



Hunky Cajuns and Gay Sextons:

Diversity as Represented in Adolescent Book Reviews

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Abstract

The call for increased diversity in books for adolescent readers should play a role in decisions about purchasing books for library and classroom shelves, and book reviews are an instrumental tool in making these decisions. The research project described here sought to conduct a close examination of book reviews in order to assess whether or not elements of diversity are described in reviews, how they are described, and the degree to which reviews accurately and comprehensively reflect and communicate issues of diversity in the books being reviewed. Through an examination of reviews written about books popular with teens, this research reveals important trends in the portrayals of diversity in these books. It also reveals the complexities of identifying diversity, of describing representations of diversity in short texts like book reviews, and the disconnect that exists at times between reviews and the content of books (in terms of diversity). The article closes with recommendations for librarians and those who review books in response to the call for more diversity in books written for teen readers.

The need for diversity in the representations of characters and experiences in books for adolescents has long been recognized by librarians, teachers, and writers of adolescent literature. The most recent push for diversity, collected under the banner of the “We Need Diverse Books” movement (<http://weneeddiversebooks.org/>), has brought these concerns to the twenty-first century and to a new generation of readers. Diverse representations in books matter in the way they present mirrors to teen readers who see their own unique experiences and situations in the books they read; they also present windows into the lives of others, and in so doing encourage readers to develop empathy and understanding for those who may seem unfamiliar.

The call for diversity represents challenges for those who select books for library or classroom shelves and who want to select a broad range of representations in those books. Given the

explosion in adolescent literature in the past decades, it is unreasonable to expect that librarians and library workers can examine each potential book choice; that amount of reading would be prohibitive. So teen services librarians, school librarians, and others involved in these decisions often rely on published reviews of books to guide purchasing and selection; it stands to reason that those who are concerned about diversity may also be examining those reviews to identify potential diverse titles for their collections.

In this context, it makes sense to explore what reviewers might say about diversity in their reviews, including examining how they explicitly and implicitly describe diverse representations in books and how well readers can make judgements about those representations based purely on the review (as opposed to a reading of the complete book). This examination can help inform librarians, teachers, and others who rely on these reviews to make decisions about diversity in their collections.

Review of the Literature

Diversity in literature, particularly in works aimed at youth audiences, has often been the focus of scholarly discussion.¹ The latest iteration of the conversation has refocused the attention of the youth literature community on the issue.² The topic of diversity is one that permeates the professional gamut, from scholars who read and write about books to the publishers who produce them.³ All of the professionals who work with the creation, production, and distribution of literature to youth certainly have a stake in the process of championing diversity, so it is clear that there is a role for everyone to play.

In the discussions of diversity to this point, the focus has mostly rested on those with responsibilities for creation and production (i.e., writers and publishers). The focus of scholarship seems to rest mostly with the fact that diversity does not exist or critiquing why diverse representations are flawed.⁴ Writers ask for more attention to diversity from those who create literature and extend a call to publishers to focus on producing a more diverse catalog.⁵ There is little doubt that these kinds of conversations are significant and will do much to make the community aware of the issues.

However, within this conversation it seems there is a significant lack of discussion on the role that disseminators play—the librarians, teachers, parents, and others who work with organizations like libraries and bookstores to get books into the hands of youth. These individuals can certainly champion the cause of diversity by buying books with diverse representation and by seeing that they get into readers' hands. In considering these groups there are some fundamental questions that must be considered. How do disseminators make themselves aware of the issues surrounding diversity? How do disseminators find diverse literature and how do they get diverse books into the hands of readers? While some of these questions have been directly addressed by researchers like Jamie Naidoo and Sarah Dahlen, there is still much to do in this area.⁶ In reviewing the literature in this area, it is clear that there are important questions about how librarians ascertain diversity in the book selection process and, in particular, the role that book reviews may play in attending to issues of diversity as part of the selection process. (The term paratext will be used in this article to refer to materials like book reviews that accompany published books and are used to make purchasing and selection decisions.)

