

Looking for a Fantasy that Isn't so White: The diversity problem in YA High Fantasy By Marilla Word

Abstract: *This article discusses the issue with the whiteness that has traditionally been prevalent in High Fantasy. Outlining some of the ways Fantasy gets whitewashed, this article also gives a list of more diverse YA High Fantasy novels.*

Readers of YA high fantasy expect to encounter things like elves, sorcerers, and mythical beasts, and creatures. Audiences and readers are taken to galaxies far, far away. In one such galaxy far, far away, created by George Lucas, Luke Skywalker is famously told “Luke I am your father” (Kershner & Lucas, 1980). That line, easy to recall and hear in the minds of so many fantasy fans, is spoken by the character Darth Vader, but is voiced by actor James Earl Jones. When Star Wars viewers eventually see the man behind Darth Vader’s mask, they see David Prowse. Both are actors, and surely differ in many ways, but one obvious difference is that Prowse is white, while Jones is Black. Despite Jones’ memorable performance, it is a white face that is revealed to the viewer. In worlds where readers and audiences can find hobbits, witches, and life on other planets, why isn’t it easier to find characters of colour?

First, it should be pointed out that there are some great YA high fantasy novels written by people of colour, and that have incredible protagonists that are people of colour (a small list is included below, as a starting point). However, just as there is an issue with diversity in YA literature, in general, high fantasy is no exception. To answer the question as to why that may be, may not be fully possible. There are the all-too-common reasons of racism and continuing to

elevate white voices the most. However, there has also been a long-held (racist) notion that people of colour don't read fantasy. This is not true, but the argument can be made that the lack of representation in YA high fantasy may lead some readers who are people of colour to not be drawn to read the genre, which in turn can make a vicious cycle of publishers not being motivated to publish more diverse fantasy novels (Leonard, 2015). Quite frankly this argument is unhelpful, and even damaging. It implies that if it were true that people of colour do not read fantasy (which is not true), then representation in the genre is not necessary because white readers don't want, or benefit from reading stories that have people of colour in the role of protagonist. We all need to have a vested interest in diverse books.

Perhaps you may find yourself thinking that you have not noticed race in YA fantasy books, and this could very well be. As YA fantasy author Lori Lee (2014) has pointed out, physical descriptions in YA fantasy often leave race out altogether, but when it is mentioned it is too often to portray otherness, or foreignness. Lee (2014) elaborates further on the issue using the character of Tolya, from *Siege and Storm*, whose eyes are described as having a "Shul tilt". Of this example Lee (2014) writes:

"This isn't necessarily a bad thing (except for when "foreigners" become caricatures and stereotypes, the mysterious visitors from the East). Like in the example above, it's simply a means to differentiate characters' countries of origin. But because their foreignness needs to be pointed out at all, it also reinforces the "white as default" mentality." (para. 3)

It is this "white as default" mentality that can be more easily overlooked than perhaps overt racist stereotypes in YA literature. It is for that reason that librarians need to be more conscientious in their collection selection. Just because high fantasy is by definition, not real, does not mean that

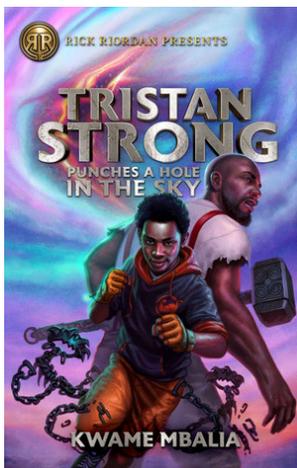
efforts for inclusive representation do not matter. It is also important to note that the whiteness of high fantasy fiction does not just occur in a passive way. There have also been patterns of actively whitewashing High Fantasy.

Ursula K. Le Guin is hailed as one of the most beloved and celebrated high fantasy authors, and although she is white, she has written many characters, and leading characters at that, who are people of colour. However, if you were to find a copy of her novel *A Wizard of Earthsea*, you may find an image on the cover of Ged, the main character, looking white, despite the fact that in the novel he is a person of colour (Dickinson, 2014). This erasure is significant and sends a dangerous message that readers do not want to see non-white characters. We see the same thing happening in film. Movie studios seem to doubt that audiences want to see a non-white protagonist, despite the fact these protagonists and stories were so well received that the books are on Hollywood's radar. Actress, Scarlett Johansson, who played Japanese character Motoko Kusanagi in the 2016 live-action adaptation of the Japanese Anime *Ghost in the Shell* argued that she should be able to play any character, and that art should not be restricted (Andrews, 2019). That simply is not a good or valid excuse. Representation matters. Youth seeing representation especially matters.

