Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 6 | Issue 2

May 2025

Ramdarshan Bold, Melanie. *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom.* Palgrave Pivot, 2019. 157 pages. ISBN 9783030105211.

Karen Sands-O'Connor
University of Sheffield

https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/rdyl

Recommended Citation: Sands-O'Connor, Karen. "Ramdarshan Bold, Melanie. *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom*. Palgrave Pivot, 2019. 157 pages. ISBN 9783030105211," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2025.

When Melanie Ramdarshan Bold's book was first published, George Floyd was still alive, and the word 'pandemic' was something associated with the global 1918 flu outbreak.

The UK painted itself publicly as a modern, multiracial nation, something perhaps best highlighted in the Danny Boyle-directed opening ceremony for the 2012 London Olympics, which featured a model of the Empire Windrush and its Black Caribbean passengers who had travelled to Britain to fill worker shortages after World War II. The most-published Black British children's author to date, Malorie Blackman, had been made children's laureate 2013-2015, a position that gave her a national platform to raise issues about children and books in British society. However, there was a growing sense of unease about this depiction of a tolerant society. The Grenfell Tower fire (2017), which killed seventy-two people, many of whom were from racially minoritized communities, and the Windrush Scandal (first reported on in 2018) in which Black people who had lived in Britain since childhood were being detained and deported due to the British government's "Hostile Environment" policy, had both received considerable attention in the press.

Cultural figures and literacy charities were becoming more vocal in their calls for children's books to reflect British society as well. Malorie Blackman's 2014 criticism that there weren't enough Black characters in children's books was reported with race-baiting headlines (such as Chris Green's for the *Independent* newspaper, "Children's Books are Too White, says Laureate"), but unlike in the US, there were few statistics available to back up Blackman's claim. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE), partly in response to concerns voiced by Blackman and other authors of colour, published their first *Reflecting Realities* report in 2018 which revealed that "Only 1% of the children's books published in the UK in 2017 had a BAME[1]

[1] Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic. This term, used in government statistics such as education reports, is now considered reductive and has not been used by CLPE in their *Reflecting Realities* reports since 2020.

character" (5), a statistic which compared unfavorably with the number of primary school-age children from one of these backgrounds, which was 32.1%. Booktrust, another literacy charity in the UK, also put out a report through their *Booktrust Represents* program (2019), which examined statistics about children's book authorship. This report included the statistic that "In 2017, 5.58% of children's book creators were people of colour" (Ramdarshan Bold, *Representation* [2019] 9), again an unfavorable comparison with the 16% of the UK working population from these backgrounds.

Ramdarshan Bold was the author of the Booktrust report, and a steering committee member for *Reflecting Realities*. Her work with these charities made her highly aware of the dearth of academic research on children's and young adult publishing by and for British people, particularly research that examined the effects of a hostile or indifferent publishing industry on book creators and readers. *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction* does at least some of that corrective work. Focusing on young adult authors of colour, the study combines statistical research over a ten-year period (2006-2016) with anecdotal experiences of fourteen Black, Asian or multiple-heritage authors who had published for young adults during that time. Fourteen authors might not seem like a large sample, but this demonstrates the importance of Ramdarshan Bold's research: those fourteen authors represented 35% of all the authors of colour published in the period between 2006 and 2016 (and yes, if you do the math that means that there were only forty authors of colour publishing new books in ten years' time). Ramdarshan Bold was able to contact thirty-two of these authors and conducted interviews with the fourteen who were willing and available to respond. She sets out her methodological and statistical approaches in the initial chapter, as well as what the research could and could not do. For example, she notes that most of the interviewees were from middle class backgrounds but adds that "people from working-class

backgrounds are not well represented in the cultural industries" (12) anywhere in Britain. She does say she will discuss class when it "intersects with ethnicity" (12) but suggests more work needs to be done in this area. However, one of Ramdarshan Bold's advantages as a researcher is that she is one of the (still far too few) academics of colour in the UK; she notes that "many of the authors explicitly said, during their interviews, that they would not have been so open and honest about issues of 'race' and racism with a white researcher" (13). This reminds academic readers of Ramdarshan Bold's book, particularly those in privileged positions who mentor and supervise students and early career researchers, what is at stake when we don't properly support those new researchers of colour.

Her second chapter focuses on who is left out of histories of young adult literature—both in terms of British young adults in general and those of colour more specifically. With a few exceptions (Ramdarshan Bold singles out the editorship of Topliners by Aidan Chambers in the 1960s and 70s), the young adult literature with characters of colour published in the UK has historically been American, not British. And although a few of her interviewees were hopeful that the industry was changing, Ramdarshan Bold concludes this chapter by quoting young adult author Catherine Johnson. Johnson argues that "the wider YA readership has done amazing things in terms of gender and sexuality but not race because it's ultimately a white, middle class [readership]" (35). Ramdarshan Bold then notes that her own research with Booktrust confirms that "things, for British authors of colour, are worse now than they were a decade ago" (36). The third and fourth chapters, which are the heart of *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction*, delve into possible answers for why Johnson's pessimism is justified.

