



Teen Book Covers: What's Missing?

[Elizabeth LaRosee](#); Assistant Director / Young Adult & Technology Instruction Librarian;
Turner Free Library

Abstract

One of many important objectives for teen services librarians is to develop a relevant and current collection of materials. This collection should be representative of the community in which the library resides and the teens in that community. It is important for teens to be able to see themselves in books as both characters and writers. The writing of this paper was triggered by a group of teens advocating for more books (covers specifically) in their collection reflecting the vast diversity of the town in which they live. This paper contains results of a survey of 6,785 teen fiction book covers, across six different libraries and two bookstores in metro Boston and southeastern Massachusetts. Correlations drawn using the collected data reveal that the current state of books in both libraries and bookstores is lacking when it comes to racially diverse covers. This data can be used to further the discussion already under way concerning the need for more racially diverse teen books and the responsibility of teen service librarians to advocate for change.

Introduction and Research Questions

The focus of this study is diversity on teen book covers (meaning books marketed or geared toward teens, usually ages 12–18). The reasoning behind this study lies in some honest feedback from a group of teens who regularly attend programs at the Randolph Turner Free Library (Massachusetts), where about 40% of the slightly over 32,000 residents are African American.ⁱ When asked how to improve the teen collection, the resounding response was “more books with black people on the cover[s].”

After assuring the teens that they have a right to access to books with cover art featuring relatable characters, I sat down to buy some new books. Although there was some older fiction and some titles labeled “urban” fiction available, it was difficult finding many books with diverse characters on the cover. As a twenty-something, white, female librarian, I wondered if this issue could be widespread and possibly caused by general unavailability of books representing diverse teens on their covers. Based on my own experiences, I suspected that white character representations graced the covers of a majority of teen books, but I couldn't find research to support or negate my suspicion.

To address these questions, I undertook the research project described in this paper. It involved a survey of over 6,000 bookstore and library titles and spanned metro Boston and southeastern Massachusetts.

Literature Review

A large body of literature dealing with diversity on teen book covers is available. Whether it is in literary journals or professional blogs, this literature covers the history, trends, equality, and diversity of teen book covers. In an article by Cat Yampbell discussing the history of teen book covers, it is clear that photographic depictions of people have become very popular (as well as other renderings of characters).ⁱⁱ Therefore in this study, it was expected that there would be a large proportion of character representations on teen book covers to survey.

Why do teens need diverse book covers? In addition to requests from teens themselves, there are other reasons that support the need for more such materials. Donna Miller discusses the current trends in photographic covers and how publishers “need to keep tabs on youth culture to produce cover art that is relevant.”ⁱⁱⁱ Teens want to read about characters and experiences that are relevant to their own lives.

Research has also addressed the question of why diverse representation is lacking on teen book covers (specifically among fiction titles). In an article in *Publishers Weekly*, Beth Feldman describes publishers as knowing they “can’t please everyone.” She suggests that it is frequently easier to create existing covers with ambiguity of race, age, and gender in order to avoid narrowing the pool of teen buyers.^{iv} In fact, Yampbell relates that not all illustrators are required to read the entire book before creating a cover, thus leading to possible misrepresentation of characters. This could be another reason why vagueness on book covers is simply easier for the illustrators/designers to create.

In late 2015 *Kirkus Reviews* began identifying characters by race and/or identity in book reviews, suggesting that “the American audience for these books is rapidly closing in on the moment when it will be majority-‘minority.’”^v

Having diverse characters represented on teen book covers is important for teens. It is often difficult to accomplish this since authors, publishers, and illustrators must coordinate to avoid misrepresentation of characters on book covers. This paper specifically addresses representations of diversity on book covers and not the equally (if not more relevant) significant topic concerning a lack of characters of color in teen books. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center examines most U.S. trade-published children’s and teen books, and it reports statistics that show low occurrences of culturally diverse characters.^{vi} The effects of this low occurrence are described in detail by Walter Dean Myers in a *New York Times* opinion piece citing the impact literature had on his search for identity as a black teenager.^{vii} Taking it one step further, research done by Casey Rawson compares titles on preassembled booklists (often used by libraries to order material for their collections) to demographic data on U.S. teens, and she concludes that these lists are not sufficient if we mean to adequately represent diversity through characters in these books.^{viii} Finally, the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement began as a Twitter exchange in 2014 and is now a widely publicized organization promoting diversity with a mission statement of “putting more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children.”^{ix}

