

Hi, I'm Liz Garri, a senior communication sciences and disorders major with a minor in Children's Literature. Today, I'm going to be talking to you about "Windows, Mirrors, Sliding Glass Doors, and Maps..." ways of visualizing children's media as a reflection of reality and possibility for diversity and inclusion. I chose this topic because it stems from ongoing research I began in Fall 2020 with Dr. Miskec, a project that will culminate in an essay published in the upcoming book *Children's Lit in Place: Surveying the Landscapes of Children's Culture*, a collection edited in collaboration by Dr. Miskec and Dr. Flegar. But, more importantly, I chose this topic to share the power of story.

Once upon a time...how many of us have heard this phrase? And how many more times in our lives will we hear it? As Dr. Faith G. Harper, a licensed professional counselor and author of microcosm publishings' series "UnF#ck Your Brain," notes in her work our brains are hardwired for storytelling. In fact, she goes so far as to argue that it's our default mode...driving a well-known road thinking about the rest of your day, *bam* storytelling; waking up from a strange dream, storytelling; half-listening to this presentation while daydreaming about your weekend plans, you guessed it... storytelling. All of this just goes to show the significance of stories not only in bed-time routines and classrooms, but in the very fabric of our consciousness. In other words, stories matter.

So we've already established that stories are important. But has anyone noticed how children's books, the stories we give to the youngest and most impressionable members of our society, are overwhelmingly White.

According to the US Census Bureau, nearly 40% of the country's population identifies as nonwhite and/or latino. Yet in 2021, only about 34% of the books received by the [Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison](#) were about characters who are black, indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC); and only 36% were written by authors from these backgrounds. Who care's, right? These stories exist, in fact, from these figures, we can estimate that the market share of books featuring BIPOC characters grew 12.7% from 2020 to 2021.

Yet, stories matter. In 1990, Rudine Sims Bishop, an African American Children's Literature Scholar, penned her formative piece "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," in which she argued books may function as "windows," providing a glimpse of worlds "real or imagined"; "sliding glass doors," offering a chance "to walk through in imagination to become a part" of these worlds; and "mirrors", "reflecting back the human experience", serving as a means of self-affirmation. People, and especially children, want to see themselves in stories, but even for white children, diverse stories are important, allowing them to go beyond their own worlds, to appreciate differences in culture and lived experience, and to recognize the commonalities that unite us all.

Of course, stories do all these things, but they are also, as Christopher Myers argues in a 2014 op-ed published in the *New York Times*, "maps." At their best, stories not only reflect upon who we are, but who we can be. They tell us that we can be curious, compassionate, and courageous; they tell us about beauties that tame beasts, Jacks that fall giants, and, now, princesses that slay their own dragons. Yet, as Myers notes, children's literature often confines BIPOC children to worlds where success is seen only in "rappers and basketball players," they are seldom seen in

fairy tales and fantasy, and they are “navigating the streets and avenues of their lives with an inadequate and outdated chart” (Meyers).

One young-adult author, Anna-Marie McLemore, reflected upon how her own childhood experience reading fairy tales shaped her recent novel, *The Mirror Season*, in a recent interview, sharing “the only brown character (she) saw in “The Snow Queen” ... was a cringe-worthy depiction referred to as the Little Robber Girl. That left a painful impression... (she) only got to see (herself) as an impediment to a main character’s journey”. Perhaps then, it is not surprising that McLemore and others are making a concerted effort to rework “classics” of children’s culture into more diverse stories, expanding the spaces in which individuals from traditionally marginalized populations are seen, to create a map of possibilities that encompasses both the mundane and spectacular for all children. Here, you can see a small sample of recently published diverse stories inspired by traditional fairy tales.

But what can we do to provide these windows, sliding glass doors, mirrors, and maps in the form of stories that are rich, enjoyable, nuanced, and, yes, diverse? We acknowledge them, we read them, and we share them. Many of you will go on to work with children as educators, speech therapists, and other professionals. Think carefully about what works are included in your curriculum, your classroom, your therapy room, your office. Many of you will be parents, what stories do you want your children to read? All of you interact with stories every day...instagram posts and tiktoks, tv shows, books, podcasts, and other forms of media. Are you walking through a sliding glass door to deepen your understanding of the world around you, or merely seeking the

shadow of your reflection to affirm your own identity, confirm your own biases? Both are valid, but remember that our brains are storytellers, and these stories matter.

Here you can just see the sources I used for this presentation if you're interested in reading more about anything I mentioned today.

Questions?

Bibliography:

- Cooperative Children's Book Center. "*Data on books by and about Black, Indigenous and People of Color published for children and teens*" School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, February 25 2022, <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-and-or-about-poc-2018/>.
- Harper, Faith. *Unfuck your brain: Using science to get over anxiety, depression, anger, freak-outs, and triggers*. Microcosm Publishing, 2017.
- Lavoi, Alaina. "Q&A with Anna-Marie McLemore, *The Mirror Season*." *We Need Diverse Books*, March 16 2021, <https://diversebooks.org/qa-with-anna-marie-mclemore-the-mirror-season/>.
- Meyers, Christopher. "The Apartheid of Children's Literature." *New York Times*, March 15 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/the-apartheid-of-childrens-literature.html?searchResultPosition=1>.
- Sims-Bishop, Rudine. "Windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors." *Perspectives: Choosing and using books for the classroom*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1990, <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>.
- United States Census Bureau. "Quick facts." 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221>.