The role that book reviews play in book selection particularly for teen services librarians is complex, and sadly one that is not much discussed in the research literature. What is clear is that that book reviewing in general is a discipline focused on assisting librarians in finding books: As Joyce Milton notes “young adult reviewing ... is not directly for young adults but for librarians concerned with young adult services.”⁷ It is also clear that many librarians consider book reviews to be a main resource in the book selection process.⁸ However, beyond a few studies that focus on the use of reviews in academic libraries, there is little to say about how public librarians and youth librarians in particular use book reviews.⁹ Nevertheless, since they are considered to be a major book selection tool, it seems reasonable that they could be used to better understand how these paratexts could be used to assess and find diverse books.

Research Questions

If librarians want to select and promote diverse books, they need to be aware of diverse representations in the books that are available to them. Because reading every book published every year is an impossible task, book reviews are likely to be prime resources for determining if diversity exists in a book. This leads to the question of how book reviews may or may not represent diversity in books written for adolescent audiences. The research team settled on two research questions to guide a content analysis of diversity as depicted in book reviews of adolescent literature:

1. To what extent are elements of diversity described in book reviews and what aspects of diversity do these book reviews reveal?
2. Do book reviews accurately and comprehensively reflect and/or communicate issues of diversity?

Methods

To look at diversity in book reviews our research team found it necessary to first narrow the field of adolescent literature. The researchers decided to focus on books that librarians would most likely buy but may not always have time to read, and felt that the most likely candidates for this group of texts would be those represented on the Young Adult Library Services Association’s Teens Top Ten Lists. Nominees for this annual list are chosen by teenage readers from across the United States and the final ten titles chosen each year are chosen by teenage voters. This process results in annual lists that arguably best represent the most popular books among teen readers each year. Because of their obvious broad and tested appeal to teens, books on these lists could be considered must-buys for most library collections; they may or may not, however, be must-reads for the adults who work with teens. Since professionals focus on a very broad range of books, it is likely that they will also spend time with books teens are not reading in order to promote those and will have less time to read books that teens are already scooping up.

Even though buying considerations were foremost in the selection of the Tens Top Ten as an ideal subject for study, there is another strong reason to select this group. It is clear that librarians and teachers care about what interests teens as they try to find books these readers will like; we must also recognize, however, that adults control the discussion of issues in adolescent literature, and it behooves professionals and researchers to seek to include the voices of the adolescents for whom this literature is written. It may certainly be that teens care about the exact same things

that professionals do and that they talk about it in the exact same way as the adults do.¹⁰ But it is just as likely (or perhaps even more likely) that teens do not care about what adults care about in the same way that adults care about it. In order to incorporate teens' feelings and choices into this adult-managed conversation, the researchers felt that using books chosen by teens was at the very least a good start to showing that teens and their interests are relevant to this discussion of diversity.

The research team identified winning titles from this list (since and including 2005) in order to identify a contemporary view of diversity in books published for teens; this process resulted in a list of 100 books (ten from each of the ten years surveyed). Paratextual information for each of the books on the list was then gathered. To do this, reviews of each book were collected from the primary industry sources: Publisher's Weekly, School Library Journal, Booklist, Kirkus Reviews, and Voices of Youth Advocates (VOYA). (Note that not every book had a review from every source.) These reviews were collected in a Microsoft Word document, and each of the four researchers who took part in this analysis were randomly assigned to 50 of the 100 titles; the paratext for each book was consequently coded twice for indicators of diversity.

In a pre-coding meeting, the four researchers met and brainstormed different kinds of diversity that they thought books written for teenagers could explore. This was a wide-ranging discussion of the possibilities, and after significant discussion, the team arrived at a list of categories: nationality, gender, sexual identity, race/ethnicity, religion, intellectual or emotional disorders, physical appearance (including physical disability), and socio-economic. With this list of categories or codes, an initial analysis of twenty titles was conducted, with each coder analyzing the paratexts of ten titles (with each title's paratexts being coded twice). In this and all other stages of the coding process, the researchers individually conducted a close reading of each review for their assigned titles, focusing on words and phrases that would suggest the book's treatment of any of the above-mentioned types of diversity. Once this initial coding was finished, those phrases were then inputted into a shared spreadsheet where the results of coding were gathered and maintained.

