



*Throughout civilization there have certainly been more similarities than differences between us; and books, more than anything, tell children that it matters who they are as individuals.*

# Choosing Books for Today's Children

**Marcia Strykowski**

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Today, more than ever, school librarians have one of the most relevant positions in our society. My sincere gratitude for all they do to encourage children to become lifelong readers. Along with learning new technology, school librarians teach research skills that last a lifetime and help millions of children discover a love of reading. To achieve these goals, librarians choose appropriate equipment and books. Books where children can not only escape today's pressures and visit magical lands, but also books where they can encounter characters with whom they identify. Children who feel singled out due to their race, religion, or sexual identity can come into their school library and find books that speak to them. Throughout civilization there have certainly been more similarities than differences between us; and books, more than anything, tell children that it matters who they are as individuals.

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*I feel it's important to not only pick the most beautiful or popular products, but also to check what's pertinent locally and balance the subject matter in order to have a worthwhile collection.*

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I have some experience with these types of selections because I work at a public library where I get to select and purchase children's books. As a children's author, I keep up with all the latest releases, so choosing books is second nature. I spend hours studying reading lists on the Children's Book Council site, participating in discussion boards—Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, for example—and perusing professional review journals to narrow my choices.

I feel it's important to not only pick the most beautiful or popular products, but also to check what's

pertinent locally and balance the subject matter in order to have a worthwhile collection. I am committed to selecting and writing books that will briefly pull kids away from the bright lights of their tablets and grab hold of their interest from one crisp page to the next.

Books were a huge part of my childhood, from Little Golden Books through tween series (anyone else a Trixie Belden fan?). I am fortunate to have parents who are book lovers, and to this day their shelves overflow with books. My children are voracious readers as well,

proving book love can be maintained from one generation to the next.

As for my own writing, I mostly focus on character-driven novels for ages 8–12 and picture books. I attempt to discover and reveal the heart of my stories. No matter how exciting a plot or compelling a character, a story worth telling has an underlying universal theme at its deepest level. Sometimes I like funny plots, often with animal characters. I also adore historical fiction and picture book biographies.

I'm very excited about one of my current works in progress that involves researching the fascinating culture of long-ago Poland. I've already become quite attached to my main character. She's strong, clever, and optimistic, despite the struggles of rural Poland during the Russification period. Although I find digging into bygone days of any country interesting, being part of a Polish family offers me a more immediate connection to this particular project. A recent fourth-place win in a contest held by the Institute for Children's Literature gives me happy confidence my manuscript is heading in the right direction.

My first two books *Call Me Amy* (Luminis Books 2013) and *Amy's Choice* (Luminis Books 2014) were written in the first person, and although fictional stories, they were inspired by the small fishing village on the coast of Maine where my grandparents lived. Both books feature a shy 13-year-old who nurtures a wounded seal pup and discovers that everyone, herself included, has a voice worth hearing.

My third book, *Roller Boy* (Fitzroy Books 2018), started out in first person as well, but when I changed it to third person, it really came together. Like all my projects, *Roller Boy* went through many phases. Often



a character arrives after I've come up with a plot or location or both. In *Roller Boy*, Mateo, the main character, came first. My children were involved in roller-skating for a while, which inspired Mateo's interest in the sport. At some point I realized he had an autoimmune disease. Although his disease doesn't drive the events of the story, he does need to avoid eating gluten at all times, an unfortunate condition for many kids these days.

Mateo happens to be half Mexican and half Dominican, and he has celiac disease. I didn't set out purposely to write a character with a distinctive background. My first dabbling with *Roller Boy* started

before the long-overdue call for diverse books. By the time the book was under contract there was an increased interest in "own voices," and I worried that some might think I wasn't the one to tell Mateo's story. However, I soon realized nobody else knew his particular story. After considering that males write female characters (and vice versa), adults write through the eyes of children, and so on, I decided to carry on. After all, did Beatrix Potter really know the thoughts and feelings of a small rabbit in a blue coat? A fun example of a man who successfully created a female character is Ian Falconer and his popular series of books starring Olivia the pig. For

a well-written male character by a female author, Harry Potter by J. K. Rowling quickly comes to mind. I support including all author voices in books, and I hope all good stories, no matter who writes them, will someday be read.

I am one of the many authors writing for children who believe reading is essential and that books should depict kids from a variety of backgrounds, so that all readers will find characters to which they can connect—to feel included and be counted. Not only will children who read be entertained by first-hand adventures, but they will also gain new ways of thinking about and relating to those who may appear different from them. Discovering these similarities while reading gently encourages children to reach out with empathy and kindness to those who share the world around them.

My thanks again to school librarians who get these timely books into the hands of the children who need them.

Along with numerous magazine and anthology contributions, **Marcia Strykowski** is the author of several novels for children: *Call Me Amy*, chosen for Bank Street College of Education's Best Books of the Year, and its sequel *Amy's Choice* were both published by Luminis Books. More recently, *Roller Boy* was published by Fitzroy Books of Regal House Publishing. Marcia has worked at a public library for the past fifteen years where she selects new books for their children's collection, catalogs all items, and best of all, gets to interact with library patrons of all ages at the circulation and reference desks. Learn more about Marcia at her website [www.marciastrykowski.com](http://www.marciastrykowski.com).

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