



*Diverse characters and stories give life and voice to marginalized communities, wanting, needing, deserving to be seen and heard.*

# Behold the Gatekeepers: Unlocking an Equal and Diverse Library

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A child who reads is the gatekeeper of worlds of possibilities; with each new book a child gains a key to a world once unknown.

The feel of a book, the spine, its numerous pages give life to new adventures. When the light breeze of a book's printed pages blow softly upon a child's face, the child breathes deep the text.

A child's eyes scan the pages and with every turn of the page, takes one step closer into a world where the impossible becomes probable. Where the heroine saves the day, a quest of great peril awaits, or purple polka-dotted dragons can be your pen pals.

As a child I was a voracious reader. I would devour anything I could get my hands on, from *National Geographic* magazines to volumes of Greek mythology. I lived just a few minutes walk from my local library

branch. Each day after school, I'd grab a snack at the YMCA and head next door to my escape, my sanctuary. Every time I swiped my library card, I imagined I was getting an all-access pass to a top-secret vault of adventure where I could navigate treacherous seas with a band of pirates, discover Middle Earth, fight my way through the doldrums, or meet Aslan on the edge of Narnia.

As I descended the aged stairs, the familiar smell of books of all shapes and sizes welcomed me back another day. I sat for hours searching the shelves for new friends and foes, going on adventures, all while sprawled over my favorite bean bag chair that was just the right amount of lumpy. I sometimes laid like a starfish on the green carpet and imagined myself in lush green grass reading while fingering through my favorite tattered copy of *Stuart Little*.

Or perhaps tucked away in a nook somewhere reading *Slake's Limbo*. Best of all on a rainy day, bringing my flashlight and turning my raincoat into a makeshift tent with a chair and reading the latest edition of R.L. Stein's *Goosebumps*.

The thing is, as much as I LOVED the library—the plethora of books offered, falling in love with new characters and hating others, setting off on a new adventure, or feeling a true sense of loss when I closed the back cover of a new favorite book—there was always a question that lingered in my mind from a young age...where are the characters who look like me?

With the exception of *Snow Day*, your odd side character in the *Babysitter's Club* series, and a myriad of informational books about Harriet Tubman, Fredrick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Malcom X, I



never saw myself reflected in the fantastic characters that I read about. The stories of people like me were nonfiction, rife with pain and struggle. Meanwhile eight-year-old me dreamed of brown girls with dragons in far-away worlds. The diversity in my local library was lacking, and the selection at my private school was even more limited.

It doesn't take away from the beautiful experiences or memories I have of the library, but it did have an impact. I was a little brown girl in a monochromatic literary world, desperately yearning to see herself.

I always thought of the library as my sanctuary surrounded by my favorite characters.

A sanctuary should be a haven for all and not just a select few. Some might argue that in the literary world, a reader should be able to identify

with a fictional character, so what does it matter their race, socio-economic status, or gender? It matters. It matters the world to the child searching to see themselves. Diverse characters and stories give life and voice to marginalized communities, wanting, needing, deserving to be seen and heard.

Books containing LGBTQIA characters, diverse family units, princess boys, melanated masterminds, differently abled heroes, neuro-atypical astronauts, and strong-willed girls who rescue themselves are imperative.

Painting your library with the inclusive works of Jess Hong, Yangsook Choi, Jess Twiss, Jessica Love, Daniel Haack, Alexandra Penfold, Rebecca Sugar, Jillian Roberts, Michelle Worthington, Vivek Shraya, Koja and Angel Adeehoya, Matt de la Pena, and



Jacqueline Woodson will provide your shelves with a spectrum of color, inclusivity, and consciousness.

These texts and others like them provide a mirror into a child's identity. One of the duties of literature is to hold up a reflection of the human experience. It allows the child to connect with characters who look like them or share their common experience. Conversely, diverse selections of books give children a key to a door that life may never have opened for them otherwise, thus allowing them access and expanding their worldview.

When children have access to texts like these, their world explodes with

promise and possibility. As educators, authors, parents, and librarians, we owe it to every child to create an imaginarium of books and characters in which children see themselves reflected.

For the next child who opens the door to their local or school library, it is my hope that the shelves be colored with inclusivity and they find themselves weighted with keys to unlock a world of adventure and diverse experience, while curled up comfortably on an oversized bean bag.

As that little brown girl swept up between the pages in a monochromatic literary world, I held tight to the vision of some day seeing

characters who looked like me upon the page. Out of this tiny spark grew my passion of depicting children of color, being their free, quirky, unapologetic, melanated selves. From that passion came my debut picture book *M Is for Melanin: A Celebration of the Black Child*. Every time I pick up a pencil to draw or sit behind my desk to write, I remember my eight-year-old self tucked away in the library, and I create for her.



**Tiffany Rose** is a left-handed illustrator and author. She is currently living and working in Shanghai, China. She's a lover of coffee, wanderlust, massive curly Afros, and children being their imaginative, quirky, free selves. She is a full-time teacher, part-time author-illustrator, and world traveler. Rose remembers what it was like as a brown child not seeing herself reflected in the books and characters she loved so dearly and has been inspired to create art and meaningful stories so that underrepresented children can see themselves in books. Pencil in hand, she's changing that percentage one illustration at a time.

#### STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

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