

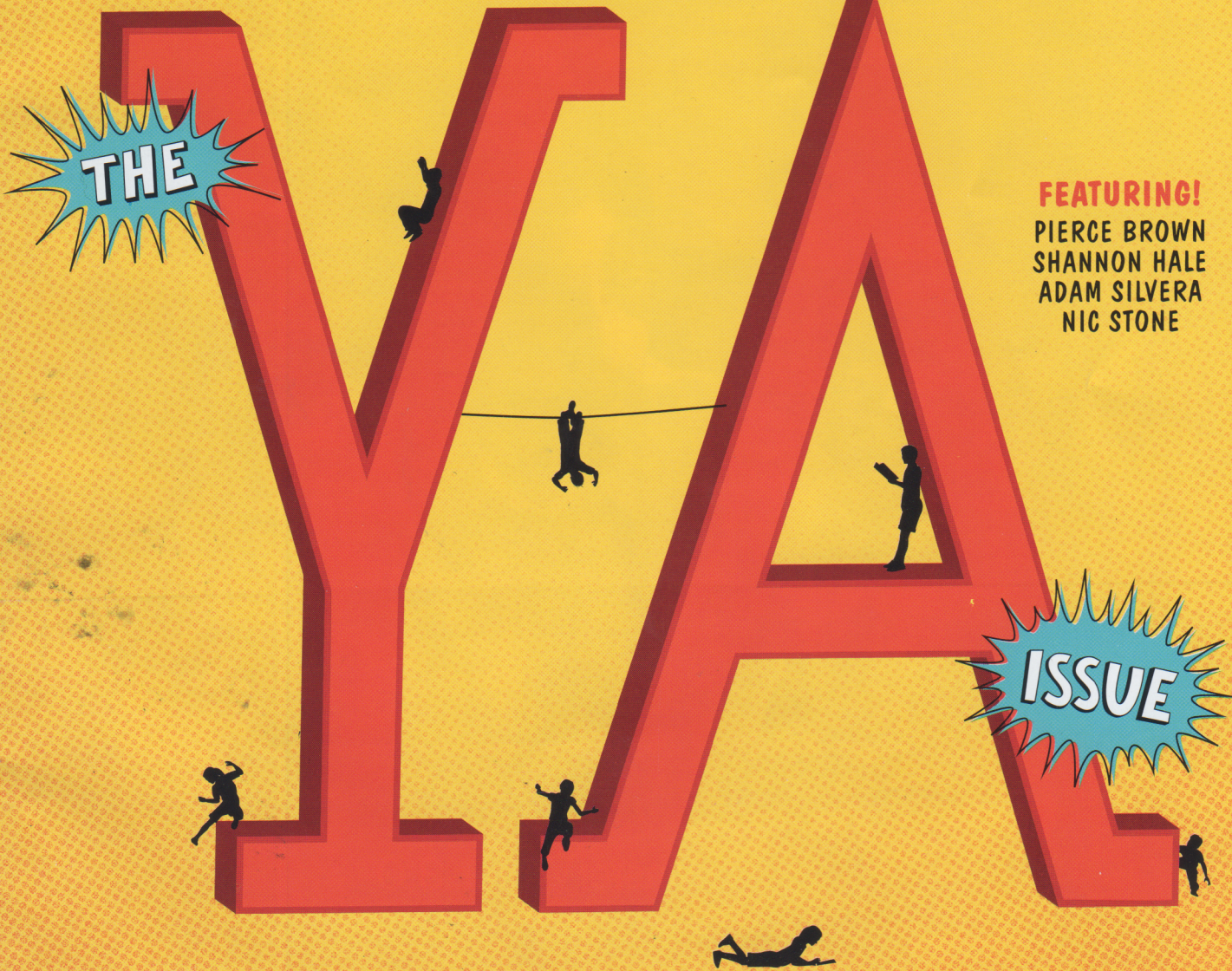
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OUR ANNUAL CHILDREN'S & YOUNG ADULT SPECIAL



WE NEED DIVERSE BOOKS

Half of U.S. children under age 5 are non-white.

But only **10 percent** of children's books in the last two decades featured multicultural characters.

The math doesn't add up.

And one nonprofit organization is determined to even the playing field.

BY MELISSA HART

Jennifer Baker grew up watching actor LeVar Burton as the host of the children's television program *Reading Rainbow*. "That's how I heard of the book *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*," she says, describing the award-winning African tale written and illustrated by black author John Steptoe. "It was the most powerful thing," she adds. "You had a black man introducing literature to kids who really enjoyed it, and it was fun and funny. We have fewer of those kinds of shows now. Social media [has] become such a big part of educating people."

