

Diversity and Representation in Children's Literature Script

Tavish: Hi, and welcome to "Misra's Talk Justice."

Nicole: A podcast by me, Nicole Misra

Tavish: And me, Tavish Misra.

Nicole: Today, we're going to talk about a topic I really care about, especially because I am an English teacher.

Tavish: Diversity in children's books

Nicole: So Tavish, I've known people who insist that diversity in book publishing isn't really a social justice issue. What do you think about this?

Tavish: I didn't think it was an issue when I was in grade or as a young adult, but I do think it's an issue now.

Nicole: Why?

Tavish: Because children and teens and young adults need to be able to see themselves represented in literature and media.

Nicole: Did you read books about Indians or Indian-Americans while you were in school?

Tavish: No, I did not. My mother, however, who is a librarian would bring many books home featuring different Indian figures in history like Gandhi, Chandrasekar, and Ramanujan.

Nicole: How do you think reading books about Indians impact you, now looking back on the situation?

Tavish: It gave me a sense of self-pride. :)

Nicole: To me, as a White person, I can say I've always been able to read books that featured characters that look like me: White, female, likes the same things as me, so I didn't realize that it's hard--like I have to search to find books about Indian folks. It's worth it, but it should be much easier.

That's the personal side of things, but let's go to some research.

There's an organization called the CCBC or the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and they actually track books every year to see how diverse they are.

Tavish: Out of 4,035 books in 2019, a little more than 10% of books were ABOUT Black/African folks. But only 5% books were written by Black folks.

Nicole: So like... that's weird to me. Shouldn't Black folks write about their own experiences in their own voices? Because I feel like, I might know about a culture but I don't think I could tell a story accurately as someone who is not from that culture. Does that make sense?

Tavish: Yeah, I think that makes sense. Also, 5.8% of books were ABOUT Latino/Hispanic folks, and 6% were by Latinx/Hispanic people. That's not okay.

Nicole: Yeah, it's not really a lot considering Black folks are like 14% of the population, and Hispanic folks are 18% of the population. There should be more books!

Tavish: 1.6% of books were ABOUT Native Americans, but 1.1% of books were BY Native Americans. That's only 46 books by Native authors out of 4,000 books.

Nicole: Bro, that's not okay. I know there's a big push to help new and more diverse authors publish stories, but I didn't realize that even with that there's still underrepresentation. Like, it's still hard to find books by Native, Black, or Latino authors.

Tavish: Thankfully, there are organizations that promote diverse literature.

Nicole: One local example is the Eyeseeme Bookstore in University City, which is only ten minutes from Soldan. Tavish, you went there with me for the first time two weeks ago.

Tavish: I did, and I enjoyed myself.

Nicole: What did you like?

Tavish: I saw many books by many different authors from different cultures in the US and around the world.

Nicole: It's also a Black-owned family bookstore, and they do book fairs and host reading clubs. It's basically awesome.

Tavish: The next organization is We Need Diverse Books or WNDB for short. We Need Diverse Books is a nonprofit which features many different books from many different cultures you can browse by culture or race or religion and find books you would like to read.

Nicole: There's also books about disabilities like blindness, autism, and even books about LGBTQ+ youth! And they also try to help new authors publish stories. So if there were only 46 books by Native Americans, you need to say, okay, who can we help publish their stories, to increase that number. And that's what they're doing.

Tavish: Toni Morrison said, "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."