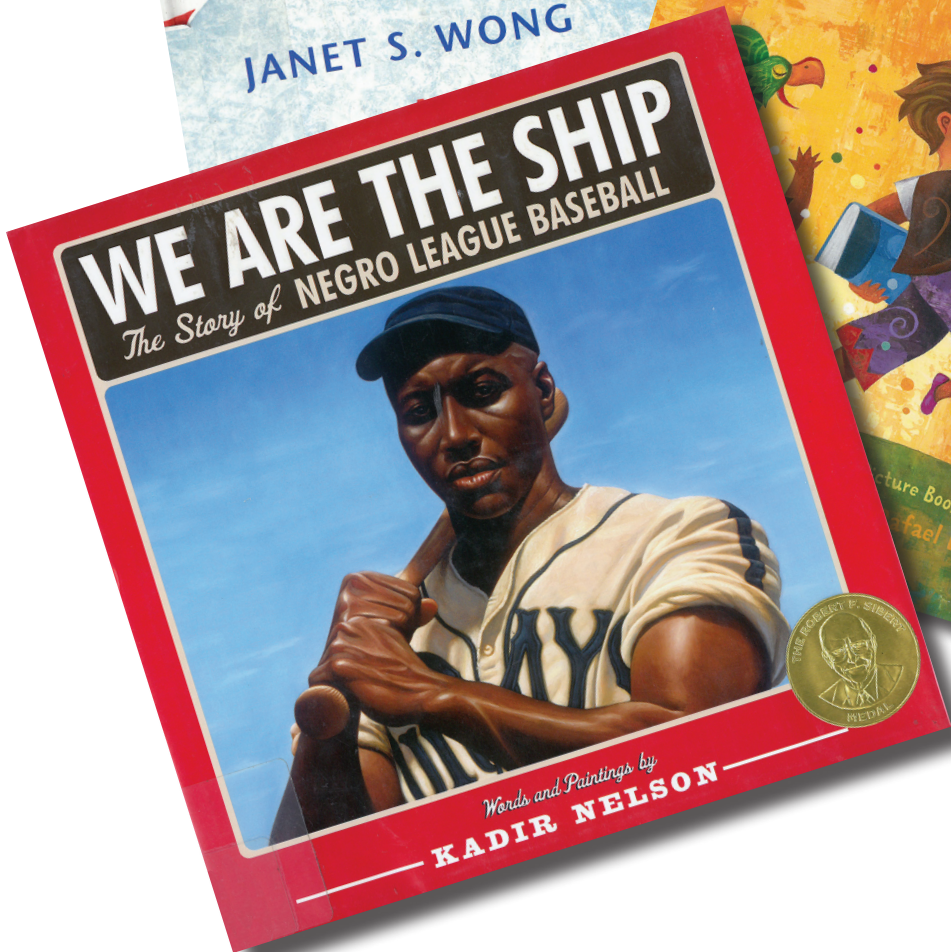


The Insider Perspective

Insights on Diversity from Award-Winning Diverse Authors

by Jackie Marshall Arnold and Mary-Kate Sableski



There is perhaps no better source to speak about diverse literature than the “insider” authors who have been writing it for years. We were fortunate to speak with three accomplished authors of diverse books for children who invite students into their books—Pat Mora, Kadir Nelson, and Janet Wong. Invited to participate in phone and e-mail interviews based on their reputation for publishing diverse books, each author shares his or her perspective on this timely topic.



Pat Mora

Mora, who is a second generation US Latina of Mexican descent, has written numerous books of poetry celebrating diversity and is the creator of *Día*, a celebration of the connection between children and books. Her book *Book Fiesta!* (2009) highlights this important initiative celebrating the diversity and stories of all children.

Nelson, an African American, is the distinguished illustrator of Caldecott Honor Books *Henry's Freedom Box* (2007) and *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* (2006), among many others. His books profile diverse historical figures but also speak to the present by inviting readers to see themselves in his stories.

The child of Chinese and Korean immigrants who was raised in California, poet Janet Wong has written many books of poetry



Kadir Nelson

for children. Her poetry is advocacy in action, in which she works to bring literature to all children. *Apple Pie 4th of July* (2002) challenges stereotypes and speaks to young readers.