Educating people – online, in classrooms, in publishing houses – is a key component of the nonprofit organization We Need Diverse Books (WNDB). Approaching its third year, the organization has a website and blog, numerous social media feeds, school outreach programs, and its own wildly popular hashtag (#wneeediversebooks).

The nonprofit grew out of authors' frustrations with the lack of diversity in publishing, along with their concern that students who don't see themselves represented in books will lose interest in both literature and literacy. Its mission statement emphasizes the recognition of all diverse experiences, including "LGBTQIA, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities."

On Twitter, Ellen Oh and

Malinda Lo discussed the all-white male panel of children's authors during the 2014 New York City fan convention BookCon. Others involved in the publishing industry began to join the conversation. The online discussion resulted in a formal three-day event where concerned writers and readers networked and discussed how best to go about diversifying children's literature.

Baker points out that the conversation has been going on for decades; for example, 2014 National Book Award winner Jacqueline Woodson petitioned for diverse literature when she began publishing in the 1990s. "Action needs to accompany the conversation," Baker says. "We need to engage people in and out of the industry to recognize that more needs to be done."

Reflecting the diversity of readers

In her 1990 article "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," black professor Rudine Sims Bishop writes, "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part." Though 2014 census data found that over half of U.S. children under 5 were non-white, only 10 percent of children's books in the past two decades have offered multicultural content...and much of that is penned by white authors speculat-

ing on the challenges experienced by people of another race or culture.

Over the past three years, WNDB has established fellowships and awards for underrepresented writers. The organization offers grants and mentorships and book lists. Members appear on panels and round-table discussions and social media chats – all in an effort to ensure that diverse authors get their stories out into the world and into the hands of young readers.

Editorial consultant Marcela Landres spent years as an editorial assistant at Simon & Schuster before launching her own business. She found that most people working in book publishing were middle- to upper-class white women and men who hired younger versions of themselves for entry-level positions – problematic, she notes, on many levels. "They, not people of color, determine what's an authentic story by a person of color and what's not an authentic story," she explains, adding that most literary agents are also white. "If there's one thing I've learned as a Latina editor," she says, "it's that we still live in a segregated society."

Landres believes the solution to segregation in book publishing lies in outreach to children. "If I was queen of the world," she says, "I'd reach down into the middle grades and start a mentoring program for children of color so they could see themselves growing up to be members of the literary community, as readers, writers, and/or publishing professionals."

She'd also create paid internships for high school and college students of color at publishing companies, with literary journals, at nonprofits and libraries, and at other literary



Jennifer Baker

organizations. "By the time they graduate college," she says, "they'd have a solid resume full of publishing internships and connections."

Baker agrees that high school students especially need to realize that if they love reading and writing, they can work as writers, publishers, editors, publicists, and librarians. "If you like coding," she says, "e-books are so huge. If you're a graphic designer or illustrator, you can work in publishing, too. We need to let students know this sooner, rather than later."

To that end, WNDB brings authors to classrooms, either in person or via Skype, and gives each child a copy of the author's book. The classroom program offers students an interaction with marginalized writers that they may not otherwise have been able to meet, Baker explains. "If you can identify them as eager readers, if you have young black boys and they meet author Jason Reynolds (*All American Boys; As Brave as You*) and he's making a living as a writer, they'll see that it's doable."

Turning interns into editors

In 2015, *Publishers Weekly* released the results of an annual survey that found 89 percent of people who work in publishing describe themselves as white/Caucasian. One percent described themselves as African-American. Volunteers at We Need Diverse Books point out that internships at publishing houses and literary agencies, critical to those wanting to work in the business, aren't always financially accessible, especially in cities with a formidable cost of living. They offer grants to support interns from diverse backgrounds who want to work in children's publishing. The awards, \$2,500 each, supplement

paid positions at participating businesses like Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, Donald Maass Literary Agency and Serendipity Literary Agency.

Scholastic Books editorial assistant Maya Marlette always knew she wanted to be an editor. As an English major at Wellesley College, she followed industry news, including the We Need Diverse Books movement on social media. Both the Twitter and Tumblr pages for WNDB publicized the internship grant. "Professors, people at Scholastic, friends... it seemed like everyone knew about this grant and wanted to make sure I knew about it, too," she says. "At one point I went from being like 'yeah, I applied!' to 'yeah... I won that!'"

Marlette spent most of her days as an intern last summer reading submissions from the slush pile and learning the ins and outs of publishing from co-workers. "It really helped me get a feel for how the submission process works and how much effort goes into turning a manuscript into a book," she says.

She believes it's important to validate all sorts of stories. "If I'm online and I see a list of books where every author and every character is a white person, I know something is up," she says. "I think one of the very best things WNDB has done for me was give me access to the vocabulary I needed to talk about these things. Just scrolling through their Twitter feed is like being told, 'No, you're not the only one who sees this is a problem, and you're not the only one working to make things better.'"

