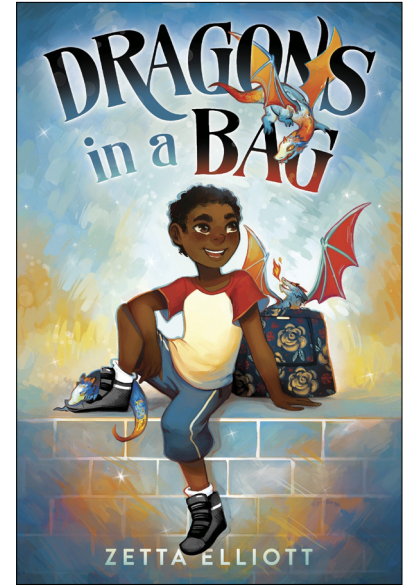


# Transformative Magic

## Considering Zetta Elliott's *Dragons in a Bag*

ERIN HOOPES



I saw a social media post recently in which librarians were asked to share their favorite recommendations for read aloud books for early elementary students. Nearly all the responders suggested books by white authors, until a commenter noticed and pointed it out. A conversation ensued about how we, as librarians, need to change the way we recommend books. If we want to serve all children and all families, we must pay close attention to what stories we highlight, to whom, and why. American institutions have been dominated by white culture since their inception, and librarianship is no exception. As librarians, we must actively and continuously strive to change the way we select, purchase, consume, and recommend books. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas writes, “Since troubling discourses of colonialism and supremacy are transmitted via childhood stories, it is absolutely critical that these functions of children’s literature are revealed, historicized, and interrogated.”<sup>1</sup> We can use the theory of critical multiculturalism to critique the way we practice librarianship, in addition to the way we analyze texts. As Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman write, “critical multicultural analysis . . . is literary study as social change.”<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I will apply the lens of critical multiculturalism to Zetta Elliott’s 2018 novel *Dragons in a Bag*, which I think is an excellent read aloud for early elementary students and was the first book I thought of when I read that social media post about the need for greater diversity in book recommendations. *Dragons in a Bag* is the story of Jax, a Black nine-year-old who makes a surprising discovery when his mother leaves him with a prickly old lady she introduces as Ma, and a mysterious package on Ma’s kitchen table starts moving. The package turns out to contain three tiny, living dragons and Ma tells Jax he

absolutely cannot let the dragons see him, lest they imprint on him. An exciting adventure ensues, in which Jax learns about the presence of magic in Brooklyn and the larger world and decides to accompany Ma in her quest to return the dragons to another realm. First, I will analyze the author’s development of Jax as a character, then I will examine the systems and institutions of Jax’s world, and finally I will consider the story within the larger context of the fantasy genre.

### A Human and Humanized Main Character

In a 2020 column in *Journal of Children’s Literature*, written by several children’s literature authors and scholars, Maria Acevedo-Aquino discusses the importance of asking questions about visibility and power in children’s literature. Specifically, “What messages and characters are included/excluded?” and “Who has power? Who solves the problems?”<sup>3</sup> Jax is a fully developed, relatable human boy. He feels and shows emotions such as sadness, frustration, and anger throughout the story. The author affirms his humanity immediately with the book’s opening lines: “Mama strokes my cheek with her finger before pressing the doorbell. I feel



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tears pooling behind my eyes, but I will them not to fall.”<sup>4</sup> As events unfold, Jax responds in ways that will be immediately recognizable to child readers or listeners. When Jax first realizes something unusual is happening in Ma’s kitchen, and Ma tells him, “‘You ain’t here to get all up in my business, boy’ and ‘You’re hardheaded, just like your mama,’” (29) he must hold back tears of anger and frustration. But he still finds the inner strength to defend both his mother and himself. “‘Don’t talk about my mama,’” he tells Ma, quietly, and when Ma laughs at him, he walks out of her apartment. This scene brings up familiar images of the child’s impulse to run away from home, but Elliott reframes it in this story—Jax leaves the apartment, but immediately and calmly assesses his situation and considers his options. Ma comes outside shortly afterward, and the rift is repaired when Ma asks Jax if he wants to come with her. Both characters are aware of the social and emotional forces at play: “Ma isn’t looking at me, but her voice isn’t as harsh as it was before. Something tells me Ma’s not the sort of person who’s good at apologies. That’s okay with me, because I’m not planning to apologize, either ” (33). The story of *Dragons in a Bag* is centered on Jax, a child who both deserves and commands respect, a boy with both the inner resources and social supports that he needs to thrive.

