

Review

Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour

in the United Kingdom.

Melanie Ramdarshan Bold.

Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

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Inclusive Young Adult Fiction might have preceded the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020, but the points Melanie Ramdarshan Bold raises in this book resonate on many different levels with experiences that authors of colour have been sharing this year, as well as with conversations that have been taking place for decades about racism in publishing, including in the fields of children's and YA literature. This book is part of the broader social and political project of documenting racial inequalities in publishing by way of pushing the industry to re-examine its practices so that real, substantive change can finally take place.

Ramdarshan Bold focuses on the representation of the British authors of colour who still form a very small percentage of published YA authors in the UK. In an earlier quantitative study, Ramdarshan Bold found that British authors of colour represented only 1.5% of authors who had YA books published between 2006 and 2016 ("The Eight Percent Problem"). In *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction*, Ramdarshan Bold draws on semi-structured

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interviews conducted with fourteen of those British YA authors of colour (male and female, representing different ethnic communities, and including several authors of mixed heritage) to present their experiences in navigating the predominantly white, middle-class field of publishing as an industry which rests upon and promotes whiteness as the norm. The responses to these interviews are an important basis for the arguments that the book makes, although they are supplemented by an impressive range of resources, including quantitative data, reports, press interviews, and press coverage of diversity and inclusion in British publishing. Given the influence of American culture and the large percentage of American YA authors published in the UK (43%), Ramdarshan Bold presents the issues she addresses in the context of Anglo-American YA discourse, while also highlighting similar debates and trends in other cultural fields, such as adult publishing and the film industry.

Ramdarshan Bold's introduction offers a rationale and justification for the study: she places her research in the context of the turn within cultural studies to take into greater account the role of race and ethnicity in cultural production, given that media and book content shapes identity construction, especially for the younger generation. Drawing from critical race studies, she highlights the need for 'counter-narratives' that challenge the hegemonic ways of representation which normalise whiteness and perpetuate cultural hierarchies. She also uses Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphors of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors to argue for inclusive literature that reflects the multicultural lives of readers or provides access to other worlds and realities. In researching YA publishing, Ramdarshan Bold notes that she is entering relatively uncharted waters because there is little academic work that addresses race in the cultural industry, while the 'industry' side remains relatively unexplored in studies on diversity versus more common topics such as representation in YA texts or the responses of minoritised or majority readers to YA literature, especially multicultural texts.

The second chapter presents a brief history of Anglo-American YA through the lens of inclusivity and diversity. The reader gets a rather patchy image of how British YA, in particular, emerged and developed, but this seems mainly to be due to the lack of resources and comprehensive historical studies. Nevertheless, Ramdarshan Bold highlights some significant instances, including the drive to publish books about young Britons in the context of racial tensions in Britain of the 1970s as well as the work of Topliners, the imprint established by the British author, Aidan Chambers, which published titles by minoritised authors. She also points out that calls to promote greater diversity in children's and YA fiction go back to the middle of the nineteenth century, most recently culminating in the We Need Diverse Books movement in the USA and various grass-roots initiatives established in the UK by authors of colour.

In the third chapter, Ramdarshan Bold approaches her topic from an industry angle to explore the implications that the current state of publishing, including its whiteness, has for the acquisition, editing, and the discoverability of books by authors of colour, or the extent

to which consumers are made aware of them. In particular, she situates her discussion in the context of two main trends: the growing dominance of Anglo-American publishing by a few media conglomerates and the predominant whiteness of publishing professionals (90%), which also extends to gatekeepers at all levels, from booksellers to librarians, juries of literary prizes, organisers of literary festivals, and book reviewers. Ramdarshan Bold points out that publishing is animated by a constant tension between the desire to create a cultural product of importance and the drive to make a profit. As she suggests, while daring or experimental works continue to be released, conglomeration has made publishing more risk averse as it aims to appeal to dominant, mainstream cultural tastes.

