

#ownvoices for IASL: Curating a List of Authentic Voices for Indigenous Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

At the 2017 IASL Annual Conference, the Children's and Young Adult Literature Special Interest Group (CYAL SIG) discussed the creation of "Authentic Voices," a curated list of titles, authors, illustrators, and publishers identified by IASL members as sharing authentic voices from indigenous peoples around the world. "Authentic Voices" is envisioned to be a mirror for readers from these groups, a window for readers outside of these cultures, and a sliding glass door to promote engagement with all (Sims Bishop, 1990). This paper describes the need for such a list, important diversity movements and trends in children's and young adult literature including #weneeddiversebooks and #ownvoices, and some exemplars to be included on the list.

Keywords: children's literature, young adult literature, diversity, multicultural literature, indigenous literature

In 1990, Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop articulated the awesome metaphor of books as "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" which has been echoed by writers, librarians, educators, and many more who work to share the joy of reading with children. Sims Bishop noted that a window can reveal many different things as one gazes through it to see onto the other side, looks into it to see one's own reflection, or opens it and enters to experience something new and different (1990). Sims Bishop (1990) states that "literature transforms human experience" (ix). This is a foundational tenet for the work we do in the Children's and Young Adult Literature Special Interest Group (CYAL SIG) and focuses on an important part of being a school librarian: to celebrate and promote lifelong reading habits in children and young adults. In addition to managing the Gigglet Project, major objectives of the CYAL SIG include to:

- “Exchange information about current developments in the field, including collection development, author awareness, publisher access and issues;
- Share methods of promoting literature with children and young adults for their love of reading;
- Discuss methods of developing an appreciation of the place of literature in personal development and in the curriculum process;
- Report trends in children and young adult reading interests; and
- Identify research and research needs related to children and young adult literature” (IASL, n.d.).

Considering these objectives at the 2017 IASL Annual Conference in Long Beach, California, the CYAL SIG discussed the creation of a curated list of children’s and young adult literature suggested by IASL members. The specific intent of this list is to promote “Authentic Voices,” representing indigenous peoples from around the world and thus, the reach of our membership. This list includes culturally genuine representations of indigenous peoples and issues affecting indigenous groups. They are books created by indigenous people themselves who personally represent the culture they are writing about or illustrating. These authors and illustrators have personally lived and experienced the distinct and unique nuances of their culture in a way outsiders cannot claim. Indigenous perspectives were selected for this list as these groups have been particularly silenced and marginalised historically and it can be hard to find accurate and authentic titles to select and share. The CYAL SIG envisions “Authentic Voices” as a collaborative resource for school librarians and other educators to turn to when selecting and using indigenous literature with children and young adults.

Authentic Literature

Authenticity is not a new issue in the field of children’s and young adult literature. Nancy Larrick’s pivotal study “The All-White World of Children’s Literature” was published in *The Saturday Review* in 1965, and revealed what many young readers of color already knew: the cultures being reflected in the pages of most children’s book were not reflecting the diversity of their readership. While some progress has been made, the cultural homogeneity of children’s literature reflecting dominant mainstream culture persists today, over 50 years later.

The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has collected statistics on the books published by and about people of color and different cultures that come into their library since 1985 (CCBC, n.d.). This collection holds most of the U.S. trade books published each year so is a good baseline to consider the diversity of what is being published in American children’s and young adult literature. They specifically look for books by and about African/African Americans, American Indians/First Nations, Asian Pacifics/Asian Pacific Americans, and Latinos. The statistics have varied greatly from year to year, but there has been a steady increase across most of these groups since 2014 (CCBC, 2018). That being said, there is still an imbalance between the books written *by* people from these groups and books written *about* people from these groups. For example, of the 3,700 books received at the CCBC in 2017, there were 122 books *by* Africans/African Americans which is the highest number received since the statistics started being collected in 1985. However, also in 2017, there were 340 books *about* Africans/African Americans. Obviously, it is not assumed that all of the 122 books *by* Africans/African Americans were also written *about* Africans/African Americans, but there is still a disconnect between the numbers and the result is likely

authors from outside of this racial/ethnic group writing about the experiences of Africans/African Americans.

