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Race' and Ethnic Identity

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"The little black Canny Cannibal children approached Pippi's throne. For some strange reason, they had got hold of the idea that a white skin is much better than a black one..."
(Astrid Lindgren, Pippis in the South Seas, 1955/1957, p.51)

Writers and readers

Many of the books which treat the subject of gender most effectively and with the least reliance on stereotypes are those which also present broader themes, such as social deprivation and, most notably, race, language and culture. Many of the writers of such books are people who for one reason or another have been politicised by their own or their group's experience of prejudice, and have come to realise that equality issues can seldom, if ever, be viewed in isolation from each other. The work of the distinguished black American writer, Alice Walker, has been pre-eminent in this field, for it is totally clear in The Colour Purple (1983), an adult book which has also become very popular among upper secondary readers, that the social and political oppression experienced by all the black population, is fundamental to the degree of oppression suffered by the women in particular. In focusing on the subject of race and culture in books for children, it also becomes apparent that much of the most impressive writing occurs in books which present powerful female characters; of these books a significant number are written by black women.

The category of race is of a slightly different nature from those of sex or gender; the sex of most humans is fairly clearly defined from birth, and for the majority of people their gender orientation is associated with their sex. The term 'race' however is far less definitive. Research shows that differences in so called racial characteristics are far less prominent between different groups of humans than are the variations within most other animal species; over ninety nine per cent of our genetic inheritance is apparently common to all of us. Although in the past, some distinctive physical traits may have resulted from the geographical isolation of groups of humans, or even from deliberate breeding among slaves, today there are few communities with any claim to be racially 'pure'; in modern society there has been a considerable amount of intermarriage which has blurred any such distinctions even further. Racial identity, for many people, especially those of mixed background, allows a higher degree of choice than does gender.

It would however be impossible to discard the category 'race' entirely; for one thing, any substitute term would demand many more words! In addition to this, even today, for a considerable number of people involved with books on the subject, especially the readers, the term 'race' has a much solider meaning than it has for geneticists.

I shall also, with some reservations, generally use the term 'black' to mean 'non-Caucasian', which means that a good many distinctions of culture, which in many cases provides a more significant difference than skin colour, are glossed over;

It is inevitably difficult to determine how far the portrayal of race, a word which in my subsequent usage should always be regarded as having invisible quotation marks round it, has an effect on children who read books relating to it as an issue. If it is badly done, it may both give offence to 'black' readers and reinforce the prejudices of 'white' readers. Sensitivity on the subject has sometimes led to the opinion that black characters should only be portrayed by black authors and illustrators – something which would surely be impossible if a true picture of our ethnically very mixed society is to be conveyed by people of any race! Nevertheless, any depiction of race needs to be accurate, which also means that to produce a contemporary 'realist' text set in Britain or North America yet totally omitting black characters is unacceptable.

The Roehampton Survey of young people's reading (1996) shows that the majority of young readers say that whether or not the leading character in a children's book is of the same race as themselves makes little difference to their choice of a book; it seems to be less influential on choice than is the gender of such characters, and much less than their age or the period in which they live. It should be noted that the survey was demographically representative in relation to ethnicity. There is in fact research, described extensively by Milner (1983; chapters 4 to 6) which shows that black children have often had a mental image of themselves as whiter than they really are.

'Political correctness' and anti-racism

People who are worried about the effects of 'political correctness' on children's literature since, say, the 1970s, are likely to present three main areas of concern:
(i) the fear that existing literature for children will be adapted or even censored;
(ii) the effects of what they regard as the hypersensitivity of ethnic minority groups about well-meaning efforts to portray black characters, leading to the fear that only black writers or illustrators will be allowed to do this;
(iii) the effect on literature if authors try to write books conforming with a political agenda.
The second and third concerns are difficult to separate and will form the substance of the present chapter, together with an evaluation of some of the books concerning ethnic minority children which have been produced in more recent years. My impression is that in the last twenty-five years there has been a noticeable swing from a reactive to a proactive approach, from trying to rid existing books of undesirable

racist images and writing books which have attempted to combat racism, towards the creation of truly multi-ethnic and multi-cultural literature.

One of the first effects of the realisation that children's literature was deficient in books which portrayed black characters in significant roles, were several books which set out to confront racism and at the time were largely acclaimed for this quality. Subsequently many of these books have been re-evaluated and greeted by some hostility because of their ambivalent effects.

