

Black and White and Read All Over: Diversity and Inequity in Children's Publishing

Cheryl B. Klein

I gave this talk at Kansas State University in November 2010, at the kind invitation of Professors Karin Westman and Philip Nel. I am glad to say that a lot of things have changed for the better since I wrote this: Diversity in Books, the editors' organization I mention, became the CBC Diversity Committee. The We Need Diverse Books organization was born and spurred action on multiple fronts, creating an industrywide conversation around representation and taking real action to create more diverse books. There have been many diverse bestsellers, from Linda Sue Park's *A Long Walk to Water* to Jenny Han's *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* and Nicola Yoon's *Everything, Everything*. The overall numbers of diverse books published, however, are still not where they should be, as per these charts.

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2015 Statistics of Children's/YA Books by Race/Ethnic Group

Figures from the Cooperative Children's Book Center,
University of Wisconsin

Source for 2015: http://ccblogc.blogspot.com/2016/02/ccbc-multicultural-statistics-for-2015_23.html

	Percentage of US Population, 2012	Books w/ Significant Content, 2013	Books w/ Significant Content, 2014	Books w/ Significant Content, 2015	Percentage of total books* received, 2014 2015
Hispanic	16.9%	57	66	82	1.8% 2.4%
Black	13.1%	93	179	261	5.1% 7.6%
Asian/PI	5.3%	61	112	111	3.2% 3.2%
Native	1.2%	34	35	41	1.0% 1.2%
White	63%	2955**	3108**	2905**	88.8% 85.4%

	Percentage of US Population, 2012	Books by Creators, 2013	Books by Creators, 2014	Books by Creators, 2015	Percentage of total books* received, 2014 2015
Hispanic	16.9%	48	59	57	1.7% 1.6%
Black	13.1%	67	84	100	2.4% 2.9%
Asian/PI	5.3%	88	128	173	3.7% 5.0%
Native	1.2%	18	17	18	0.5% 0.5%

White	63%	2,979	3212	3052	91.8%	89.7%
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* 3500 in 2014, 3400 in 2015

** Numbers assume all remaining books were about white people, which is inaccurate given the many children's books about things that are not people at all. Still.

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So this talk remains relevant, I think. I look forward to the day when it isn't.

The talk was accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation, and I've left my <CLICK> marks in the document so you can see when I'm heading off in a new direction. You can see the references for much of the material I cite in my blog post here:

<http://chavelaque.blogspot.com/2010/09/some-things-im-reading-watching.html>

- My name is Cheryl Klein
- I'm a senior editor at Arthur A. Levine Books, an imprint of Scholastic Inc.
- And my talk today is titled "Black and White and Read All Over: Diversity and Inequity in Children's Publishing"
- And that subtitle can basically be explained by this chart:
- <CLICK> Here are the census figures for the United States population as of 2008
 - Hispanic: 15 percent
 - Black, Non-Hispanic: 13 percent
 - Asian: 5 percent
 - White, Non-Hispanic: 68 percent
- <CLICK> And here are the figures from the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin regarding the content of 3000 trade children's books published in 2009, with themes and topics focusing on or protagonists of the following races:
 - Hispanic: 61 books, or 2 percent
 - Black: 157 books, or 5.2 percent
 - Asian-American: 80 books, or 2.6 percent
 - The CCBC also counts books featuring American Indians, which make up another 33 books, or 1.1 percent.
- And that leaves us with this figure:
 - White: 2,669 books, or 89 percent
- <CLICK> When we look at statistics from the same source regarding the races of children's book creators, the disparities are even greater:
 - Hispanic: 2 percent

- Black: 2.7 percent
- Asian-American: 2.2 percent
- And that leaves us with
 - White: 93 percent
- And all of this means that clearly, the children’s books publishing industry is not keeping up with the ever-growing racial diversity of the United States.
- Now I’m going to slip one more statistic into the chart—< CLICK > each group’s percentage of the children’s book buying market:
 - Hispanic, 13 percent
 - Black: 8.2 percent
 - Asian: 3.2 percent
 - White: 74 percent
- Those market numbers should be read as “X percent of children’s book buyers are _____,” not “X% of _____ are children’s book buyers.”
- They come from the SIMBA Children’s Publishing Market Forecast 2011,
 - and I should note there was an asterisk on the chart saying that “data may be unreliable due to small sample size,” and SIMBA did not provide much info on its sample methodology.
- However, these were the best numbers I was able to locate as regards the racial makeup of the children’s book-buying public.
- And as children’s publishing is a business that relies on the purchasing of children’s books,
 - And thus responds to the perceived and actual tastes of those who DO buy children’s books,
 - This data is extremely relevant to our discussion.
- So I’m going to discuss this and other factors that have created such enormous gaps in the numbers here—the differences and correlations among populations, book buyers, content and creators.
 - Some of these factors are economic
 - Some of them are cultural
 - Since I’m an editor in this industry, some of them are personal for me
 - And all of them are complicated.
- I’ll then suggest some things we could all do—you audience members included—to bring about more equity in children’s books.
- Because the important question, in the end, is not who we should fault for this situation,
 - But what we can do to create more authors and illustrators of color,
 - And how we can better support their work.

- I should note I'm representing only my own opinions here, not speaking for my company in any way;
- And I'd like to thank Karin and Phil for giving me the opportunity to think through and talk about these issues
- And thank you for your attendance and attention.

