

Diversity of Characters in Fantasy Fiction

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Introduction

There have been improvements in including characters with diverse backgrounds in the fantasy fiction genre of books. Social media conversations with the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks started movements which contributed to the promotion of this important topic (Wang, 2017).

Cindy Pon and Malinda Lo continued the discussions around this topic with their research and publishing of the results on diversityiny.com up to 2014. Their article discusses why readers should pay attention to the diversity of characters in fantasy fiction. They also recommend that authors include more diversity in their stories. Baker's study finds that the "desire for otherness" is still limited when it comes to including protagonists with diverse backgrounds, or imagery which represents diversity in books (Baker, 2007).

The Diverse Worlds of the Fantasy Fiction Genre

The Why

There are three main reasons why the diversity of characters in fantasy fiction is important.

- a. We live in a diverse world. Diversity among fantasy fiction characters can reflect the reality of the world that we live in. Lack of diversity in fantasy fiction can be even more dangerous than any other genre. Fantasy fiction is meant to stretch the reader's mind to dream big, picture an ideal world, and imagine the utopia where anything is possible. Depiction of such a world without diversity prevents the minds of young adults from picturing an ideal world where a diverse group of inhabitants co-exist. This can potentially set up young adults for failure as they start to become more involved in their community and society where diversity exists. Young adults not only need to collaborate with a diverse group of people as they grow up, they also need to envision how they can work together to better create a win-win situation in various aspects of their lives. If their minds are trained to only idealize a world where diversity never existed, how are young adults supposed to perform their best without being judgmental or biased against their peers with diverse backgrounds?
- b. Today, young adults are arguably more politically aware and active in their communities than previous generations. The recent wave of refugees who were accepted into our country have exposed many Canadian young adults to peers with different cultures, religions and physical abilities. On the other hand, as the young adult immigrants adapt to their new environments, they start to look for ways to blend in. Fantasy fiction can be an excellent resource that young adults of any background can turn to. Fantasy fiction characters with diverse backgrounds can inspire hope and spark new ideas for young adults.
- c. Diversity is no longer limited to race and multiculturalism. Diversity now has a broader meaning. It includes multiculturalism as well as age, gender, sexuality, gender identity, physical disability or other ideologies (Oregon University, 2018). The presence of fantasy

fiction protagonists who belong in one or more diverse groups is critical for young adults who look for someone that they can connect with in a story.

The How

Publishers

Publishers can help this cause by including photos of characters with a diverse background without hesitation. The book publishing industry has been infamous for promoting the photos of white characters and hesitating to include photos of the non-white characters. Publishers are typically worried about the look of the book and how it can impact its sales. However, they should take note that the true representation of characters on the cover can help create a true reflection of the real world that we live in. In 2017, author Nnedi Okorafor spoke up about the whitewashing of the character in her book, *The Shadow Speaker*, by the publisher on Twitter. She started a series of Tweets on Twitter which were welcomed by other YA authors (Harrop, 2017).

Authors

How can an author include diversity in their stories? For instance, can a white Christian male author write about an atheist, gay, Muslim, or female character in his story? I will include some recommendations for ways that authors can include diversity in their books.

- a. In *This Book is Gay* the author, Juno Dawson, has written an LGBTQ+ guide (Dawson, 2015). While the author himself only belongs in the gay community, he asked other members of the LGBTQ+ community to offer their input to help him write various sections and chapters of the book. While *This Book is Gay* is not a fantasy fiction, I would like to recommend Dawson's approach to fantasy fiction authors. Co-authoring a book with an author who is knowledgeable about a diverse group can help an author make better storytelling decisions, and inspire confidence in others to tell stories of a group that one may not belong with.
- b. Authors must add characters with a diverse background as/when they fit into the story. They should avoid adding such characters to their stories for the sake of diversity only. It is important to keep in mind that fantasy is not a blueprint, it is a springboard. The story and the character must be believable to the readers, and the author shouldn't feel any limitations in storytelling because they write about a character with a diverse background (Edmonds, 2016).

YA Librarians

- a. Develop library programs to support both the authors and the readers. By inviting authors to the library who have both diverse backgrounds and traditionally well-represented backgrounds, libraries can facilitate opening the lines of communications between these two groups. Authors can be invited to meet and speak with young adult readers, which can create an opportunity for both the authors and their readers to exchange ideas, learn from each other, and answer any questions.
- b. Reading diverse fiction to develop a diverse collection is crucial. Subsequently paying tribute to fantasy fiction characters with diverse backgrounds in a library's collection not only promotes reading these books, but can also assure the authors and publishers that these titles are very welcome amongst their readers. Librarians can consult lists such as:

- Tiptree Awards recommendation list and honor lists
- Lambda Lit online book club
- We Need Diverse Books end-of year book lists
- Diversity in YA book lists
- Follow social media hashtags on this topic

Conclusion

In this article, we reviewed why it is important to include diverse protagonists in the fantasy fiction stories. However, this goal cannot be achieved without support from a community of publishers, authors and librarians. Each group has a vital role in realizing the importance of paying closer attention to diversity in this genre of books. The support from one group can ideally facilitate the progress of the other groups, and promote diverse YA fantasy everywhere.

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