

On Being White

A Raw, Honest Conversation

ALLIE JANE BRUCE

I'm white. But I didn't start describing myself that way until adulthood. In fact, I doggedly avoided it. In high school, I once crossed out "white" and wrote "half Jewish" on a standardized test. I knew I was white, but I also knew that it was not good to *name* whiteness. Black history, we could talk about, in Social Studies (during certain units). Latino cultures were celebrated (or, at least, acknowledged) in my Spanish classes. But the whiteness that served as the foundation for the other 99 percent of my life was taboo. Nobody ever said "as a white girl, I think . . ." or "white people like us . . ." in my (totally white) circles.

It took me a long time and a lot of education to figure out that whiteness is taboo in large part because naming whiteness makes race—and therefore racism—something that includes and affects everyone. If white people decline to acknowledge or discuss whiteness, racism stays other people's problem. If I am white, I'm suddenly part of the equation.

But I am part of the equation. Because I am white, I have access to what Peggy McIntosh calls the "invisible knapsack" of white privilege,¹ and one of those is that I see my culture reflected everywhere; in the United States, I am "standard," I am "norm." And I've never lacked for books in which characters look, speak, and act like me.

The now-familiar statistics kept by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) confirm the truth that white culture is extremely prominent and well-represented in the world of children's literature. Though there was a jump in the number of books by and about people of color in 2014, the percentage is still small (14 percent)² and does not reflect the US population,

which is 37 percent nonwhite,³ or 50.3 percent—a majority—when you're talking about nonwhite children in US public schools (by contrast, 82 percent of public school teachers are white).⁴ Clearly, white culture still dominates in children's literature, despite a population of children that is becoming rapidly less white.

Why should white people care (beyond a desire to assuage vague feelings of guilt) about something like the We Need Diverse Books organization (for which I am a librarian)? Why do white people, like me, need diverse books? Because "white" has its own culture and cultural beats, and those are too often considered "universal" or conflated with "American." White people have not graduated into some advanced form of humanity in which color does not matter, and being white does not render us raceless. We are all racial. And white people, like me, have access to privileges that are uniquely afforded to us because of our whiteness. White privilege shows itself in our government, our banks, our housing, our health care, our schools, and yes, our libraries.

I should mention here that while they are linked, white privilege is different from economic privilege. It is true that most



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of the wealth in the United States is, and historically has been, in the hands of white people,⁵ but it is also true that white people are the largest group of recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or what used to be called “food stamps”).⁶ We do ourselves a disservice if we try to paint the situation simply as “white people have more money.” We also do ourselves a disservice if we take the opposite approach and constantly dismiss the correspondence between race and wealth with “but really, aren’t you talking about class?” White privilege is tied to, but not the same as, access to wealth. And white privilege as distinct from economic privilege can be hard to pin down.

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Just as it is essential to name whiteness to render privilege visible, it is equally important to specifically name the privileges afforded by whiteness. Here, then, is a starter list (inspired by McIntosh’s “Invisible Knapsack”) of the privileges afforded by whiteness in libraries and the world of children’s literature.

Privileges Afforded to Me, a White Librarian and Reader

- I have a wide variety of books from all genres to choose from in which characters look and speak like me.
- When browsing in most libraries or bookstores, I can be pretty sure I will see white people who look like me featured on book covers without having to search for them.
- When I go to library conferences, publisher previews, or other events aimed at readers and librarians, I walk into a room in which most people look and speak like me.
- Those who work in publishing often share my cultural background and understand my cultural beats, which is conducive to forming friendships, which in turn makes it easier for me to request and access resources such as class sets of galleys or visits from authors.
- When I visit other libraries, the librarians I meet often look and speak like me, which makes it easier for us to form partnerships and share resources.
- When invited to speak on panels or at events, I am not asked to speak on behalf of all white people or offer the “white perspective.”

- When I bring up issues of racial justice, I am generally praised and lauded as an “ally” and “changemaker” by children’s literature colleagues. I am rarely, if ever, dismissed as someone who is complaining, attention-seeking, or “can’t let go of the past.”
- I can bring up issues of racial inequity in my work without fear of being demoted or fired.
- Should I ever wish to publish a book I’ve written, I can be fairly certain that my race will either play a neutral or positive role in determining whether an editor reads my draft or decides to work with me.

Privileges Afforded to the White Children I Teach

- My whiteness will be either a neutral or positive factor in whether white children view the library as a place where they can relax and feel at home.
- White children can enter my library knowing that decisions about which books to buy and what materials to teach have been determined by people who share their racial history and background, and that those books and materials testify to the existence of, and do not contain dehumanizing stereotypes of, their race.
- When white children read historical fiction or nonfiction as part of a class assignment, they need not worry that people in the book who look like them will be enslaved or subservient to people in the book who look like their nonwhite classmates.
- White children can be confident that their race will not work against the appearance of their ability to be responsible with books they check out.
- If white children are asked to account for overdue or lost books, they can be sure they have not been singled out because of their race.
- White children can return books late without having that lateness reflect on their race.
- When a white child asks me to recommend a book, she does not have to worry that I will assume she wants a book about “issues” that relate to her race.
- White children do not have to teach me about the holidays they celebrate in order to enlist my help in finding books about those holidays.
- If a white child is labeled a “reluctant” or “struggling” reader, she and her family need not worry that such a label will be attributed to poor parenting, poverty, or the lower intelligence of her race.

