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I start this with a riddle: a father and son have a car accident and are both badly hurt. They are both taken to separate hospitals. When the boy is taken in for an operation, the surgeon says “I can not do the surgery because this is my son.” How is this possible? While the argument can be made that the boy had two fathers, there is often a certain desperation to make the doctor a man. Why not the mother?

My intention for this comic focuses on the choices we make in what we create and how we process content. These choices are not only personal and revealing, but also deliberate and impactful. I wanted to prompt people to reflect and reconsider what these choices said about how you see the world. Essentially, reflection on individual internal biases.

My research paper was the backbone of this comic, heavily influencing the information I prioritized and how I framed the character. The paper focused on racial biases, and the harmful impacts of a white neutrality. While digitally done, I printed out the comic because I felt that the physicality of it would accentuate being present, in the moment. I was inspired by the divide between literature and visual art, how individuality was and was not communicated. In this, I wanted the reader to constantly be thinking about why, why did they make the unsaid choices about the character that they did. I advise the reader to be patient with themselves, and keep an open mind.

The Default is Not
Neutral; Careful, Your
Bias is Showing



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How do internal biases affect how books are written? How do they affect that generation? Why is it so important to have a diverse cast, especially in fiction books. In this paper, I go into these and other aspects of literature, keeping in mind the small but important choices I and others make when reading and writing books

I know when I was younger, I always inserted myself into stories, wishing I could be as cool as Katniss Everdeen, and as smart as Hermione. Yet when the movies came out, and the book covers portrayed them, they felt distant. I wasn't pale or skinny, but these were the assumptions that people often make when reading literature and other non-visual (and sometimes visual) works. The default in literature has become white, a character unspecified is automatically relatable for the typical white individual who picked up the book. When a person of color is mentioned, they usually follow a stereotype, are thrown in to create artificial diversity, or are benched as side characters. When a protagonist is a person of color, the focus on them being a person of color isn't lost on them, oftentimes a focal point. While what I just suggested is not necessarily bad, and sometimes healthy in moderation, communicating race passively, instead of it being the only aspect of the story, can provide a more diverse pool of literature that lends itself better to empowerment.

I began to understand that I did not fit into the stories that people spoke of, I was not going to be getting a letter in the mail to attend Hogwarts anytime soon, nor was I going to find out I was some half-blood destined to change the world. In a way, that racial barrier that media and books created forced me to grow up.

My research began in a bit of a mundane place, understanding and getting to know the basic structures and rules that literature follows and how that affects how the plot holds up over time. I browsed through papers about The Hero's Journey, 'Someone comes to town, someone leaves', and other foundations for literature. This gave me a better understanding of how a story is told, how it is approached, and how the change in a character is created. Character development is critical in creating a dynamic recurring character. I then dived deeper into certain genres that were guilty of an "unapproachable cast" per se.

By unapproachable, I mean most characters were all white and followed the typical tropes of their genre. They threw the minority to the backseat, having them contribute in the slightest of ways. The people of color featured would be stereotypical be it their name or the way they acted, and you'd never hear anything about them without it concerning the white protagonist. The white protagonist would exploit the person of color's abilities while giving nothing but the bare minimum of appreciation. The Gothic, Utopia, and fantasy novels were infamous, books such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *Mistborn*, and *Harry Potter*. (It should be noted that I do not dislike these works, they are all great in their own right, but the point still stands.)

"A lack of diversity (in whatever form) is defended as 'the way things were back then.' No they weren't, —Too often if you look at what 'everyone' knows about the past, it turns out that 'everyone' doesn't know anything. There were always gay people. There were always people who defied societal norms." Mark Palace states. They address the barrier that is created by literature, and how the excuse "the way things were back then" dismisses the many people who weren't the majority at the time. Dr. Valentina Stoycheva writes, "At the societal level, where they (those who become nostalgic without coming to terms with the reality of the past) glorify some historical past, without acknowledging the many cultural and collective traumas of that past, such as racism,

sexism, homophobia, and other institutionalized human rights violations...overuse of it (nostalgia) as an emotionally regulatory strategy in a complex world will always backfire. It will also inherently disenfranchise (all over again) the groups who were collectively traumatized in the first place—the groups who may not have the luxury of reminiscing of ‘simpler, better times.’”