After this initial coding phase, the research team met again and shared notes on the process. They shared results from the spreadsheet and described the process for identifying specific phrases as evidence of the book's treatment of a certain kind of diversity. This meeting was critical to establishing reliability in coding this initial set of data. And based on that initial coding work, the initial list of codes was expanded to include a code for physical or terminal illness. At this point, the researchers then finished coding the rest of the titles and inputting results into the shared spreadsheet; no other changes to the list of codes were needed after this initial meeting.

When this coding was complete, the team met to review the results of the coding. In some instances, coders did not agree on identifying attributes of diversity based solely on a reading of the paratexts, so researchers sought to clarify a "threshold" that the paratext's wording would have to cross in order to qualify as representing diversity in each category. For instance, in the reviews of *Looking for Alaska*, one coder indicated a "positive" for the diversity category of physical appearance given the mention in one review that Pudge, the book's main-character, was "skinny." However, in discussion with the group, it was decided that since the review did not indicate that this character wrestled with issues of weight that might cross a threshold that would have us consider it a book that represents diversity in this area, it would not "count" in totals for that category.

Once all the paratexts had been coded, the analysis of these results proceeded in two directions. The first sought to gather general, descriptive results about the kinds and frequency of diversity presented in these books based on the paratexts. To do this, researchers converted the shared spreadsheet (with its phrases from the book reviews that suggested treatment of diversity) into a simpler sheet that simply indicated the presence of treatments of diversity according to the paratexts. This sheet then allowed us to gather descriptive data about the kinds of diversity implied by these paratexts and the frequency of representations of different kinds of diversity.

The second direction of the analysis sought to identify how accurately or comprehensively these paratexts identified the diversity as represented in the actual books. To explore this, researchers identified a set of “case studies,” choosing books whose full content could then be compared to what would have been assumed based on the paratext. Researchers looked at some reviews for books that they had not read and were unfamiliar with, to speculate about what they might infer about diversity based on the reviews alone. As a comparison effort, the team also chose cases where they were familiar with the books and could compare the content of the books to their paratexts.

Results

This section shares the results of the content analysis, organized around the two central research questions. This section will first address the question of what kinds of diversity were represented in the paratextual information about these books. Then, attention turns to consider the comprehensiveness of these reviews and how well they represented the diversity present in the books.

Before addressing specific results, it should be noted that this analysis was complicated by the popularity of speculative fiction (fantasy, science fiction, or even paranormal romance) with these teenaged readers. Representations of diversity take on different surface features in a fantasy novel (where perhaps members of the dwarf or elf races are discriminated against) or a paranormal romance (where a werewolf might have to hide his true identity while enrolled at a high school) as opposed to representations we might expect in a book of realistic fiction. While the researchers wrestled with the way these different genres could potentially represent issues of diversity, it did not seem appropriate to teens’ interests to eliminate titles of speculative fiction; and, in fact, our analysis found that these titles often dealt with issues of diversity within the speculative worlds they had created. But in the interests of reporting the results here, the choice was made to categorize the results in ways that distinguish realistic from speculative fiction.

Is There Diversity?

The results of the coding of the paratexts can be viewed in Table 1. According to the analysis, it seems clear that teens are reading and enjoying books that feature a variety of diverse representations. Each year’s list of books represented a range of diversity, with no year seeming to feature more diversity than another. While it might have been assumed that more recent lists would feature a higher quantity of diverse titles, given the more recent focus on diversity in publishing, this did not seem to be a pattern witnessed in the analysis of books popular with teen readers. From this data it seems that the simple answer to the first research question is that, yes, diversity is represented in popular books identified by teen readers. However, the comprehensive answer may not be that simple. Books featuring diversity were clearly in the minority, relative to

the total number of books in each list each year, especially when speculative fiction titles are removed from consideration. (Since individual titles might feature more than one marker of diversity, the numbers given in the table may represent individual titles counting more than once.) This might be explained as a reflection on the interest (or lack thereof) that teen readers have for diverse representations, but it may also be a reflection of the overall lack of diverse representations in the books on offer for those making these lists of teen favorites.