- Sadly, this inequity is far from a new problem in children's publishing.
- <CLICK> In 1965, Nancy Larrick published a seminal essay called "The All-White World of Children's Books," in which she found that of 5,200 trade books published from 1962-1964,
 - only 349 included one or more African-Americans.
- More recently, in a 1990 essay in *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, Professor Rudine Sims Bishop introduced two terms that have become common in discussions of multicultural literature. I'm going to quote from her essay at some length, because it's such a succinct and accurate summation of the problems these disparities create. <CLICK>
 - She observed that books can function as windows, "offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author."
 - Or, she said, books can function as mirrors, <CLICK> reflecting readers' experiences back to them, "and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation."
- <CLICK> Ms. Bishop then writes that, "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part.
 - <CLICK> "Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. . . . They need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans. . . . If they see only reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world—a dangerous ethnocentrism."
- Ms. Bishop's ideas have been confirmed by sociological research as well.
- Contrary to popular assertions that children are all color-blind,
- The sociologist Phyllis Katz has shown that children notice skin-color differences as early as six months old.

- And there are numerous other studies demonstrating that young children consistently value the groups they're a part of and devalue others, even when the composition of the groups are entirely random.
 - Who's wearing red shirts, say, vs. who's wearing blue.
- This makes emotional sense, I think, especially with children:
- They're small creatures entirely dependent on other people to help them navigate the world and fulfill their needs
 - And in a situation like that, the safest place to be is with people who are what you know
 - Which in turn might lead to blind faith in the primacy of one's own group.
- But this emotional trend becomes worrisome sociologically when we don't educate children out of that way of thinking
 - By bringing them in contact with people unlike them, and having the children see *their* worth as well.
- And when the cultural messages about racial status begin to impinge on self-esteem.
- In one of Katz's studies, by age three, 86 percent of White children demonstrated a marked preference for playmates of their own race, while only 32 percent of black children held the same preference,
 - Indicating that those white children continued to have a strong (and likely unconscious) sense of the primacy of their group,
 - While the black children perhaps had begun to sense that their group maybe didn't hold as many social advantages—
 - One of the markers of low self-esteem.
- This difference increased over the next three years of the study,
 - Indicating that Black children became increasingly aware and affected by the status differences associated with each group.
- This directly echoes Ms. Bishop's warning,
- That due to the messages from ALL media and our culture as a whole,
 - Black children can “learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in ... society,”
 - While white children develop that “dangerous ethnocentrism.”
- And this is not the way most of us want our kids to behave, or the world we want to live in.
- Of course, books are only one small part of an ever-more-complex media landscape these days,
- But they still can serve as incredibly powerful mirrors, to reflect and enhance identity,
 - and equally powerful windows, to enlighten and create empathy.

- From a readerly perspective, the ultimate goal for those of us concerned about this imbalance
 - is to create more mirrors to the experiences of people of color,
 - And to find ways to encourage the window audiences—that is, anyone not of the race portrayed in the book—to open up those sliding glass doors and walk through.
- The author Mitali Perkins, who is of South Asian descent, has identified what she calls the “three assumptions of gatekeepers” in dealing with literature by and about people of color.
- The most important and pernicious one for our discussion today is what she calls “apartheid” <CLICK>
 - the idea that kids will or should only read books with characters like themselves:
 - that they *only* want mirrors, and not windows,
 - And more than that: The only important kind of mirrorship is race.
- That way of thinking reflects an essentialism I want to acknowledge upfront:
 - The idea that race is the single greatest factor determining how we each act, think, feel, and make cultural decisions
 - Here, especially, reading.
- Where in fact we are all individuals, with many dimensions and identities.
 - This is clearly a “duh” statement.
 - But when we’re speaking of people in the aggregate and the one trait they have in common,
 - it’s easy to lose sight of all the other traits we have as individuals,
 - Which are often just as or more important to our lives, our reading, and our writing.
- I am white, true. But I am also a woman, a Methodist, an editor, a liberal, a feminist, a New Yorker, a Midwesterner, a daughter, sister, girlfriend and friend.
- I am a person who has loved and lost people;
 - who has achieved both small victories and great things;
 - who has failed and felt unwanted;
 - who dreams of doing more and being more.
- And I’m sure all of you could say the same.
- So because I have many identities and many experiences, there are many ways in which I can recognize myself in books—where I can be a mirror—even across racial lines.
- To cite one of my teenage reading experiences, <CLICK> I read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou in 1993,

- After I saw her speak at Bill Clinton’s inauguration.
- And despite my lack of racial identification with the protagonist, I recognized parts of myself in it—
 - Ms. Angelou describes feeling awkward, ugly, an outcast,
 - And lord knows I did too for many of my teenage years.
 - So I saw my feelings affirmed, and felt comforted, by knowing that Ms. Angelou had experienced all of this before,
 - And that she had survived it, and more,
 - and become beautiful and awesome.
 - That gave me hope for my self too.
- I don’t mean to claim too much here—for instance, that I identified with the book as deeply as an African-American teenage girl might.
 - Because race IS such a huge factor in American life,
 - There is a level of common cultural experience there that is not mine, could never be mine,
 - And that would lead to a different exchange between reader and book than I could have had with it,
 - A deeper mirrorship, let’s say, than I could ever experience.
 - And I fully respect that.
- But books that we might at first see as windows
 - Will often prove to be mirrors in another way,
 - And we shouldn’t allow ourselves to forget that.
- I would also assert that because of the power of Ms. Angelou’s writing,
 - The ability of a great writer to fire my imagination,
- I didn’t *need* to see myself in it to be moved by it:
- Her story and her writing were powerful enough to make me hear their truth and share her feelings,
 - even if I hadn’t recognized those particular emotions I cited.
- My point being: In the private sphere, that magical exchange that takes place between an author and a reader, we all, black and white and Hispanic and Asian and everything else, have the right and ability to see ourselves in many books through our many identities,
 - or to love books that have nothing to do with us at all.
- And writers should have the right and ability to have their work judged as the work of an individual artist, not the work of someone of a particular race.
 - So Ms. Angelou, say, might be seen as simply *a* writer, rather than an African-American writer,
 - And segregated in that section of a bookstore or academia.

