



The background of the author matters. Even when portrayals of diverse characters by majority group authors are respectful and accurate, there's an extra degree of nuance and authority that comes with writing from lived experience.

Making Mirrors

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According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), one-third of Latinx students perform below grade level (Bandeira de Mello et al. 2019). Multiple reasons for the gap have been cited, including social, economic, and systemic factors. Yet again and again, progressive scholars return to one of the single biggest barriers: whether a student's culture is reflected and centered in the curriculum. How, then, do we ensure children see themselves as academic learners and as readers and writers?

Rudine Sims Bishop established a useful conceptual framework: books can be windows into other lives, sliding glass doors through which readers can pass into new worlds, or mirrors in which they can see themselves reflected. "Reading, then," she declares, "becomes a means of self-affirmation" (Bishop 1990).

So what happens to kids without a literary reflection? You should note that 50 percent of U.S. school-age children are "people of color" or POC (Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Pasifika) (Bandeira de Mello et al. 2019). These kids need to see their lives, their families, their communities, and their culture as worthy of academic study, valuable and integral parts of not just school life, but schoolwork.

The problem is that just 23 percent of books published last year featured POC protagonists. While that's an improvement over the annual 10 percent between 1994 and 2013, it still falls short of reflecting reality (Reardon and Portilla 2016). Also, many of those "diverse" books aren't being used in classrooms: teachers often stick to canon, tradition, personal taste.

If POC students are only exposed to a sort of generic, homogenous White American worldview and history,

they begin to internalize a view of themselves as unworthy, lesser, marginalized. This subtractive literary practice erases them, makes them less likely to achieve their dreams.

I grew up in deep south Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, attending elementary and junior high in the town of McAllen. Though most of my peers and I were Mexican American, the only book I read in the 70s and early 80s with any speck of Latinx representation was *Ferdinand the Bull*, because it took place in Spain and had some Spanish names (although, oddly, not the main character, who should've been named Fernando like my little brother). By the time I was ready for college, I had come to believe that to be successful, I had to turn my back on my heritage.

Yet it isn't enough to add mirrors to students' academic careers. Students need access to mirrors made by people like them. How can Latinx kids see themselves as readers and

writers if we don't expose them to Latinx writers?

This phenomenon is known as #OwnVoices, a Twitter hashtag created by Corinne Duyvis.

Some may be skeptical. Isn't diversity enough? No. There's a long history of majority group authors (white, abled, straight, male, etc.) writing outside their experience to tell diverse stories. Sometimes the books they create are wonderful! But many times, they're rife with stereotypes, tropes, and harmful portrayals. Marginalized people's stories are taken from them, misused, and published as authentic, while marginalized authors have to jump hurdle after hurdle to be published, fighting to receive even a fraction of the pay, promotion, and praise that white authors receive for writing diverse characters' stories ... if they're allowed through the door at all.

In 2017, when the percentage of POC protagonists in kid lit hit an all-time high—25 percent—there was a catch. The publishing industry had prioritized White authors rather than #OwnVoices authors. As a result, only 29 percent of books with Black protagonists were written by Black authors; 34 percent of books with Latinx protagonists were by Latinx authors; 39 percent of books with Asian and Pasifika protagonists by Asian and Pasifika authors; and 53 percent of books with Native protagonists by Native authors (Horning et al. 2019). The problem has become clear: some writers see diversity as a popular trend, so they jump on the bandwagon, taking up space that writers of color should occupy.

The background of the author matters. Even when portrayals of diverse characters by majority group authors are respectful and accurate, there's an extra degree of nuance and authority that comes with writing

from lived experience. #OwnVoices books have an added richness because the author shares an identity with the character, with the deepest understanding of the intricacies, the joys, the difficulties, the pride, the frustration, and every other possible facet of that particular life—because the author has actually lived it.

Furthermore, research shows that both children of color and white children benefit from greater exposure to inclusive literature, especially #OwnVoices books that accurately reflect our diverse society. We have to move past local policies and procedures that focus on a numbers game or only on literature that has been approved by the

principal gatekeepers. Given how diverse school-age children are, we must have collections and curricula that center historically marginalized voices.

As a university English professor, I advocate for the inclusion of diverse, kid-centric texts in the classroom. As a writer, I produce award-winning, #OwnVoices work that centers the lives and culture of Mexican American communities, especially along the border, as well as their roots in Mexico and that country's roots in pre-Colombian Mesoamerica.

My Pura Belpré Honor-winning middle-grade series *Garza Twins* (which starts with 2015's *The Smoking*



Mirror) is a mythic adventure in the vein of Rick Riordan's work, focusing on two Mexican American twins from south Texas who discover they are nagueles, or shapeshifters. I retell essential Aztec and Maya sacred tales in *Feathered Serpent*, *Dark Heart of Sky: Myths of Mexico*.

During a dark time for immigrants, refugees, and Mexican Americans, my middle-grade novel-in-verse *They Call Me Güero* (winner of the Tomás Rivera and Claudia Lewis awards, among others) shows a happy Chicano kid on the border, using poetry to find his way.

Border issues and Latinx kids are also front and center in *The Unicorn Rescue Society #4: The Chupacabras of the Río Grande*, which I co-authored with Adam Gidwitz.

And I've got more exciting projects coming soon! The middle-grade graphic novel *Rise of the Halfling King* drops in spring 2020. HarperCollins is publishing my chapter book series *13th Street* (a sort of *Stranger Things* for kids ages 5–9); the first two books release summer 2020. In the fall of 2020, my YA graphic novel *Clockwork Curandera* arrives, illustrated by Raúl the Third.

It seems like a lot (and there's more in the works), but representation still has a long way to go. There are so many gaps in our stacks.

Together, however, we can keep filling them with mirrors.

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Mexican American author **David Bowles** has written fourteen books, including the *Pura Belpré Honor Book* *The Smoking Mirror and Feathered Serpent*, *Dark Heart of Sky: Myths of Mexico* (one of *Kirkus Reviews'* *Best YA Books of 2018*). His most recent publication, *They Call Me Güero: A Border Kid's Poems*, has received multiple accolades such as the *Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award*, the *Claudia Lewis Award for Excellence in Poetry*, the *Pura Belpré Author Honor*, and the *Walter Dean Myers Honor Award for Outstanding Children's Literature*. His work has also appeared in a wide range of venues, among them *Journal of Children's Literature*, *Translation Review*, *Rattle*, and *Huizache*. In 2017, David was inducted into the *Texas Institute of Letters* in recognition of his literary accomplishments.

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