Desperately Seeking Diversity: The Whitewashing of Young Adult Literature

Imagine this: You walk into your local bookstore and go to the young adult section to find a new summer reading book. You’ve heard that there are some great new books, and all your friends have recommended a particular author. You don’t find the book you want right away, so you browse. You check out the covers, start reading a few of the summaries on the backs, and begin to notice a strange pattern—almost all the characters are white. These books definitely don’t match the reality of your diverse community. What’s going on? Is it just this bookstore? Or are these really the only books that are out there?

Where’s the Rainbow? Not in the Publishing Industry

Sadly, this imbalance does exist in the representation of characters (and authors) of color in young adult books. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) reports that a mere nine percent of the 5,000 books for children and teens published in 2010 had protagonists of color and only seven percent were written by authors of color. Meanwhile, 2010 census data indicate that 47 percent of Americans under age 18 are people of color—that’s almost half of the youth population!

This dramatic underrepresentation of people of color extends into the publishing industry’s workforce. Dr. Zetta Elliott is an author and playwright who is a leading voice about the lack of diversity in the publishing industry. “You have to look at who the gatekeepers are,” Dr. Elliott told Teen Voices. “The gatekeepers are the editors, the artistic directors, the people in marketing, and those who have the power to make decisions about what gets published and what gets put on the shelf… There is a huge imbalance in terms of who gets to make decisions that results in a huge imbalance in terms of who is getting represented…The people who work in publishing are 99 percent white.”

Elizabeth Bluemle, a children’s book writer, blogger, and independent bookstore owner, agrees. In her 2010 Publishers Weekly blog entry titled “The Elephant in the Room,” Bluemle writes: “The number of publishing, editorial, art direction, sales, and marketing professionals in our field is tiny, and that’s not good for anybody. This discrepancy between the real world and the publishing world limits the range of books published, the intellectual scope of discussion, and, for the bottom-liners among us, greatly stunts the potential market.”
Judging by the Cover

To make matters even worse, the characters of color who do make it past the publishing gatekeepers are often shown on book jackets with lighter, more Anglo-Saxon features, a phenomenon known as white-washing. One of the most public and hotly debated cases of whitewashing is Australian author Justine Larbalestier’s book Liar. The main character, Micah, describes herself as black with nappy hair; but for the American edition of the book, Bloomsbury Press decided to use a model who had very light skin and straight hair.

When she saw the proposed cover, Larbalestier voiced her concern to the publisher, but to no avail. (You may be surprised to learn that authors have little or no input on the covers of their books—we were!) When reviewers saw advance copies of the book, they were outraged. They protested with blogs and letters to the publisher. Finally, Bloomsbury backed down and announced it would redo the cover. The new cover features a brown-skinned, curly-haired model, who some readers argue is still too light-skinned to match the protagonist’s self-description.

Misguided or Something Else?

Bloomsbury told Publisher’s Weekly: “We regret that authors have little or no input on the covers of their books—we were!” When reviewers saw advance copies of the book, they were outraged. They protested with blogs and letters to the publisher. Finally, Bloomsbury backed down and announced it would redo the cover. The new cover features a brown-skinned, curly-haired model, who some readers argue is still too light-skinned to match the protagonist’s self-description.

Vote with your wallet!

• Buy a book by or about a person of color for your friend’s birthday.
• Steer clear of mainstream bookstores that perpetuate an imbalance in the young adult book market. Instead, shop in independent bookstores, like the Flying Pig bookstore in Vermont, that feature a diverse selection of books with a person of color on the cover that have the full weight of a publishing house behind them.
• Start a book club! With a group of friends, read books by and about people of different backgrounds.
• Challenge yourself to read books that explore cultures different from your own. As Ari said, “Reading about teens just like yourself in all ways except skin color is a powerful and fun way to learn about other cultures and the world, and to grow in tolerance.”
• Write a petition to request more books by and about people of different backgrounds.
• Send an email to the major publishers of young adult books. Let them know that there is a market for more diverse books—and that market is you! Bloomsbury (childrenspublicity@bloomsbury.com) HarperCollins (harperteen@harpercollins.com) Little, Brown (childrenspublicity.generic@hbgusa.com) Penguin (youngreaderspublicity@us.penguingroup.com) Scholastic (tradepublicity@scholastic.com) Simon & Schuster (childrenspublicity@simonandschuster.com)

Join the blogosphere! If you see book covers that do not accurately reflect the protagonist, blog about it and read what other bloggers have to say.

Read widely and diversely.

• Challenge yourself to read books that explore cultures different from your own. As Ari said, “Reading about teens just like yourself in all ways except skin color is a powerful and fun way to learn about other cultures and the world, and to grow in tolerance.”
• Vote with your wallet!
• Read widely and diversely.

Sources
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com

Read widely and diversely.

• Challenge yourself to read books that explore cultures different from your own. As Ari said, “Reading about teens just like yourself in all ways except skin color is a powerful and fun way to learn about other cultures and the world, and to grow in tolerance.”
• Vote with your wallet!
• Read widely and diversely.

Sources
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com

Resources
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com

Read widely and diversely.

• Challenge yourself to read books that explore cultures different from your own. As Ari said, “Reading about teens just like yourself in all ways except skin color is a powerful and fun way to learn about other cultures and the world, and to grow in tolerance.”
• Vote with your wallet!
• Read widely and diversely.

Sources
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com

Resources
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com

Read widely and diversely.

• Challenge yourself to read books that explore cultures different from your own. As Ari said, “Reading about teens just like yourself in all ways except skin color is a powerful and fun way to learn about other cultures and the world, and to grow in tolerance.”
• Vote with your wallet!
• Read widely and diversely.

Sources
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com

Read widely and diversely.

• Challenge yourself to read books that explore cultures different from your own. As Ari said, “Reading about teens just like yourself in all ways except skin color is a powerful and fun way to learn about other cultures and the world, and to grow in tolerance.”
• Vote with your wallet!
• Read widely and diversely.

Sources
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com

Read widely and diversely.

• Challenge yourself to read books that explore cultures different from your own. As Ari said, “Reading about teens just like yourself in all ways except skin color is a powerful and fun way to learn about other cultures and the world, and to grow in tolerance.”
• Vote with your wallet!
• Read widely and diversely.

Sources
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com
• “Whitewashing in Young Adult Literature.” January 26, 2010. www.romanceinperil.com
• “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.” 2011. www.libraryocalypse.com