Jax experiences emotions of uncertainty, fear, and determination that will also be relatable to child readers and listeners. Jax bravely agrees to help Ma return the dragons to the magical realm, which is accessed through a guardhouse in Prospect Park. After their first bumpy ride through space and time in the guardhouse, Ma asks Jax if he’s okay. “I don’t know if I am okay, but I’m here to help—not be helped. So I clear my throat and say, ‘Ready, Ma,’ with more confidence than I actually feel” (57). He finds courage in his role as a helper. Jax and Ma end up in the wrong time and place and Ma has trouble getting the guardhouse transporter to work, so Ma tells Jax he has to go back to the present without her. He says, “I’m just a scared nine-year-old boy, but I came along to help Ma, so I decide that’s what I’m going to do” (66). Jax makes an important realization: “maybe Ma sent me back alone because she trusted me,” he thinks (80). These dual experiences of being trusted and finding a purpose in being a helper reinforce the inner strength on which Jax has already learned to call. When he travels in the transporter a second time, with Trub (the grandfather he’s just met), and Trub asks him the same question Ma had after his first transporter journey, Jax responds differently. “‘I’m fine,’ I tell him—and I mean it. I’m nervous, but I’m not afraid” (112).

## Analyzing the Story’s Power Dynamics

Jax’s choices speak to Acevedo-Aquino’s questions about who solves the problems in the story. Jax holds genuine power in the story, and also works cooperatively with other characters, of a variety of ages, to confront the challenges he faces. When Ma sends him back to the present, alone, Jax is terrified, but even in his fear, he is able to draw on the love and support of his family and community to figure out a solution. “My eyes

fill with tears again, but I quickly blink them away. I’m Ma’s helper, and I have to find a way to bring her home, too. But I can’t do it on my own. Who will help me?” (74). He has strong female role models, especially in his mother, who is always emotionally present even though she is physically absent for much of the story because she’s in court fighting a looming eviction. Ma also models strength and resourcefulness, and surprises Jax by getting help from a man named Ambrose, who Jax assumes is homeless when he first sees him, saying, “He’s wearing so much clothing he looks like a walking pile of laundry!” (45). Jax learns an important lesson that appearances can be deceiving, and when he finds himself back in Prospect Park alone, he too turns to Ambrose for advice. Ambrose encourages Jax to call his friend Vik and offers to call on his own resources as well. “‘You call your people and I’ll call mine. That’s how we’re going to fix this, Jax—teamwork” (76). Vik and his sister Kavita come, as does Trub, called by Ambrose. Upon meeting the children, Trub says, “‘Why don’t we sit down. I can think on my feet, but we can make a better plan if we put our heads together” (92). This pattern of friends and family members coming together to solve their problems repeats throughout the story, creating a strong sense that the people in Jax’s life and community support and care for one another. Even Trub, who describes himself to Jax as a “rolling stone” to explain why Jax’s Mama has chosen not to involve him in Jax’s life thus far, becomes a source of strength for Jax (98).