One of the more commonly discussed issues related to teen book covers is apparent racism and whitewashing. Annie Schutte mentions that often the covers are changed due to feedback after releasing the advance reading copies, the hardcover, and finally the paperback. She focuses on drawing out examples of whitewashing on popular teen fiction book covers. “Whitewashing happens when a publishing company represents a non-white character on the cover of a book with a white representation.”^x One of the books she uses as an example is *Liar* by Justine Larbalestier in which the main character is described as being black.^{xi} The advance reading copy caused an uproar as it was a depiction of a very light-skinned woman, so it was officially printed with a black woman on the cover (although still relatively light-skinned). Schutte then goes on to describe the issue of silhouetting on teen book covers. Although silhouettes are artistic and a great way to allow readers to use their imaginations, Schutte has found an overwhelming number of books in which silhouettes are used to depict non-white characters. Not only is it important to gauge the numbers of white character representations on covers in relation to non-white characters, but we must also factor in the idea that silhouettes, shadows, cloaks, and so on may play a part in promoting obscurity in place of representing non-white characters.

In an article in *School Library Journal*, Allie Bruce describes her attempts to explain whitewashing and silhouetting to a sixth-grade class. When she asked the students why they thought publishers would purposely avoid depicting people of color on teen book covers, their response was “Do they think it won’t make as much money?”^{xii} Bruce suggests that the answer is most likely yes, and that publishers probably conduct surveys/focus groups that lead them to believe that depicting people of color on YA book covers might cause reduced profits. While bookstores might prefer limited diversity in book cover illustrations in order to maximize sales and profits, what are the implications for public libraries, where there is a mission to serve all teens and to provide diverse teen collections? This study examines just how large the gap is between libraries and bookstores when it comes to diverse teen covers. It also examines how large the gap is between white and non-white representations on teen book covers. Finally, it compares the levels of ambiguity used on covers across the survey sites.

Method

The process began with the creation of a list of features found on teen book covers, shown in table 1. This list was slightly altered as better ways of describing these variables were formulated throughout the analysis process. The final list of features includes gender, age category, type of cover art, notes, and racial diversity. The data compiled for these teen covers is based solely on the author’s perception of these variables. While this could be considered a limitation of the study, the idea behind this research is to show how covers are perceived, as opposed to looking for empirical variance, making observation an appropriate method for the study.

Table 1: Variables used on spreadsheet for data collection purposes

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Library or BookStore Name/Location						
2	Population -						
3	Separate Teen Area - Y						
4	Number of Fiction Books Shelved in Teen Area -						
5	Number of Fiction Books Faced Out/Displayed -						
6	YA Book Covers						
7	Person on Cover	Cover is Photograph	White	Gender	YA	Faced Out/Display	Notes
8							
9							
10							
**							

Y = Yes
 N = No
 ; = used to distinguish if multiple characters represented on the cover
 M = Male
 F = Female
 u = Other or Unidentifiable

Six public libraries located in the metro Boston area and southeastern Massachusetts were selected based on population: two urban libraries, two suburban, and two rural. These libraries are referred to as Libraries A–F throughout this paper (A/B = urban libraries, C/D = suburban libraries, E/F = rural libraries). One chain bookstore and one independent bookstore were also selected within these areas (referred to throughout this paper as Bookstore 1 and Bookstore 2). A breakdown of these locations can be seen in table 2.

Table 2: Libraries and bookstores by population level, selected for data collection

Location	Library A	Library B	Library C	Library D	Library E	Library F	Bookstore 1	Bookstore 2
~Population	600,000+	100,000+	50,000+	25,000+	11,000+	10,000+	35,000+	55,000+

“US Census Bureau: State and Country Quickfacts,” last modified 2009, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/25000.html>.

