the hill. I stood on the plain next to David as he fought Goliath, and tasted the porridge with Goldilocks.

As a teenager I romped the forests with Robin Hood, and trembled to the sound of gunfire with Henry in "The Red Badge of Courage." Later, when Mama's problems began to overwhelm her, I wrestled with the demons of dealing with one's mother with Stephen Dedalus in "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." But by then I was beginning the quest for my own identity. To an extent I found who I was in the books I read. I was a person who felt the drama of great pain and greater joys, whose emotions could soar within the five-act structure of a Shakespearean play, or find quiet comfort in the poems of Gabriela Mistral. Every book was a landscape upon which I was free to wander.

In the dark times, when my uncle was murdered, when my family became dysfunctional with alcohol and grief, or when I realized that our economics would not allow me to go to college, I began to despair. I read voraciously, spending days in Central Park reading when I should have been going to school.

But there was something missing. I needed more than the characters in the Bible to identify with, or even the characters in Arthur Miller's plays or my beloved Balzac. As I discovered who I was, a black teenager in a white-dominated world, I saw that these characters, these lives, were not mine. I didn't want to become the "black" representative, or some shining example of diversity. What I wanted, needed really, was to become an integral and valued part of the mosaic that I saw around me.

Books did not become my enemies. They were more like friends with whom I no longer felt comfortable. I stopped reading. I stopped going to school. On my 17th birthday, I joined the Army. In retrospect I see that I had lost the potential person I would become — an odd idea that I could not have articulated at the time, but that seems so clear today.

My post-Army days became dreadful, a drunken stumble through life, with me holding on just enough to survive. Fueled by the shortest and most meaningful conversation I had ever had in a school hallway, with the one English teacher in my high school, Stuyvesant, who knew I was going to drop out, I began to write short columns for a local tabloid, and racy stories for men's magazines. Seeing my name in print helped. A little.

Then I read a story by James Baldwin: "Sonny's Blues." I didn't love the story, but I was lifted by it, for it took place in Harlem, and it was a story concerned with black people like those I knew. By humanizing the people who were like me, Baldwin's story also humanized me. The story gave me a permission that I didn't know I needed, the permission to write about my own landscape, my own map.

During my only meeting with Baldwin, at City College, I blurted out to him what his story had done for me. "I know exactly what you mean," he said. "I had to leave Harlem and the United States to search for who I was. Isn't that a shame?"

When I left Baldwin that day I felt elated that I had met a writer I had so admired, and that we had had a shared experience. But later I realized how much more meaningful it would have been to have known Baldwin's story at 15, or at 14. Perhaps even younger, before I had started my subconscious quest for identity.

TODAY I am a writer, but I also see myself as something of a landscape artist. I paint pictures of scenes for inner-city youth that are familiar, and I people the scenes with brothers and aunts and friends they all have met. Thousands of young people have come to me saying that they love my books for some reason or the other, but I strongly suspect that what they have found in my pages is the same thing I found in "Sonny's

Blues.” They have been struck by the recognition of themselves in the story, a validation of their existence as human beings, an acknowledgment of their value by someone who understands who they are. It is the shock of recognition at its highest level.

I’ve reached an age at which I find myself not only examining and weighing my life’s work, but thinking about how I will pass the baton so that those things I find important will continue. In 1969, when I first entered the world of writing children’s literature, the field was nearly empty. Children of color were not represented, nor were children from the lower economic classes. Today, when about 40 percent of public school students nationwide are black and Latino, the disparity of representation is even more egregious. In the middle of the night I ask myself if anyone really cares.

When I was doing research for my book “Monster,” I approached a white lawyer doing pro bono work in the courts defending poor clients. I said that it must be difficult to get witnesses to court to testify on behalf of an inner-city client, and he replied that getting witnesses was not as difficult as it sometimes appeared on television. “The trouble,” he said, “is to humanize my clients in the eyes of a jury. To make them think of this defendant as a human being and not just one of ‘them.’ ”

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.

Years ago, I worked in the personnel office for a transformer firm. We needed to hire a chemist, and two candidates stood out, in my mind, for the position. One was a young white man with a degree from St. John’s University and the other an equally qualified black man from Grambling College (now Grambling State University) in Louisiana. I proposed to the department head that we send them both to the lab and let the chief chemist make the final decision. He looked at me as if I had said something so remarkable that he was having a hard time understanding me. “You’re kidding me,” he said. “That black guy’s no chemist.”

I pointed out the degrees on the résumé that suggested otherwise, and the tension between us soared. When I confronted my superior and demanded to know what about the candidate from Grambling made him not a chemist, he grumbled something under his breath, and reluctantly sent both candidates for an interview with the chief chemist.

Simple racism, I thought. On reflection, though, I understood that I was wrong. It was racism, but not simple racism. My white co-worker had simply never encountered a black chemist before. Or a black engineer. Or a black doctor. I realized that we hired people not so much on their résumés, but rather on our preconceived notions of what the successful candidate should be like. And where was my boss going to get the notion that a chemist should be black?

Books transmit values. They explore our common humanity. What is the message when some children are not represented in those books? Where are the future white personnel managers going to get their ideas of people of color? Where are the future white loan officers and future white politicians going to get their knowledge of people of color? Where are black children going to get a sense of who they are and what they can be?

And what are the books that are being published about blacks? Joe Morton, the actor who starred in “The Brother From Another Planet,” has said that all but a few motion pictures being made about blacks are about blacks as victims. In them, we are always struggling to overcome either slavery or racism. Book publishing is little better. Black history is usually depicted as folklore about slavery, and then a fast-forward to the civil rights movement. Then I’m told that black children, and boys in particular, don’t read. Small wonder.

There is work to be done.

An author of books for children and young adults including “Monster,” and the previous Library of Congress National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature.

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