Theodore Taylor's The Cay (1969) was given five major book awards, but is described by Albert Schwartz (in ed. Stinton,1979) as "the story of the initiation of a white upper middle class boy...into his 'proper' role in a colonialist, sexist, racist society" (p.45). It depicts the white boy, Phillip, being shipwrecked on a very small island with another survivor, an old black man, Timothy. The racism of Phillip's mother, which he has inevitably imbibed, is made explicit at a number of points, and only implicitly condemned by its contrast with the tolerance shown by Timothy:
"Because it had been on my mind I told him that my mother didn't like black people and asked him why. He answered slowly, `I don' like some white people my own self, but 'twould be outrageous if I didn' like any o' dem'." (p.58)

At first Phillip despises Timothy, particularly when he discovers that the old man is illiterate, but in the blindness which results from an injury at the time of the shipwreck, Phillip becomes totally dependent on him, and at the same time learns much from Timothy's wisdom. This book has been welcomed by many people, but it has also sustained a good deal of criticism, particularly because so much depends on the reader's understanding of what the author is doing in portraying racist attitudes and trusting the reader to reject them. This recalls what Victor Watson (in Styles et al, 1992) describes as 'irresponsibility' on the part of an author, who does not make explicit his condemnation of racism. Watson quotes Hollindale who says of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (1884), "You cannot experience the book as an anti-racist text unless you know how to read a novel" (Watson, p.4;).

The first introduction of Timothy displays the danger of using an unreliable narrator; before Phillip loses his sight, he wakes up to find himself alone a raft with

"a huge, very old Negro sitting on the raft near me. He was ugly. His nose was flat and his face was broad ... The Negro said, 'You `ad a mos` terrible crack on d`ead, bahss'." (p.23)
Timothy is portrayed here and elsewhere as using a strongly marked dialect and having had no education, and his appearance is repulsive to the young boy. Throughout the book, by the use of first person narration, everything is mediated through the ignorant and prejudiced gaze of the young boy, who has been brought up as a racist but gradually learns the considerable qualities of Timothy. There is clearly the risk that the child reader may be oblivious to the message, and may in fact, from a racist perspective, take on Phillip's idea that black people are by birth less intelligent than white, without recognising Phillip's growth in understanding by the end of the book, when the old man dies protecting him from a tidal wave, and is reverently buried. What is needed in a case like this is what Watson (1992) describes as 'responsible readers'; rather than the book being banned because it doesn't make the process of condemning racism easy, the child reader needs to be educated to become aware of the more subtle shades of meaning involved in a mature reading of such a text.

Perhaps because of the way in which many people found it difficult to admit that children might be able to decode the racism shown in The Cay and put it into perspective, Taylor much more recently produced Timothy of the Cay (1993), which is far more explicit in its overt condemnation of racism, leaving less to be done by the reader. The narrative alternates between the first person narration of Phillip, who has an operation to correct his sight and returns to the Cay to find the grave of Timothy, and the third person narration describing Timothy's life preceding his encounter with Phillip, thus giving a more 'objective' perspective on black history. It also includes a more explicit condemnation of Phillip's mother's attitude. The newly enlightened boy questions his mother's reluctance to have black neighbours:

"'Are you afraid of them?' I asked.
'Let's just say I'm uncomfortable around them'
'Why? Did any black person ever do anything to you?'
'Philip, don't question me', she flared, the old tightness back in her voice.
'Timothy said that under the skin we're all the same'
'I'm not interested in what Timothy had to say about this subject'." (p.68)

Taylor's attempts realistically to convey Timothy's use of dialect and automatic acceptance of Phillip as his natural superior (explained in the later book as "Just habit, a leftover from slave days" (p.54)) together with his portrayal of the old man's lack of education, could be seen as too challenging for some young readers. But at least no-one could describe the portrayal of the character of Timothy as passive, another aspect frequently detected by critics within the well-intentioned books written by white writers. Armstrong's Sounder (1969) is another book later savaged by Schwartz (in ed.Stinton, 1979, p.49); the black family at the centre of the story are seen as suffering in silence, without any natural expressions of emotion.

What may be at work, here and elsewhere, is a conflict between the explicit ideology of writers such as Taylor and Armstrong, by which they would certainly defend the view of the equality of black characters, and some unexamined assumptions and even prejudices, which may still form part of their implicit cast of mind. This means that the books provide some very useful material for discussion for instance in the secondary school.

Another book from the 1970s which was highly acclaimed at the time but reviled later is Paula Fox's The

Slave Dancer (1973). It won the Newbery medal, and Dixon (1977) describes it as a novel of “rare excellence ... great horror and as great humanity. It seems to me it approaches perfection as a work of art” (p.125). By contrast, four writers in Stinton's Racism and Sexism in Children's Books (1979) see it as racist because of the language and the passivity of the slaves.

The first person narrator, Jessie Bollier, is kidnapped and taken aboard a slave-trader, in order to play his pipe for the slaves' exercise on deck during their long voyage, so keeping them relatively fit and worth buying. Most of the time they are imprisoned below, and Jessie, angry and himself a prisoner, finds

“a dreadful thing in my mind. I hated the slaves! I hated their shuffling, their howling, their very suffering ... I wished them all dead!” (p.78)

Despite his horror, he really craves their companionship and is fascinated by a young slave-boy, Ras. Ultimately, the only people who survive the wreck of the vessel are Jessie and Ras; when they land they are helped by an old black man, Daniel, who has presumably escaped from slavery, and Jessie voices at the end his own abhorrence for slavery. Jessie's hatred of the slaves is really an instant reaction rather than a considered opinion; it is clear that he isn't really against the slaves as such but rather against aspects of his own situation. His feelings presumably result from his own forced passivity, the fact that he did not and cannot rebel at his own captivity, and therefore feels as if the slaves should do so in his stead. Their failure to rebel is of course realistic, and it seems unreasonable for critics to criticise either this quality or the complex emotions felt by a character in an extreme situation. Again, we have use of the dangerous device of an unreliable narrator through whose reactions the evils of prejudice and slavery are displayed; it seems clear that this is a technique which is not easy even for some adult readers to appreciate, and it certainly demands explicit attention if books of this kind are used in the classroom.