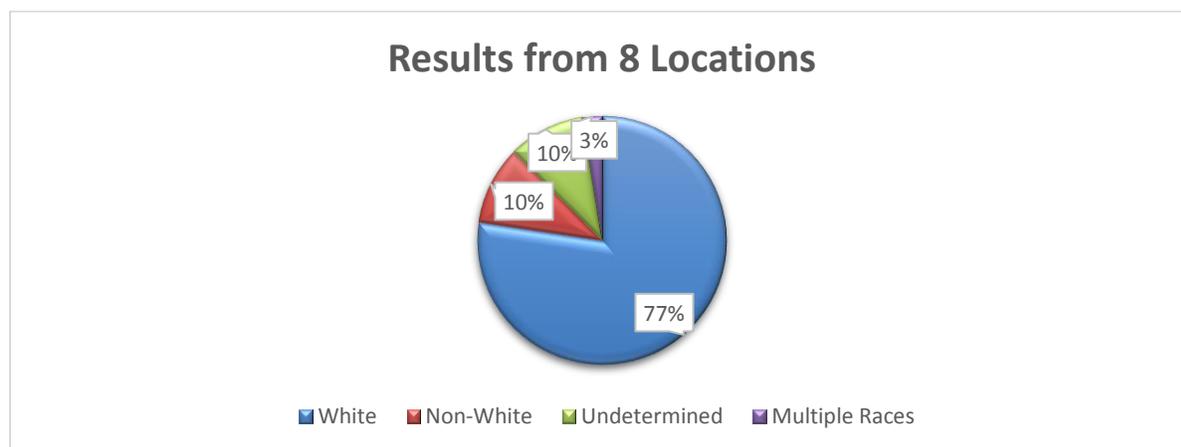
Next, each teen section at these locations was visited to be surveyed (all of which had a separate area for teens and their collections). The visits were not prescheduled (to avoid any bias), and a staff member was informed of the survey upon beginning each assessment of the teen collections, to be sure entry into the area was permitted (all locations were visited either during school hours or later in the evening to avoid encroaching on the teenagers’ space). Each teen fiction book cover was individually surveyed for variables, and duplicate copies of the book were not considered. Only teen fiction was included in the survey (other specialized collections and summer reading materials were excluded). The data collection took a total of two weeks (with approximately 3–4 hours spent at each location), and all results were collected on a spreadsheet. To see a breakdown of data, refer to table 3 and graph A.

Table 3: Breakdown of all location data collected

	Total Teen Books	Books with Character on Cover	White Character	Non-White Character	Multiple Races Represented	Undetermined/Ambiguous
Library A	1,143	773	572	88	27	86
Library B	526	340	208	97	9	26

Library C	265	160	125	11	2	22
Library D	1,609	1,045	827	86	26	106
Library E	495	258	184	36	7	31
Library F	1,457	944	781	76	27	59
Bookstore 1	747	412	320	22	3	51
Bookstore 2	543	320	258	16	5	40
Totals	6,785	4,252	3,275	432	106	421

Graph A: Overall results for teen book covers displaying representations of people, for six libraries and two bookstores combined