Table 1. Number of books under each category of diversity, by year. First number is the number of titles from realistic fiction (realistic, mystery, romance); second number, in parentheses, indicates number of titles in speculative fiction (fantasy, science fiction, dystopian, paranormal romance).

	Nationality	Gender	Sexual Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Religion	Intellectual/Emotional Challenges	Physical Appearance	Socio-Economic Issues	Physical Illness
2005	1 (0)	3 (1)	1 (0)	1 (0)	2 (0)	2 (0)	1 (1)	2 (1)	2 (0)
2006	0 (3)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (5)	0 (4)	0 (1)	0 (1)	0 (3)	1 (1)
2007	2 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (3)	2 (1)	2 (4)	1 (2)	1 (0)	1 (0)
2008	1 (2)	0 (1)	1 (2)	0 (5)	0 (0)	2 (1)	1 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0)
2009	0 (2)	2 (1)	0 (0)	0 (4)	0 (0)	1 (2)	0 (0)	1 (2)	0 (0)
2010	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (4)	1 (1)	3 (1)	1 (0)	1 (0)	2 (1)
2011	0 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (5)	0 (1)	0 (2)	0 (0)	1 (0)	0 (0)
2012	1 (1)	0 (1)	0 (1)	1 (1)	1 (0)	4 (1)	2 (1)	0 (3)	2 (0)

2013	0 (1)	0 (3)	0 (1)	0 (2)	0 (1)	2 (4)	2 (2)	3 (2)	1 (1)
2014	0 (0)	1 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2)	0 (0)	1 (3)	1 (1)	1 (2)	0 (1)
2015	0 (4)	1 (1)	0 (1)	1 (2)	0 (0)	2 (3)	0 (1)	1 (0)	0 (0)
Total	5 (25)	8 (9)	2 (5)	6 (34)	6 (8)	19 (22)	9 (9)	12 (13)	10 (4)

In terms of other patterns, researchers noticed that diverse representations of race or ethnicity and intellectual or emotional disorders seemed to be most prominent. The former category of diversity was particularly present in titles from the speculative fiction genres, while representations of emotional disorders were clearly the most popular for readers of realistic fiction. This latter pattern suggests an increased interest on the part of readers for representations of characters who struggle with issues like depression or learning challenges.

Another anticipated pattern was an increase in the number of books featuring diverse representations of sexuality or sexual identity (again, given recent increased interest in this manifestation of diversity); however, there seems to be no particularly significant increase in these titles over the ten years surveyed in our analysis. While adult scholars, librarians, and other interested parties may be concerned about seeing increased representations of sexual diversity, this evidence does not suggest that teens are identifying these among their picks for best books. Another category of diversity which didn't appear as frequently as others was religious diversity; the smaller numbers for this category are not surprising, however, given that portrayals of religion are more rare in publishing either because of a perceived lack of interest for treatments of religious and spiritual experiences or because publishers see this as fraught territory that they are hesitant to explore (Campbell, 2015).

How Well is Diversity Represented?

The researchers were also interested in how well the paratexts represented diversity and found that in many cases, these book reviews featured references to diversity as long as it played a significant role in the plot progression. This does not apply to all reviews however. There are many reviews where we did not code for any diversity. Without reading the book it hard to know if the reviewer did not mention any possible diversity because it played no part on the plot, because there simply was no diversity in the book, or they simply overlooked the diversity within the book and failed to mention it in a review. That is where using these reviews to evaluate the presence or treatment of diversity in the book itself can be challenging. Some reviews were blatant in their mention of diversity while others were veiled or lacking. Part of our research was to read multiple reviews for each book and those reviews differed. While some reviews would mention a diverse aspect of a book, other reviews would not.

For example, the reviews for *Firegirl* by Tony Abbott vary in discussing the diversity present in the book. Of the five reviews examined, only two of them mentioned class prayer in the book, which was coded in this analysis to suggest religious diversity. If a librarian was looking through book reviews to find more religious books to add to his library, depending on which review he read, *Firegirl* may be a book he'd consider. In contrast, every single review for Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park* mention Eleanor's abusive homelife and Park's Korean heritage. In this case, every review of this book was clear in pinpointing these elements of diversity within the novel.