Another book acclaimed at the time but subsequently accused of portraying black characters as passive is Bernard Ashley's The Trouble with Donovan Croft (1974), which won the Children's Rights Workshop Other Award in 1976. The title character is a black boy whose mother's departure to look after his grandmother in the Caribbean causes him to become an `elective mute'. He is living with a white family as his father is unable to care for him (such interracial fostering has subsequently become uncommon) and is exposed to the racist hostility of the next door neighbour and of an unpleasant teacher. Here again, we have ‘irresponsible’ writing, as the reader is expected to judge the wrongness of the behaviour of these characters. Mr Henry is angry when Donovan will not answer to his name:

“as he raged, he slapped Donovan hard across the face with the palm of his hand.
‘Tell me, you stupid black idiot!’” (p.56)

Again, the verbalisation of abuse could be seen as dangerous to the inexperienced reader. Most of the criticisms of the book however have resulted from the passivity of Donovan and, in particular, his father, who seems unable to help his son, and contrasts with the competent and caring Chapmans. At least Donovan takes an active role at the end where he shouts to Keith and prevents him getting run over, but prior to that it is difficult for the reader not to see him as a victim deserving pity. Perhaps this reflects something of the ideology of well-meaning liberals at the time; we must do something for the blacks!

All the books discussed above have a claim to literary merit, but another facet of the debate concerning political correctness is the production of books which seem to have an issue like race as their sole agenda. Many such books are non-fiction, but two fictional examples may be worth mention here: Arvan Kumar's The Heartstone Odyssey (1988) and Judith Vigna's Black Like Kyra, White Like Me (1992). The first of these attracted a good deal of publicity when it was first published, particularly as it had been rejected by mainstream publishers; some of its supporters considered this to be on racist grounds. It would be churlish not to admit that good art and dance work was associated with the book, but at the same time, the fact that its stylistic defects, which I have discussed at more length elsewhere (1990) make it an unattractive read cannot do much good to the cause of anti-racism.

Black Like Kyra is a much slighter book which deals with the question of a black family moving into a white neighbourhood in the United States. The tone is heavily didactic; when the narrator Christy's friend Kyra and her family come to live next door, and are greeted with antagonism by the residents, Christy's father explains:
“Some people are scared of anyone who looks or acts different from them, especially if that person's skin is a different color”

No easy solution is put forward; Christy's previous best friends move away, though Kyra's family decide to stick it out. In its lack of easy solutions or evasions, this is to be welcomed, but it is difficult to imagine any child reading this book for entertainment. Its illustrations lack the polysemic qualities of most good picture books, where an added richness is supplied by aspects about characters or stories which would not have been apparent from the text alone; in this respect it contrasts with some of the books which I shall discuss below.

Emancipatory books
The subject matter of more recent writing for children related to race suggests that authors have found that it is more interesting to depict the positive qualities of a variety of ethnic backgrounds than to concentrate only on anti-racism. Negative aspects tend to be included in these only where they are relevant to a complete rounded picture.
Black characters in our multi-ethnic society
Many contemporary authors, both of illustrated and non-illustrated books, particularly those within the mode of realism, evidently feel that to limit themselves to child characters only of white European stock is unrealistic.

People who criticise this kind of inclusive treatment as ‘political correctness’ make much use of the pejorative term ‘tokenism’. The problem is however that British society today does include children from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds, and not to depict this in some way would also be open to criticism. It would be less satisfactory, however, if on the one hand this were the only mode of depiction of ethnic minority characters, which is far from being the case, or on the other, there were no books which only presented groups of children of the same ethnic group as each other. Books which present a mixture of children of different racial groups are not making race an issue, but simply portraying the realities of contemporary British life. The question of how much the child reader's attention is drawn to the diversity of the characters is one to be faced by the parent or the teacher of the very young children who are the implied readers of such texts.

The skin colour of the characters is of course more evident in picture books than those without illustrations, but many ethnic minority characters also occur in other contemporary children's books, especially those in a realist mode. These black characters, without being major protagonists, may be visible on the cover or their ethnic identity may be discussed in the text.