Each of these authors holds unique motivations for writing for children, the genres they favor, and the audiences they consider, yet their responses reveal a similar perspective that speaks

to the unifying element of children's literature. Just as we seek diversity in children's literature to help children see the similarities between themselves and others who seem different from them, the responses of these authors reveal common thematic elements.



Janet Wong

Children Want Diverse Books

Conversations with children quickly identify their longing for diverse books with complex topics. Worthy, Moorman, and Turner's (1999) seminal work identifies that what students want to read, they often cannot find.¹ Children need and want to see



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themselves and others represented in the literature that they read.

Wong said, "We obviously need more books where kids see and hear themselves, whoever they are; where they learn that they, too, belong in the library." As librarians, it is of critical importance that we provide literature that represents everyone and that provides access to important topics that children want to explore.

Mora shared a story detailing an event at last year's #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign, in which many participants held up a sign with the line, "When I was a child, I never found a book with someone like me in it." Nelson said he was not a passionate reader in his childhood because "I didn't relate so much with the characters in the books that I was reading . . . no one looked like the kids in my neighborhood in those books." Children want to read across and within different cultures and they want to wrestle with challenging topics.

As Wong said, "I want to help children celebrate 'everyday moments' and to see themselves, their friends, and their neighbors as worthy of being in books." These experienced authors and our experiences with children clearly identify and remind us of their passion to have diverse, complex books accessible. Making it a priority to incorporate diverse books throughout our selections will bring our reader back to those shelves, to find themselves and others, over and over again.

Diverse Books Are Resources

Diverse books provide rich and critical resources for our patrons. Teachers and families are looking for diverse books as resources to support curricular research areas. These are crucial for our children to have representation of all cultures. Literature can provide the firsthand account of a historic topic as well as the rich details that textbooks do not provide.

As Wong said, "Teachers and librarians have so much to cover and so little time—and there are so many great books to share! I'm happy with my books being used as resources to illustrate a point in a five-minute mini-lesson. It's easy to integrate snippets of literature throughout the day. Poems make great snacks for the mind."

Supporting student learning and experiences with books as a resource provides an opportunity to read and learn about curricular topics through a different lens and from a voice that textbooks cannot provide. We can provide students curricular connections through quality diverse literature. These resources provide insights into important topics and historical events. Through books like Kadir Nelson's *Nelson Mandela* (2013) and

We Are the Ship (2008), and Wong's *Apple Pie 4th of July*, students can build upon their knowledge, extend their schema, and have other worlds brought to them. Students who are lifelong self-reliant readers and critical thinkers need diverse books to develop alternative perspectives.

Diverse Books Have a Universal Audience

Just as all cultures need diverse books, so do all readers. Authors of diverse books write for a wide variety of reasons, but for Mora, Nelson, and Wong, their motivation is not limited to writing books for children.

Nelson said, "I don't necessarily feel I am writing for children. I am just trying to write a really good story." His books possess a beauty and a universal appeal that make them engaging to readers of all ages, while also worthy of decorative display in homes, schools, and libraries. *We Are the Ship*, for example, discusses the development of the Negro Leagues in baseball and is filled with information, facts, and stunning paintings depicting some of the most significant figures and moments that were part of this pivotal historical period in baseball. This universal appeal of both image and content of Nelson's books makes them accessible to children and adults alike.

Wong considers the perspective of teachers and librarians as she creates her books, accounting for the ways in which they will both select and share her books with children. She said, "Everyone needs to be interested in learning about everyone else." She feels that diverse books provide these opportunities. "Creating diverse literature—and sharing it—involves risks," and according to Wong, children need authors willing to write their stories of diversity and librarians willing to select and share these stories to engage all groups in the conversation about diversity in literature.

Mora, who has written books for both children and adults, uses this dual audience to share the story of diversity with as many readers as possible. Like Wong, she emphasizes the importance of librarians sharing the voices of

diverse authors with children and considers the perspectives and interests of librarians, teachers, and parents as she writes her books for children.

Diverse Books Cultivate Learning about Others

The conversation on diverse books includes varied opinions on the role of author "insider" status in the culture of which he or she writes. As librarians and others who work with children continue to demand more diverse books to share, the need to publish an increasing amount of high-quality diverse books grows. This includes complex considerations by publishers and

It is also vitally important that diverse books are shared with children to provide “windows and mirrors” that become a kaleidoscope of perspectives and dispositions.

award committees, as well as authors concerning who is getting published and why.

