

Does Cultural Competence Matter?

Book Reviewers as Mediators of Children's Literature

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School and public librarians have a moral imperative to purchase, provide, and present authentic and accurate children's and young adult literature. To succeed, librarians must be culturally competent.

Cultural competence involves values, behaviors, attitudes, and practices that enable librarians to work cross-culturally to serve increasingly diverse constituencies. A considerable amount of work has yet to be done for the library profession to fully embrace and understand the needs of culturally diverse populations, particularly since the cultural background of many library professionals differs from those they serve, and issues surrounding diversity (e.g., immigration, English-only legislation) have become increasingly complex.¹

The Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), as well as other ALA youth divisions, promotes competencies for librarians related to providing culturally competent library services, including advocating for equity and displaying empathy, respect for cultural diversity, and inclusion of diverse cultural values.²

In addition to these competencies, librarians who serve as reviewers for children's and young adult book review sources must practice cultural competence as they read. Reviewers must be aware of their own cultural biases, be curious and accepting about other people's cultures, and commit to increasing their knowledge of cultures other than their own. "Competency in matters of cultural pluralism are not intuitive and must be learned, like any other essential skill."³

Children, educators, and families (and review sources, too) rely on librarians' careful review and selection of resources for literacy and learning. Library patrons should also be able to trust that the books on library shelves, used in programming, and promoted to patrons will support youth as they

develop intercultural understanding—a critical aspect of living and working in a global society.

Global literature is a comprehensive term that encompasses both international and multicultural literature. It "honors and celebrates diversity, both within and outside the United States, in terms of culture, race, ethnicity, language, religion, social and economic status, sexual orientation, and physical and intellectual ability."⁴ In recent years, there have been a number of publicly condemned children's books that have been published with negative stereotypes and cultural misrepresentations. In addition to book editors and art directors, the initial book reviewers and book review source editors may have missed the fatal flaws in such titles and initial published reviews for these titles provided undeserved positive comments.

In this context, many publishers, book review sources, and book reviewers have raised their consciousness about the complexity of authenticity and accuracy in children's literature. Many are making sincere efforts to end the publication of or praise for inauthentic or inaccurate titles.

Still, questions remain regarding how and how well book reviewers are prepared to review titles that are written with perspectives outside their own experience and culture. Some



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in the publishing industry and in the library world believe that only cultural insiders are capable of reviewing global literature. Others believe that cultural outsiders can develop the necessary cultural competence to thoroughly vet and review literature with cultural components that are outside their own cultural experience.

Reviewing Global Literature

“Global literature expands our worldview so that stories become a window for readers to see and experience cultures outside their own personal contexts. They also function as a mirror, reflecting back human experiences and helping us understand ourselves and our lives better.”⁵

Librarians and other educators seek to share mirrors and strive to open windows into diverse cultures. “In today’s increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, cultural competence is vital for preparing [children and] young adults to be active and engaged citizens of the global community.”⁶ Global literature offers a way to support young people who are growing up in an increasingly diverse global culture.

Global literature also presents challenges for children’s book reviewers. As mediators between literature and readers, reviewers have the responsibility to compose reliable reviews. Parents, educators, school and public librarians, and university faculty rely on published reviews for selecting titles that they themselves cannot physically examine or are unable to read in advance of purchase. With the moral imperative to share authentic, accurate global literature and the constraints of tight book budgets, book buyers count on reviewers to apply cultural competence in assessing the accuracy and authenticity of the books they review.

Using the results of an anonymous online survey administered to librarians living in the U.S. who review books for well-known journals, this article explores these questions:

1. What in their personal lives or professional training prepares U.S.-based book reviewers to be reliable mediators between global literature and readers?
2. What processes do reviewers use to determine the authenticity and accuracy of a book that is situated in a culture that is not their own?

In addition to the survey, the researcher conducted a four-part interview with Mary Margaret Mercado, children’s librarian at Pima County Public Library in Tucson, Arizona, who reviews children’s literature for *Kirkus* and *School Library Journal*. The goal of this study and this article is to further the conversation among book reviewers, authors, illustrators, publishers, educators, librarians, and book review sources regarding strategies to elevate the competence of reviewers and the accuracy of global book reviews, in particular.

