

Layered Literacies (Supplemental): Vol. 42, Issue 2 (Winter 2015)
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In this online version of our column, we include the complete texts of the responses we received when we asked Sharon Flake, G. Neri, and Nikki Grimes how race matters in their work:

(Untitled)

By Sharon G. Flake

In 1953 race mattered. Today it still does. Don't believe me? Then ask President Obama. Oh I know what he says in public, but if only those White House walls could talk. Then again maybe we are all better off because they can't. I suspect the things we would learn from them about race and the first African-American president would make us so ashamed of ourselves as a nation that we would take to our collective beds never to rise again.

But some of us are braver than others. And in the face of racism as well as sexism we grow more determined; shine more bright. The President and First Lady Michelle Obama are such people. So is Octobia May, the protagonist of my latest novel *Unstoppable Octobia May*. In 1953 she probably would seem an unlikely character—a Colored girl who habitually pushes against the limits placed upon her—a girl born ahead of her time.

Race matters to the adults who love and care for Octobia May. How can it not? After all, Thurgood Marshall is fighting to end segregation. Jews themselves are still dealing with discrimination. And fair employment for Negroes and women remain a pipe dream, the lack there of negatively impacting families for generations.

Yet in the mist of such egregious challenges, Octobia May's Aunt declares that a girl is as free as her family permits her to be. It is a brazen thought for a spinster woman in the 50s. Yet despite possible repercussions, Auntie gives Octobia May the space she needs to solve mysteries, chase suspected vampires, question authority, and explore a world in which the dreams and aspirations of girls and Negroes weren't often fully realized.

Octobia May is just the sort of girl President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama would have raised if they were parents in 1953. A girl who has not been shielded from the events of history, but permitted to be her own person—one mistake, one grand idea, and one giant leap at a time.

Race matters. Our children are not fools they see that it does as well. As does unstoppable Octobia May. That is why we must be open and brave enough to discuss such things with our young ones. To speak up against racism and sexism when we witness it. And to create characters that cannot just speak to the issue, but do so in a wholly unique way that makes young people and adults alike eager to read such stories—and children desiring to become the heroisms that grace the pages of such books as well.

If Octobia May were a child of this century, she would most likely have written President Obama numerous letters by now. Many would be to encourage him. Some would be to chastise him most likely, since I do not see her approving of those drones. But given the girl that she is, I expect she would wag her finger at the entire lot of us. Asking whatever we are doing letting race matters once again separate this country as it seems to be doing right now. Then she would dash off as young people do. And chase after things only the young seem to embrace whole-

heartedly. Like possibilities, imagination, and a world that is far more just, fair and compassionate, than we adults seem willing to work toward at this point in history.

The Minority Majority/ g. neri

A lot has been said about race in the publishing industry and frankly, I'm getting a little tired of having to say more about it. *But does race matter? Are we underrepresented? Is there an opportunity to be had?*

You better believe it.

I have found myself in the unexpected niche of writing books about people of color, usually through the lens of tough urban issues, geared towards boys and reluctant (or non) readers. The results are in the two comments I hear the most from librarians and teachers: we can't keep them on the shelf (meaning they go out as soon as they come in, regardless of how many copies they have); and two, their students repeatedly say things like: "this book is about me—this is my world."

That's because I write the way many of them talk—urban speak—and they hear a voice they can relate to that they rarely see in print. Because of that, I also hear things like my books are amongst the most stolen from libraries-- something of which I am dubiously proud. My readers tend to be part of the minority majority – the silent many. As of 2014, kids are more than 50% "minority", which means, we gotta stop referring to ourselves as such. The minority majority may not as big on reading as a whole, but that's largely because of the lack of books out there that speak to them. Once they find that book—watch out.

Pretty much every school I've ever visited, anywhere around the country, there is at least one kid who has never read a book, and somehow came across one of mine and devoured it. They either read it again and again, or seek out my other books but then they always end up searching for more books like the one they read. So they might read books by Walter Dean Myers or Sharon g. Flake or Matt de la Pena and the like. But then they soon hit a point where they usually start reading *outside* their group.

I've had readers graduate from my books to Shakespeare or Jane Austin, something that never would have happened if you plunked one of those books down in front of them in the first place. The social and cultural gap is too great, those voices too different. But seeing their own voice in print opens a door for them to begin to listen to other voices and it grows from there. I consider my books to be stepping stones in the bridge towards reading—steps high enough to where readers can see across the bridge to the other side. I am overwhelmingly proud of all those who have taken up the challenge to cross that bridge.

But the industry is behind because very few have figured out how to reach much of this untapped market. Some companies like Lee and Low Books, have done an outstanding job of breaking the traditional model and succeeding, year by year, book by book, slowly but surely. They don't get much press but they are the gateway to that bridge-- an open door to future possibilities.