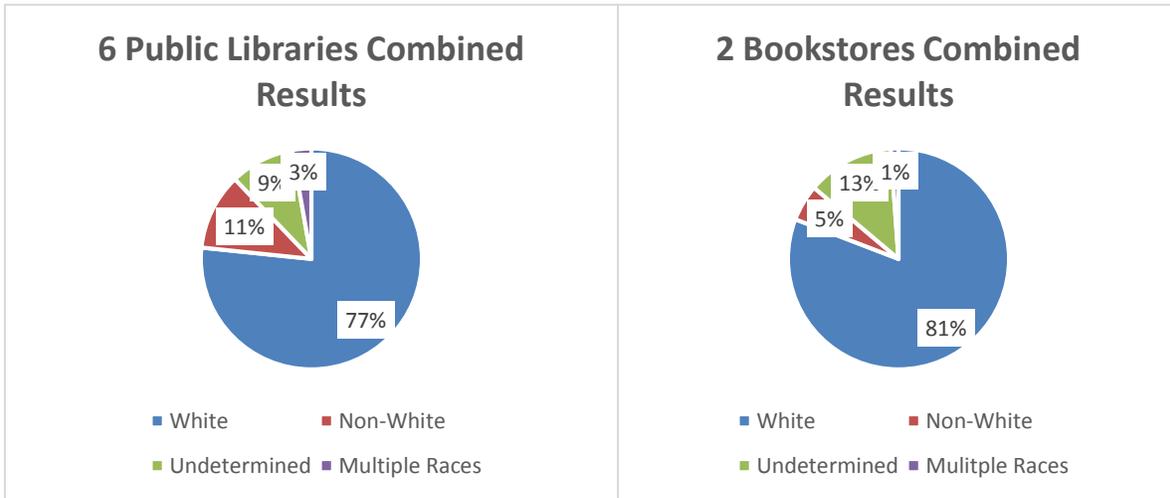


Due to the nature of the research, analysis was mainly focused on the question of race (assumed white vs. assumed non-white) and also on the level of perceived visual ambiguity of the covers in reference to representation of diverse characters.

Findings and Discussion

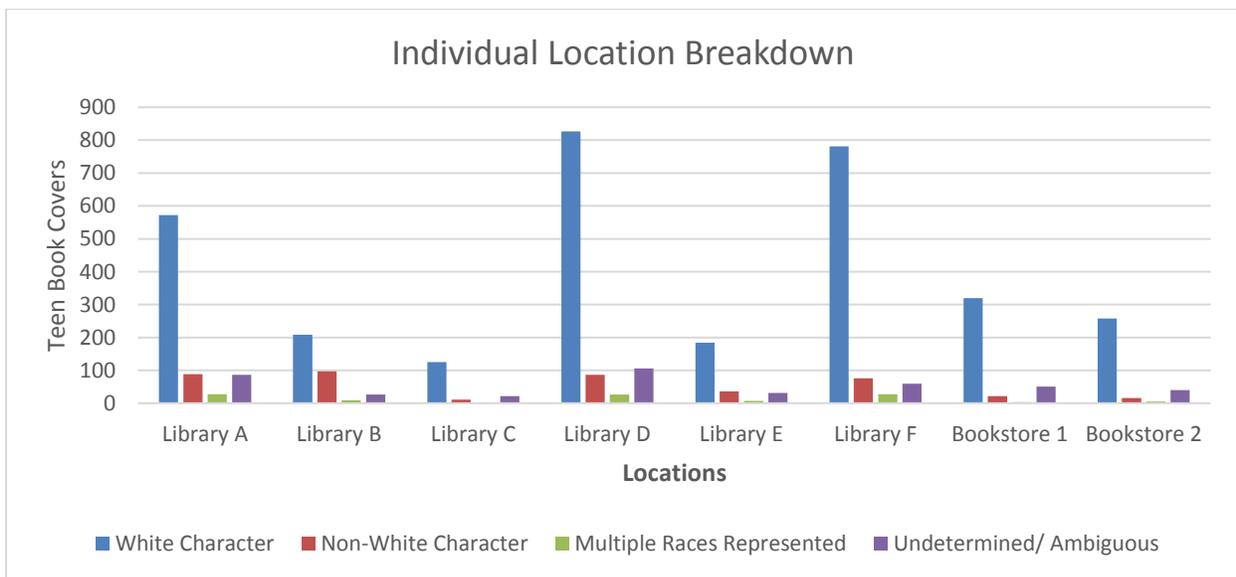
In total for all eight locations, 6,785 covers were surveyed (4,252 of which depicted representations of people). Out of the 4,252 covers, 3,275 (77%) were representations of white people, 432 (10%) were non-white, 421 (10%) were unidentifiable, and 106 (3%) represented characters of more than just one race on the cover. According to these calculations, on average, over three-quarters of teen books on both the library and bookstore shelves featured a character whom I perceived to be white. The six libraries and two bookstores had very similar results with only a few differences in numbers. A comparison can be seen in graph B.