Perhaps the most significant aspect about the treatment of race in Michael Rosen's This is our house (1996), illustrated by Bob Graham, is the fact that it is not explicitly mentioned at all. The simple story is about a white child, George, having a game in which he takes possession of a cardboard box and denies any of his friends entrance, claiming: “This house is all for me”. He says in turn that the house isn't for girls, it isn't for small people, it isn't for twins, it isn't for people with glasses and it isn't for people who like tunnels. Though three of the eight children who are denied entrance are black, no mention is made of their colour as a reason for their exclusion; this may be because race is a sensitive area, or because such a mention is best left to the teacher of the very young children who are the implied readers. Alternatively, the implication may be that we are now so aware of race that it doesn't need explicit mention, but I think it is one of those situations where the omission is more powerful than the inclusion would have been – the multi-ethnic nature of our society can be taken as a given. Naturally, the other children eventually take possession of George's house and at first exclude him, on the grounds that he has red hair, but he notices that this is also true of one of them and the concluding words of the book are: “This house is for everyone!”

In Britain today, not only is society itself mixed, but many people come from a fairly mixed family background. This has always been the case, with the mingling of Anglo-Saxons and Normans, the Irish, the Jewish, and people from a variety of European inheritances, but it is now more evident. Cognisance is taken of this fact, and especially of marriages between people of different ethnic origins, in a number of children's books. Among a number of picture books which present this situation without drawing any explicit attention to it are three books by Tony Bradman and Eileen Browne (1986, 1988, 1990) about Jo, with a black mother and white father, a parental situation which is reversed for Billy and Belle in Sarah Garland's book by that name (1992). Verna Wilkins and Beverley Naidoo add the incidental depiction of mixed race parentage to their books featuring another equality issue, disability.

Race as an incidental aspect rather than the main focus is a characteristic of many books where a leading or otherwise significant character is black. When I Grow Bigger (1994), by Trish Cooke, illustrated by John Bendall-Brunello, features Thomas, a black infant whose father has been left in charge of him and three older children, two white and one black, while he would clearly prefer to concentrate on the gardening. Thomas's frustration at being small is eventually replaced by joy at being exalted to his father's shoulders from where he can look down on the other children. This is a very simple story in which the colour of the protagonist is in no way integral to the plot, yet where the art work makes the reader at the same time very aware of Thomas's ethnic identity and empathetic to his plight as the smallest.

Malorie Blackman's Hacker (1992) has a black protagonist who is considerably more in charge of her fate than Thomas is. A book like this, while doing relatively little to maintain any distinct racial identity, at least maintains visibility and gives an opportunity for black children to feel present in the text. Blackman is writing out of her own experience as a systems analyst, and some readers may feel a little uncertain what Vicky, the narrator, needs to do with the computer in order to prove that her father is innocent of stealing a million pounds, but we know it is something very clever of which no males, black or white, would be capable. Blackman would seem to be choosing to write about characters who are familiar to her and share her own British Afro-Caribbean background; her books mark the welcome arrival on the scene of reader-friendly writing by black women authors without going out of her way to feature race.

A more ambiguous example of a book with a leading black character without any explicit notice of her colour being taken in the text, is Gareth Owen's Ruby and the Dragon (1990), illustrated by Bob Wilson, and presented in a comic book format. Ruby, a black girl who is always late for school, wants a part in the school play; she is rejected for the role of the princess, as the dress does not fit her, and for the prince, because the helmet is too big, but is left playing the dragon. On the night of the performance, she loses her way to the stage and accidentally disturbs two burglars in the headmaster's office; they are somewhat improbably terrified of the dragon. Ruby at last makes her way to the performance, and the audience are surprised to witness crossing the stage in turn, the two fleeing burglars, a policeman who has swiftly been summoned, the school caretaker, and Ruby as the dragon. Against the play-script, Ruby defeats the prince, and finally is applauded, not only for saving the school valuables, but also for making the play more interesting.

My reactions to this text are ambivalent; on the one hand, it portrays a central black female character, who has a distinctive personality and triumphs at the end. On the other hand, however, it goes some way towards having Ruby fulfil some of the stereotypes attributed to black people by racists; she is always late, and she really isn't very bright, defeating the robbers and changing the play by accident rather than design. Yet a further reaction is to re-examine the situation; perhaps the portrayal of black characters has by now advanced to the stage that we can forget about trying to reverse passive, unheroic, roles, and instead,

rejoice in the farcical comedy which is provided by a character who is only incidentally black. There seems to be within this text the possibility of what has been termed ‘negotiated’ reading (cf. Cherland, 1994:166); children (of any colour and either sex) who have been less successful in the educational process and feel that they will never triumph by cleverness might well empathise with Ruby's accident-prone and lively personality, whether or not this is the intention of the authors. It seems probable that the format of the book has been chosen to appeal to older children who may find reading conventional text difficult but are more confident with the different kinds of demands placed by a story being told in pictures, speech bubbles and occasional sub-picture narrative- demands which ‘mainstream’ readers often find taxing.

Political aspects of children's texts

Any imposition of categories on to fiction is bound to be arbitrary, and there is a fairly thin dividing line between some of the books considered above and those which could be described as having a more explicit political agenda. Such books often explore the relationship between the characters and the opposing or disempowering aspects of society. In some instances these books are set in the past, or within countries than Britain – in places and periods where it is not so easy to regard the situation of the characters separately from society as a whole.