Some reviews are very clear about the presence of some of these representations, which likely emerges in the paratext due to the central importance of such issues to the book and its characters. The reviews for *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson, for instance, were very straightforward about what the characters are dealing with in the novel. Publishers Weekly's review's first sentence is: "Acute anorexia, self-mutilation, dysfunction families and the death of a childhood friend." This is one review that clearly writes of the diversity readers will find in this book. Another book that garnishes reviews that speak of diversity is *Every Day* by David Levithan. All the reviews for this book mention the fact that "A", the main character, inhabits different bodies and falls in love with different people and "sometimes he is a boy, sometimes a girl; sometimes he is gay, sometimes straight, sometimes he is ill, more often well" (Booklist). Multiple reviews referred to "A" as "genderless" and Kirkus' review mentions "teens of different races, body shapes, [and] sizes." *Voya* writes in its reviews that "A" also deals with "drug addiction . . . [and] suicidal thoughts." These three sentences alone reference multiple diverse characteristics and challenges. This book, however, is only one of a few that has reviews that so blatantly showcase the diversity within the book. Since this entire book centers around a "genderless" body inhabiting character it would have been hard for reviewers not to mention it but there was a definite push in all the reviews to showcase the diversity that Levithan writes about.

These explicit reviews seemed to be in the minority; many reviews glanced over diversity or provided veiled references to potential diverse representations. Kirkus' review of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is a good example of a review that does this. The reviewer writes about the adventures that Greg, the main character in these books, faces while going through middle school: "Largely through his own fault, mishaps seems to plague Greg at every turn, from the minor freak-outs of finding himself permanently seated in class between two pieced stones and then being saddled with his mom for a substitute teacher, to be forced to wrestle in gym with a weird classmate who has invited him to view his 'secret freckle.'" It is unclear here if this "weird" friend of Greg's is a homosexual boy or just some middle school boy trying to be funny. If this "weird friend" is homosexual, which a reader cannot know just from this review, would this book be labeled as "diverse" for having a homosexual classmate? There is no way to infer, just from this review alone, whether or not there is more diversity in this book than is led to believe by the reviews.

In other cases, it was clear to the research team that book reviews could have featured more explicit references to diverse representations given the content of the book. *Code Name Verity* by Elizabeth Wein is an example of one such book. Wein's book tells the story of two women who actively participate in World War II, including one who is acting as a spy and is captured and tortured by the Gestapo. The book turns gender expectations on their heads and explores

unexpected and likely unfamiliar roles that women played during this war, a treatment that certainly answers the call for diverse characters and representations. However, coders for the paratexts for this book did not highlight any references to diversity. In the reviews, there are no references to the absolute amazing accomplishment it was for young women to be flying planes or spying during WWII. This would have been a perfect moment for reviewers to emphasize the great gender divide during the war and how brave and courageous and plucky these women were for breaking barriers and forging new ground in the fight for equal rights. Unlike *Code Name Verity*, those reviewing *The Sweet Far Thing* by Libba Bray made sure to mention that the main character, Gemma, “chafes not only at the physical constraints of a corset but at the myriad restrictions place on women. Her quest is to break free.” In this review, which explicitly mentions the fact that women were fighting for greater rights for their gender, a reader looking for diverse representations will know they are to be found in Bray’s book.

Some reviews left out diversity entirely but because the researchers had read the book they were aware it was in the text. For example reviews for, *Girls in Pants: the Third Summer of the Sisterhood* by Ann Brashares, did not indicate any diversity. In this case, if one were to rely only on the paratext to inform one of the diversity in this book, one would think there was nothing in this book that made it any different from other “chick-lit” books about teenage friendships. In a closer look at the book itself, one finds that there in fact are elements of the story that could be categorized as diversity. For example, one of the main characters, Carmen, is Latina and her heritage plays a big role in her personal identity throughout the series. Issues of grief and mental health are explored in this book as well. In previous books in the series we find that Bridget suffers from depression. These sorts of issues are explored in this installment as well, as the four friends are preparing to go to college and experiencing transitions in life. Although not the most diverse book on the list, we can see that it is, perhaps, more diverse than the paratext would initially suggest.