Graph B: Comparison between six library totals and two bookstore totals



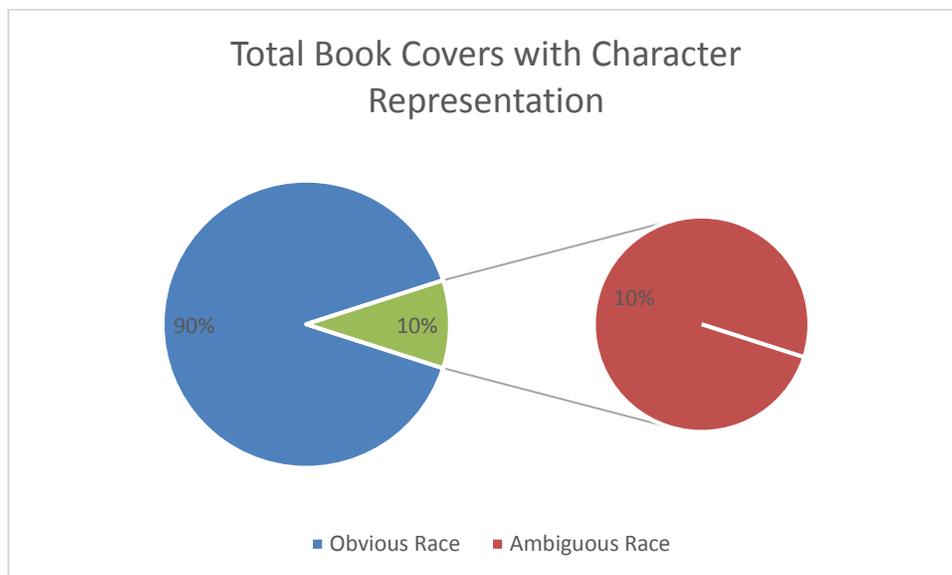
The average of the six libraries showed 77% of the books having white characters on the covers, and the two bookstores showed 81%. This is not a large difference; however, libraries did show more diversity with a higher percentage of non-white characters and a lower percentage of characters of ambiguous race, on covers. Out of all eight locations (see graph C), Library B (which was located in a very diverse neighborhood) had the most even breakdown of variables. Library A also had a larger amount of diversity than Libraries C–F. Library E appears to have a more significant amount of diversity. However, from notes collected during the survey process, a large number of the non-white characters appeared to be Native American. While this town does not have a large Native American demographic (in comparison with the entirety of Massachusetts), it does have special collections dedicated to the history of Native Americans, which may be the cause for the large amount of diversity shown in its teen book covers.

Graph C: Breakdown of eight locations surveyed



While it is quite clear that there is limited diversity on the teen book covers examined for this study, there was also considerable ambiguity in the depictions. As discussed in the literature review, this could either be a way to allow readers to use their imagination when reading about the characters, or it could potentially be a way to conceal the fact that a character may be a person of color. Ambiguity might also provide a solution for publishers who may not want to draw distinguishing lines between possible stereotypical characteristics of certain races, in order to avoid backlash. Or if illustrators are not required to read the entire book in order to create the cover art, perhaps using a silhouette is not just an artistic way to represent a character, but a way of depicting a character of a race that is unknown or unfamiliar to that illustrator. The results from all eight locations show an almost equal number of non-white covers and ambiguous covers (at approximately 10% each, see graph D). This is interesting considering the idea that some elusiveness on covers may have a purpose other than mere aesthetics.

Graph D: Ambiguous representations of characters vs. non-ambiguous for all eight locations



There are a number of limitations to this study. The first is that it only covered the metro Boston and southeastern Massachusetts area. Some of these towns may have specific histories that are reflected in their teen collections. Some of the libraries did not have dedicated teen services librarians. The selection of variables themselves was a limitation as there was only one researcher to perceive diversity on the teen covers. I am white, a librarian, and grew up in the areas in which this study took place; each of these factors may have interpreted my perceptions of the cover art. Finally, there were many limitations when it came to the books themselves. Only teen fiction was surveyed; however, not all books were arranged to accommodate this type of research. At one of the bookstore locations, the shelves were being stocked at the time of the survey so the number of books and where they were being displayed was mutable. Some of the libraries surveyed were smaller branches of main libraries. These branches may have had specialized collections, and one in particular was very new and therefore had mostly newer teen fiction books on the shelves. Also, in the locations without a dedicated teen services librarian, it was obvious that the collections were on the older side, affecting the currency of the results for this study. Finally, this survey was performed toward the end of the school year, and therefore

almost all locations had a separately displayed or labeled collection containing local summer reading books. These, as well as separately shelved or labeled urban fiction collections, were not considered as part of the survey.

In order to reduce limitations and biased or inconsistent data, I kept the data collection process systematic and very rigid: the variables surveyed remained extremely similar or the same for each location, the amount of time looking at each cover was similar, and only teen fiction books were considered, as prescribed in the original research agenda.

