

## **A Moral Duty**

Laura Henry-Allain

Every autumn, I wait in anticipation for the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education's (CLPE) report, *Reflecting Realities, Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature*. The first report, in 2017, noted we were more likely to see an animal in a children's picture book than an ethnic character. Like, I imagine, most readers of this first report, I was not surprised or shocked. As a parent, a lover of books and a former teacher, I was all too familiar with this absence. However, there is a glimmer of hope. In 2017, the percentage of children's books featuring Black, Asian or minority ethnic characters was 4 per cent; this has increased to 20 per cent in 2021 which, while showing improvement, demonstrates that the publishing industry still needs to keep ethnic representation for all children high on its agenda.

Hot on the heels of CLPE's annual report in 2022, BookTrust published *Representation of people of colour among children's book creators in the UK, 2020-2021*, another must-read. It was noted in this report that in 2007, 4 per cent of

children's book creators were people of colour, and in 2021 it was 11.7 per cent. Looking at the above statistics reveals a disparity. It seems that books that are created *with* a diverse character are not necessarily *by* creators of colour; there is more than an eight per cent difference in terms of the colour of the creator and the published book in terms of diverse characters.

Although it is good to see an increase in both diverse characters and creators, there is still work to do within the publishing industry. For instance, how do we increase diversity in the industry – from authors and illustrators to editorial and sales – to include people who have the lived experience to publish stories that authentically show the nuances of diverse characters? How are publishers making sure that books that feature an ethnic character are also being created and marketed by people of colour? That said, it is equally important to give creators of colour the freedom from a burden of representation to write what they are passionate about across a wide range of subject matter.

While the publishing industry has made progress in increasing representation, more work clearly needs to be done in opening, and holding the door open to literacy for creators of colour. This must include those who are, for example, disabled or LGBTQ+ for an understanding of how intersectional stories should be

shared positively. This entails more than one-off competitions and incentives; it involves a holistic investment in people.

Why does this matter? It matters for children of colour who benefit from seeing themselves in books, and are encouraged to develop a strong self-identity; and it is important for other children to see positive representations of children of colour, so that they can develop a lasting awareness and knowledge of others from positive perspectives. To use Dr Rudine Sims Bishop's analogy in *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors* (1990): mirrors allow children to see themselves and their own experiences, windows enable them to look through into other worlds that they can compare with their own, and sliding glass doors allow them imaginative entry into those other worlds. How wonderful for children to see themselves as part of a global village learning and *leaning* into the worlds of others, recognising and appreciating similarities and embracing differences.

*CLPE: Reflecting Realities*

*Book Trust: Representation of people of colour among children's book creators in the*

*UK*

This piece was written in April 2023 and may not reflect updated research.

A recording of this text can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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