

Authentic

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Abstract

Debates about “authentic” children’s literature often focus on the question of who can legitimately write children’s literature. Therefore, an author’s age, race, and/or ethnicity, (dis)ability, and sexuality become important considerations in establishing credibility and authenticity. If we define children’s literature by authorship, then perhaps, as critics like Rose and Zipes suggest, adults cannot write “authentic” children’s literature. However, as children’s authors such as J.K. Rowling and E. Nesbit claim, adults who remember their own childhoods (such as Rowling and Nesbit) do have a right to tell children’s stories. Other critics focus on how marginalized identities are portrayed in books through their thematic content and characters. Concern over misrepresentation and stereotyping has created a push for books by “insiders” who tell their own stories and experiences. While controversies surrounding authenticity are forcing nuanced discussions about identity, authorship, and audience, some critics are pushing back at the label as a limiting framework.

Keywords: Authentic, marginalized children, race, ethnicity, ableism, sexuality, stereotypes, authorship

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The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2011) defines “authentic” as, “stating the truth, and thus worthy of acceptance or belief; of established credit,” etymologically relating it to “classical Latin *auctor* AUTHOR *n.* and *auctōritās* AUTHORITY *n.*” (OED). Implicit in this definition is the idea that an authentic author is one who writes with authority. Authentic does also mean, however, “having the quality of verisimilitude, true to life” (OED). In children’s literature, both definitions—‘authority’ and ‘verisimilitude’—are contentious.

“Authentic” children’s literature is controversial in its most basic sense because there is nearly always a “hidden adult” author (Nodelman, 2008). For Jack Zipes (2001), the fact that “there has never been a literature conceived *by* children *for* children, a literature that belongs to children” makes the genre itself unauthentic. Jacqueline Rose (1984) famously describes the impossibility of children’s fiction because the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver) and Karín Lesnik-Oberstein suggests that children’s literature criticism “is fatally compromised” because of adult involvement (as cited in Rudd & Pavlik, 2010, p. 226). While Marah Gubar (2013) acknowledges the power imbalance between children and adults, she considers it far riskier to refuse to discuss children because however reductive, flawed, or potentially disabling our new theories about childhood may be they can prevent still more demeaning options. For Rose, Zipes, and Lesnik-Oberstein, adults cannot write authentic children’s literature.

While adults write the majority of children’s and young adult books, there are also child and teen authors. Some notable examples include: *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank (thirteen years old); *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (nineteen years old); *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton (sixteen years old); *Stevie* by John Steptoe (sixteen years old); and *The Neon Bible* by John Kennedy Toole (sixteen years old). Although the authorship belongs to teenagers, adults, in the form of editors, publishers, or reviewers, are still implicated in these works. As Peter Hunt (2011) points out, the possessive in “children’s literature” can be interpreted as *by*, *for*, *of*, or *belonging to*; therefore, debates about authentic children’s literature go beyond adult or child authorship.

Some children’s authors stake their claim to authenticity by arguing they write *for* children or that their work is obliquely *by* children because they remember being children. E. Nesbit remembers praying as a child that “I might never forget what I thought, felt, and suffered then” (as cited in Vidal, 1964, para. 9). J. K. Rowling echoes Nesbit’s statement when she says, “I remember exactly how I felt and thought at 11” (as cited in Nel, 2005, p. 252). Lewis Carroll for the *Alice* books and J.M. Barrie for *Peter Pan* drew inspiration from real children, Alice Liddell and Peter Llewelyn Davis respectively, and claimed they wrote to entertain children.

While it is possible to argue that children’s literature is defined by audience, not by authorship (Martin 2011), the author’s racial identity matters in assessing the authenticity of books engaging with race and culture. Concerns about the misrepresentations of children of colour and of historically underrepresented or marginalized groups are growing louder. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin, for example, provides statistics on the number of children’s books by and about people of colour published annually in the United States.

The authorship *by* debate centres on the definition of authentic as ‘of established credit,’ thus focusing on the credibility of the author to tell a particular story. Renowned African American collaborators Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney teamed up for a retelling of *The Tales of Uncle Remus* (1987), for example, in order to reclaim the African folktales that slavery apologist Joel

Chandler Harris appropriated. The grossly exaggerated and inaccurate transcriptions of African-American dialect Harris appropriates in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and his Sayings* (2002) now reads as offensive. In her introduction to *The Tales of Uncle Remus*, Augusta Baker suggests that a true translation and interpretation of these folktales would come from within the black experience.

