**The Answer To Implicit Racism Might Be In Children's Literature**

By Noah Berlatsky

1 - Could diverse protagonists reduce racial anxiety?

2 - Children's literature is a vast sea of white.

3 - Children’s literature is not a diverse space. Of 3,200 children's books published in 2013, only 67 were written by African-American writers, and only 93 centered on black characters. That's actually the lowest tally recorded since 1994, when the Cooperative Children's Book Centre began collecting data. Children's books didn't do much better with American Indian, Asian, or Latino kids. For children of color, children's books offer few role models and few heroes who look like them.

4 - The bulk of the discussion around diversity focuses on the need, as YA writer Amy McCulloch says, "to make sure children see themselves represented in literature." But there's another side to this lack of diversity. White kids, and, for that matter, white adults, might need diverse literature as much as people of color do.

5 - Why do white people need diverse media? One answer, according Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education, is that a lack of diversity can have detrimental effects on white as well as black self-images. She points to teen shows on the CW Television Network where, even in comparison to the 1990s, "Almost all the women are size 0," and there's a narrow range of acceptable beauty standards. "I think it's really important for white people to have diverse literature, media, and a diverse culture," she says, "because it takes some of the pressure off whiteness," and a unitary image of what perfect bodies, or perfect heroes, look like or can be.

6 - A new paper from the Perception Institute offers another reason to support this idea. The report, "Addressing Implicit Bias, Racial Anxiety, and Stereotype Threat in Education and Health Care," doesn't discuss kid's literature or media directly. But it does provide a framework for seeing racism as a problem lodged in perceptions—often, and especially, in white perceptions. "[M]ost Americans," the report points out, "espouse values of racial fairness." And yet, despite that, racial disparities are both brutal and entrenched. The We Charge Genocide project, for example, reports that between 2009 and 2013, blacks made up 75 percent of police shooting victims in Chicago, even though black people represent only 33 percent of the city's population. And, in another register, at a recent National Book Awards ceremony, host Daniel Handler made a series of racist remarks about black award winner Jacqueline Woodson. Handler apologized, and pledged matching donations to the "We Need Diverse Books" Indiegogo campaign—but even his contrition emphasized the dynamic at play.

7 - Americans largely believe in equality, but from policing to the publishing, there is a clear pattern of discrimination against black people. How does that happen?

8 - The Perception Institute argues that part of the answer, at least, is that people's perceptions don't always square with their ideals: While the ideals may be egalitarian, the perceptions are often racist, or can lead to racist outcomes. People may have implicit bias, involving unconscious stereotypes and reactions—biases which, research shows, can increase the speed (and likelihood) with which a white person may shoot a black person, or may affect who is and is not called back in for job interviews.

9 - Implicit bias is a relatively common concept. But the report also discusses other kinds of racial dynamics which can cause discriminatory outcomes. For example, both blacks and whites can experience racial anxiety—that is, they may be uncomfortable in situations involving interracial interactions. People of color may be worried that they will be targeted for discrimination (for good reason), and whites may be anxious that they will be seen as racist.

10 - White anxieties here may seem trivial. Black people are being shot and imprisoned and targeted for violence, and we should spend time worrying about whether white people feel good about themselves? But the report explains that white anxieties are important, precisely because they contribute to these systemic racist outcomes. White teachers who are anxious about appearing racist may be afraid to give students of color critical feedback, setting them up for failure. Doctors who are anxious about racial interactions may cut visits with black patients or patients of color short, which can (and does) result in lower quality health care. In addition, racial anxieties tend to compound further racial anxieties. "A negative experience with someone of another race or ethnicity can trigger a negative feedback loop where the experience of racial anxiety predicts fewer and lower-quality interactions with other racial and ethnic groups in the future."

11 - The report points out that more, and more positive, interracial interactions are important for reducing this anxiety. But there are other ways to reduce bias and anxiety as well. The report says that researchers have had some success with counter-stereotyping—presenting people with non-stereotypical examples of minorities. For example, showing the film The Joy Luck Club seemed to reduce implicit bias toward Asian-Americans. In addition, contact across racial groups reduces racial anxiety. In fact, even knowing that someone you know knows someone of a different race can reduce racial anxiety. Such extended contacts are especially important, the report says, in a segregated society, where many white people may have limited opportunities for social interaction with black people and people of color.

12 - Which brings us back to diversity—in kids' literature and in other venues as well. One of the takeaways from the Perception Institute report is that racism isn't necessarily always a conscious choice. You can have egalitarian ideals, you can consciously want to be egalitarian, but implicit bias and racial anxiety can still trip you up. If white people are going to stop being racist, they need more than just will—they need a culture that supports anti-racism. Diverse kids' literature gives children of color a chance to see themselves as heroes, which is vital. But smart, thoughtful books with non-white protagonists can also give white children a chance to see black people and people of color as something other than anxiety-producing others or stereotypes.

13 - Greater diversity in children’s literature (and in media in general), gives more options to everyone. It lets kids see themselves as heroes—and, just as important, it lets them see that other people can be heroes too.

Source: https://psmag.com/social-justice/answer-implicit-racism-might-childrens-literature-95094

**COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS**

* + 1. What does the statement “Children's literature is a vast sea of white” mean? (paragraph 2)
    2. What is implicit racism?
    3. According to the author, what is the relationship between the discrimination seen in children’s literature and implicit racism?
    4. What does the author mean by “white anxieties”? Why does the author think white anxieties are important? (See paragraph 10)
    5. According to the author, what are some ways to reduce anxiety and bias?
    6. According to the author, what positive effects would greater diversity in children’s literature have?

**AUTHOR’S CRAFT**

* + 1. In addition to starting the article with a question, the author poses a question to the reader several more times throughout the article. Why do you think the author does this and what effect does this have on the reader?
    2. How does paragraph 4 build up to the question posed at the beginning of paragraph 5?
    3. In paragraph 10, the author elaborates on “white anxieties.” How does he build the argument that white anxieties are important?
    4. How does the author wrap up and conclude the article in paragraphs 12 and 13? Do paragraphs 12 and 13 summarize important points that he mentioned previously in the article?