While I may never make the NY Times bestseller list with these books, my modestly successful numbers don't paint the real picture. For every copy sold, there are many readers who hold that book-- hundreds in some cases. These students don't necessarily have the resources to buy the books, but more likely, don't know these books are something they can buy. Anyone smart enough to see the number of students not being catered to as a whole, and wise enough to think outside the box will hop on the case and make a lot of money—and then others will sit up and notice. Until then, I keep plowing ahead, knowing the industry as a whole will overlook the

successes on the ground. But that doesn't matter. Because I see it every time I meet a new reader that has crossed the bridge to reading, when I see their eyes light up or read their emails full of heartfelt connections. There is a long way to go, no doubt, but I have hopes for a future more open to diversity in books. The readers will demand it.

FROM THE MOUTHS OF BABES

by Nikki Grimes

I grew up as a voracious reader, cutting across genres and age categories. I read adventures, myths and legends, folktales, contemporary fiction, poetry—you name it. I explored the gamut. With all that reading, though, I rarely came across books that featured anyone who looked like me, or who shared the particulars of my environment or my culture. My desire to correct that oversight ultimately led me to devote myself to creating books in which children of color could see themselves. However, it never occurred to me that my books would only be considered appropriate for children of color. And why should it have? The stories, themselves—about friendship, loss, pets, puberty—as well as the emotional experiences of the characters within said stories, could apply to any reader, regardless of race or culture. Why, then, wasn't that obvious to everyone else? I just didn't get it.

Consider the issue this way: Were I to suggest that only white children should read *Charlotte's Web*, the average person, educator or not, would find that patently absurd, wouldn't you? And yet, otherwise intelligent people regularly imply that books featuring characters of color should only be shared with children of color. Now *that's* what I call patently absurd, and so should you. But here we are, discussing this very notion.

In my 30+ years as an author of books for children and young adults, I have routinely come up against what I call this ghettoization of children's literature featuring characters of color. From a scarcity of diverse books being published, to a narrower focus on their marketing, to the lower sales that often result, the treatment of black and multicultural books as "other" is systemic. I find the constantly perpetuated notion that black books are only for black readers maddening, since I write stories with universal appeal, as reviewers frequently note. In an effort to counter this misguided notion, I address the issue whenever I have an opportunity to speak to the gatekeepers, namely teachers, librarians and booksellers. These are the people who, in the main, along with a child's parents, determine what books end up in the hands of young readers. A shift in their thinking is sorely needed.

About 18-19 years ago, I presented during a story-hour at a local bookstore in Seattle. Following my presentation, I stayed to sign books and to chat with those who had attended. The titles available for purchase were *Meet Danitra Brown* and *C is For City*. A lovely girl in the audience asked her mom for one of my books. The mother encouraged the girl to choose which book she wanted. However, when the girl reached for a copy of *Meet Danitra Brown*, featuring African American characters on the cover, the mother winced. She quickly slipped the book out of the child's hand (snatched it, actually) and tried to interest her in *C is For City*, instead, a book with a multicultural cast of characters on the cover, including at least one white child. The girl, however, was adamant. *Meet Danitra Brown*, a book about friendship, was the book she wanted. Period. Dear Mom wouldn't have it, though, and I watched, incredulously, as the mother dragged the child from the bookstore, empty-handed and in tears.

I wish this experience were an anomaly. It is not. I tell the story because it demonstrates the vital role all gatekeepers, parents included, play in determining whether the general juvenile readership has access to books that are culturally diverse. The problem is not, nor has it ever

been, the children. Most readers care not one whit about the color of a character. All they care about is the story. If they love humor, and a story is funny, they will love the book. If they love sports, and the book is about sports, they will love the book. If the story is about dogs, and they are dog-lovers, they will love that book. It is story that drives their book choices, not the race or culture of the character. We adults are the ones that tend to make that an issue. Shame on us!

A couple of years ago, I wrote a blog titled "The Color of Character", addressing the subject of race in children's literature, and several teachers subsequently assigned a reading of the blog as homework for their students. A number of said students have responded to the blog, (there are 164 comments, to date) in ways that were very telling. Many of them were reading, or had just read, *Bronx Masquerade*, and one made a comment that goes to the heart of this issue. So, rather than my conjuring up some erudite explanation as to why it is important to share diverse books with readers of every stripe, I will leave it to this young man, from Holland, Pennsylvania, to make my point. Here's an excerpt from his letter:

"Dear Ms Grimes,

I'm currently reading your book Bronx Masquerade. In the beginning of the school year, I hated reading. But reading your book made me want to read more and more. Reading is now one of my hobbies...

I am very happy I read this book...You made me realize that even though we look different on the outside, we are pretty much the same on the inside. Everybody should read this book to help them change the way they think about other people they make fun of. I know it changed the way I think of people."

Why are diverse books—black books, Latino books, Asian books, Native American books, all kinds of books—important to all kinds of readers? Because they teach them that, at the end of the day, we are all pretty much the same on the inside.

Argue with that if you dare.