This chapter documents how racialised inequalities in the publishing industry impact authors of colour at various stages of their careers. For many of the authors interviewed, the decision to start writing arose from a sense of personal commitment when they found that their stories were not being told. As Ramdarshan Bold suggests, the desire to become a writer is, however, only the first step. Entry into the field of publishing requires networking and some prior knowledge of the industry, something that is not too readily available for people of immigrant backgrounds. Once they had their first publishing deals, the authors reported that they often found publishing an uncomfortable space with few authors or publishing professionals of colour. Some authors mentioned the resistance they faced from publishers who worried that their stories would not sell or were too ‘ethnic’, and in certain cases, they have been asked to amend content that questions white supremacy. In addition, many reported being on the receiving end of racist micro-aggressions or having their experiences of racism invalidated. In an industry where ethnic ‘otherness’ is commodified, they often feel tokenised or obliged to perform in particular ways to fit pre-existing ideas about their ethnic groups.

In recent years, there have been calls for greater diversity in the industry, but Ramdarshan Bold expresses her scepticism regarding the effectiveness of diversity schemes, a sentiment shared by the authors she interviewed. While grassroots initiatives by people of colour fared much better in the opinions of Ramdarshan Bold and her interviewees, they point out that diversity schemes, often run by white people, have so far resulted in very little tangible change: “instead of addressing the systematic racism that is embedded throughout the cultural, and wider, institutions, ‘diversity’ initiatives focus on providing more opportunities to minoritised creatives in order to appeal to a wider audience” (61); in other words, they are a mechanism to manage diversity. As *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction* makes clear, authors of colour also face systematic hurdles in the form of the little financial or moral support they receive from publishing professionals. While publishers derive ‘diversity points’ from having authors of colour on their roster, many authors complained of the little effort put into marketing their books relative to their white peers. This obliges them to carry out unpaid labour to promote their work and count on personal and social networks for

support. Given the precarity of cultural work and its low economic returns, authors of colour with fewer means would find it difficult to stay in the field of publishing.

What emerges most prominently from Ramdarshan Bold's argument is the contradictory treatment of race by publishers: on the one hand, people of colour are frequently marginalised; on the other, race is often commodified for profit. The industry admits few British authors of colour, but the ones that do make it are defined solely by their ethnic identity. Authors of colour are also expected to focus on issue books, which trade on the supposedly problematic existence of ethnic minorities. As a result, they are less frequently published in lucrative, mainstream genres such as fantasy, romance, or science fiction. Ramdarshan Bold relates this to the rarity of characters of colour in such genres and the fact that, when they appear, they are depicted through stereotypes and negative tropes. This state of affairs lays bare the assumption at the heart of mainstream publishing of readers as predominantly white and whiteness as a 'universal' experience relative to more niche 'ethnic' experiences. As one author, Peter Kalu, tells Ramdarshan Bold, "publishers aren't always explicit in requesting white characters but you can read between the lines. They want characters for their imagined readership" (qtd. in *Inclusive* 77). In a similar vein, Alex Wheatle shared his experiences with adult publishing: "I believe they refused to see the potential in my work, they refused to see it as universal" (qtd. in *Inclusive* 77). Ramdarshan Bold points out that not only does this attitude underestimate the general interest in multicultural works, it also dismisses minoritised people as potential readers.

The fourth chapter then approaches inclusive and multicultural YA through the lens of identity, sometimes reiterating points Ramdarshan Bold made in the previous chapter. If media and book content shapes one's identity and ways of being in the world, what happens when certain members of society are not present on the pages of books? Ramdarshan Bold argues that this promotes dominant notions of what both fictional characters and authors look like (primarily middle class and white) and leads minoritised people to question their worth and consider their experiences as atypical or deviant. This has implications for both author and reader identities, but also in terms of the aspects of ethnic identity and notions of British national identity sold by the publishing industry.

For aspiring or emerging authors, the lack of representation of authors of colour means that there are fewer role models. Several authors interviewed by Ramdarshan Bold use this fact, alongside the perceived impenetrability of the publishing establishment, to explain why people of colour are turning to other avenues to express their creativity, such as performance poetry and grime. Once they enter publishing, YA authors have to find ways to negotiate their ethnic minority or mixed identities in the predominantly white world of publishing. What emerges, Ramdarshan Bold argues, are complex dynamics of self-positioning or positioning by others, with many authors feeling that they have to code-switch or modify their behaviour to fit in. To complicate the matter, their ethnic identities are put front and centre in the marketing of their books, thus placing authors of colour in a bind. While they

want to have the freedom to share their specific world view, they resent being defined solely by their ethnicity. Finally, one of the most thought-provoking arguments made in the book is how people of colour or those writing at the margins or beyond the literary canon were made casualties by Roland Barthes' announcement of 'the death of the author' or the belief that authorial identity and intention should have no place in literary criticism and the reading of a text. Ramdarshan Bold counters this by noting that not only do perceptions of the author make a difference to readers, the identities of authors of colour and their experiences as racialised individuals undoubtedly affect their writing, a fact that emerges very clearly from her author interviews.