Anonymous Online Survey

In fall 2017, an invitation to children’s (and young adult) book reviewers to participate in a ten-question anonymous online survey was posted to two national distribution lists: *alsc-l* and *LM_NET*. Thirty-one people responded to the invitation; twenty-six people participated in the survey. The first eight questions on the survey were multiple choice focused on demographic questions and the participants’ preparation for serving as children’s and young adult book reviewers. The last two questions were open-ended. One sought to discover challenges book reviewers have faced in reviewing books outside their own culture. The other asked for their responses to the trend of assigning books for review based on the ethnicity, race, or other demographic characteristics of the reviewer. In the data that follow, references to specific publishers, book titles, and authors or illustrators have been removed.

Of the twenty-six respondents, twenty self-identified as White. Three identified as Asian, two as Hispanic/Latinx, and one as Black or African American. There were no American Indian or Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander respondents. Ten of the respondents served in public libraries, and four were school librarians. Three were college or university librarians and three were retired. There were two consultants, two journalists, two who worked for library associations, and one college or university educator. (One respondent self-identified in two categories.)

Several of the respondents reviewed books for more than one review source. Table 1 shows the most frequently mentioned review sources for which these participants were contributing reviews at the time they participated in the survey.

Other review sources noted included Bank Street Children’s Book Committee, *Canadian Materials*, *Catholic World*, *Children’s Book and Media Review*, *CM Magazine*, *Hornbook*, *Library Journal*, participants’ own blogs, and Florida State University.

One demographic question was related to the participants’ work and home communities and another asked about their ability to read in languages other than English. Thirteen reported they work in culturally diverse communities; ten reported they work in monoculture, predominantly White communities. One participant reported working in a monoculture, predominantly non-White work community. Fifteen of these book reviewers reported that they live in culturally diverse home communities; ten reported that they live in monoculture, predominantly White home communities. (Not all participants responded to this question for both their work and their home communities.) When asked about languages read fluently, eighteen reported that English is their only fluent language. Six reported Spanish, three reported French, and one of those reported both French and Spanish.

Table 2 shows the source of these book reviewers’ training regarding issues related to cultural diversity in children’s

Table 1. Book Review Sources (N=26)

Source Name	Number of Reviewers
<i>School Library Journal</i>	14
<i>Kirkus</i>	7
<i>Booklist</i>	3
<i>School Library Connection</i>	3
VOYA	3

and young adult global literature. Respondents were asked to mark all of the sources that apply and were invited to add other sources as well.

In addition to these training providers, survey participants noted diverse book award committees, national and international conference sessions, self-directed reading of current professional literature and social media sources, and their own experiences of living outside of the U.S. Participants were also asked to rate the effectiveness of their training on a scale of one (being the least effective) to ten (being the most effective). The average rating was 7.6 out of ten. Two respondents skipped this question.

Table 3 shows the processes these book reviewers use to determine the authenticity and accuracy of a book that is situated in a culture that is not their own. They were invited to check all that apply.

Participants mentioned additional strategies including consulting cultural experts, consulting scholarly and practitioner resources, reading and comparing with new titles of other culturally accurate children's and young adult literature. One reviewer who focuses on fantasy and science fiction felt that authenticity and accuracy do not apply to those two genres.

Reviewing Books from a Cultural Outsider Perspective

The last two open-ended questions sought to provide respondents with the opportunity to freely share their experience and their opinions. The penultimate survey question asked them to describe a review that presented them the greatest challenge as a reader who is not a member of the culture portrayed in the book. Twenty-three responded to this question; four responded that they had not had this experience or could not remember such an experience. Since the other nineteen responses were unique, these are a sample of their responses.

"I had a book that had some pretty big flaws with the portrayal of a Native culture. I did my cultural research by talking to members of that group and looking into the author's background. When I submitted my (very negative) review, I included a lot of notes as justification. The review was printed in its entirety with my harsh language in it. I felt my editors were very supportive."

Table 2. Sources of Cultural Diversity Training (N=26)

Source Name	Number of Reviewers
College or university course	19
Review journal training	16
Public library training	9
School district training	4

Table 3. Processes for Determining Cultural Authenticity and Accuracy (N=26)

Process	Number of Reviewers
Reading information included in the book	24
Reading additional information provided by the author, illustrator, or publisher	21
Conducting research found via free-range Web searching	19
Conducting research found in scholarly articles/databases	11
Reading additional information provided by the review journal	10

"I review many books about Middle Eastern culture and Islam, but this was a particularly political book. I believe that I could be an impartial reviewer of this book, but I had to think carefully about my perceptions of Israel, the settlers, and the occupation."