Chapter three, "The 'Diversity' Status Quo in the UK Publishing Industry," begins by criticizing the neoliberalism of the publishing industry, which appears to offer choices for readers

(sometimes through "diversity initiatives") but which only accepts certain kinds of diversity that don't trouble the status quo. This includes the status quo of the industry itself, which "are dominated by professionals from white, middle-class backgrounds" (46). The overrepresentation of white people in the book industry at all levels often leaves authors, illustrators, and editors of colour feeling isolated and required to be 'the' representative of their entire community; these authors "felt tokenized, fetishized, and a spokesperson for their specific ethnic background" (52). Diversity initiatives, which ostensibly support creators of colour, often "result in under-represented groups acquiescing to the pressures of dominant culture and thus enacting, or overemphasizing, their otherness" (61). This provided the publisher with the "economic and social value" (61) linked to "Markers of difference [. . .] used to elevate products in an oversaturated marketplace" (68). In other words, the author becomes a commodity that can be sold as something different for the reader. However, this otherness is not valuable to the author. Ramdarshan Bold notes that author interviews indicated that "they received fewer opportunities and visibility through marketing than their white counterparts, while some had even experienced editorial pressure to make their characters, and books, more 'palatable' to the wider (predominantly white) mainstream audience" (69). In terms of young adult literature, this means that the authors Ramdarashan Bold interviewed "were often encouraged to write issue books" (73) rather than being able to write across the spectrum of young adult literature. 'Diversity initiatives' benefitted publishers, who could trumpet their anti-racism, more than new editors or authors, who were rarely supported enough to succeed in the industry.

The fourth chapter in *Inclusive Young Adult Literature* interrogates the notion of Britishness, examining what it means when only one definition of British exists in books. "This singular [white and middle/upper middle class] British identity is one that informs the publishing

industry, in the widest sense, and has had an impact not only on the interviewees' writing careers, but also on their sense of identity growing up" (98), Ramdarshan Bold writes. In terms of their identities, they did not feel they belonged in books, and this belief carried on as they became writers, with many feeling a sense of impostor syndrome. Additionally, the definition of Britishness pervaded the international market as well, and many of the interviewed authors had difficulty getting their books published in the US. But rather than being allowed to be angry, authors were expected to be grateful to be published at all and "consequently, they should not complain" (102) if their books weren't marketed here or elsewhere. The author of colour is only valuable to UK publishers if they perform an acceptable type of 'ethnicness' to provide the publisher with an opportunity to tick the diversity box. So why do UK young adult authors of colour carry on? Mostly for their readers, whether readers of colour or white readers, and for themselves as readers and writers. Representation, as author Sita Brahmachari is quoted as saying in the book, is "vital for every aspect of our growing society. To offer stories that are representative of our world" (131).

Following the publication of Ramdarshan Bold's book, many things appeared to change, both in British publishing and in the wider society. George Floyd's death in 2020 reignited the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK, and protests took place across the country, including in Bristol where the statue of enslaver Edward Colston was dumped in Bristol Harbor. More diversity initiatives were announced, including Penguin Random House's Lit in Colour initiative to support schools in providing more inclusive literature curricula. The *Reflecting Realities* reports continued to show improvement in numbers of books with characters of colour, and Booktrust's follow-up report (2022) to its 2019 report also showed gains. So, all is well, right?

2024 has questioned these conclusions. Several university programmes focused on Black literature, history and culture have been closed or suffered redundancies, including the universities of Winchester, Chichester, and Birmingham City and Goldsmiths. In July, far-right rioters, many of them white British and describing themselves as 'patriots' attacked people of colour and the police who were trying to protect them. Although the rioters argued that they were anti-immigration, it is significant that the people they attacked were people of colour, many of whom were British born. Clearly, the definition of Britishness still excludes people of colour for many white British people. And the number of books with characters of colour published in the UK for children declined for the first time since CLPE began publishing its reports. CLPE called the results 'disappointing' (4) and said that the 'sociopolitical context [. . .] has impressed a necessary urgency to challenging prejudice, racism and discrimination' (22). It is difficult to know whether this is a temporary or more permanent shift in the publishing industry's focus, but the need has certainly not gone away.

The decline is not a result of the research not being there to prove the importance of including authors and characters of colour under the umbrella of British young adult literature. Ramdarshan Bold's book and the wider work in which she and others participate give ample evidence that all of society benefits from wider reading choices for young people. The problem is systemic, and structural. As *Inclusive Young Adult Literature* concludes,

> Instead of increasing quotas of publishing professionals, authors, and characters of colour, often in a tokenistic way, publishers, authors, and readers (and other groups in the book trade and beyond, such as literary agents, book reviewers, booksellers, librarians, and educators) have to examine their role in supporting this cultural dissonance and extending hegemonic practices. (149)

Until we all expand our definitions of who can be British and who can be book creators, we will continue to see diversity in the publishing industry existing only as a momentary trend.

Works Cited

Green, Chris. "Children's Books are Too White, Says Laureate." *Independent*, 12 July 2014, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/children-s-books-are-too-white-says-laureate-9602505.html.

Ramdarshan Bold, Melanie. *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom*. Palgrave Pivot, 2019.

Ramdarshan Bold, Melanie. *Representation of People of Colour Among Children's Book Authors and Illustrators*. Booktrust, Apr. 2019, www.booktrust.org.uk/globalassets/resources/represents/booktrust-represents-diversity-childrens-authors-illustrators-report.pdf.

Ramdarshan Bold, Melanie. *Representation of People of Colour Among Children's Book Authors and Illustrators (2020-2021)*. Booktrust, Nov. 2022, www.booktrust.org.uk/globalassets/resources/booktrust-represents/2022/research-reports/booktrust-represents-representation-of-people-of-colour-among-childrens-book-creators-in-the-uk.pdf.

Reflecting Realities: Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature. Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, July 2018, clpe.org.uk/research/clpes-reflecting-realities-survey-ethnic-representation-within-uk-childrens-literature-0.