In short, the answer to the second question is less clear than the answer to the first question. If the facet of diversity in the book (whether it be gender, sexuality, or emotional disorders) played a strong role in plot events or characterization, mentions of these would often appear in the paratexts. However, reviewers could not always be counted on to note these diverse representations even when they were integral to the book. Similarly, some reviews provided vague hints at representations of diversity that may have overstated the case or made judgments difficult for those seeking to make diversity a factor in book selection.

Discussion

The lack of clarity experienced in investigating the second research question relates to several challenges that emerged in the process of this analysis. Coupled with the findings from the first question, this sheds light on some significant issues that emerge as a result of this research.

Definitions are Difficult

Perhaps the most obvious challenge that arises in identifying “diversity” in texts like these comes from the different definitions of diversity in use in the discourse around literature for children and adolescents.¹¹ For some, diversity may only refer to race or to ethnicity while others may see diversity coming from social or economic class or a range of other demographic characteristics. Some may see diversity as including people with illness, mental and physical, and still others

would put religious belief or upbringing in the diversity column. At the risk of complicating the coding process too much, the team decided to have the operational definition of diversity cover a wide field (including nationality, gender, sexual identity, race/ethnicity, religion, intellect, physical appearance, socio-economic, physical illness). Although we hoped that this broad range of diverse aspects to humans would allow a comprehensive picture about the type of diversity seen in YA book reviews, arguments could be made against this choice and the codes chosen for the analysis.

Another challenge with defining diversity regarded specificity. Our analysis quickly revealed the challenge of “sorting” different terms and phrases into nine kinds of diversity. If we look at diversity as simply being aspects of life that make us different from one another, the categories are potentially numbered in the hundreds rather than the small number of characteristics we have used for this study. In the case of the categories we did choose, a second challenge was in identifying just how explicit a review had to be (or could be) before it was counted as communicating something significant about diversity. Take, for example, our work with the category of emotional/intellectual diversity. The team initially agreed that emotional/intellectual diversity would include problems such as depression, anxiety, and other diagnosed mental illnesses. During coding, though, it was decided to also include issues similar to grief or debilitating anger, thus making the emotional/intellectual category broader. A more specific category might have been “mental illness” or “learning disabilities.” However, if the team were to break apart every aspect of emotional/intellectual diversity then the categories would have been overly numerous and perhaps too narrow. It was essential in the analysis to make general assumptions about the broader aspects of diversity so as to keep the study informative and inclusive. Other categories used, such as physical illness and sexual identity, are not quite as broad and thus are an easier indicator of the aspects of the story within the book that caused it to be categorized as it was.

This challenge faced in defining diversity is representative of the broader challenge faced when experts in the field call for more diversity in books written for children and teenagers. Whose definition of diversity should dominate in this discussion? Are some markers of diversity valued over other markers? How detailed need we get when identifying diverse books? As with any term that becomes widely used in academic discourse, scholars looking to expand the discussion around diversity will need to be clear and forthright about how they define the concept.

Paratexts are Limited

It is clear that the paratexts studied here are, by design, superficial representations of the larger novels being reviewed, and thus they do not always capture the complexity of each book. The nature of the review format strips down the text, revealing only the most essential elements. The many limitations of the paratexts to indicate diverse books were clear in the research and often ran contrary to the researcher's presumptions about the paratexts themselves. As reviewers and consumers of reviews, the researchers thought that recent reviews represent very precise depictions of diversity, given the increased interest in diversity over the past decade. It would seem that with so few words at one's disposal a reviewer would select them very carefully and use words that were accurate and understandable markers of diversity. Additionally it was also assumed that if a reviewer included an item in the review, it was likely to be something that was of significant merit and essential to the review and the book. Again, with so few words it seems a

focus on only the items that entail the most overarching and important parts of a text would be included.