Conclusions

While much more research can and should be done on this topic (across larger areas and possibly even virtually with eBooks and Amazon holdings), this study did find meaningful results. It was predicted that there would be a much larger percentage of representations of white people than people of color on teen fiction covers. This was expected due to my personal experience in libraries and a long history of reading teen fiction. The results, however, showed even lower representation of non-white characters than I had expected, as well as even lower representation of multiple races on the same book cover. If almost 80% of the teen fiction covers that depict people represent white characters (see graph A), I expected that at least the other 20% would represent characters of color. Looking at the average results from all eight locations it appears that only 13% (non-white and multiple races represented) are diverse. The other 10% in question are covers with characters whose race is ambiguous (whether it is to hide a character's diversity or for aesthetic purposes, it is impossible to say). These covers depict characters that are hooded, cloaked, silhouetted, or in some way hide the ethnicity of the character portrayed. It is possible that libraries may be slightly more in tune with the needs of their diverse patrons than bookstores, as they showed a slightly higher percentage of diversity on teen fiction covers. This research is an attempt to create a more transparent discussion regarding diversity on teen book covers. It is now time to consider the possible causes of the lack of diversity shown here. Could it be due to a lack of diverse authors? Is it a failure to communicate with illustrators/artists? Is it poor marketing techniques by publishers? Is it outright racism? These are questions we need to answer in order to ensure that our teens have access to books that proportionally reflect the diversity of our society.

To build on this work, the data collected in this survey could potentially be used to study gender on teen fiction covers, representation of age groups on teen fiction covers, and even the popularity of one medium of cover art over another. For the purpose of this study, the perception of racial diversity on covers was the main focus, in order to better understand this issue and educate the specific group of teens who initially posed the idea. Besides focusing on developing a more diverse collection for these teens (with more diverse cover art), a meaningful conversation about the dominance of "whiteness" on teen book covers is now possible.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Melanie Kimball of Simmons College for her unfaltering guidance and support throughout the initial writing and editing phase of this paper.

Notes

-
- ⁱ U.S. Census Bureau, “State and Country Quickfacts,” last modified 2009, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/25000.html> (accessed August 16, 2016).
- ⁱⁱ Cat Yampbell, “Judging a Book by Its Cover,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 3 (1991): 348.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Donna Miller, “You Can’t Judge a Book by Its Cover,” *VOYA* 3, no. 4 (2011): 243.
- ^{iv} Beth Feldman, “Covers That Catch the Eye,” *Publishers Weekly* 48 (1991): 46.
- ^v Vicky Smith, “Unmaking the White Default,” *Kirkus Reviews*, May 4, 2016, https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/unmaking-white-default/#continue_reading_post (accessed June 6, 2016).
- ^{vi} CCBC, “Publishing Statistics on Children’s Books,” <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp> (accessed June 6, 2016).
- ^{vii} Walter Dean Myers, “Where Are the People of Color in Children’s Books?” Opinion, *New York Times Sunday Review*, March 15, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html (accessed June 6, 2016).
- ^{viii} Casey Rawson, “Are All Lists Created Equal?” *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, Spring 2011, <http://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlya/2011/06/are-all-lists-created-equal-diversity-in-award-winning-and-best-selling-young-adult-fiction/> (accessed June 6, 2016).
- ^{ix} We Need Diverse Books, “Mission Statement,” <http://weneeddiversebooks.org/mission-statement> (accessed June 6, 2016).
- ^x Annie Schutte, “It Matters If You’re Black or White,” *YALSA the Hub*, December 10, 2012, <http://www.yalsa.ala.org/thehub/2012/12/10/it-matters-if-youre-black-or-white-the-racism-of-ya-book-covers/> (accessed May 15, 2015).
- ^{xi} Justine Larbalestier, *Liar* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009).

^{xii} Allie Bruce, “School Librarian Talks to Students about ‘Whitewashing’ Children’s Book Covers,” *SLJ*, May 6, 2014, <http://www.slj.com/2014/05/diversity/bank-street-school-librarian-shares-her-year-long-lesson-in-diversity-in-childrens-books> (accessed May 15, 2015).