

## BOOK REVIEW

*Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: The Hidden Racism of Children's Literature, and the Need for Diverse Books.*

By Philip Nel. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 278 pp.

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Philip Nel's book argues that children's literature contains hidden racism, primarily because of structural racism that is "embedded in culture, and in institutions" (1) and has caused people of colour to be under-represented. This system is shown to be harmful to people of colour, as well as to White people, and needs to be dismantled by changing how literature for young people is produced, read, and taught.

Chapter One looks at *The Cat in the Hat* (1957) by Theodor Seuss Geisel ('Dr Seuss') to argue that the racialised origin of a character in children's literature can be concealed due to its complexity. The Cat is drawn from many influences, including racial stereotypes of Black people in blackface performances which "attempted to forget history [and]... proffered the myth of the happy plantation slave" (43). However, it is difficult to spot the racist elements Geisel unconsciously drew on because he also based the character on White influences, hence making the Cat "mixed-race" (50). Nel highlights that we should not dismiss the racial stereotypes in Geisel's work, even though he advocated against racial stereotypes, as acknowledging them will help us understand how current children's literature, or any other form of work, still contains America's racist past.

In Chapter Two, Nel presents the necessity to "read uncomfortably" (66). Many efforts have been made to censor classics by editing out racial slurs and reimagining illustrations, to maintain children's innocence. Nel disagrees with this practice because it prevents children in America from learning how to respond properly when faced with a racist text. However, he acknowledges that the original texts can strengthen structural racism, hence the importance of creating a safe space for children to read "uncomfortably" or critically. Questions should be asked when reading these texts so children are aware of their effects on different groups of people.

In Chapter Three, Nel shows how characters of colour are not found where one expects them to be by analysing William Joyce's *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* (2012). Nel points out that the picture book lacks people of colour although they were victims of Hurricane Katrina, which partly inspired the book. While it may be unintentional, this "racial invisibility is as harmful as racial stereotyping." (122). By using a contemporary example, Nel shows how children's literature today can still feature structural racism and the invisibility of people of colour.

Chapter Four argues that whitewashing novel covers is also a form of structural racism, reflecting publishers' belief "that books with a person of color on the cover will not sell" (136). Unlike the children's literature discussed in previous chapters, the examples here are mainly young adult novels such as Justine Larbalestier's *Liar* (2009) and Jaclyn Dolomore's *Magic Under Glass* (2010). Nevertheless, Nel still raises interesting points. When "publishers put a White face (or a silhouette, or an ambiguously raced face) on the dust jacket of a book whose protagonist is not White" (136) this can impact readers' perceptions of that character and can cause people of colour not to realise that there are books that represent them. Also, it is wrong to assume that whitewashed covers attract White buyers because they can identify with characters of the same race - if people of colour can identify with White characters, surely "White readers can identify with non-White characters, too" (152).

In Chapter Five, genre is presented as a "post-racial" way of regulating the literary experiences of people of color" (169). Nel shows how publishing companies, predominately controlled by White people, have slowed down the production of books written for and by people of colour by restricting these to a few genres. For example, Black authors find it difficult to write books beyond these genres because "White publishers serve a parallel gatekeeping role, determining what kinds of 'Blackness' get represented" (175).

Nel concludes by providing a manifesto for anti-racist children's literature, which is mostly directed towards the White people in America, but is still worth the attention of people from other places because structural racism happens elsewhere too. To summarise, Nel provides a thorough look at how structural racism has covertly dominated children's literature and how we can combat it to ensure a future full of diverse books for children of all races.