However, the results suggest that this was not always the case: Many reviews used vague language and included information that may not have been vital to representing the book. While many reviews did indicate clear representations of diversity (i.e. bisexual, biracial, Korean-American), others offered only indeterminate language that only raises questions about potential diversity. For example a review of *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult, makes note of “ethical issues.” Given that this book deals with topics that delve into the purpose of life, it may certainly be that these “ethical issues” could surround some aspect of religion, but with such broad language it is impossible to tell. Another example comes from *Captain Hook: The Adventures of a Notorious Youth* by J.V. Hart, where the main character’s “unusual appearance” is noted. Again this language indicates something unexpected, but without clarification we can only speculate if this means that there is some kind of diversity present in the text. This proved to be one of the greatest limitations of the paratexts. The oblique references to possible diversity make it difficult to determine if the reviewer intended to bring out a diverse aspect of the book.

In addition to vague language, we note that some reviewers brought possible diversity to the fore even when it may not have been an integral or essential part of the text. There is little doubt that each reviewer will find different things in a text and that in writing reviews many can disagree about what is worth mentioning. So while we don’t wish to downplay the value of different perspectives, it seems that sometimes items mentioned in the reviews may have given a false sense of diversity. For example in a review for Meg Cabot’s *Abandon*, the “gay cemetery sexton” is mentioned. It seems that the mention of this rather minor character’s sexual identity could lead readers to infer that there is a treatment of diversity in this text that is not really there. On closer inspection of the content of the book, it is clear that the sexual identity of this character is barely mentioned and it is not an important part of the larger story to any degree. Additionally, the sexton is elderly, which could make his sexual orientation of minor interest to teen readers seeking an accurate representation of their own life experiences. A similar instance was seen in reviews for *Poison Princess* that mentioned a “hunky Cajun” character; but examining the book reveals that the treatment of the Cajun background is minor and doesn’t meet a real definition of a diverse representation.

Building on the call for authentic and integral representations of diversity in books, it seems that reviews should do their very best to represent the most accurate picture of diversity. While our research found that many reviews did represent diversity in accurate and clear ways, the reviews with vague language and seemingly unnecessary mentions lacked the clarity and directness the researchers (and, we suspect, those using these reviews to make purchasing decisions) hope for. The clear limitations of many of the paratexts presented a challenge to the researchers but also reveal a challenge for those who rely on these texts to select diverse books. While librarians may use book reviews to attend to issues of diversity as part of the selection process, it is clear that they must be very critical about the information represented in the reviews so as not to be misled by limited or vague information.

Speculative Fiction Versus Realistic Fiction

The last challenge confronted in the study was in relation to diversity as defined by genres. Throughout the study the researchers separated the books into two main genre categories:

realistic fiction and speculative fiction. We defined realistic fiction as characters and experiences that closely resemble something that could reasonably be found in reality; genres that fell into this category included realistic fiction, romance, historical fiction, and mystery. Speculative fiction was defined as fiction that involved either an alternate universe, a fantasy land, or something of supernatural nature; this could also include tales of a “what if” nature. Genres included within this category were fantasy, paranormal, dystopian, science fiction, and so on.

From the beginning, it was clear that a majority of the top ten books each year were fantasy or paranormal romance books, genres which lend themselves to fantastical creatures and species. As these books were coded it was extremely difficult to determine when and if these fantastical creatures and species were intended to or could be categorized as diverse. For example, it was tempting to identify werewolves as a marker of diversity because they lived in a population of fairies and they were the minority. However, when a creature does not exist in reality, identifying it as diversity seemed to run counter to the motives of the diverse movement to better represent the reality we see in the world every day. Initially it was suggested that we not code these genres at all, but ignoring these titles would have discounted a significant number of books that teens are reading and enjoying. They were coded as best as possible, taking into account that many teens reading these books may identify with a character that is different from other characters even if that character is not human. In most cases, authors gave these characters human traits and had them express human emotion. Teenagers reading these books can identify with those elements and could potentially find diversity within the chapters of these genres.