Ramdarshan Bold makes the case that the commodification of race, coupled with the publishing industry's courting of the white gaze, has led to practices of cultural appropriation, in which aspects of minority cultures are taken by members of a dominant culture and presented in a commercial package acceptable to whiteness. This includes the publication of stories written by white authors writing about non-white characters that, more times than not, promote racial stereotypes or present the experiences of ethnic minorities in ahistorical and asocial ways. None of the authors interviewed rejected outright that white authors write about people of colour. However, some of the concerns raised highlight the role that white authors need to play to support diversity such as building a history of supporting and promoting writers of colour, portraying characters of colour with respect and dignity, and creating works that interrogate whiteness. As Ramdarshan Bold notes, one of the main products of British cultural industries is the notion of a "singular [white and middle/upper middle class] British identity" (98). The authors interviewed for the book felt that while their own work presented a better reflection of the complex makeup of contemporary Britain: "many UKYA authors of colour are constructing their own notions of Britishness, to counter the unconscious manifestation of racism inherent in traditional constructions and to broaden the understanding of what it is to be British in the twenty-first century" (93-94). However, this very fact may make their work less attractive in the global market, especially with recent trends of nostalgia for a white England. The situation is different with American authors of colour, and the interviewed authors link this to different attitudes to race in the two nations. In the UK, a supposed racial or colour blindness is the norm which only makes it more difficult to talk honestly about race.

Despite the inhospitable climate of the British publishing industry and its resistance to change, Ramdarshan Bold shows that British people of colour still choose or aspire to become authors. For them, writing is a vehicle to present their vision of the world and perhaps bring forth change. In her concluding chapter, Ramdarshan Bold sums up the main enabling factors and barriers that have played a role in the careers of authors of colour based on the interviews. The seven main barriers are: the tokenisation or ghettoisation of authors of colour; under-representation of gatekeepers from marginalised groups; authors of colour feeling uncomfortable or not sure of their place in the literary community; lack of

quality/authentic representation for authors of colour with implications for both readers and aspiring authors; the lack of support (financial or otherwise) and attention given to marketing their books; low income; and finally, the discrimination and unconscious bias they face. The enabling factors included the important role played by libraries; author visits as a way to encourage a future generation of readers and writers; the existence of role models; and the vital importance of supportive networks.

Overall, the book clearly presents the structural barriers that hinder the entry or success of British authors of colour in YA publishing and make it difficult for calls for diversity to produce tangible change. These barriers rest on the normative whiteness that structures the field, reflected in the racial composition of publishing professionals, the ‘mainstream’ taste and gaze that is being catered to, and the notions of British identity that are reproduced. While the book succeeds in presenting the factors that affect whether aspiring authors of colour consider a career as writers or are able to last the course in publishing, it lacks a more focused examination of the structural inequalities that govern entry into the field at the acquisitions phase. It would also have benefited from a clearer and tighter structure that avoids some of the existing repetitions across different sections.

However, Ramdarshan Bold addresses an aspect of YA literature, namely its writing and production, that is usually only examined in press or trade publication articles or raised by authors themselves in different fora. In this regard, it is a pioneering study that can be used as a model to examine other aspects of diversity. Furthermore, her examination is not only informative but grounded in a wide range of theoretical traditions, including cultural studies, critical race studies, postcolonial studies, and reader response theory, while remaining highly accessible and very readable. *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction* would appeal to those with a scholarly interest in publishing, especially Anglo-American young adult publishing; issues of diversity; cultural studies, and author identities. Since it assumes an audience already somewhat familiar with the workings of the Anglo-American publishing sector in the current era, those less familiar, including international readers, will find it useful to supplement their reading with additional sources, some of which are cited by Ramdarshan Bold herself. Ultimately, this book is for those who share Ramdarshan Bold’s faith in the potential of YA to “be at the forefront of educating and informing young people, about important social issues, including representation” (6).

REFERENCES

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