#WeNeedDiverseBooks (#WNDB)

Despite the recent increase in the diversity of children's and young adult literature measured by the CCBC since 2014, it was that year that the #WNDB movement started on Twitter in response to an all-white, all-male author panel at BookCon (WNDB, n.d.-a). The group is now a non-profit organisation supporting the need for and creation of diverse books representing the diverse readership of our world. WNDB takes a broad definition of diversity noting that, "We recognize all diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities" (WNDB, n.d.-b). This wide-ranging definition seeks to embrace a variety of groups, perspectives, and experiences.

A main focus of the organization is to "[advocate for] essential changes in the publishing industry" (WNDB, n.d.-b). This is particularly critical to the diversity of children's books given a 2015 survey from publisher Lee & Low Books (Low, 2016), "the largest multicultural children's book publisher in the United States" (Lee & Low Books, n.d.). The Diversity Baseline Survey collected demographic information including race, gender, orientation, and disability for the industry as a whole and at different levels including the executives, editorial staff, sales, marketing and publishing, and book reviewers. Findings revealed the cultural make-up of the publishing industry is quite homogenous, like the content of the books published, with the industry overall identifying as being 79% White/Caucasian, 78% Woman/Cis-woman, 88% Straight/Heterosexual, and 92% Nondisabled. (See more specifics from the survey at the Lee & Low website.) While this is not to say that just because someone does not identify with a particular cultural or social construct, they will not select or promote books from these particular cultural or social constructs, it is a notable finding. And this brings up another important movement in children's and young adult literature: #ownvoices.

#OwnVoices

This hashtag movement also started on Twitter in 2015 by science fiction and fantasy young adult writer Corinne Duyvis (n.d.-a). Duyvis suggested this hashtag be used to denote children's and young adult literature "about characters written by authors from that same diverse group". The protagonist and the author of the book share a marginalized identity in some way whether that be from living with a specific disability to being a person of color. The #OwnVoices movement stresses the personal, lived experiences of the authors and acknowledges that they have an important and authentic perspective to share with their readers. (See Duyvis's website for more useful information about #OwnVoices and using it.) Books representing #OwnVoices are particularly important to consider given the statistics presented by the CCBC and Lee & Low: that many authors and those in the publishing industry do not represent the diverse cultures of their readerships.

Exemplars for "Authentic Voices"

The CYAL SIG's "Authentic Voices" list will give IASL members an opportunity to share insider knowledge from the Indigenous cultures represented within our diverse global communities. This list recognizes that it is much easier for a person from that area to make suggestions about resources from that area. For example, members from the Southwest region of the United States may be better informed to suggest a book about the Navajo culture than someone from outside of that area. That being

said, we highlight some exemplars from our own corners of the world to be included as “Authentic Voices.”

Indigenous Australia

As shown in Figure 1, *Two Ways Strong: Jaz's Story* (2017) was written by The Deadly Mob, a group of Australian Aboriginal students from Concordia Lutheran College in Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia. These students come to this school from 12 different Indigenous communities across Australia. This book tells the story of the Indigenous students' experiences leaving their homes to attend boarding school, making this young adult novel a great example sharing "Authentic Voices" from Australian Indigenous communities. The book was created in collaboration with the Indigenous Literacy Foundation (ILF) which helps Indigenous communities and Indigenous youth build their literacy skills (ILF, n.d.-a). The Indigenous Literacy Foundation Program manager Tina Raye's comments about this book emphasizes the potential of *Two Ways Strong* to be that mirror, window or sliding glass door described earlier by Rudine Sims Bishop (1990). Raye notes:

Two Ways Strong is a powerful message and story for young Indigenous students attending boarding schools or thinking about attending boarding schools outside of their home communities...It's also an important story for the wider non-Indigenous community to learn about the many challenges these Indigenous students face. (ILF, 2017)

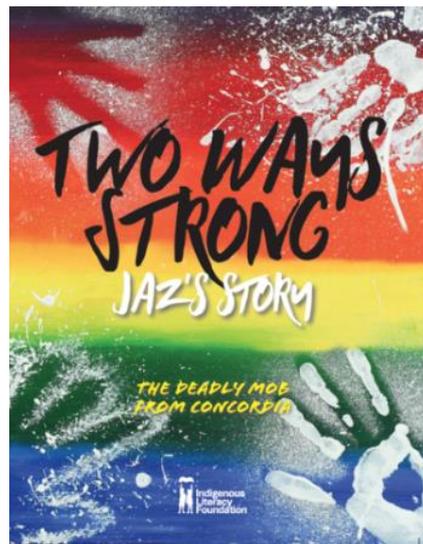


Figure 1: *Two Ways Strong: Jaz's Story* Written by The Deadly Mob from Concordia (2017) Published by the Indigenous Literacy Foundation in Australia (ILF, n.d.-b)

Further, the ILF publishes many similar books written and illustrated by Indigenous children and communities so their website would be a great resource to use when seeking out "Authentic Voices" from Indigenous Australia.

