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Yes, but ... One Librarian's Thoughts About Doing It Right

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Yes, but ... One Librarian's Thoughts About Doing It Right

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HEATHER MCNEIL retired in September after 40 years of librarianship in Colorado and Oregon. She is now consulting and training on early literacy and storytime skills, as well as enjoying more opportunities to perform as a professional storyteller. She has also been contracted to write a book on social emotional learning at storytime. Heather lives in the forest outside of Bend. She reads three books at a time (one at the dining table, one in the bedroom, and one on audio), and enjoys writing teen historical fantasy, none of which have been published. Yet.

Here's the thing. All the conference programs, blogs, and conversations about diversity and inclusion have given me increased awareness and caused me to pause and reflect and question. I've cringed at practices of mine in the past, and delighted in the increasing abundance of beautiful books that feature people of color. I've learned a lot and have had more than one tough conversation with staff.

Yes, but ... I've also seen and heard opinions in the library world that potentially create more barriers. I've perceived attitudes that seem to shut down dialogue with, "I'm right, you're wrong. I understand, but you just don't get it."

This was not an easy article to write. I have struggled, rewritten, asked others to review, and rewritten again. But, as I prepare to retire after 40 years in the library profession, and after seeing many trends and issues ebb and flow, I offer my personal thoughts on diversity in the literary world that I, and perhaps others as well, have struggled with as a library professional.

Collection Development

Here at Deschutes Public Library we are lucky to be well-funded, and we have an excellent collection development department who stocks the shelves with important books such as *Dreamers*, written and illustrated by Yuyi Morales; *The Undeclared*, written by Kwame Alexander, illustrated by Kadir Nelson; *Want to Play Trucks?*, written and illustrated by Bob Graham; and *The Big Umbrella*, written and illustrated by Amy June Bates. We include them in booklists and displays. We promote them in book talks. We read them at storytime. We put them face out on the new books shelves. I asked Cheryl Weems, collection development librarian for the children's and teen collections, how well they circulate. "Better than they used to. There is such quality now, such beautiful books, and a good story is a good story."

That was wonderful to hear, but it must be difficult for libraries with limited budgets and very conservative communities to determine the priorities for the book budget. How do we balance spending the dollars according to our community's preferences, vs. purchasing books that represent cultural awareness and diversity but will possibly sit, unread, on the shelves? This does not include just picture books, which are somewhat easier to promote, but also chapter books, teen books, urban novels, etc.



Dr. Seuss

I am saddened to learn about his racist cartoons. I am disappointed at myself for not noticing the stereotypical illustrations in *If I Ran the Zoo*. I am relieved to know that his opinions changed over time, as have mine and most everyone I know. Goodness, I think back to my college days in the early '70s. I was certainly opinionated, but not very informed, about the Vietnam War. My world was the military world, raised on army bases and guided by protocol, expectations, and pride in my father. I was also absolutely unaware of the civil rights activities of the '50s and '60s. But now I know, and continue to try to be better informed.

Do we hold children's authors and illustrators to a higher standard when we suggest no longer promoting their literature because of their racist beliefs of fifty years ago that later changed?

The *Cat in the Hat* is now considered racist because of the comparison of the Cat to an African American in a minstrel show. Seuss himself wrote a minstrel show in college and performed in blackface. I'm also uncomfortable knowing that Lewis Carroll had a fondness for photographing young girls, Roald Dahl was blatantly anti-Semitic, and Orson Scott Card is homophobic. I clearly remember trying to read aloud *Peter Pan* to my daughter, and being very uncomfortable with J.M. Barrie's stereotypes. We talked about it. We put the book aside.

I'll repeat that. We chose to put the book aside. Let the parent or teacher decide. Offer more choices. I agree with the suggestion that if someone requests the *Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, the librarian could also recommend Louise Erdrich's *Birchbark House* series. Recent blogs seem to suggest it is our responsibility to caution customers about their choices, advise them about the stereotypes or prejudices—and I do not agree with that. I absolutely detest *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, but I can happily put it in the hands of a customer and then maybe recommend *Poetree* by Shauna LaVoy Reynolds or the lovely *Pandora* by Victoria Turnbull. Choices.

So, back to Seuss. Will children subconsciously absorb stereotypes and racism by reading *Cat in the Hat*? In a world that no longer offers minstrel shows will they see his gloves, facial characteristics and antics as representative of behavior that was intended to ridicule and belittle? Or will they just think he's mischievous like Bad Kitty, and hyperactive like David Shannon's *No, David*, and manipulative like every trickster tale ever told?

