

“Why don’t black people ever get to solve mysteries?”

This was the complaint of one eight-year-old boy I met a few years ago. The boy had picked up his brother’s chapter book mystery, flipped through the illustrations, then threw the book across the room after seeing no one in its pages who looked like him.

It’s a frustration that many of us—both those making the books and those getting them into the hands of readers—share. Every few years, the Internet or the media notice that we have a diversity problem in books and other media, but with the success of this spring’s viral #weneeddiversebooks social media campaign and other major news coverage of the issue, the intensity of the discussion has reached a new height. No wonder: This fall, according to the Associated Press, white children will no longer be the majority population in public schools, at only 49.8 percent of students.

Why isn’t there more representation in genre fiction, specifically? After all, aren’t science fiction and fantasy (SFF) all *about* thinking outside the box? In some ways, these genres often think deeply about racial issues: high fantasy settings are constantly exploring clashes between elves and ogres, zombies and unicorns, and *Star Trek* was constantly exploring future “new worlds and new civilizations” with a multi-ethnic crew.

Hard numbers prove that these are exceptions, not rules, and that the same sci-fi and fantasy stories that contain messages of inclusion about elves and robots often exclude characters of color. We’ve been studying the lack of representation of people of color across media, from children’s books to the Oscars and Tony Awards to the Emmys. Lee and Low Books recently released a study exploring the “diversity gap” in the one hundred top-grossing SFF films of all time and found that a mere eight percent starred a protagonist of color—six of them portrayed by Will Smith. Another was a cartoon (*Aladdin*). There were no LGBTQ protagonists and only twelve movies with a female protagonist, none of them played by women of color.

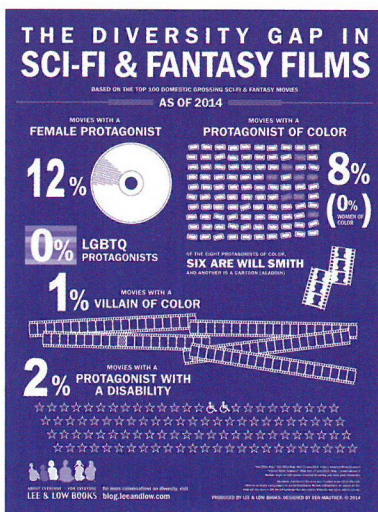
So many readers of color who might have been interested in mystery, fantasy, or science fiction books turned away from those genres early on, feeling unwelcome and invisible. Historical fiction tends to relegate people of color to slavery, internment, and the Civil Rights movement. At Tu Books, we are working to change that: to welcome new fans and to provide representation for fans of color who *are* here, hoping for more than just crumbs.

The response from science fiction and fantasy fans to Tu’s first books has been wonderful. The dystopian craze was (and in many ways still is) strong, but before Karen Sandler’s *Tankborn* came out in 2011, the trend generally featured jackets with pretty white girls in beautiful gowns. With *Tankborn*, we made a conscious decision to put a person of color on the cover, to prove that it can be done and that it can sell. That decision paid off—at New York Comic Con, black teen girls and their parents would stop short when they saw the cover of *Tankborn*, stunned that a dystopian YA novel carried the picture of a girl who looked like them. The third and final book in the *Tankborn* trilogy, *Rebellion*, was released this spring.

Killer of Enemies, another of our recent titles, is a post-apocalyptic YA novel with a steampunk twist, featuring an Apache main character. Native American representation in genre fiction has been nearly non-existent, and the books that do have Native characters often resort to stereotypes of the close-to-the-earth noble savage. In *Killer of Enemies*, renowned Abenaki author Joseph Bruchac sought to tell a good yarn while placing well-drawn Native characters squarely in a richly imagined future. *Killer of Enemies* won the American Indian Youth Literature Award in the YA category earlier this year. “It shows that we’ve always been here, and that we’ll always be here,” one Native American librarian said.

This is also why sisterhood stories like *Summer of the Mariposas*, by Pura Belpré Award-winning author Guadalupe Garcia McCall, and high fantasy tales starring brown people, like *Drift* by M. K. Hutchins, are so important. They show that people of color are centrally important in any worlds we can dream up.

It is true that reading creates empathy, and that young readers should be able to connect with characters who come from backgrounds or cultures different from them. But it is equally true that teens feel less invisible when they can find characters who look like them, depicting reality in the full diversity of the world as it truly is—even if it’s a made-up fantasy world. Greater representation will create a culture that recognizes people of color as the heroes in their own stories, not minor sidekicks to white heroes. We truly believe we can make the real world a more inclusive, equal place, one fantasy novel at a time. ■



TITLES MENTIONED

- Bruchac, Joseph. *Killer of Enemies*. Tu Books, 2013. 400p. \$9.99 Trade pb. 978-1-62014-143-4.
- Hutchins, M. K. *Drift*. Tu Books, 2014. 352p. \$18.95. 978-1-62014-145-8. VOYA December 2014. 3Q 3P J S
- McCall, Guadalupe Garcia. *Summer of the Mariposas*. Tu Books, 2012. 352p. \$19.95. 978-1-60060-900-8. VOYA December 2012. 2Q 3P M J
- Sandler, Karen. *Awakening*. Tu Books, 2013. 400p. \$18.95. 978-1-60060-982-4. VOYA August 2013. 3Q 4P J S
- _____. *Rebellion*. Tu Books, 2014. 400p. \$18.95. 978-1-60060-984-8. VOYA August 2014. 3Q 3P J S
- _____. *Tankborn*. Tu Books, 2011. 384p. \$17.95. 978-1-60060-662-5. VOYA December 2011. 3Q 4P J S

RESOURCES

- Lee and Low Books; The Open Book: “Where’s the Diversity, Hollywood? Sci-Fi and Fantasy Blockbusters Overwhelmingly White, Male”: <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2014/07/29/wheres-the-diversity-hollywood-sci-fi-and-fantasy-blockbusters-overwhelmingly-white-male/>
- We Need Diverse Books Official Campaign Site: <http://weneeddiversebooks.org/>
- #We Need Diverse Books Official Campaign Tumblr: <http://weneeddiversebooks.tumblr.com/>

Stacy Whitman is the founder and publisher of Tu Books, an imprint of Lee & Low Books. She holds a master’s degree in children’s literature from Simmons College.



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