Among the failures to produce authentic stories from underrepresented communities is Judy Schachner's *Skippyjon Jones* series with its rampant use of "Mock Spanish" (Hill, 1998) and harmful stereotypes about Mexicans. Carmen M. Martínez-Roldán (2013) recommends instead that readers look for Latino authors as they "present a view of Latinos from within their communities" (p. 12). In response to calls for authentic representations like Martínez-Roldán's and Baker's, Corinne Duyvis established #OwnVoices hashtag to promote "the importance of books created by cultural insiders to the identity experience they portray" (Horning, Lindgren, Schliesman, & Townsend, 2017, para. 5).

As Lee Schweninger (2010) argues, scholars must challenge generalized conceptions of authenticity, but what counts as authentic is still difficult to determine. Sherman Alexie, for example, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* provides a controversial example. Alexie, though Spokane/Coeur d'Alene himself, writing about a Spokane teenage boy in a partially autobiographical novel has not escaped criticism about his portrayal of Indigenous peoples. In *Diary*, protagonist Junior comes to terms with his identity as an off-the-reservation Spokane teenage boy. While Junior's struggle to inhabit two worlds validates a common lived experience of many children of colour, there have been critiques that the novel's portrayals of alcoholism and death also reinforce negative stereotypes about Indigenous peoples—what Cook-Lynn called the "unhappy, deficit model" of Indian lives (as cited in Kertzer, 2012, p. 54). Supposedly authentic stories can in fact function to sustain stereotypical perceptions about marginalized groups. Since children's books function as sites of identification, both authors and critics often focus on identity with a qualifying adjective, such as gender identity, national identity, racial identity, ethnic identity, or class identity (Coats, 2011).

The question of who has a right to tell a particular story becomes even more complicated as disability advocates fight long-held assumptions. For the most part "outsiders" frame stories about disabilities, as in R. J. Palacio's *Wonder*, Jack Gantos's *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, and Holly Robinson Peete and Ryan Elizabeth Peete's *My Brother Charlie*. For disability advocates, there ought to be space for people with 'disabilities' to provide insight about their experiences. The 'About' description on the *Disability in Kidlit* website states this position using a disability rights saying: "Nothing about us without us."

Another 'qualifying' category that Coats did not mention in her list is sexuality. Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell's *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), is among the top ten most challenged books according to American Library Association (ALA) statistics. As the authors are married, this picture book on homosexual penguins might be considered 'authentic' regarding the subject broadly, but its primary claim to authenticity is more likely to be its basis on science and that it is based on information provided by a zookeeper from Central Park Zoo. In an effort to support more 'authentic' children's literature written by LGBTQ+ authors or that feature LGBTQ+ characters, two awards were established: ALA sponsors the Stonewall Award and Lambda Literary sponsors the annual 'Lammy' award. The purpose of these awards is to encourage more and better LGBTQ+ depictions in children's literature. Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) won the Stonewall, the

'Lammy,' and the Pura Belpré. The first two awards directly tied to its gay content, and Sáenz qualified for consideration in the latter because he is Latino. While the qualifying criteria for the 'Lammys' allows straight allies, awards like the Belpré and the Coretta Scott King, have in-group restrictions that define 'authenticity' more concretely.

The creation of incentives for more authentic and diverse children's literature is important, but the enforcement of strict parameters of authenticity can have unexpected negative consequences. In Belpré Illustrator Award-winning author/illustrator Yuyi Morales's picture books, vibrant colour palettes, characters of colour, and the occasional use of Spanish words code them as 'Latino' works. Her charming and 'authentic' depictions of Latino children have led to her critical and commercial successes; however, these boldly-coloured stories also happen to conform to stereotypes about Latinidad and 'the' Latino aesthetic. Because there are still so few examples of non-White experiences in children's literature, 'authentic' representations of minorities can work to strengthen one-dimensional perceptions of their communities.

While the debates about authenticity are forcing nuanced discussions about identity, authorship, and audience, some critics are pushing back at the label as a limiting framework. Postmodern critics have challenged the restrictive parameters of a defined identity "arguing that identity is instead provisional and fluid" (Coats, 2011, p. 109). Some postcolonial critics argue that often the usage of the term "authentic" is unproductive because in practice 'authenticity' can easily perpetuate stereotypes. For example, Clare Bradford writes "that the discourse of authenticity too easily invokes concepts of 'pure' or 'full-blood'" (as cited in Kertzer, 2012) thereby adopting reductive colonial categories. Thomas King "is also wary of the dangers of authenticity, calling it a 'racial reality game that contemporary Native people are forced to play'" (as cited in Kertzer, 2012, p. 70). And Schweninger (2010) claims that Indigenous authors and scholars sometimes "perpetuate myths of the authentic" (p. 69). As these critics point out, conceptualizing racial/ethnic authenticity as a set definition of characteristics actually comes to depend on stereotypes. Children's literature that is labeled "authentic" can come to rely on the assumption that culture is a singular category that can be defined "accurately."

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