- Our ideal is the Martin Luther King “I have a dream” world, where each reader will consider authors, and books, by the content of their characters,
 - and not the color of their skins or book jackets.
- Again, that’s the point of this whole discussion—
 - how we can make that world happen in children’s books,
 - in hopes of helping our kids, and the world as a whole, to be more like that in turn.
- But we must never forget that even in 2010, even with an African-American president,
 - we don’t live in that ideal world,
- And in the public sphere, race matters, including when it comes to reading.
- Moreover, while I claimed many identities above,
- because I’m white, I have the freedom to toggle through those identities in a way people of color often don’t have.
 - When I’m invited to a conference, or a writer sends me a submission,
 - I always have the privilege of being seen as an editor first, with my race not attached.
- But my colleague Cassandra Pelham might be seen as a Black editor, instead of just a terrific one,
- Or my author Lisa Yee, who’s written several hilarious and award-winning books about both Chinese-American and white kids,
 - says it seems like she’s been sent every Asian-American-related middle-grade novel of the past five years for a blurb,
 - as if a word from her verifies the authenticity of the author’s portrayal.
- The Katz studies showed that every child, at the beginning of their lives, thinks they and their group are the center of the world.
- The unfortunate thing is that, when it comes to race, we white people often don’t have to grow out of it.
 - Despite what Fox News might say, we’re rarely the targets of discrimination, so we rarely have to think about race as something that affects us personally.
 - Talking about race requires us to acknowledge both historical injustices and their present-day results,
 - To admit that perhaps some privilege has been involved in our lives
 - And to look hard at our own behaviors and thought patterns now.
 - Many of us simply DON’T talk about race, even if we think about it,
 - maybe because we’re afraid of saying something stupid or offensive accidentally.

- A 2007 study in the Journal of Marriage and Family found that out of 17,000 families with kindergartners, 75 percent of white parents never, or almost never, talk about race,
 - Which is bad news in terms of teaching children to appreciate differences, as discussed earlier.
- It takes time to think through these questions honestly and speak carefully—something that’s true for people of all races.
 - And in a world that moves ever faster in demanding ever more from us,
 - It’s easy to put off anything that involves complications and slowing down.
 - We shouldn’t forget what I’ll call the speed-and-stress factor here, because I think it influences our lives and decisions a lot more than we recognize.
- So with those ideas on the table,
- I thought I’d go through the book publishing process, from manuscript submission to point of sale,
 - And discuss some of the reasons we’ve ended up with that 89% number.
 - And what we can do to create more equitable statistics.
 - In fact, I’m going to begin all these latter statements with WE NEED,
 - so we have a solid list of action points by the end.
- And I’m going to start right now with this: <CLICK>
- 1. WE NEED more authors and illustrators of color.
- By which I mean, we need more to exist, period, and to be sharing their work with the industry.
- To state the obvious, one reason children’s authors are 89% white is because of simple demographics:
 - If 68% of the population is white, and only 5% is Asian-American, then there’s a relatively small number of possible Asian-American authors, comparatively speaking.
- With that said, clearly the actual numbers of authors are often disproportionate to the population, per our opening chart.
- So why does this happen?
- All books begin with an author, who finds she has a story to tell.
- Often this story is inspired by or happens in reaction to another story—
 - For instance, I was talking with Karin’s Harry Potter class yesterday about the reams and reams of fan fiction that have been written about the Harry Potter universe
 - People saw a story in that universe that they wanted to see told, and they then sat down to tell it.

- Or the writing urge happens because the author has a powerful personal story he or she wants to share.
- But if you don't see yourself reflected in books, in stories, then it's harder to imagine that you belong in stories—that you have the right to tell them.
 - And thus the rarity of books about people of color hurts the chances of our having *more* authors of color,
 - Because it's that much harder for young readers of color to find their mirrors,
 - And writers to find encouragement and inspiration.
- It was clear already that, <CLICK> 2. WE NEED more mirror books,
 - But here we need them specifically because there are wonderful and important stories that are not getting written—stories all readers need to hear.
- Writing and getting published takes a LOT of determination, no matter a writer's race,
 - Since, despite what many people think, writing for children is neither an easy nor a financially lucrative field.
 - It usually requires a long apprenticeship, as writers learn the specific forms of writing for specific ages and formats, discover the story they want to tell, and write and revise their manuscripts.
- But let's suppose you're one of these determined writers.
- You have a story to tell, you've finished a draft and revised it a few times, and you think it's pretty good.
 - We'll call this manuscript *Benny and Marnie*—just because those are two names I like.
- Now you need to get it out to the publishing world.
- There are two structures for doing this in children's publishing:
- There's the standard one, where you send the book either directly to an editor, or to an agent, who will then submit it to an editor.
- Fewer and fewer editors accept unsolicited manuscripts these days,
 - So if you don't have an agent, it can be difficult to get your work in front of one for consideration.
- In order to increase the chances of that happening,
 - There's an organization that works in concert with that structure, called the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.
- SCBWI holds conferences in nearly all 50 states, where editors and agents talk about their work and the craft of writing, and usually critique some selected manuscripts.
- So the conferences offer writers a chance to make a personal connection with those industry professionals
 - Learn proper submission techniques,
 - and often submit their work directly to said professionals afterward.

- Thus it's one of the very best ways for new writers to learn about the industry, get their work out there, and get published.
 - I've bought two books from authors I met at SCBWI conferences, in fact.
- SCBWI does not keep statistics of its membership by race, but I've spoken at more than twenty conferences all over the United States,
 - including cities with high populations of people of color, like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles,
- And I must say, based on this anecdotal evidence, the demographics of SCBWI do seem to rather reflect the content/creator statistics,
 - as it's rare to see more than ten people of color total at any of these conferences—even in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles.
- Writers at these conferences also network, form critique groups, and offer encouragement and support through the writing and submissions process,
 - which keeps all of them invested in the work,
 - Because it becomes a social experience as well as a literary one.
- And if writers of color aren't finding like-minded connections or support, then they're less likely to return to the group and to keep trying to write.