These sources helped me understand the divide between visual literature and one where you're left to your assumptions. How do those assumptions impact the story? What do those assumptions say about how you see and experience the world? How often is it that a young woman picks up a book wishing she could one day feel like she belongs in the world of her fictional heroes? It is on the older generation to come together and create a foundation for younger generations to feel that the world they were born into was made for them, and was made for them to live and be happy in. Books should be a gateway to different worlds, but those worlds should still have what this world strives for (or mentions of it.) Whether that's steps towards eradicating racism, sexism, or even mentions of gun control and healthcare. It's stuff that makes the world real.

Another effect that this bias by the author's writing creates is internalized racial bias, which enforces a sort of learned helplessness in the minority community. The “you will always be second” and “you will never be the main character” sort of message.

“The life experience of many economically deprived black Americans is largely a direct result of racial discrimination and prejudice, abject poverty, and educational, economic, social, and political control in America” Leon Green speaks on the learned helplessness that culture and poverty enforce. “The tendency in America has been to invoke arguments of innate intellectual inferiority.”

This feeling of inferiority isn't arbitrary, it was built over time through systemic and systematic oppression and obstacles. It should be noted that the results of the study applied to all minorities.

The paper explained how depression is more prevalent for minorities, and how that often was linked to feelings of “hopelessness and helplessness.”

Things that played a part in this were microaggressions, blatant racist treatment, and culture. Books play a heavy part in shaping the world of young people, and they are easily influenced by the content and people they look up to. If they grow up with the beliefs that their books reflected, they perpetuate the cycle of ignorance and bigotry.

“Questioning where in the text you get the idea that a character is white from their descriptor is something that will help you consciously think through your own biases.” states Ciara Smith, (Bookstr) who goes on to talk about how internal biases are rooted at a young age, it takes time to rewire our “default”. Checking your biases means questioning the choices you make, no matter how harmless they seem. “If you have a reason why a character is brown or black then you also have a reason to point out that another character is not.—When authors avoid physically describing a character's whiteness but put effort into pointing out non-whiteness what you're doing is increasing the invisibility of whiteness, standardizing it, making white the norm and making everyone else the 'other.'” Renee Harleston writes in her paper, “Dismantling

the White Default." When you do this you are helping to increase the privilege of being the standard that everyone else is compared to and judged by.

"I think what white people don't understand is that whiteness is not a race; it is erasure of ethnicity. It's the absence of race." S. Jae Jones.

"My publication is a little guilty of this problem. The 1930s had a lot of lack of diversity (in most media and literature), which was the era I had based my book on. My publisher never brought it up, which is embarrassing...Tom Sawyer, and most old books, it's very rarely stated that a character is white." Says Doug Reed, author of the book *Half*. He talks about how he brought inspiration from novels he read himself, which led him to have a cast that lacked diversity.

The representation of people of color, or lack thereof is a cycle and an unsaid foundation of old/classical literature.

Race and diversity have become words that people are scared of saying, touching them is too daunting. Shying away from the topic does not make you neutral, and to do so perpetuates the harmful impacts that it has on current and future generations. "Literature indeed reflects society, it's good values, and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of society with a view to making society realize its mistakes and make amends. It also projects the virtues or good values in the society for people to emulate." (Duhan, Roshni)

But it's not just the content that reflects the time that the book was written. "Is literature a mirror held up to nature, which can render the fullness of life, in all its goodness and evil? Or is literature a lamp that shines out to illuminate all it touches, rather than a mirror that merely reflects?" (Encyclopedia.com)

With an ignorant author comes an ignorant book. Negligent research when writing only provides the reader with stereotypes and biases that are contagious when the younger audience consumes it.