Botelho and Rudman write that in critical multicultural analysis, “The social processes among the characters are explored to determine how power was exercised along the continuum from domination and collusion to resistance and agency.”<sup>5</sup> Jax demonstrates a strong sense of self and agency throughout the story. Early in the story, when Ma repeatedly calls Jax “boy,” he remembers what his mother has told him—“Mama always said I didn’t have to respond to anyone who called me out of my name”—and finds the courage to tell Ma, “‘My name’s Jaxon” (33). This scene repeats itself toward the end of the book, when Sis, a guardian of magic, calls him “boy” just as Ma had. “‘My name’s Jax,’ I tell her in my most respectful voice. ‘And I won’t let you down, Sis. . . .’ Sis looks down at me, and I think I can see something in her eyes that wasn’t there before: respect” (137). Jax is supported in affirming his own self-worth and agency throughout the book. He is praised (“‘You’re no fool, Jax,’” Ma tells him), trusted (“‘He’s had a rough first day on the job, and Jax still has a lot to learn, but I trust him,’” Ma says), and loved (“I blink a few times, and Mama comes back into focus. Her face is full of love, and that gives me the courage I need” (38). And he acts with courage and confidence because of those experiences. When Mama tells him “‘This world is the only one that matters, Jax. This is where you live. This is where you belong,’” he has agency to make a different choice than the one his mother made (135). “‘Bad things happen, and sometimes there’s nothing we can do. But this time, there is something I can do. I want to help Ma return the last dragon” (148–49). Jax’s agency in this scene, and throughout the story, comes from his belief in himself, the love with which he is surrounded, and his strong senses of curiosity, hope, and joy.

## Genre Considerations

The fact that *Dragons in a Bag* is a fantasy adventure story is significant. Critical multicultural analysis asks us to consider the messages a book sends in all its components. Botelho and Rudman write that in addition to examining “how identities are constructed in a story,” we must also look at how “texts are constructed” and how “societies are constructed.” In a *Juunesse* essay written before *Dragons in a Bag* was published, Zetta Elliott reports, “there is still an appalling lack of fantasy fiction for children of color.”<sup>6</sup> *Dragons in a Bag* is one solution to that problem, in addition to being a fun and appealing adventure story. According to Botelho and Rudman, “Fantasy often disguises itself as unrelated to fact, lowering the reader’s guard and inserting ‘information and values’ that the reader internalizes.”<sup>7</sup> This makes it even more critical that fantasy stories featuring positive representations of Black and Brown children and communities are published and shared. The values demonstrated by Jax and his family and friends—of love and care, courage, and responsibility—are essential for children of all backgrounds to witness and consume. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas writes, “if today’s children grow up with literature that is multicultural, diverse, *and* decolonized, we can begin the work of healing our nation and world through humanizing stories.”<sup>8</sup>

Although *Dragons in a Bag* is a fantasy story, it is set in present-day Brooklyn. The setting is integral to the story’s power. In her *Juunesse* essay, Zetta Elliott writes: “Within the field of children’s literature, my novels may be categorized as urban fantasy, but I prefer Ramon Saldivar’s concept of ‘*historical fantasy*,’ which ‘links desire and imagination, utopia and history, but with a more pronounced edge intended to redeem, or perhaps even create, a new moral and social order.’”<sup>9</sup> How can this new “moral and social order” be created? First, as was explored previously, through the characters’ actions and development and the systems of power and agency developed by the author. In the world of *Dragons in a Bag*, which notably is the world in which we live, Jax has personal power. He experiences love, magic, and wonder. He is the hero of his own story. Second, the painful structural inequities of this world are not ignored; rather, they are subverted. Daniel Hade writes that “critical multiculturalism is a reform movement based upon equity and justice. . . . Critical multiculturalism is about naming this injustice and struggling toward social change and social justice.”<sup>10</sup> Third, Jax’s heritage is celebrated. When Trub helps Jax learn more about magic, he says, “‘Africa’s called the cradle of civilization. Know why?’ ‘Sure,’ I reply. ‘That’s where the human race started out’”<sup>11</sup> Trub goes on to explain that the source of the magic is also in Africa, and that connects Jax even more closely to his ancestors. Through her acknowledgment of injustice, her honoring of Jax’s racial and ethnic heritage, and the fact that Jax owns his story, Zetta Elliott has written a transformative and critical story.