I think we are guilty of our own accusations when we reach the point of, "The author had racist beliefs early in his career, so we will not promote, display or recommend his titles." Whoa. To me, that smacks of a form of censorship, implying that we will promote, display or recommend only those titles that have been vetted and approved by ... whom?

Debbie Reese

Hoo boy. Opening a can of worms here. Believe me, I admire her work. I have heard her speak at ALA, I recommend her website to teachers preparing a Native American curriculum, I read her reviews. So when she was selected as the May Hill Arbuthnot speaker, I made sure I set aside the time to listen. Her speech was important and interesting. Until the Caldecott Medal. Ms. Reese implied that the 2019 committee did not choose wisely when they passed over Morales's *Dreamers*. And those are the kinds of accusations that do this movement toward inclusion and awareness a disservice. I served on the 2018 Caldecott Committee and the 2005 Newbery Committee. I know how intense, difficult, and challenging discussions can be. I know how fifteen voices and perspectives are shared, minds must



remain open, and voting results can be individually heartbreaking. To imply that the committee should consider the ethnicity or diversity of the author or illustrator, and not award those who have been awarded before, reflects a lack of knowledge about the criteria for the Newbery and Caldecott. Other awards were created for the purpose of a specific ethnicity, whereas the Newbery and Caldecott consider the entire volume of that year's publications without considering an author's or illustrator's previous awards or ethnicity.

Reading While White

There are many who support the blog, *Reading While White*. I read their entries, and I appreciate what the writers are trying to achieve. I read them because I want to know what they're challenging. I read them because it is not comfortable. But after a while, I began to realize that all I was left with was a feeling of animosity (them) and failure (me). I also felt that they believe anyone who dares to disagree with their views about books, art displays, awards, etc. is W-R-O-N-G. Or, at least, seeing through an uninformed white lens. That does not help promote dialogue. That does not enlighten me or encourage me. I just feel bad. Maybe that's what they want—to make those of us who still like *Cat in the Hat* to feel bad.

My awareness and desire to understand more have been much better served by resources such as:

- The Scene on Radio podcast series, "Seeing White"
- Rebecca Nagle's podcast, "This Land"
- Robin Di Angelo's book, *White Fragility: Why It's Hard to Talk to White People About Racism*, as well as YouTube interviews
- Samini Ali's TED Talk, "What Does the Quran Really Say About a Muslim Woman's Hijab"
- Maya Gonzalez's blog, "Children's Books as a Radical Act"
- The amazing books that are being published, such as *When Aidan Became a Brother*, written by Kyle Lukoff and illustrated by Kaylani Juanita; *Where Are You From?*, written by Yamile Saied Mendez and illustrated by Jaime Kim, and *Hope Nation: YA Authors Share Personal Moments of Inspiration*, edited by Rose Brock.

These resources give me a better understanding, or reassurance, and, sometimes, hope.

There are two things I am sure of. I absolutely know that discomfort is part of the movement, and that we need all these voices. We have to fight back to move forward. I also know that those who work in libraries are truly committed to the importance of literacy, to their communities, and to personal choice without judgment.

Yes, but ... Will the loudest, strongest voices allow—and hear—other voices? Will we work together or fraction off? Will we, as one colleague said to me, "overcorrect ourselves?"

I'm going to close with a personal experience I had many years ago. I've written about this elsewhere, so forgive me if I repeat, but it was a powerful experience that has shaped my attitude about stories, inclusion, and cultural divides. I am not African American, but I have



been fascinated by African folklore and animals ever since reading *Born Free* by Joy Adamson when I was about 10. Finally, I put myself horribly in debt and traveled around Kenya with a member of the Kikuyu people, listening to and recording stories. I always asked their permission to tell them, and they always looked at me like I was crazy to even ask. Of course, they said. Tell our stories.

A year later I was invited to present a program about my experience of collecting stories at the International Reading Association Conference in Charleston, SC. I was nervous because I am clearly not of African descent, and yet I was going to tell some of their stories and describe my experiences with the people and the animals. I showed slides (no PowerPoint back then), told stories, and told stories about the stories. When it was over, an African American woman walked up to me. She was wearing traditional West African clothing, which was colorful, dramatic and causing me even more uncertainty. She said, “When I walked in here and saw you, I thought, huh! But then I heard the stories that came from your heart, and I saw the love in your eyes, and I want to say just one thing to you. Sister!” She opened up her arms and gave me a big hug I have never forgotten.

That gift from her guided me toward believing we can eliminate boundaries and include more, not less. My experiences on the Caldecott and Newbery committees taught me the importance of being open to perceptions other than my own. Working with talented and dedicated library staff confirmed that best intentions prevail in libraries throughout Oregon. And *The Cat in the Hat* taught me that sometimes it’s okay to be just downright ridiculous. 🌍

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