How do we measure up?

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Children’s books as a mirror to society, how do they measure up? asks Chitra Soundar.

Imagine if aliens wandered into a bookshop to understand humans? what would they think? Author Chitra Soundar asks if we are representing family life today accurately.

As a child I grew up reading British books. I also read some Indian fiction, a lot of Indian comics and oral folklore and epic tales. Therefore when I started writing books, I either retold folklore (which I still like to do and is one of my favourite things to do) or wrote stories with western protagonists. What did I know of a western household, which wasn’t derived from those books I read? Until recently, until I came to live in Britain and belong here, I knew very little.

As an author who visits schools across the world, I worry that fair representation of families be it about race or culture or ability or gender or sexual orientation or families that are unconventional is rare. Books that are in children’s early lives do matter these are the books they take with them into adult life and shape their perspectives about our world. And this world is more colourful and joyful than the one predominantly represented in books.

Buchoff writes in The Reading Teacher about family stories: When incorporated into the elementary curriculum, family stories are effective tools for encouraging students to learn more about their heritage, to acquire and refine literary skills and to develop greater respect for the multicultural differences that make them unique.

It is critical for children from all backgrounds to see their own family and cultural setting in these stories. It is important for them to recognize familiar family structures in these stories living in a joint family, having different or hybrid bedtime rituals, celebrations and festivals that are more specific to them. All of that adds to their overall understanding of their own world as the learning always begins with the known and proceeds to the unknown.

At this point the usual argument would be that these minority groups don’t buy enough books to justify profitability. And I would like to humbly disagree for two reasons.

First of all, the discoverability of these books is dependent on traditional distribution systems that don’t reach gatekeepers beyond the usual channels.
An informal Twitter poll taken in Mar 2017 indicated that 56% of the booksellers discover inclusive books via word of mouth and only 25% from publishers? marketing campaigns.

A repeat of this survey in May 2017 showed a marked difference. Only 19% of diverse books are being discovered via publishers? own sales reps and over 43% are discovered via word of mouth.

And so even when books are being published, getting them into the hands of booksellers, librarians and parents also requires a less traditional approach.

Secondly, we often assume that a story about a non-traditional family, or protagonist will not be interesting to people who normally buy books. I go into schools a lot and I can happily confirm that parents, teachers and children are more than open to new stories from different families and new. Also, often from the questions on social media, I know there are librarians, teachers and parents who are looking for great inclusive books and do not always find them easily or know where to look.

In today?s world of divisive politics and extreme ideologies, it?s important that we bring up a new generation of citizens who know more about the world than perhaps their parents or grandparents did. Today?s children are tomorrow?s presidents (with twitter accounts), prime ministers, industrialists and artists. And tomorrow?s world is shrinking even more quickly than today; if we do not show our children to be generous and open-minded about this wide world, to see differences as something to be celebrated rather than scared of or frowned up, then we have failed as parents, teachers, artists and lawmakers.

But it is not all bad news. There are some wonderful independent publishers and amazing independent booksellers and sometimes even chains, bringing unique stories from around the world to us. These books are getting published. The trouble is often they are either considered ?exotic? or that there simply aren?t enough of these stories to create a body of work that complements, contradicts and surprises the stereotype.

Chimanda Ngozi Adichie says in her TED Talk The danger of a single story: ??the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.? Books serve as mirrors and doors and in many cases as doorways into discovering more about friends, neighbours and the diversity of our modern societies. As a child, books were my friends. They gave me wings.

And I wish every child, irrespective of their circumstance or background to have the chance to try on new wings.

As Bishop puts it, ?first literature can show how we are connected to one another through our emotions, our needs, our desires ? experiences common to all?. Second? books can help us understand, appreciate, and celebrate the differences among us ? those things that make each cultural group special and enrich the larger society?. Thirdly, literature can be used to develop an understanding of the effects of social issues and forces on the lives of the ordinary individuals.?

Allow me to give an example ? my nephew turned five last year and I wanted to show him a story where an Indian (or mixed-race child) was having a birthday that is celebrated not with cake and candles, but also in an Indian way. Much to my disappointment, not only did I not find that book, I found out that there hasn?t been a birthday book for young children that doesn?t portray an animal or a traditional family in decades in the UK. At the end of that research I decided to write a story myself. I might one day even manage to get it published but there are many more children out there,
whose aunts are not writers, whose parents have tried and failed at finding books that reflect their lives and children who will never believe they can be part of stories, adventures and escapades.

So I?m going to conclude the same way I started: what if aliens wandered into a bookshop to understand about humans? what would they think? Are we representing family life on earth accurately? What would the definition read for CHILDREN?S BOOKS in the Hitchhiker?s Guide to the Galaxy? If I asked Deep Thought about what % of children?s books should represent the myriad of children in Britain today, would the answer be 42? I?ll take 42%. It?s bigger than the number we have now.

Chitra Soundar is an Indian-born British writer of children?s books. She has published picture books and junior fiction with Walker Books, Otter-Barry Books and her latest book You?re Safe With Me will be published by Lantana Publishing. Find out more [3] and follow her on twitter at @csoundar.

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