Jax knows why his mother brings him to Ma at the beginning of the book. “Mama thinks I don’t know our landlord’s trying

to get rid of us. She takes down the eviction notices he pins to our front door, but I still know what’s going on” (2). The entire reason we learn Jax’s story is because of this part of his lived experience—of being a poor child in a poor family in a modern American city. This fact is the reason, as Ma explains to Jax, why they must take the dragons to another time and place. Ma tells Jax: “‘Brooklyn’s lost its magic. All kinds of creatures used to call this place home. But not anymore.’ I think about the notices our landlord keeps putting on our front door. ‘Everybody should have a home,’ I say, ‘and get to stay there as long as they want.’ ‘In an ideal world, that would be true,’ Ma says. ‘But that’s not the world we live in, Jax’” (40). Later in the book, Trub explains to Jax more fully why the dragons must be taken to another realm. “‘This realm is a sanctuary for many beings and creatures that just wouldn’t be safe in our world. But the longer they stay hidden here, the more foreign and frightening they become to humans. People fear what they don’t know, and when you’re separated from folks just ‘cause you’re different . . . well, our people know what that feels like’” (116–17). Jax understands that Trub is talking about both historical and present-day segregation. In *Dragons in a Bag*, Jax isn’t whisked away to a utopian paradise where everyone loves and respects everyone else and all people are treated equally. But in the story, such a place is possible. Trub tells Jax: “‘Some folks fear magic, Jax—black magic especially. But in the other realm, there is no black and white. There’s less fear and more . . . wonder’” (105). Jax’s discovery of this magic allows him to see the world more clearly and allows him to change the way in which he interacts with the structural oppressions present in his life.

Although Zetta Elliott writes that she prefers the term “historical fantasy” instead of “urban fantasy,” considering *Dragons in a Bag* as an urban fantasy can still lend useful insights when applying a critical multicultural lens to the book. Urban fantasies are notably set in cities, and the book’s Brooklyn setting is essential to the story. Stefan Ekman writes that “urban fantasy is a genre of the Unseen, and it offers a way for us to discover—and discuss—it.”<sup>12</sup> Jax would be unseen by many in modern American culture—just one of so many little Black boys living in the crowded city of New York. In the beginning of the story, Jax expresses awareness of how American society sees him. “People never expect a kid like me to know anything about anything. I’m used to it, but it still bothers me sometimes.”<sup>13</sup> By the end of the story, American society hasn’t changed, but Jax has. He is more confident, more determined, more resourceful, and more powerful. He learns that he deserves to be seen, to be visible. Botelho and Rudman write that a critical multicultural analysis asks the question, “Who is silenced/heard here?”<sup>14</sup> Because Jax’s story and voice are centered, *Dragons in a Bag* sends the message to child readers and listeners that Jax’s life matters. His voice matters. His fears and worries, his triumphs and mistakes, his humanity is affirmed through the telling of his story. There is a long tradition in fantasy literature of white male children being the heroes. That is why this book is transformative, and why it is, as a fantasy story, an example of how, as Botelho and Rudman point out, “genres can be sites of resistance and struggle.”<sup>15</sup>

In the previously cited *Journal of Children's Literature* column, Zetta Elliott writes, "I worry that the industry's appetite for narratives about Black pain may prevent me from finding homes for the books I've written about Black joy." Thankfully, at least in this story and in the lives of all the young people who experience it, that worry has not come true. *Dragons in a Bag* is ultimately a joyful story. Jax struggles and experiences pain, but his overall story is one of wonder and magic, power and determination. The story ends with Jax's firm decision: "I've decided to become Ma's apprentice," I say with a mixture of fear and pride."<sup>16</sup> Readers are left to anticipate what adventure Jax will embark upon next, knowing he has the inner fortitude and love and support to be a force of love and good in all the realms of his life—magical and real. &

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