- So what can be done about all of this?
- Well, the demographic numbers are going to take care of themselves, somewhat:
 - By 2042, more than 50 percent of the nation will be people of color
 - And more than 50 percent of U.S. schoolchildren will be of color by 2023,
 - Which reinforces how important this is.
 - And as the ranks of each group in the population swell, the population of writers will as well.
- In the meantime, <CLICK> 3. WE NEED not only more mirror books, as said above,
- But programs to encourage readers and writers of color starting from grade school.
 - For many successful writers, the reading and writing habit begins early.
 - Statistically, kids of *all* colors fall off reading in middle school and high school, as other opportunities and distractions become possible or necessary.
 - Extracurriculars, homework, friends, the opposite sex, getting a job
 - So we need to show kids the absolute necessity, and pleasure, of reading and writing throughout their lives.
- Finally, <CLICK> 4. WE NEED to expand the ways in which authors and illustrators of color can come in contact with publishing professionals.
- Agents and editors like me must make our interest in such authors explicit in statements of what we're looking for,

- And be on the lookout for such authors at all times.
- Some houses hold contests, either for authors of color or just for first-time writers, which can open up those doors of possibility.
- It would be useful to see SCBWI reach out to communities of color,
 - Or for authors of color to form parallel organizations to support and educate each other in similar ways.
- It is, of course, incredibly easy for me to stand up here and suggest work for other people and organizations,
 - And incredibly difficult for that work to actually get off the ground.
- But if we want to change that 89% statistic, it requires investment across the board.
- So you're ready to submit *Benny and Marnie*.
- You've done a little research, gone to an SCBWI conference or two,
 - And you've found my name.
 - My website states that I'm looking for authors of color, for the record,
 - Because I'm trying to put my money where my mouth is on this issue.
- So finally you send me a query letter.
- A query letter is a letter that offers a brief description of the manuscript and author,
 - with the hope of intriguing the editor enough that she'll want to read the whole book.
- I like the sound of your query, and I ask to see the full manuscript.
- I should pause here and explain all the dimensions of the editor's job.
 - <CLICK> I'm a talent scout, first of all—I read manuscripts and choose the ones I think have the most promise, artistically and commercially.
 - Once I've found one of these, I share it with our Scholastic acquisitions board, where we discuss how best it should be published.
 - I make an offer and negotiate the contract with the author or his or her agent, kind of a business manager,
 - And then I actually edit the manuscript, working with the author and illustrator to turn their work into the very best literary experience it can be.
 - My favorite part of the job.
 - Finally, I'm a producer, overseeing the book's budget, arranging for it to have the best title and cover it can possibly have, talking it up to our sales reps and to librarians and booksellers.
- Right now we're still back in that talent-scout stage.
- And I'm going to return briefly to our first need earlier, for more authors of color . . .
- because, proportionally speaking, there aren't a huge number of authors of color submitting books to publishers in the first place,
 - And it is impossible for editors to publish books that don't come to us.

- Some friends would remind me here that if authors of color are not submitting ms. to me, that means I need to go looking for them.
 - That I should read journals and blogs and adult novels by authors of color
 - And then reach out to those writers and ask if they'd like to write for kids,
 - And I accept that critique as true—and I've done it, too.
- But it does again bring up the speed-and-stress issue:
 - We editors have so much on our plates already, as you might imagine
 - That making a special effort to find and reach out to these authors is difficult and time-consuming in a job that already requires well over forty hours a week.
 - Which is not an excuse, but which is a truth I wanted to observe.
 - And which could be ameliorated if we could find ways to bring more authors of color into the standard submission process, as discussed earlier.
- Anyway, as I read your manuscript, I'm thinking about three interrelated things:
- <CLICK> Number one: Does this sound good?
- <CLICK> Number two: Does it sound right for me?
- <CLICK> Number three: Does this have reader appeal? That is, could this sell?
 - I really do think about the questions in this order,
 - And I'm hoping very much that the answers to all of them are yes.
- I'm going to unpack those questions one at a time here.
- <CLICK> Number one: Does this sound good?
 - By "good" I mean a book that's of good literary quality
 - And I have now painted myself into the corner of having to define literary quality!
- I think a *successful* book makes the reader feel the emotion the writer intends him or her to feel.
- A *good* book is a book that not only does that, but those emotions give some kind of pleasure to the reader.
 - Which could be anything from excitement in a big action scene, to the pleasure of crying your eyes out over a character's death or loss.
- In Western literature, that creation of emotion generally comes about through the techniques Aristotle identified 2400 years ago in *The Poetics*:
 - The reader's investment in the protagonist
 - Often through identification with him—the mirror idea
 - Then a plot that puts that protagonist through experiences that hold the reader's interest,
 - All written in language that is both considered and compelling.