"As a non-Latina who has worked with Latino communities my entire career, I found [the book's] presentation of the characters stereotypical and troubling. I chose to discuss the feeling with my editor and asked her to reassign the book to someone within the culture, out of fear of oversensitivity. I'm glad I did this, because the book wound up getting a great review and being very well received by Latinx librarians. When I talked with others later I learned little winks and loving jokes it made to insiders that I simply didn't have the experience or exposure to understand."

"I didn't know much about the cultures or the schools that First Nations and/or American Indian populations were forced to attend. I did some searching about the cultures presented [Haida and Chinook], but I struggled with knowing if I had conveyed appropriate information or been critical enough in both of those reviews."

"I couldn't find information in the back matter, jacket flap, author's website, or other online research to verify exactly which Traveler culture the author was referencing. Without that information, I didn't feel comfortable recommending the title. Here is the note I wrote to my editor: 'My main concerns are that the author is not clear on whether this is an original or traditional tale and it's not exactly clear which culture he's drawing from. Although there's an author's note that attempts to provide cultural context it's not quite

enough. The story is good enough, but I'm not sure I'd recommend this title given its vague origins and culture."

"It was supposedly a Puerto Rican origin story of the indigenous Taino people. Yet the book included clothing, architecture, food, and cultures spanning all five hundred years of Puerto Rico's history. Talk about artistic license."

"Even books featuring characters with whom I share a culture still pose a challenge to me because cultures are not monolithic and friends from the same ethnic background can have very different experiences and values taught."

Readers of this article may be interested to know books focused on American Indian and other indigenous peoples were most frequently mentioned by survey participants as difficult to review—seven times in nineteen responses.

Pairing Culturally Specific Books with Cultural Insiders

The final survey question asked for participants' opinion or experience related to book review sources pairing reviewers with specific books in order to help ensure they publish more culturally authentic and accurate reviews of global books. Again, twenty-three participants responded to this question. Four respondents noted they had no experience with this practice. One of them thought it was a "good idea" and wrote, "I think it would make sense to have members of the community or ethnic group provide feedback on its authenticity and respectfulness for the culture." Another noted this was not an issue for science-focused nonfiction titles.

The following are a sampling of unique responses that show a range of opinions and experiences among the other eighteen responses to this question:

"I'm not sure about how I've been matched with books. My editor knows I'm a Spectrum Scholar but didn't ask about my ethnic background."

"While I am white, I am married to a member of a Native group and know socially and by family many others. My editors usually send me books related to our place of living and those Native groups because they know I have the cultural context to read them."

"I took a diversity course sponsored by a review source that was both informative and eye-opening to me, in that I didn't fully realize biases I had or how that could affect my reading and reviewing of materials. In general, I think the source that I review for, does its best in trying to match reviewers with materials of interest and relevance to their qualifications. I realize my skin color is well-represented in the publishing and reviewing industry though."

"When joining a reviews team, I completed a document explaining my cultural Latinx experiences and personal

background (I'm first-generation); meanwhile, I have studied Middle Eastern literature, poetry, religions, history, cultures, and geopolitics. I have also spent quite a long time traveling and living in either Muslim, African, or Middle Eastern countries."

"It seems unrealistic to say that only a member of X group can review books about X, especially as a reviewer with the needed qualifications might not be available or interested." (comment submitted with the previous question)

"After reading the books and reviews regarding titles dealing with the Mexican or Chicano cultures, I found so many inaccuracies that I read the reviews to see how these inaccuracies were discussed. I discovered that none of the reviewers had caught the blatant errors and wrote the review source's editor. I have since been given more assignments for books dealing with my culture to provide a more balanced and accurate perspective."

"Although I appreciate the reasons for (pairing books with reviewers based on cultural background), I feel that I have a very broad background and strong interest in reviewing books from many cultures. I must admit that I resented receiving that information."

"I totally respect this. It does make me somewhat sad though that I won't have as much of a role in highlighting excellent diverse literature as I used to."

"In my opinion, review sources are not very proactive in this effort. I believe that they are more reactive to demand from consumers (individuals, libraries, and bookstores). Thankfully, consumers are demanding more authentic and diverse materials."