“Racism is ingrained into the fabric of our society in general” begins Lindsay Pérez Huber. “In 2015, there were 85 books published in the U.S. that included Latinx characters from the 3,200 children’s books the center received that year. That’s about 2.5% of the total, whereas Latinx kids represent about 1 in 4 school children in the U.S — Helping children to make sense of what they see, challenge ideas, and recognize problematic storytelling are critical tools they can use to read the world around them.”

Is it completely out of the question to expect everyone to incorporate diversity in their novels? “She (a white writer) admitted she feels uncomfortable adding people of color (POC) to her fiction, as it feels disingenuous. “Write what you know” and all that. How could she add, say, a Japanese person without it seeming like a token gesture?” States Mari Naomi, who’d been asked by a friend to look at their book.

“First things first, check your privileges.” Mari Naomi continues, as she explains ways to consciously create characters that are POC. “Even stereotypes of POC that seem positive on the surface... are still harmful if they are stereotypes. This is about being extremely aware of the fact that as a non-POC person, your depictions (or lack thereof) of less represented people can carry untold consequences...If you’re not sure about something, run it by a few of your POC friends.”

You’re never going to be a POC, and truly know their experience, but shying away just disregards people of color and ignores their existence.

This does not mean you should add them for the sake of adding them. When writing POC, make their races clear with mentions of physical appearance, culture, and cover art. (Don't let your characters get whitewashed!) If you are a white author, this does mean doing your research.

"Make your characters realistic and grounded, and avoid falling back on stereotypes. Instead of merely describing your characters' skin color, build a realistic and complex backstory— how will those things affect the ways in which they think, behave, and interact with others during the course of your story? Research extensively. Expect and listen to criticism." (Kristan Nelson)

The writing community cannot continue to ignore and avoid the pressing issue that is diversity. Time and time again, there have been displays of laziness, ignorance, and flat-out racism. (I'm looking at you, J.K. Rowling.) They have all lent to an unfortunate outcome that is one-dimensional characters that are only there to serve their white "counterparts." Yes, white authors all around the world, you should be writing with a diverse cast of characters. If we do not hold that expectation above the heads of the privileged, we can expect them to continue to shy away and turn a blind eye. We cannot allow the next generation to believe they do not belong, that they cannot be the hero. Neutral is not unbiased, and the choices you make for your story speak for themselves.

I've always wanted to read a book and hear about someone who looked like me, who acted courageously, who helped change the world. I knew that if they could do it, then maybe so could I. Maybe I didn't grow up with that, but the hope is that one generation will grow up knowing that they are the main characters of their own story. That they can do anything if they put their mind to

it. But until that day comes, we must all hold ourselves accountable for the choices that we make, the prejudice that we hold, and the racism that is ever so prevalent in our day to day lives. While it might sound like a good thing that I grew up faster than my white peers, and was more mature when it came to emotional trauma, I would have liked it if I could still get my letter for Hogwarts. Jokes aside, a young individual should feel like they are just as capable as their peers. To do this, be wary of what choices you make of your work, ask questions, do research, and be humble. You don't have to know everything, you just have to be willing to learn.

If everyone did their part to make the world a better place, the world would be a better place, but we can't ask that. Sometimes we need to be selfish, which is probably why it took me so long to write this paper. But despite all that, your efforts don't fall short. The time and effort you put into making your writing made for everyone will pay off, and you will feel it. Don't do it because everyone is telling you to, you don't do good for just that. You do good because you are good, you do it because good is possible and it's worth it. There should be more books in more genres that are diverse and achieve an empowering message. Take your time to be thoughtful, and build the people like they are. People. Don't be intimidated by the adventure that it takes to be a good educated writer, and instead see that you yourself are a hero, braving the challenges you face with humility and understanding.

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