- So when I'm looking at a manuscript, I'm thinking about how well it accomplishes all that,
 - And also, how *new* is this?
 - Have I seen this plot or character before? If I have, what is the writer doing that will distinguish this book from all the similar books already out there?
- If my answers to all of these things are positive, I go on to question number two: <CLICK> Does it sound right for me?
- Because readers are so diverse in their interests and tastes,
 - And writers are so diverse in the stories they find to tell,
- We publishers put out a huge range of books at all literary levels and price points,
 - From paperback series like Goosebumps, the Baby-Sitters' Club, Warriors, and Gossip Girl
 - Which are the books we expect kids to buy with their own money
 - And, speaking VERY broadly, which often place more of a focus on the story or subject than on character development or gorgeous writing
 - To fine literary hardcovers like this year's Newbery winner, *When You Reach Me*
 - Which tend to be more parent, teacher, or librarian buys
 - And place more emphasis on character development and writing, though (hopefully) not to the exclusion of plot.
 - To books that fall in between, like the *Fancy Nancy* picture books or *The Lightning Thief* or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*
 - Which have a foot in both worlds, both saleswise and literarily.
- My boss, Arthur Levine, who founded the imprint,
- has decided that the books our imprint publishes will appeal to that second market—the fine literary hardcovers,
 - And that limits the kind of books that are right for me.
 - It's hard to publish a novel shorter than a hundred pages, for instance, and expect a reader to pay \$15.99 for it.
 - Or a ten-book series about NASCAR drivers—
 - That's much more a paperback project
- Moreover, when I take on a book, I'm making essentially a two-year commitment to it and its author.
 - I will read each draft of that book three or four times, at least.
 - When I line-edit the later drafts, I'll be going through them word by word, phrase by phrase, to make sure the text is as tight and beautiful as it can be.
 - The author and I will have lots of intense conversations refining the ideas behind the book and what needs to happen in revision

- And as you can imagine, if an editor doesn't believe in the project she's working on, or the editor and author don't share a vision for the book,
 - this can be very tedious for both parties.
- So I'm lucky enough to generally be able to take on only those books I feel passionate about.
- One of the great pleasures of multicultural literature is that the stories are very often new to me,
 - Because they're often about lives and worlds so different from my own.
- But that difference might also make it more difficult for me to identify with the protagonist,
 - Because there's less of a mirror there to my own experience, to what I recognize as true.
- I feel somewhat conflicted about saying this, since, as I said earlier in talking about Maya Angelou,
 - I believe I don't *need* to see myself in a protagonist if the writer is capable of involving me in the story without that identification.
- <CLICK> Earlier this year, I published a YA novel called *The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*,
 - by a writer of Mexican descent named Francisco X. Stork.
- The protagonist of the book is a sixteen-year-old boy named Pancho who lives in New Mexico,
- And we readers quickly learn that he's going to an orphanage,
 - He has a violent past,
 - And a gun now,
 - He wants to get revenge for his sister's murder;
 - And by the end of the first chapter, we readers are totally, 100% on board with that.
- I have nothing in common with Pancho—zip, zilch, nada.
 - But I adore him and believe in him absolutely.
- And that faith in Pancho happens because Francisco Stork is a great writer who shows readers the small details that make him real.
- If Francisco were a less great writer—well, then, it's true: I might have had a harder time sympathizing with Pancho,
 - And it would have been easier for me as an editor to say, "I'm sorry, I'm not connecting with this character," and to pass on the manuscript.
- But supposing Pancho was a white orphan with a violent past,
 - or even a white female school nerd in the Midwest like I was,
 - and still written badly—

- Well, I don't believe I'd connect with that either, because the writer still wouldn't have been doing the work to make me care.
- Seen from another angle,
- What I'm really saying here is that the literary quality of this book is so high
 - That they can put even someone like me, who doesn't have much of a racial or cultural stake in the story,
 - Into the shoes of that character.
- And I want all the books I publish, by writers of all colors and about characters of all colors, to be at that level of quality
- That is a high standard to have to uphold, and honestly, not many writers of *any* race meet it.
- And while I consider well over five hundred manuscripts in a given year,
 - I publish five to ten books a year at most—
 - A one to two percent acceptance rate.
- So let's suppose I've read *Benny and Marnie*
 - I've answered "Yes" to the questions of "Is this good?" and "Is this right for me?"
 - And I've decided I'd like it to be one of those five to ten books.
- I'm now on question three:
- <CLICK> Does this have reader appeal? Will it sell?
- When I think about sales, I believe a book needs to have some level of quality, as already discussed,
 - And then it needs to have reader appeal.
- Not everyone in the publishing industry cares about the level of quality, it must be said,
 - Which explains why Snooki of *Jersey Shore* has a deal to "write" a "novel."
- But everyone cares about reader appeal—the factors that will make a reader pick up and buy the book.
- So in some ways, this phrase should be *buyer* appeal, because that's equally important here.
- It's very easy for people who aren't in the industry to be snobby about buyer appeal,
 - And say that publishing houses should have a higher calling than just profit.
- But the truth is, to accomplish that calling—whether moral or artistic—we have to make money.
- We're struggling under decreasing readership, competition from videogames and television and the Internet, the fact that nobody knows what will happen with e-books.

- Plus our customers—both booksellers and actual readers—have been hit hard by the economic downturn
- And we’re seeing that reflected in our own earnings every month.
- So we do have to look for that reader appeal factor.
- Sometimes it’s recognition of the author’s name, as with Snooki or Lauren Conrad
 - (Or Christopher Paul Curtis or Katherine Paterson, to be fair)
 - Sometimes it’s the cool factor involved in the book: it has a new way of presenting an old subject, or it’s a series that everyone’s reading.
 - Sometimes it IS literary quality—to a certain segment of the audience, that matters
 - And quite often it’s plot appeal: the story just sounds terrific
- When I’m thinking about reader appeal, often, honestly, I’m thinking about what appeals to me,
 - Or what appealed to me when I was the age of the likely reader of book—
 - What I liked as a six-year-old, a ten-year-old, a sixteen-year-old.
- Because I was and am a smart reader, right? And if I like it, chances are good other that people will too.
- Of course, my tastes are neither foolproof nor universal.
 - I don’t tend to like books about snot, or with toilet humor
 - And I’m not a big animal person.
 - But of course there are lots of kids who LOVE books with toilet humor or animals
 - Just as there are kids who love the books I publish.
- This is why publishing needs a diverse pool of editors with diverse life experiences:
 - so that we’ll have widely varying visions of what’s great, who that mythical reader is, and what has kid appeal,
 - and we’ll publish a wide range of books for that whole wide range of readers.
- Unfortunately, it may not surprise you to learn another thing WE NEED: <CLICK>
 - More editors of color in children’s publishing,
 - Because there aren’t many of them.
- The same issue that came up in Necessity #2—the lack of mirror books creating a lack of authors—applies to editors as well.
 - If you don’t see a place for yourself in books, in stories, then it’s harder to fall in love with them;
 - And you really need to be in love with books to do this job.
- It’s also a bit of an esoteric job, in that many readers seem unaware that editors exist.
 - And that means, to attract more editors of color, we need a better level of public awareness about editorial work.