Even books for young children can display an awareness of the potential for clashes between people of different backgrounds. Without any of the explicit didacticism of Black like Kyra (see above) and Mary Hoffman's Amazing Grace (1991) openly confront potential tensions. Jamila Gavin, herself of mixed British and Asian parentage, is adept at portraying contact, friendly and unfriendly, between people of different cultural background. In `My name is Jasmine Grey', a story in her collection, I want to be an Angel (1990), the friendship between two young girls is threatened by the racist attitude of Rachel's grandmother, to the extent that Jasmine says: “I wish I was white”. Rachel however reveals that her friendship transcends both this and the unpleasant behaviour of some other children; finally the dog, Bramble, which has already been used by Gavin as a means of making this adopted character feel at home in her new family, becomes a sign of the restored friendship when Rachel finds the dog and restores him to Jasmine.

Books which depict a setting overseas, in India, Africa, or the Caribbean, may run the risk of giving the impression to the indigenous reader that these countries are purely rural, without cities and the familiar elements of ‘civilisation’. On the other hand, to minimise the differences, and indeed the attractive qualities, of such environments may be equally falsifying. Eileen Browne's Handa's Surprise (1994), despite its artistic merits, might possibly be seen to sustain the stereotype that Africa is made up only of villages with thatched huts. This need not be a problem, provided it is discussed within a broader overall context.

A number of recent books explore the effect on children brought up in England of the experience of going to the country of their parents' origin. The eponymous character of Caroline Binch's Gregory Cool (1994) is equally unhappy with his initial impressions of his grandparents' home in Tobago; it is too hot, the food is too spicy, and unfamiliar insects bite him, so he consoles himself with a video game, until at last he begins to appreciate the advantages of the warm sea and the coconuts, and the friendship of his cousin.

The family situation in Mary Hoffman's Grace and Family (1995), illustrated by Caroline Binch is more complex, and provides another instance of how a book may, without being didactic, help to make children aware of a number of difficult issues. Grace's mother and grandmother live in England, but her father, who has married again, invites her to holiday in The Gambia, so that the book examines Grace's unfamiliarity with Africa, her anxiety about her step-mother which results from her knowledge of so many fairytales with evil step-parents, and her search for her own identity within her divided family. Advised again by her wise grandmother, she concludes that families do not have to follow a specific pattern:

“ ‘Stories are just what you make them’, said Nana.
‘Just like families’, said Grace. ”

Books like these are too complex to be crudely described as resulting from the impulse to be ‘politically correct’. They show the child reader that societies all have different qualities, some of which might be difficult to cope with, others attractive, but that ultimately, people have to live within their own family and culture, while being aware of the many factors going towards the making of identity.

Relatively few books for young children could be termed truly ‘political’ in their engagement with society on a larger scale than the individual. Two of those are Journey to Jo'burg (1985) and Chain of Fire (1989) by Beverley Naidoo. Southern Africa is the setting of both these books about Naledi and her brother Tiro; the children live in a small village and are subject to the evils of apartheid, including forcible transportation to a `homeland'. It could be argued that now this evil system has been abolished, there is no need for books about it, but apart from the desirable result of making children familiar with history and the still remaining effects of apartheid, the fact that totalitarian regimes still exist in many places means that children need to be educated about what people can do to each other. And this education is one which works best through the kind of identification which imaginative literature offers; as Naledi and Tiro make their three hundred mile journey to seek their mother and tell her about the illness of their sister Duneo, we see through their innocent eyes the kind of servitude that their mother experiences. When she asks permission to go back home to attend to her sick daughter she is told by her employer: “I hope you realise how inconvenient it will be for me. If you are not back in a week, I shall just have to look for another maid, you understand?” (p.40). In both these books the reader is aware of strong female characters who take so much of the responsibility in a society where the men are often absent, in a way similar to Mildred Taylor's Southern America of the 1930s.

In Taylor's Roll of Thunder, hear my Cry the strongest agent against the falsification of history put out by the white establishment is Cassie's mother, who loses her job as a teacher because she insists on teaching the true history of slavery. She is also responsible for encouraging other black residents to avoid the stores

whose owners who exploit the blacks; instead they travel further for merchandise. In a way characteristic of black American writers, Taylor seems here to be uniting a feminist perspective with an anti-racist one, a stance which has been called 'womanist' in its refusal to separate the situation of women from the whole position of the group within society.

Fantasy and folk tale

In view of the power of fantasy for transcending boundaries and helping readers to experience situations which are otherwise totally unfamiliar, it is surprising how relatively little use is made of it as a means to showing the triviality of some of the apparent differences between people. A number of illustrators, however, manage effectively to convey in pictures what might be less easy to say only in words.

