The Impressionable Age: Stereotypes in Children’s Picture Books

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Many firmly held beliefs of adults originate as early as their childhoods, whether from the conditioning of parents, interactions with other children, or from the normative beliefs that exist around them in society. One source of these beliefs that continues to expand is what the media portrays as conventional, acceptable, and hegemonic. The media even effects toddlers and their ideologies, with children’s books being one of the most powerful forms of mass communication. Because children are exposed to picture books at such a young age, the values that the books portray are the first things they come to learn as “right” or “normal” about society. And because children’s picture books reflect the existing inconsistencies in gender and racial equality in America, even at the progressive year of 2014, children are unknowingly conditioned at a young age to buy into these stereotypes, perpetuating cyclical prejudice.

When adults prepare for parenthood, many stock up on picture books in the home with the hope that reading to their children will help their babies develop speaking and reading skills early on. These parents have the time and money to spend on educating their children, usually because their high-paying jobs allow them to do so. Generally speaking, these parents ordering books online or purchasing them at the nearby Barnes and Noble are more likely to have higher levels of disposable income than parents who do not buy books for their children, and therefore can use more discretion when selecting the images they expose their children to and can filter what stereotypes they are buying into. On The New York Times Best Sellers List for “Children’s Picture Books,” which I consulted in my research, six of the top ten books revolved around transportation or animals.¹ Transportation and animals are often the

¹ This paper was written for Stephanie Portman’s Contemporary American Issues class in the spring of 2014.
tools writers utilize to attempt to avoid perpetuating stereotypes in their writing. However, out of those six books, there was a definite preponderance of lighter furred or skinned animals and light-skinned trains and cars. So, while the writers may have purposefully used modes of transportation and animals create an image of equality, their efforts are discredited by the transparent, personal tendencies of their characters. Furthermore, the fact that these books have light-skinned animals on the covers shows a preference for a whiter protagonist. On the other hand, the books that did not have transportation or animals, the books centered around humans, also outwardly preferred white people. For example, the third book on the best sellers list was *Founding Mothers*, in which most of the leaders mentioned are white, as is the woman on the cover. The other books on the list centered around white people included *Rosie Revere Engineer* and *I Am Abraham Lincoln*. The former told the story of a white girl, and the latter glossed over the Emancipation Proclamation in a perky, I-saved-the-world-with-no-opposition way. Therefore, while the “The New York Times Best Sellers List” shows a variety in picture books with not only white people, the list still shows the tendency to depict light skin tones. The danger of this fact is that toddlers being exposed to racial preferences so early on will mature thinking the books reflect reality, and start to think white people are and should be in control of everything, furthering racial inequality for generations.

Racial inequality in picture books is not only seen where parents pay for books, though. In libraries, the inequality is even more obvious. When I visited the San Mateo Public Library and went to the children’s section, I noticed that almost every book on display had white children on the cover, such as *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, *Love You Forever*, and *Where is Baby’s Belly Button?* This is troubling in libraries. As public spaces that are visited by people of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, libraries have the utmost responsibility to support books representing all realities. For families that cannot afford to pick and choose the books they want their kids to read, whatever books the library has is what they have to choose from. There are people of color in this socioeconomic status who go to libraries regularly to check out books. If every book has white, male protagonists on the cover then people of color are being marginalized from what is seen as respected
and normative in culture. These library patrons do not have many choices so when they check out the books available they, themselves, are buying into the stereotype that people of color are less relevant than white people. It is so important for young children to be exposed to all races at a young age because if they are not, then they will have preconceived notions about what is normal and special to society and what is not. While these views can be dismantled by children and teachers in school, it is important to address these issues at a young age when kids do not even realize the inconsistencies. I have noticed in my own life that when I read a novel, I assume that the protagonist is white unless the book explicitly states otherwise. I suspect I assume this because I am so accustomed to reading books where the main character is white. This by no means indicates that I don’t believe in racial equality, it just exposes that I was conditioned at a young age to think a certain way about books. While in television media there is a movement to promote people of all races, the book industry is lagging behind because authors write what they think will sell, and for them, writing about a white child is the safe way to make money off of a picture book.

How gender is portrayed in picture books also reflects preexisting stereotypes in society. Most of the picture books that I found online as best sellers or in the library bought into some sort of gender stereotype. For example, the book about animals called *Just Me and Mommy* showed a mother and daughter getting dressed up and doing their makeup together. But the parallel to that story, called *Just Me and Daddy*, showed a father and son fishing. Even though the main characters are animals and not people, the fact that the female and male animals are doing traditional human gender-specific activities creates a connection for toddlers to absorb gender stereotypes. Along the same lines, books about girls often had pink covers, while books about boys often came in a dark blue or black cover. By associating specific colors with genders, writers of storybooks are allowing toddlers to absorb gender stereotypes. Along the same lines, books about girls often had pink covers, while books about boys often came in a dark blue or black cover. By associating specific colors with genders, writers of storybooks are allowing toddlers to absorb gender stereotypes. Along the same lines, books about girls often had pink covers, while books about boys often came in a dark blue or black cover. By associating specific colors with genders, writers of storybooks are allowing toddlers to absorb gender stereotypes. Along the same lines, books about girls often had pink covers, while books about boys often came in a dark blue or black cover. By associating specific colors with genders, writers of storybooks are allowing toddlers to absorb gender stereotypes.
child grows up with no siblings, no parents, or parents of the same sex, that child automatically feels marginalized and begins to envy the ideal family that is portrayed by books that always seem to have a happy ending.

As we notice these vast and obvious inconsistencies in children's picture books, the question becomes: how can we stop this? I believe the solution to gender and racial inequality in books is to have more variety in libraries and the marketplace in general. Writers should be encouraged to write books about people of color: one with a black protagonist, or a book with just Asians in it and no white kids. If there is a variety so that it can become normal to see books with all races and have books where girls go fishing and boys cook, then stereotypes will not be ingrained so easily into the minds of children. It is our responsibility to create a safe environment for children to grow and develop their own ideologies, free of what is being shoved in their face by something so simple as a picture book.

Notes


2. Ibid.