- To that end, some editor friends and I have founded an organization of children's book people called Diversity in Books.
 - We're just getting started, but we have plans in place to reach out to high schools and colleges to talk about careers in publishing
 - And we're putting together a website where we describe how we got into publishing,
 - To help people of color imagine their way into the industry.
- Also, because I've already made a habit of volunteering other people for work here,
- Publishers should sponsor more internship programs for students of color,
 - And make an effort to reach out to possible interns for the programs that already exist.
- I'm proud to say Scholastic has such a program,
 - And indeed, my friend I mentioned earlier, Cassandra Pelham, came out of it.
- I'll also note quickly that <CLICK> WE NEED some program of editorial education in multicultural issues.
 - Editing is one of the last apprentice jobs, where you learn the craft by working under another editor and observing what they do.
 - So what you learn is pretty much left to that older editor's teaching and your own good luck and reading,
 - And these multicultural issues are too important, and the problem too flagrant, for young editors in the industry not to have a greater awareness of the situation,
 - So we can say to an illustrator: "Hey: How about putting someone of color in this crowd scene?"
 - Or to an author: "Have you done your research into this community you're writing about?"
 - And try to better and more honestly reflect our diverse world.
- Of course, if we're saying a book will appeal to some mythical reader, that means we have a vision in mind of who that reader is and what he or she likes.
- When it comes to the "what kids like," there are certain standard elements that we automatically think of as having reader appeal,
- because they've proven so popular with readers over time:
 - For picture-book-age readers, stories about animals, families, dressing up, dinosaurs, and school
 - For middle-graders, animal stories, ghost stories, adventures, and humor
 - For YA, thrillers and romance,
 - And lately, paranormal and dystopias.
- But when it comes to who that reader is . . .

- < CLICK > Well, that’s where this chart comes back into play.

	Population (2008)	Percent of kids buying market	CCBC Numbers Subject	Creator
Non-Hispanic whites	68%	74%	89%	93%
Hispanic (of any race)	15 %	13%	2.0%	2.0%
Non-Hispanic blacks	12%	8.2%	5.2%	2.7
Asian American	5%	3.2%	2.6%	2.2

- Probably the number-one reason for the 89% statistic is, in turn, that 74% statistic,
- Because, as both the mirror idea and Phyllis Katz’s studies showed,
 - Stories about people who are like us have natural reader and buyer appeal,
- And so publishers put out a majority of books for that majority market.
- We see these numbers reflected further in the books that become bestsellers:
- I studied the *Publishers Weekly* children’s year-in-review lists, which include sales figures for all the bestselling books of the year.
 - Excluding media tie-in properties, which made up a lot of those lists,
 - Of the 623 titles that sold more than 100,000 copies in hardcover frontlist from 2000-2008,
 - Fewer than twenty of the books focused on a person of color, as best I could determine
 - And two of them were Barack Obama biographies.
 - The numbers in paperback weren’t a whole lot better.
- That’s still an awful leap up from 74 to 89 percent.
- And indeed, we could even use these numbers to argue we should do *more* books with characters of color,
 - Because clearly we’re under-serving some of those book-buyers—especially the Hispanic market, with 13% of book buyers and only 2% of books.
- You’ll remember that I referred to the idea that people only want to read books about people who are the same race as “apartheid.”
- As people of good will, wanting equality for all,
- WE NEED to not accept apartheid as an eternal truth, but to do our best to challenge it wherever it comes up, including our own thinking.
 - And this applies to not just publishers, but to parents, librarians, teachers—anyone who puts books in kids’ hands.
- This is both a tiny thing—just one little adjustment in thinking, costing nothing,
 - And ultimately a huge one, as it’s one of the most important changes we can make.

- At the same time, in the publishing business, we have to acknowledge the reality that apartheid exists in the present,
 - and make our plans and projections accordingly
 - as we figure out ways to expand the market nonetheless.
- To that end, I'm going to move a step further in our hypothetical publishing process here.
 - Let's say I decide *Benny and Marnie* has plenty of reader appeal, and I'm going to take it to an acquisitions meeting.
- Before I go to the meeting, I have to draw up what's called a P&L, or a profit-and-loss statement, which includes how many copies I think a book will sell, and at what price; how much we'll need to pay the author; the unit cost for the physical object itself; and certain fixed costs, like corporate overhead.
 - All these numbers go into a computer program that spits back out the profit margin we'll make on the book.
- We estimate how many copies a book will sell off prior performance of the author's books or of similar books.
- So if you're a debut author who's never published a book before, then I'd need to use the numbers for similar books in projecting what your sales might be.
- Because when I'm thinking about reader appeal, and therefore comparison titles,
 - Beyond my personal tastes, I primarily think about the story.
- I believe readers love books because of their characters and writing,
 - But they *buy* them for the stories,
 - Which is what they can learn from the flaps on the book.
- And interestingly, books starring people of color are almost all contemporary realism.
- Of the 59 books on one blogger's list of black-authored middle-grade and YA novels in 2010,
 - Only three of them were fantasies or science fiction
 - While three of them were historical fiction.
 - The other 53: straight-up realism, many of them set in urban neighborhoods.
- Of the 16 novels by Latino authors published in 2010 that another blogger collected, *all* of them were realistic, either historical or present-day.
- I'm going to pause and observe there's another huge asterisk here in that whenever we talk about published books,
 - We're talking about the books editors and publishers choose to take on,
 - Based on their sense of quality and reader appeal
 - Not necessarily what writers are actually writing.
- But I can say that in my own anecdotal experience,