This escapist genre is so popular amongst teen readers, and these readers are at a very important developmental stage where they are forming ideas about their own identities, and the world as a whole. These stories that take place in magical, imaginary realms can still ask of their readers to consider very real-life issues. *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* by Tomi Adeyemi beg of the readers to ponder questions such as, "What distinguishes people from their enemies? Can friendships overcome race and class differences? Is the outcome of war ever worth the havoc?"

(Donnella, 2020). High fantasy relates to real life, and just because the realms are imaginary does not mean we should exclude certain races and demographics. What a terrible, sick fantasy that would be. It is the responsibility of librarians and readers and consumers of high fantasy to demand more diversity and inclusion. In doing so, the hope is that YA high fantasy readers in the future will have way more, bad-ass heroes to look up to in the future that represent the vast diversity of the readers of the genre.

Here is a small selection of some awesome YA High Fantasy novels written by authors who are people of colour, as well as that feature non-white protagonists.



Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky *by Kwame Mbalia*

[Image: Goodreads](#)

Seventh-grader, Tristan, is grieving his friend Eddie, when he has to go stay with his grandparents in Alabama. While there he ends up entering the MidPass through a tree. The place he enters is haunted, and scary, and the battle being fought there by black American gods, is wearing those gods out. It is up to Tristan to get the god Anansi to fix the hole in the sky.

Mbalia, K. (2019). *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky*. Rick Riordan Presents.

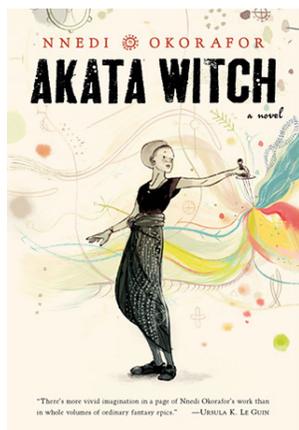


The Storm Runner by *J.C. Cervantes*

[Image: Goodreads](#)

A fun take on Mayan mythology, *The Storm Runner* follows Zane, a Mexican-American student who happens to have one leg. He is told he is destined to release an evil god from a Mayan relic, unless a new student can help him stop that from happening. Together they go to the old volcano, where adventure, and magic ensues.

Cervantes, J. C. (2018). *The Storm Runner*. Rick Riordan Presents.

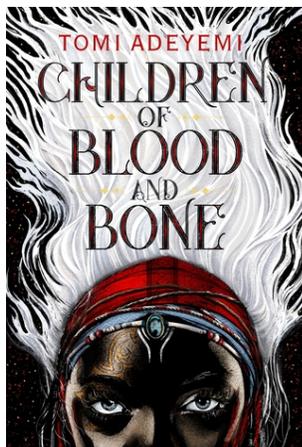


Akata Witch by *Nnedi Okorafor*

[Image: Goodreads](#)

The first book in the Akata trilogy, *Akata Witch* follows Sunny, a 12-year-old, albino girl in Nigeria. Sunny finds out she is one of the leopard people, and she has certain powers. With the help of the other kids in her coven, she must work to defeat the evil Black Hat Otokoto, who has been maiming children.

Okorafor, N. (2017). *Akata witch*. Speak.



Children of Blood and Bone *by Tomi Adeyemi*

[Image: Goodreads](#)

Written by Nigerian American author, Tomi Adeyemi, *Children of Blood and Bone* is the first book in a series that follow Zélie Adebola as she is coming to term with her own magical powers. Zélie remembers magic in Orisha, but it has been eradicated by the evil king. Determined to avenge her mother's death, Zélie must harness her own power to make sure Orisha will not be destroyed.

Adeyemi, T. (2018). *Children of Blood and Bone*. Henry Holt & Co.

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