Author and illustrator Renee Fogorty shares another “Authentic Voice” from Indigenous Australia as a Wiradjuri woman (Magabala Books, n.d.-b) who created the picture book for lower primary school readers *Fair Skin Black Fella* (2010), shown in Figure 2.

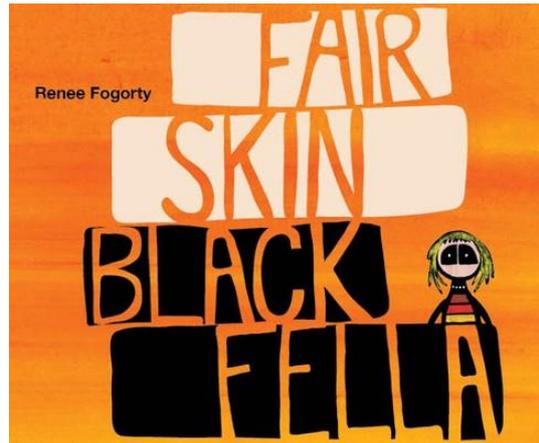


Figure 2: *Fair Skin Black Fella* Written and Illustrated by Renee Fogorty (2010) and Published by Magabala Books (n.d.-a)

This story is about a young girl named Mary who lives on a cattle station and is treated poorly by the other girls for the light color of her skin. Old Ned, an Aboriginal Elder, helps Mary to understand that being Aboriginal goes much deeper than skin color, emphasizing the strong sense of family, community, and country that Aboriginal culture encompasses. The Wiradjuri Nation of which the author and illustrator belongs is one of the largest Aboriginal nations in New South Wales (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1996) so she is writing this story as a personal member of this Indigenous group. Further, Magabala Books published this story and they are another well known Indigenous publisher out of Broome, Western Australia, supporting authentic portrayals of Aboriginal stories and Aboriginal groups (Magabala Books, n.d.-c).

First Nations in North America

American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL) is a blog website run by scholar Debbie Reese of the Nambe Owingeh tribe (Reese, 2014). AICL shares critical perspectives on resources by and about the First Nations in North America and engages in critical discussion about important issues like race, bias, and authenticity in children's and young adult literature. One of the AICL's Best Books of 2017 is *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection- Volume 2* (Reese, 2017). Funded by a Kickstarter campaign (2017), this collection of 15 comics and graphic novels was edited by Hope Nicholson (2017) and written by Indigenous peoples including their own specific traditions and aspects of their individual cultures. The cover is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection- Volume 2* (2017) edited by Hope Nicholson and published by Alternate History Comics Inc. (n.d.)

On AICL, Reese (2017) highlights one of the stories, “Water Spirits,” by Richard Van Camp (2017) who is a member of the Dogrib (Tlicho) Nation from Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories of Canada (Van Camp, n.d.) where this story is set. Reese notes that the comic addresses the destruction of the past and modern-day mining industry to the way of life for the Indigenous people living there, poisoning their water supply and food (2017). Van Camp and the other contributors to *Moonshot* give “Authentic Voices” to contemporary Indigenous issues in their respective communities, giving this collection of stories a genuine perspective and lived experience (Nicholson, 2017).

Next Steps for “Authentic Voices”

“Authentic Voices” is intended to be an ever-growing and evolving resource for IASL members and others as it will be readily available on our CYAL SIG webpage. We encourage suggestions and feedback on the development of this list about how to improve its efficiency and effectiveness to make it a more useful resource. Please send in your own contributions to the list, identifying the specific community and culture, so we can continue growing and sharing “Authentic Voices” representing the Indigenous communities of our IASL membership countries.

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