Mora said, “If we had a diverse publishing system from publishers to award committees, this conversation would not be as intense.” All three authors indicated the need for an increase in the recognition of diverse books to make them accessible to more people. As the title of the influential grassroots movement articulates so well, “We Need Diverse Books.” All three authors were unequivocal in their support and enthusiasm for this movement.

Insider status can mean that an author is of a certain culture, but it can also mean that an author has experience or passion for a culture different from his or her own, enabling him or her to write with an informed voice. All three authors interviewed for this piece are of diverse backgrounds themselves, and they feel this insider status has influenced their ability to write about their cultures.

Nelson said he did not set out to write about diversity, but realized along the way that this was a story he could tell. Children who are given opportunities to read diverse books and engage in conversations surrounding diversity will be well-positioned to write books of diversity in the future.

Wong added, “If you consider yourself an insider of any particular group, whether biologically or because of your passion or research, go for it. We need *your* books.”

Authors of diverse books of the future are made in today's libraries by reading diverse books, sharing in stories of diversity, and engaging in complex conversations about

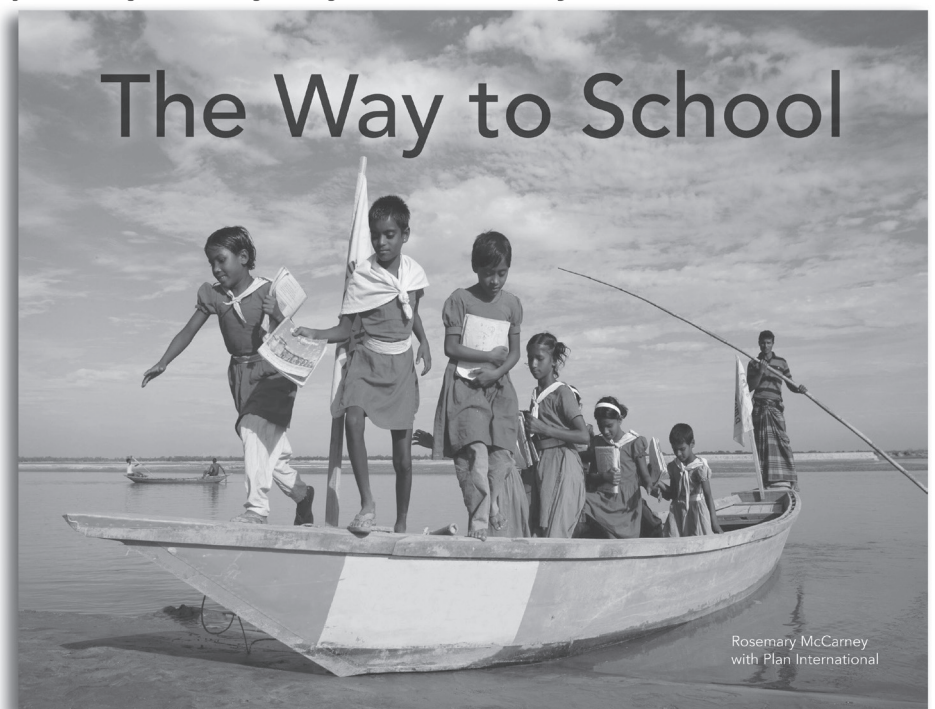
experiences of diversity in their lives. Diverse books create an opportunity for readers to find themselves in stories, but they also encourage a broadened perspective that can lead readers to becoming the insider authors who will be the future of diverse books.

It is clear from our discussions that the authors wish to encourage others to write and publish their unique stories. It is also vitally important that diverse books are shared with children to provide “windows and mirrors” that become a kaleidoscope of perspectives and dispositions. Children need diverse knowledge, experiences, and perspectives, and our libraries provide the physical and metaphorical space for these ideas to flourish. ☺

Reference

1. Jo Worthy, Megan Moorman, and Margo Turner, “What Johnny Likes to Read Is Hard to Find in School,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1999): 12–27.

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Ages 6-9 ISBN: 978-1-927583-78-4
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