The realisation that what is ordinary to us may be very strange to someone else, also pervades one of the classics of this genre, June Counsel's But Martin (1984). Four children are described in words but more vividly portrayed in pictures: "Lee's face was smooth and golden. Lloyd's face was round and brown. Billy's face was square and red And Angela's face was long and white but Martin's face was ..."; we have to turn the page to find that he is green, a Martian with antennae, who is on holiday and whose appearance goes some way towards minimising the antagonism which might be generated by any earthly ethnic diversity. As an entertaining experience this book needs no explicit teaching to bring out its message. Elaine Sturman, in a review in Dragon's Teeth (Summer,1987, no.27) however criticises the book as simplistic, though well-meaning, as she feels it implies that "physical characteristics are irrelevant", which can hardly be the case if Counsel makes them so apparent; she also claims that the school which the four human children attend is otherwise all-white, a conjecture for which the book seems to me to provide no foundation whatever. This is another unfortunate instance of critics being all too ready to fault material which, if not perfect, is at least very positive in its impact on most child readers.

An area of fantasy which is also quite productive in helping children to appreciate that differences are often attractive is that involved with animals. David McKee is one of the most effective users of fantasy involving animals, frequently elephants; while his books can be read simply as beautifully illustrated stories, they have further meanings, amply supported by the extra readings demanded by the pictures. In Tusk Tusk (1978), the black and the white elephants hate and try to kill each other, but the peace-loving elephants retreat into the jungle, their grey descendants emerging after all the hostile elephants (a trunk makes an effective gun) are dead. There is no sentimental ending, however; after "Since then the elephants have lived in peace" we have the potential shock of "But recently the little ears and the big ears have been giving each other strange looks". Whether the idea that even those who seem attached to peace have the potential for hostility is understood by child readers will depend on their own maturity and experience. The final picture of elephants shaking trunks however defuses any totally negative final impression. Like any good fantasy, this book can be taken at any level appropriate to the reader; there is no explicit didacticism but it works at a deeper level, aided by the natural interest most children have in elephants.

Other books by McKee also feature elephants; Elmer the Patchwork Elephant (1989) shows how Elmer's difference from the ordinary grey animals, which embarasses him so much that he wants to change it, is an asset rather than a liability. This conclusion has wider implications than simply ethnic difference.

Folk tales from a variety of sources have been among a rich vein of material presenting unfamiliar places in an imaginative way. As long as children realise that stories like these are not presenting the reality of life as lived today, this legacy can be of considerable value to everyone.

New stories using traditional material can often provide a very attractive way of treating contemporary issues. Jacqui Farley's Giant Hiccups (1994), illustrated by Pamela Venus, has an unusual heroine, a friendly black female giant with indigestion; her troubles are ended by the provision of a meal by a multi-racial group of children. Here we have an example of the strength of the picture book in this area – the written text by itself would not reveal the multi-ethnic nature of this story, though the unusual gender of the giant is of course apparent.

Conclusion

It is interesting to examine the ways in which the books which have been considered portray individuals in relation to their community. My impression is that the fiction which I have described as 'anti-racist' tends particularly to focus on one or two individuals who are at least for a time alienated from their community. Timothy and Phillip of The Cay have been shipwrecked, Jessie in The Slave Dancer abducted, and Donovan and Keith in The Trouble with Donovan Croft are isolated by the effect of the black boy's inability to speak. This alienation enables the authors to focus on racist attitudes in a way which a fully rounded portrayal of society would not allow. In some instances, the resolution of the book is achieved with the inclusion of the potentially marginalised individual into the community, as in Elmer and Giant Hiccups.

By contrast, the communities portrayed by Shirley Hughes, Michael Rosen, Eileen Browne and Tony Bradman and others, are inclusive ones, leaving the impression that in this kind of group where colour seems merely incidental, there are no outsiders other than those, like George in This is our house, who temporarily cut themselves off from the community.

In those books which seek to put racism into a political context, however, the central characters tend to be very much part of their community but that group is often marginalised by society as a whole. This is particularly evident in Mildred Taylor's work.

One impression which comes over powerfully from examining this wide and varied range of books is that today there is an abundance of really good literature that represents all people as valuable, and carries the conviction that no-one should be undervalued because of differences from the majority ethnic group. There needs no explicit didacticism to convey a meaning which has the potential to liberate its child readers. This

happy situation is the result of the work particularly of a number of gifted authors and illustrators. These people include both white and black writers and artists, such as Mary Hoffman, Caroline Binch, Mildred Taylor, Trish Cooke, Jamila Gavin, Beverley Naidoo, Bernard Ashley, Malorie Blackman, Eileen Browne, Verna Wilkins and many more. It has become apparent firstly that a number of people from ethnic minority groups have been attracted to this form of writing, and secondly, that there should be no exclusiveness; if there were, we might have lost the contributions of, for instance, Mary Hoffman, Eileen Browne and Helen Oxenbury. Political awareness, if it leads people to portray material which is important to them, can result in the production of first rate books for children. These need not and should not be only crudely anti-racist. What is needed is an integrated attitude which respects the appearance and the traditions of all people; this means that anyone who shares these ideals, who makes the effort to become well-informed, and has the ability to write or illustrate well, should not hesitate about making their contribution to this genre.