One case that provides an example of this is the book *Cinder* by Melissa Meyer, with its main character, Cinder, who is a non-human cyborg. Given the science fiction setting, we might be inclined to reject it as being able to explore diversity, but the reviews for this book are very clear in saying that, as a cyborg, Cinder is a “second class citizen.” It is possible then to make the case that Cinder is living as a diverse character without all the opportunities afforded to other characters—a situation that could certainly be reflective of similar challenges we would read about in diverse books in realistic fiction. This character is a good example of how fantasy and science fiction, while seemingly not seen as diverse genres, can have characters that speak to outliers and diverse situations and should not be completely discounted when talking about diversity.

The challenges with definitions of diversity within genres further shows how difficult it is define the scope of diversity. It is also clear that more research needs to be done in this area to determine if teen readers are engaging with fantasy from a perspective of diversity or not. Knowing better how the readers themselves are interpreting these books would go a long way toward developing a more concrete understanding of what role fantasy plays in the conversations about diversity.

Implications

The challenges revealed by the research underscore that fact that diversity is a complex issue and that much more work needs to be done by professionals in all venues to extend and deepen the conversation about how diverse books can be produced, distributed, and read. While the research does provide insights into the conversation, its intent was never to provide a definitive view of diversity. However, what is added by this research to this complex discussion does reveal a few implications for professionals.

For librarians, our research indicates that while reviews show some diversity, their ability to delve into the rich complexities of diverse representations is limited. While librarians and teachers rely on reviews for building collections and recommending books to readers, if their goal is to find diverse representations, looking at professional reviews alone may be a sometimes-ineffective method. Just being aware of the limitations of review sources is a good first step. This knowledge allows professionals to understand that they may have to extend the types of para-texts they consult in book selection to sources beyond professional book reviews. Conclusions from this study also suggest that professionals should, when possible, look at a wide range of review sources. Since review sources give an even more limited perspective of diversity it is critical to look at several sources in order to ascertain the most comprehensive view of diversity in any one book.

For those writing book reviews, we suggest that, in conjunction with calls for publishers to produce more diverse catalogs, a call should go out to reviewers to be more critical about when and how they represent diversity in their reviews. With so many vague or missing representations of diversity, it is clear that reviewers could be more focused on ensuring that reviews give an accurate picture of diverse representations. For example, reviewers could use a wider bank of rich descriptive words that will capture the aspects of diversity accurately. Also, reviewers should critically look at any and all diversity in a book in such a way that those elements of diversity that are critical to a book can be sufficiently communicated. Reviewers can be very thoughtful about the conversations surrounding diversity so as to focus more on diverse aspects but not at the expense of addressing aspects of diversity that are unimportant or not really present in a book.

Conclusion

The call for increased representations of diversity in books is a critical one. Adolescent readers can benefit greatly from seeing their own experiences mirrored in the characters they read about at the same time as they can gain increased empathy and understanding for those whose experiences are not so similar to their own. The analysis of the book reviews conducted here suggests that there are a variety of diverse representations among those books that teens choose as their favorites, even though numerically those diverse books still represent a minority of books on teens' lists.

Those who make decisions about books for teen readers naturally turn to book reviews to help them make those decisions, and if they are equally interested in bringing more diverse books to teens' attention, it stands to reason that these book reviews can provide insights into the diversity represented in these books. Our findings here suggest that identifying books with diverse representations based on book reviews may not be a straightforward matter. Given the format of book reviews, reviewers may not feel like they can provide the amount of detail about a book that would accurately capture these diverse elements of a book, or reviewers may not feel it important to make mention of these elements in their reviews. The research described here indicates that references to diversity in book reviews should be carefully balanced with the other demands of the genre, and that those using book reviews to make decisions about forming more inclusive and diverse library collections should use them thoughtfully.

We are also sure that there are many additional questions left unanswered by this research. In the field of adolescent literature, it would behoove us to have wider and more forthright discussions

about how we define diversity, and how diverse representations are identified in books or in the paratextual information around books. Many of those discussing diversity in these books are adults, and it makes sense as well for us to consider how teenage readers view diversity and their feelings about its importance in the books they read. Given the importance of diverse representations to our readers, these are questions and discussions we are eager to have.

Notes

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