As these comments attest, the practice of pairing books with reviewers can be a complex proposition. During the interview with Mary Margaret Mercado, who is Mexican American, she commented on the specificity of her cultural competence. "Even though I am culturally competent in both Mexican culture and Spanish language as spoken in (parts of) Mexico and the U.S., I would not be a competent translator for a story situated in Cuban or Puerto Rican culture. It is not appropriate to assume that anyone who is fluent in both English and Spanish can effectively translate any story into the other language."⁷

Discussion and Recommendations

One anonymous study participant summarized the ongoing issue of critical reviews and wrote this about a source for which she had previously reviewed books. "I reviewed for a review source for one year, but eventually decided to stop for two reasons. One, I was taking on more responsibilities at work and so my schedule was going to be busier. Two, I wasn't a big fan of the fact that this source only provides positive reviews. As a librarian, I want to know the flaws of a book, just

as much (or perhaps more) than the merits.” Readers, librarians, other educators, and parents deserve accurate book reviews.

A number of book review sources are making efforts to improve the quality of published book reviews. Several survey participants reported that their editors send them books they feel competent to review or mentioned the support they get from the review journal’s editor when needed. Some review journals are offering free or fee-based cultural competence training. Trainings include examples of previously published accurate and inaccurate reviews, resources for specific cultures that detail their worldviews, and other information provided by cultural insiders.

In January, 2018, *School Library Connection* (SLC) formed a Reviews Advisory Panel charged with developing policies, guidelines, and workflows to combat bias, including providing regular training opportunities for reviewers. *SLC* recognizes that their book reviewers are volunteers who may miss negative stereotypes or may categorize books as appropriate for readers of various ages based on their own (and often) unconscious biases. *SLC* wrote about this effort: “Recognizing the central importance of professional reviews in the collection development policies of school and public libraries, the Reviews Advisory Panel will promote best practices for reviewers in pursuit of the mission to establish *SLC* as the most trustworthy, high-quality outlet of professional reviews for librarians.”⁸

Authors and illustrators who create literature from outside their own culture must be vigilant as they write and illustrate books for children and teens. In addition to research, consulting with cultural experts is a more effective way to ensure that their texts are culturally authentic, accurate, and free of stereotypes. Cultural advisors who contribute an introduction or other informational note to the book add further assurance to publishers, book reviewers, and readers who may be evaluating or reading the book from an outsider perspective. As noted by survey participants, reviewers rely on this information when reviewing books.

Book publishers, editors, and art directors have an essential role in ensuring that the titles they select for publication are worthy. When evaluating a manuscript written or illustrated from a cultural outsider perspective, it is imperative that publishing house staff vet the title thoroughly. Similar to the authors’ and illustrators’ quest to ensure authentic and accurate representation of cultures other than their own, staff can consult cultural insiders to ensure parents, librarians, and other educators will have worthwhile texts to share with young people.

Book review source editors must stand behind their reviewers and the reviews they publish. To that end, editors must ensure that book reviewers are culturally competent to review the books to which they are assigned. Practices such as pairing books with reviewers from specific cultural backgrounds may

be an effective strategy. This practice should be explained to book reviewers who may feel that their training, experience, and expertise has prepared them to review literature from a cultural outsider perspective. Review sources can provide ongoing training and review source editors can provide on-going guidance to ensure the accuracy of children’s and young adult book reviews.

It would be difficult to learn the number of reviewers and their demographic characteristics who are currently reviewing for book review sources. Although the sample size of this survey was small, the reviewers who participated understand they have a responsibility to accurately represent the titles they review. Regardless of the status of the author or illustrator in the industry, every title submitted for review must be thoroughly analyzed.

Book reviewers are charged with documenting the merits as well as the flaws, if there are any, in the books they review. Reviewers who do not feel qualified to review particular books can seek further information from cultural insiders, the book review source, publisher, author or illustrator, or return the book unreviewed as appropriate.

As mediators between young people and their literature, it is essential that book reviewers accept their moral responsibility to honorably serve the literacy needs of all readers, librarians, other educators, and families. Authors, illustrators, publishers, editors, and book review sources share in this responsibility. Working together, book publishing and book promotion stakeholders can ensure that the literature available to children and young adults is of the highest quality and worthy of all readers. &

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Ten-month-old Edie gets a head start on literacy with a visit to the University of Minnesota Kerlan Collection exhibit "The ABC of It: Why Children's Books Matter." Photo courtesy of her librarian mom, and ALSC committee chair, Anna Haase Krueger. &