Supplement to " 'Race' and Ethnic Identity"

During the period since Children's Literature and the Politics of Equality was published, changes in society have inevitably left their mark on books written for young people. In some respects it could be claimed that western society has become much less tolerant of racial prejudice, and inclined to take for granted that the colour of a person's skin is far less significant than are other areas which reflect diversity, such as culture, gender, class and disability. It would however be over-optimistic to assume that the battle for equality is won as far as race is concerned. There is no doubt that the messages proclaimed by the books recommended in my chapter on " 'Race' and Ethnic Identity" still have an important function in children's education. In this supplement to my earlier work, with reference to a very small selection of recent books that I have personally encountered, I shall highlight certain trends which currently seem to me to be significant. Clearly this selection cannot be claimed to be representative, but the issues presented by them seem to me to have a certain degree of validity.

More recent texts by well established children's authors

Several writers whose social commitment has been evident throughout their careers have enhanced their reputations in recent novels which have continued to display concern with the subject of race. One of the most significant of these authors is Malorie Blackman; her sequence of novels beginning with Noughts and Crosses (2001; see Pinsent 2005) combines the two genres of dystopia and romance in the creation of an alternative world where the black 'Crosses' dominate the white 'Noughts'. The romance between Sephy, the daughter of a wealthy Cross politician, and Callum, a Nought, which ends in inevitable tragedy (echoes of Romeo and Juliet) is followed by later volumes following the story of their mixed-race daughter, Callie Rose. The sideways slant on racism that results from the shift in the reader's normal expectations about the racial group holding power, means that a re-examination of attitudes is inevitable.

Another writer who throughout his career has displayed a commitment to social issues is Robert Swindells, perhaps best-known for his novel about the aftermath of nuclear war, Brother in the Land (1984), Daz4Zoe (1990), like Noughts and Crosses, combines the genres of dystopia and romance, though the lovers are separated more by class than by race. In Smash (1997) he portrays a multiracial community set at odds by a developer who hopes that racial disharmony will enable him to obtain a property he wants. The antagonism affects two boys, previously friends, Steve and Ashraf. In all his books, Swindells' fluent style, strong plot lines, and short chapters, serve to encourage young readers, and these qualities are also to be found in another 'committed' novel by him, Ruby Tanya (2004) which takes on the kindred issue of hostility towards asylum seekers.

Beverley Naidoo's The Other Side of Truth (2000; see Pinsent 2005) is also concerned with the situation of asylum seekers; Sade and Feme escape from Nigeria where their mother has been assassinated. Though racism is not the central issue, the way in which the children are often confronted with hostility in the host society, indicates its relevance as one factor behind this. Naidoo, who is of South African origin, also writes powerfully about apartheid and its aftermath in her home country [in No Turning Back (1995) and Out of Bounds (2001)], while Burn my Heart (2007) takes a revisionary stance on the Mau-Mau emergency in 1950s Kenya.

Like Naidoo, Elizabeth Laird often sets her novels in troubled areas overseas. In theatres of conflict such as Palestine [the location of A Little Piece of Ground (2003)], Ethiopia [The Garbage King (2003)], and Lebanon [Oranges in No Man's Land (2006)], it is not always easy to determine whether the divide between the characters is race, religion or culture, or indeed all three. Most recently from Laird is a collection of short stories from Iraq, A Fistful of Pearls (2008). Perhaps the most notable element in these and her other books is the warmth and compassion of Laird's writing.

An interesting collection of stories from around the world, with the very contemporary theme of asylum seeking, is Give me Shelter (2007) edited by edited Tony Bradman. Two other books, Andrew Fusek Peters and his wife Polly, deal with a current situation, not so much that of asylum seekers as of families from abroad who may be facing hostility from the indigenous population and are certainly confronted with problems arising from their change of location; Roar Bull Roar (2006) and Falcon's Fury (2008) concern a Czech family and make use of folklore from that country.

By complete contrast, Mary Hoffman's 'Grace' series, brilliantly begun with Amazing Grace (1991), deals solely with domestic issues involving her lively central character. The short stories for younger children in Starring Grace (2000), Encore Grace (2003), and Bravo Grace (2005) do not generally counter racism in as direct a manner as in the first in the series, but are part of the process of normalising racial differences in a multi-ethnic society. That all these books are published by Frances Lincoln is a reminder of how this publisher has constantly been committed to the portrayal of ethnic and cultural diversity in literature.

Historical Perspectives

While the recognition that there were many black people in Britain before the twentieth century is not new, it does appear that during the early years of the twenty first century there has been more attention to this

fact, and also to the history of slavery, than was the case for much of the twentieth. Significant among books that in an entertaining and lively way portray eighteenth-century black characters are Julia Golding's The Diamond of Drury Lane (2006) and Cat among the Pigeons (2006), which feature former slaves Olaudah Equiano (the abolitionist, an historical character) and a black boy, Pedro. Another book dealing with the same period is Hero (2001; see Pettigrew, 2008) by Catherine Johnson, whose background is Welsh and Jamaican. All these books also have the asset of having strong female characters, unafraid to take on roles that would have been considered unsuitable for women at that period. All these books are set for much of the time in London, but James Riordan's Rebel Cargo (2007), which also provides an historical perspective on slavery, is located in the west country. Books like these, without undue didacticism, provide a welcome corrective to the all-white history so frequently taught in schools until quite recently.