- it's extremely rare to see any sort of genre manuscript by a main character of color.
 - I think I've seen about eight at most in ten years in publishing.
- And there's an asterisk on that too: the kinds of mss. I see depend entirely on what authors choose to write, what they choose to send me based on what they make of my tastes, and what publishing or cultural trends they choose to reflect.
 - So they may well be writing them and not sending them to me. I don't know.
- So, if *Benny and Marnie* is contemporary realism set in an urban neighborhood,
 - Then I would need to use the comp figures from one of these contemporary realistic novels.
- But if it was a paranormal romance about a werewolf named Benny and a girl named Marnie, both of whom happened to be African American,
 - Then I could use the comp figures from *Shiver*, say, because that's a fair plot comparison.
- All of this presages the biggest WE NEED of this whole talk,
 - The thing that could make the single biggest difference in our ability to publish more books by and about people of color:
- <CLICK> WE NEED better sales for books by authors of color—ideally a bestseller.
- Please note I am NOT saying that all books by authors of color sell badly,
 - Because there aren't any statistics that break out the sales performance of all books with people of color or by authors of color vs. all others.
 - And I know anecdotally that many such authors do quite well,
 - Especially once they're established.
- But publishing often has the same blockbuster mentality you can see in the film industry,
 - Because one big popular success can cover the losses of two or three smaller books.
 - And once a bestseller like that happens, more books like it follow.
- The Publishers Weekly numbers showed that these big sales numbers only rarely happen for books with characters of color
- And because of that absence,
 - it's harder to build up enthusiasm, especially for a new author writing a contemporary realistic novel.
- We still publish these books, certainly!
- But because the sales numbers are expected to be more modest,
 - The amount we pay upfront tends to be more modest,
 - Which can influence marketing and sales . . .

- It all goes around in a circle.
- So the next time a boom like *Twilight* or *Harry Potter* comes around, it would be great to see an author of color grab onto it and create a similar book with a protagonist of color,
 - to capture readers who want more books like that,
- Or better yet, for an author to write a great, trendsetting, plotty book of their own,
- Because it would make a huge difference to editors' ability to publish more books about and by people of color
 - if there were a book by a person of color,
 - about a person of color,
 - ideally with a person of color on the cover,
 - becoming a phenomenon itself.
 - Without its having won an award, or gotten a movie deal, or done anything besides being a great book that kids of all colors want to read—
 - The ultimate comp title.
- That would prove to the gatekeepers at every level that audiences for such stories exist.
 - And publishers would then create more books for that audience.
- I want to edit this phenomenon book desperately.
- But of course authors are not solely responsible for producing such phenomenon books.
- They require passion on behalf of the editor,
 - Lighting a fire under the publishing staff,
 - That then carries on out to the sales reps, booksellers, and eventually readers.
- When there isn't a good model, or good comp titles, making a phenomenon requires faith—and a really terrific book.
- Let's say *Benny and Marnie* is that book.
- I love it. My Acquisition team loves it.
- They approve all the numbers in my P&L, or even double them.
- And I make you the author an offer for *Benny and Marnie*, and it's accepted.
- At that point, you and I will work together to edit the book,
 - Bringing it more in line with both your vision and the aesthetic standards I discussed earlier.
- I want to acknowledge here that because of the intimacy the author-editor relationship requires,
- There need to be shared goals, and a level of trust and comfort on both sides
 - Which cultural factors, such as race, have been known to impede.

- And that can certainly influence editorial decisions to acquire a book—a sense of how well we’ll be able to work with the author.
- If I were working with a Korean-American author, say, on a book about a Korean-American family,
- I hope he’d know that when I make editorial suggestions, I’m doing it for what I see as the aesthetic good of the book,
 - and not because I’m a white woman trying to crush the ethnicity out of his story.
- At the same time I need to speak and listen carefully, in case I *am* misunderstanding something about the culture portrayed in the book or being insensitive in some way, and to adjust my edits accordingly.
- Both sides require humility, a willingness to listen, eyes on our joint goal, and a way to negotiate differing ideas should they come in conflict.
 - Which is, indeed, exactly the same way I work with white authors.
 - This just requires an additional assumption of good faith.
- As we approach a final manuscript, the book designer and I will start to talk about the cover.
 - I’m not going to go into the factors that influence cover decisions here, because I’m running long already, and that’s a whole talk in and of itself.
- Covers are really, really important and really, really complicated
 - All the other issues here boiled down to one single image.
- But as publishers and human beings, <CLICK> WE NEED to stop whitewashing,
 - Because it’s just demeaning to everyone involved.
- Once we have a final book package, our sales representatives go to various stores to sell the books to the store’s buyers,
 - Who decide how many of each book a store will carry, based on their sense of and data on their customers and their tastes
- And speaking of who those customers are . . . <CLICK> I’m going to flip to this chart one more time
 - And make one last observation about that 74 percent number:
- White people are the only group where the book-buying percentage is greater than their percentage of the population.
- So what could we do to get more people of color to buy books?
- One obvious answer from this talk: Put out more books of interest.
 - That leads to the question of the sales performance of the mirror-books that do exist: How well do those sell?

