

Introduction: Why Diversity Matters

By Jess Kelly

What do you think of when you hear the word fantasy? Do you think of tall, graceful elves fighting against orcs; mysterious vampires; or maybe a group of young wizards attending a magical boarding school? Popular fantasy works such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *Harry Potter* can take readers on adventures to new places, but these places often lack diverse characters.

It is not just young adult (YA) fantasy that is experiencing a lack of diversity, but all of YA literature. Despite being one of the most productive time periods in YA publishing, only 4.79% of YA titles were written by authors of colour in 2016 (Flood, 2017). This lack of diversity can also be seen in bestseller lists. When analyzing the 20 bestselling YA novels from the past decade, Randarshan Bold found that 18 featured “white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender main protagonists” (Flood, 2017). So much of YA literature now has characters from similar backgrounds that it lacks one of the most important things books should provide: diverse perspectives and experiences.

Diversity is important in YA literature for many reasons. First, it can help

readers gain understanding and empathy for those who are different from them. Studies have found links between “reading fiction and increased empathy”, particularly with adolescent readers (Gilmore, 2017). Stories give readers access to new experiences they may not have had a chance to experience before, exposing readers to different characters and situations (Gilmore, 2017). Seeing characters different from themselves allows readers to develop new perspectives and a better understanding of how people in similar real-life situations may feel.

Second, diversity in literature allows diverse readers to see themselves represented in books. Arabelle Sicardi, a writer for TeenVogue, has stated that fantasy stories taught her that her own queer and Asian perspective brought unique value to the story (Sicardi, 2014). Stories that feature characters with disabilities have also provided teens in similar situations better understand themselves and cope with the challenges they face (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011). Seeing themselves within YA media shows teens of different cultures, sexualities and abilities that they are not alone, and that their voices matter.

Thirdly, YA media plays a big role in today's popular culture. Many YA books

from *Twilight* to *The Fault in our Stars* turned into box-office movies with huge fanbases. YA literature – especially YA fantasy – has demonstrated how much it can shape current popular culture (Carstensen, 2018). This can often dictate what other books, TV shows, and media gets created, including the types of characters present in the story.

While there has been an improvement over the past few years--as seen with the rise of new YA fantasy genres like Afrofuturism (Newkirk II, 2018)--there are still improvements that can be made within the fantasy genre. Throughout our hotline, there are articles exploring different areas of representation we feel need to be more present in today's YA fantasy, including different disabilities, LGBTQ+ members, and characters that embody multiple areas.

While these terms are all current during the writing of this issue, we acknowledge that language changes over time, and the terminology we use may change in the future.

We also want to acknowledge that this issue was created in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. We feel that in an issue exploring

diversity in YA fantasy, it would be inappropriate to publish it without acknowledging our colonial history

References

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