Another area of children's literature which provides historical material on black involvement in events and exploits all too often seen as only having white participants, is that of retelling of biographies. Since my main focus in this article is on fiction, I will mention here only one, Catherine Johnson's Arctic Hero: The Incredible Life of Matthew Henson (2008), part of a series intended to attract less able readers who nevertheless deserve the opportunity to experience interesting material.

Cultural Aspects

Strongly associated with the question of race is that of culture, which can provide in many instances a greater barrier against acceptance by the ethnic majority than race. The last ten years have been marked by an increase in the number of writers from minority communities whose work can provide a greater insight into the attitudes of those communities than can be the case for those writing from outside them.

Bali Rai, from a British Sikh background, has won several awards for his books, which reveal some of the tensions experienced by the young people torn between Western mores and their own traditional society. It could be argued that these books do not confront racism as such, but that very fact discloses the effect of changes in British society, and in any case, racial issues are often referred to within such books. The presence of so many young people whose parents were from a variety of different countries but who are uncertain about their own identity in a secular society, many of whose values they themselves share, and whose friends have different cultural and ethnic roots, is a major source of tension throughout Europe. Rai's (un)arranged Marriage (2001) is about a boy who revolts against his family members who want to get him married at 17; it also presents his relationships with girls from other backgrounds. Rani and Sukh (2004) uses two time perspectives, that of the present and of the 1960s, to account for the hostility between the families of the two title characters, again from the Sikh community.

Tensions between host communities and Muslim groups which arrived within the last forty years are of course very much a matter of contemporary life throughout the world. Randa Abdel-Fattah's Does my Head look big in this? (2005) was first published in Australia, where the author grew up, but is equally relevant to all Western countries. The central character, Amal, decides to wear the hijab (thus covering her hair but not her face), and the book is concerned not only with her own feelings (is she doing it out of a sense of conceit, as implied by the title, or religious conviction, or both?) but also with the reactions of her schoolmates and family. Issues such as the situation of Muslim women, the extent to which behaviour such as kissing is permissible, and indeed the question of racism in society, are all treated, without the book in any way becoming polemical.

Sophia Acheampong's Growing Yams in London (2006) is the story of a London-born girl of Ghanaian origin, whose experience mirrors that of the author herself, torn between the traditional expectations of her family and the western teenage 'scene'. Interesting material on the retention of some African customs, such as the 'outdooring' ceremony of a baby, provides a strong contrast with the teen language-style. The title, related to an attempt by the protagonist's sister to grow this traditional African vegetable, clearly has a symbolic function too.

Picture Books with messages that counter racism

Frances Lincoln, publishers active in the field of human rights and also ecology, have produced a number of picture books about different parts of the world, conveying messages about both the ordinary nature of the activities involving the characters and the interest of the various locations. Designed both for children in British schools whose heritage may be from other countries, as well as for their indigenous classmates, these books are enriched with photographs, usually featuring children brought up in Britain and visiting their family's previous home. One of the most recent of these is Sungwan So's Shanyi goes to China (2006). Another interesting project from the same publisher, in conjunction with Oxfam, is entitled 'Around the World', again with photographs, and featuring the variety of styles used in different countries; the first two volumes are Bicycles (2006) and Hair (2006), both by Kate Petty. An international flavour is also displayed in Pretty Selma (2006), a West African version of Little Red Riding Hood, by the distinguished South African illustrator, Niki Daly, and South African Animals (2007) by Lindiwe Mabuza, the South African High commisioner, illustrated by Alan Baker. Books such as these help to reinforce the understanding of the cultural heritage of children from an African background who are in British schools.

One of the most affecting of recent picture books, this time on the theme of asylum seekers, is Anthony Robinson and Anne Marie Young's Gervelie's Journey (2008), illustrated by June Allen. This tells in her own words the true story of a girl from the Republic of Congo, and reveals not only the brutality encountered in Africa but also the bureaucratic suspicion met with on arrival in England.

Finally, the most recent in Mary Hoffman's 'Grace' series, Princess Grace (2007), illustrated by Cornelius van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu, unlike the collections of short stories mentioned above, is a richly coloured picture book, illustrating in particular Grace's African heritage. This celebratory note as applied to the traditions of children who are in British schools is a good representative of the trend now displayed in a good many books

whose authors are not satisfied with merely countering racism but prefer to show how much British society has gained from the influx of children from a variety of different backgrounds and cultures.

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[1] Note that picture books are marked with an asterisk. In most cases, date and publisher are those of first British publication. In some instances, American publication may precede this.