Assistance for emerging authors

Each year, WNDB awards \$2,000 to five winners of the Walter Grant. Named for Walter Dean Myers, the beloved black author who spent his life advocating for diversity in children's books, the grant assists unpublished illustrators and authors working toward a career in children's literature. One of the award recipients, A.C. Thomas, ended up with a six-figure deal for *The Hate U Give*, a young adult novel inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement.

Shveta Thakrar, a long-time diversity activist who describes herself as "a writer of South Asian-flavored fantasy," found out about the grant through WNDB's Twitter feed and newsletter. The award allowed her to take a break from freelancing and focus on finishing the second draft of her novel in progress.


"On a personal note," she says, "it was a fantastic boost to my writerly self-esteem. It's only been in the past year and a half that my career really started to blossom, so getting official acknowledgment that my voice as a brown writer and woman is both needed and wanted – well, that was and remains amazing."

As a Walter Grant winner, she attracted the attention of industry professionals – an interest she says she wouldn't necessarily have received otherwise. "I've been told in the past that writing about brown people automatically makes my work niche, and I can't really expect anyone to care about it," she explains.

The formation of WNDB challenges that attitude. "WNDB is



Maya Marlette



doing a lot to shift public consciousness on an impressive scale,” Thakrar says. “And no wonder – it’s made up of people who are all marginalized in some aspect or another (or many), people who want a better, more equitable world for everyone.”

Still, she notes, perception and representation of marginalized groups remains a problematic issue, one she believes no single organization or group of people can solve. “We decidedly still have a long way to go,” she says.

Appropriation issues

Author Jessica Mehta, a member of the Cherokee Nation, doesn’t believe her artistic writing is any more valuable or important than someone else’s solely because she’s Native American. “However,” she points out, “I think it’s paramount that as many different experiences are explored in *quality* writing as possible – the key word being quality.”

To that end, she offers free writing services to Native American students and Pacific Northwest nonprofits serving Native communities – a demographic, she says, that doesn’t always have the same financial and educational resources as its white counterpart.

In 2013, she established the Jessica Tyner Scholarship Fund for Native Americans pursuing an advanced degree in a field related to writing. “I established it because I know first-hand just how challenging college and grad school can be, especially for Native American, first-generation, and/or students pursuing a writing degree,” she explains. “I hope the scholarship gives a little extra financial padding to Native American writers, but more importantly reassures them that they’re not alone. There are

people who support their art and want them to succeed.”

Applicants must write an essay describing their involvement with the Native American community; however, the organization that oversees the scholarship won’t allow Mehta to restrict it to one specific demographic. In the past year, several applicants haven’t been Native American at all.

“They took one course in Native American studies in college,” she says. “It took a lot of nerve for them to apply for the scholarship.”

Appropriation of other races and cultures is a serious issue in literature, says WNDB’s Baker. “It can present a problem when – for instance – a white, straight, non-disabled writer writes about a disabled, Mexican character,” she explains. “No one’s telling you not to write, but understand that when it’s your voice that’s heard, you become an authority on someone else’s culture.”

Last year, she wrote a much-discussed blog post on what she identified as stereotypical dialect and characters in e.E. Charlton-Trujillo’s *When We Was Fierce* – a YA novel that the publisher ended up delaying for release because of concerns such as hers. “It’s easy to appropriate,” Baker says. “People haven’t been called out on it; they’ve been praised for it. But we’re seeing backlash, and it continues to separate us.”

Building compassionate community


All staff members at We Need Diverse Books volunteer their time to help emerging and established children’s authors get their voices out into the world. Volunteer opportunities abound, and those with financial resources can click the donate button on the website’s homepage. “A hundred dollars can

go toward a grant. It can help send someone to a classroom, help to pay an intern,” Baker says. “And buy the books. Buy marginalized writers writing about marginalized characters/lives.”

Not sure where to find them? WNDB’s website offers a wealth of book lists under its “resources” tab. And LeVar Burton’s *Reading Rainbow* is now an educational app that gives children unlimited access to diverse books and allows them to earn rewards for reading.

Scholastic editorial assistant Marlette is thrilled that WNDB – the name and the hashtag and the organization itself – has become a landing place for people who champion diversity in children’s books. “It creates a community of people,” she explains. “The people of WNDB are so much more powerful and effective at creating change than a scattered group of individuals.”

She’s particularly impressed with the organization’s focus on creating literature that will empower all children. “I don’t believe that success is a zero-sum game, where if some kids find success that means there will be less for others,” she says. “By supporting every child, and giving every child more opportunities to be successful, the world will be filled with more compassionate, capable people. It gives me a lot of hope at work and in my life that things are changing, and one day publishing will truly represent the kids who read the books.”

Find out more about We Need Diverse Books at weneeddiversebooks.org. 

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