- Again, there aren't any statistics that break out the sales performance of books by race—the subject's just too big and complicated to do accurately
 - But we have seen those bestseller numbers above. . . .
- So why aren't there more mirror-audience bestsellers? Are there just not many book-buyers in those racial groups? Or not enough book-buyers to be financially significant to major publishers?
 - The Census numbers would seem to argue against that, especially as these groups become an ever-expanding part of the market.
- So maybe we publishers are putting out the wrong books—books that, despite their characters of color, don't have interest for these audiences.
 - Maybe we're doing too much contemporary realism and not enough fantasy
 - Or too many books for girls, not enough for boys.
- Or maybe we're publishing the right books, but we're marketing them in the wrong manner, so the mirror audiences aren't hearing about them as much as they should,
 - Or finding the format or access or pricing prohibitive, given their other entertainment options.
- I do not know the answers to any of these questions,
- And frankly, <CLICK> WE NEED more data about it.
- In the meantime, and even without that data, I feel confident in asserting <CLICK> WE also NEED more bookstores or other book sales channels in communities of color,
 - Ideally run by members of those communities themselves.
 - <CLICK> The average middle-class household has 13 books per person;
 - In lower-income communities, which often include a high percentage of people of color,
 - the number is one book for every 355 people.
- So we need to increase access to books and book buying,
- Because if those mirror readers don't have direct and easy access to the books we're already putting out,
 - Then it's harder for those readers to purchase them
 - And that hurts sales, because we're not reaching that mirror market as best we can,
 - Which has a knock-on effect with comp titles and everything else.
- The financials can be difficult, as bookstores are hard to run in even the best economic times and richest neighborhoods.
 - But maybe we publishers strike deals with stores that already exist in the community, to get our books represented there at a low price.

- Or we partner with organizations that serve people of color to market and perhaps even sell books directly through them.
 - At a recent conference on African-American children’s literature, someone suggested that a couple of black illustrators should go on a tour of black churches in the South,
 - And I love this idea,
 - Because it seems like exactly the sort of grassroots word-of-mouth-building that could make a book a big success.
- I think it’s also safe to say <CLICK> WE NEED to find more ways to connect our books with their mirror audience in general.
 - Perhaps we need different pricing and publishing strategies than usual,
 - Releasing more books as paperback originals,
 - And keeping prices low to make them more attractive to buyers.
 - It would be great to see a catalog with each month’s titles by authors of color or featuring characters of color,
 - Distributed to librarians, booksellers, media, and other stakeholders
 - Making sure no one has the excuse to say they didn’t know those books were available
 - As a reason they’re not buying books with characters of color.
 - Or we run serial excerpts in community newspapers, with a discount code that can be used to order the book online.
- All of this would also point to the <CLICK> NEED for more marketers and publicists of color, who might have connections to these communities and be able to identify the right places for publishers to spend our limited resources.
- It is incredibly expensive and time-consuming to launch campaigns like a church tour,
 - The speed and stress factor striking again for already overworked, underfunded publishers.
- But it would be fascinating to try, to see what could actually move the sales needle,
 - and might pay off the investment in increased sales across the board.
- Those strategies would address the mirror market;
- <CLICK> WE also NEED to do a better job of educating and expanding the market of windows—
 - That is, helping white people move past their assumptions that such books aren’t for them.
 - The bookseller Elizabeth Bluemle, who also blogs for Publishers Weekly,
 - Suggested a number of smart strategies recently that she uses to booktalk these books to mirror audiences

- They basically came down to her presenting the books in the first place,
 - Overcoming her own apartheid, occasionally—
- And asserting their quality and interest,
- Implicitly challenging the assumption that the protagonist’s race disqualified the book for a white readership.
 - She says that even if the book buyer doesn’t take the book then,
 - She hopes a seed has been planted, curiosity stirred,
 - And she might have more luck the next time around.
- And as that demonstrates, <CLICK> WE, and this time I mean every person in this room, NEED to take action.
- WE NEED to challenge apartheid in ourselves and others.
- WE NEED to buy more books by authors of color, and about people of color.
- WE NEED to talk about these books, and these issues,
 - and show the publishing industry that the CCBC statistics here need to change.
- Change takes a lot of time, and in some cases, a lot of money.
- Again, the publishing industry is struggling under diminishing sales, ever-increasing costs, an uncertain future, often a general malaise.
 - But every parent wants good books for their child,
 - And to see their child, their family, in those good books.
 - I believe that if we can show the industry there’s a market for these books,
 - And the industry can find ways to reach out to communities of color and open up those markets,
 - Multicultural books could be a bright spot—a *growth* market, even—in this difficult time.
- I’d like to conclude by reading a quote from a book I published earlier this year,
- <CLICK> *Eighth-Grade Superzero*, by a debut writer named Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich,
 - Who sent her work to me through the query letter process, for the record.
- The book’s protagonist is a Jamaican-American boy named Reggie who lives in Brooklyn
 - And gets inspired to run for president at his middle school.
- In his climactic speech on Election Day, he says:
 - “People are stepping outside of their circles to work together. And there’s so much more that we can do together. We can start in little ways, by being kinder to one another, by welcoming strangers, and by leaving each other room to grow and change. We can make a difference. I know that usually that means

something big and flashy and um, newsworthy, but just saying hi to someone you've never spoken to before makes a difference. Sitting at a different lunch table sometimes makes a difference. Remembering to um, love, the people who love you makes a difference.'

- And, I would say, reading, and even more *buying* a book by someone who's different from you, makes a difference.
- It's those little differences, each book bought, each conversation undertaken, each gesture made in good faith,
 - That will reverse the negativity these numbers represent
 - And take us toward greater equity for all.
- I appreciate in advance your willingness to participate in this effort,
- And, in the present, your patience in listening to me here today.
- Thank you.