- Even if a white child is not in the racial majority at her school, it is likely that the majority of her teachers are white. She can therefore be fairly certain that she will have teachers who look like her, and who understand and preserve her cultural norms and beats.⁷

So what can we white people do? The following is, once again, a starter list.

Nine Suggestions for White People Seeking to Counter Racism

1. **Attend a training.** It is *hard* to lead conversations about race in the classroom; often well-intentioned white people do the most harm to children's psyches. Do not assume that you can do this without training and practice. I highly recommend the People's Institute's Undoing Racism workshop (pisab.org), Border Crossers' trainings (bordercrossers.org), and SEED trainings (nationalseedproject.org). You may be able to obtain funds from your school or library system to attend; if you play your cards right, you may be able to advocate for staff-wide trainings.
2. **Practice saying "I'm white."** It's harder than it should be, but it's important. If we fail to acknowledge whiteness, white privilege becomes invisible. Try dropping it in during a read-aloud, e.g., "So, most of Anna Hibiscus' family is black, and her mother is white, like me." Say it matter-of-factly; it's an observation.
3. **Don't ask your friends of color to teach you everything.** Take responsibility for your own education. See numbers 1, 6, and 7 for places to begin that education.
4. **Recognize when you're having a racist thought, and don't brush it off.** It is impossible to exist in our current society without having internalized notions of racial superiority and inferiority. Studies have shown that white people are less moved by the pain of black people than by the pain of white people, that teachers are more likely to respond to queries from students they believe are white males, that white people are likely to see black children as older and less innocent than white children, and that the lighter a person's skin, the more likely white people are to view them as intelligent, competent, trustworthy, and reliable.⁸
5. **Try not to dodge talking about racism and whiteness in the United States today.** It is so tempting, and easy, to turn a conversation about racism into a conversation about something—anything, anywhere—else. There are a lot of "isms" in the world, and all are important—but many are easier to talk about than racism. Similarly, when we do talk about race as it currently stands in the United States, it is tempting to talk about anything other than whiteness. Have conversations about whiteness, and when you do, don't escape into talking about how people of color experience racism;



A panel of diverse authors at the 2015 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Chicago.

- speak from your own racial experiences.
6. **Read books. Read articles. Watch videos.** A starter list:
 - *What White Children Need to Know About Race* by Ali Michael and Eleanora Bartoli, available via www.nais.org
 - *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (pbs.org/race)
 - "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" by Peggy McIntosh⁹
 - *The Whiteness Project* (whitenessproject.org)
 - *Waking Up White* by Debbie Irving (Elephant Room Press, 2014, 288p)
 - *White Like Me* by Tim Wise (Soft Skull Press, 2008; reissued, 2011, 208p)
 7. **Mix up your news sources.** Try foregoing your regular newspaper for a month, and read *The Root* (theroot.com) instead. Add in *Colorlines* (colorlines.com), *Latina Lista* (latinalista.com), *Indian Country Today* (indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com), *Hyphen* magazine (hyphenmagazine.com), and *The Aerogram* (theaerogram.com).
 8. **Do a headcount** the next time you're at a lunch, dinner, pre-view, conference, meeting, whatever. Notice who has been invited "inside" and who hasn't.
 9. **Educate children.** There are many ways to go about this, but children deserve to learn about racial justice and white privilege in developmentally appropriate but overt ways. I coteach a unit in which sixth graders explore different aspects of identity using book covers as a starting point (bankstreet.edu/library/about/book-cover-project).

Peggy McIntosh asks white people to “get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred dominance.”¹⁰ I have found this charge supremely difficult because everything in our white-dominated society is designed to make us oblivious to white privilege. Doing the things listed above helps me maintain my outrage and my drive to effect change.

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“I wasn’t always comfortable with naming my whiteness so openly, and I once thought good or bad intentions alone determined racism,” says author Miranda Paul, vice president of outreach for We Need Diverse Books. “Saying I was ‘colorblind’ was really an excuse to avoid uncomfortable conversations and face reality. But I need to get past the feelings of guilt, taboo, or sensitivity and acknowledge my privileges. This discussion isn’t about excluding people or pointing a finger—it’s about children and their future. The kids we serve are forming their personalities and sense of self-worth, as well as their ideas about each other. The books we recommend or read to them, the authors we introduce them to, and the way we talk about diversity, all have a profound influence.”

Please tweet other suggestions for what white people in the world of children’s literature can do to counter racism to #WhitenessInKidLit. If you don’t have a Twitter account, e-mail your suggestions to me at alliejanebruce@diversebooks.org. 🐦

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