

Diversity or Reality? Representation in YA Fantasy

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Representation is very important in media, and books are no exception. Specifically, it is of particular importance for young adults to see themselves represented in media as it can positively affect their development (Rosenblatt, 1956). In a 2013 study on young adult female readership, it was determined that the readers frequently drew comparisons between their own lives and that of the characters (Suico, 2013). In an analysis of the significance of female protagonists on young adult females, the article states, "It's all about awareness and visibility, so the more that you see female characters in lead roles, in prominent positions, it becomes expected that they're supposed to be there," (Eckstein, 2017, as cited by Stahler, 2017). From this, we can extrapolate just how important it is for young people of a marginalized group to see themselves represented as protagonists in literature. Young adult author Sabaa Tahir has been vocal about the significance of racial representation in young adult literature. In an interview Tahir states, "...how often is that hero a [person of colour]? Not often enough," (Tahir as cited by Franklin, 2017, para.5). In 2017, only 24% of YA and Children's books published were about African American, Asian American, Indigenous, and Latinx characters and only 15% were written by African American, Asian American, Indigenous, and Latinx authors (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2018).

Furthermore, it is also important for readers not of a marginalized group to read diverse literature:

We must learn how to understand one another, see each other's humanity, and work toward greater justice. [Diverse] children's and young adult literature can provide an important first step for helping youth to begin exploring these critical viewpoints, as well as to develop empathy and love for the world around them. (Augsberger & Jung, 2017, p.51)

Author Tananarive Due states, "'Diversity' should just be called 'reality.' Your books, your TV shows, your movies, your articles, your curricula, need to reflect *reality*," (Due as cited by Writer's Digest, 2018). Not only is diverse writing important, it is also just good writing.

Historically, the fantasy genre has struggled with being diverse. When you think about "fantasy", the first thing that comes to mind is likely a vision of Medieval Europe, with knights in shining armour, damsels in distress, and dragons that need slaying. Not only has fantasy been a male dominated genre, it is also a very Eurocentric genre. Diversity is rare in Eurocentric

fantasy, as many authors want to be historically accurate but are hesitant to deal with race; however, by choosing to ignore it, they are wiping out entire races and diminishing culture. Society has recently shifted away from this need to represent historical accuracy (for Medieval European inspired fantasy) to instead representing reality in a fantasy setting (after all, in the world of make-believe, an author has free reign to invent their world however they like). Moreover, trends in YA fantasy are shifting to fantasy worlds inspired by non-western settings, such as the popular Rebel of the Sands series by Alwyn Hamilton.

Libraries need to take responsibility in promoting diverse books to everyone, but particularly to teens, who may not seek these books out on their own. Having a permanent book display, incorporating diverse books into a book club, or hosting an activity such as “Book Diversity Bingo” (see Appendix A for sample bingo card) are excellent ways libraries can help advocate for diverse reading. Libraries should also teach people about “Own Voices” novels; Own Voices is a term created by YA author Corinne Duyvis that describes a book with a marginalized main character written by an author who is also a member of the same marginalized group (Gomez, 2017). This bibliography provides examples of diverse and Own Voices novels with strong female characters and a variety of representation, including racial, LGBTQ+, and disability representation.

Annotated Bibliography:

The Startouched Queen, by Roshani Chokshi. 2016.

This beautifully written fantasy is a retelling of Persephone and Hades inspired by the author's Indian culture. Chokshi also drew upon Hindu mythology to weave a rich magical world that readers will fall into. Set in a fantasy world inspired by ancient India, Maya is the daughter of the Raja of Bharata but her curse of death leaves her an outcast. When her father agrees to marry her for political gain, she is given a chance at freedom; as the Queen of Akaran she is given power and respect. But Akaran is not all it seems, and neither is her new husband. Maya must unravel the mysteries of her new kingdom to save her loved ones before she loses herself.

We Hunt the Flame, by Hafsah Faizal. 2019.

This epic fantasy inspired by ancient Arabia is written by an American Muslim debut author. We follow Zafira, a hunter who must disguise herself as a man, and Nasir, the son of the sultan. With their land on the brink of war, they must race each other to retrieve an ancient artefact that could change the fate of the world forever. Mark your calendars now, because this book comes out May 14, 2019 and is sure to take the YA world by storm. Faizal herself is a woman of inspiration; the author has spoken out about the challenges she has faced being a writer; in particular, being told that she could never be published because she wears the niqab. Faizal has stated that her dream is to show other Muslim women that they can succeed at achieving their goals.

Forest of a Thousand Lanterns, by Julie C. Dao. 2017.

This East Asian, Own Voices fantasy retells the origin of the Evil Queen in a very unique way. Despite growing up in a poor village, Xifeng has been raised to be the Empress by her aunt, Guma. Her whole life, she has been told about her future greatness, divined by the cards. When she makes her way into the palace as the current Empress's handmaiden, Xifeng realizes the only way to fulfill her destiny is to use dark magic. Dao's anti-heroine, Xifeng, is ambitious and will go to any length to achieve her destiny. She toes the line between what is right and wrong. Does the end justify the means?

Children of Blood and Bone, by Tomi Adeyemi. 2018.

Children of Blood and Bone is an Own Voices fantasy novel inspired by Nigerian mythology. Zélie was orphaned when Orísha's king outlawed magic and its wielders, the maji. This book follows Zélie as she attempts to bring magic back into her world, take down the corrupt government, and learn to control her own magic which threatens to bubble over. Though fantasy, *Children of Blood and Bone* deals with themes of race and oppression and is an incredibly important novel to read in today's society.

Dread Nation, by Justina Ireland. 2018.

This Own Voices alternative historical fiction reimagines Civil War era America overrun by zombies. In wake of the zombie revival, the American government is forcing Indigenous and African American children to train at combat school, learning to fight against the zombies. Our main character, Jane, as a black teenager, attends one such combat school. But as Jane gets tangled in a political conspiracy, she'll have to decide if the real monsters are zombies, or humans? While Ireland's novel deals with racism in a Civil War era America, the commentary is certainly applicable to modern day. In addition, *Dread Nation*'s protagonist Jane is queer; the focus of the main character's relationships lies in friendship, however, not romance.

Huntress, by Malinda Lo. 2011.

Inspired by Chinese mythology, *Huntress* tells the story of two teenage girls, Kaede and Taisin, sent on a mission to save their kingdom from an eternal winter. With Taisin's magic and Kaede's skill in combat, the two face the dangerous journey together. As the girls grow closer, they find themselves falling in love, but love is not an option for the lives they have chosen. When it comes down to it, will the girls choose love, or duty?

Before She Ignites, by Jodi Meadows. 2007.

Despite being the face of peace for the Fallen Isles, Mira suffers from crippling anxiety and panic attacks. Still, she has publicly promoted the treaty they named after her since she was born. But when Mira discovers the peace treaty is covering up a massive government scandal, she is imprisoned for trying to speak out. *Before She Ignites* is told in alternating chapters of before imprisonment and after. Mira must decide who to trust, figure out how to escape the most highly guarded prison, and learn what has happened to her beloved dragons before it is too late.