

# **TEN QUICK WAYS TO ANALYZE CHILDRENS BOOKS FOR SEXISM AND RACISM**

From ANTI-BIAS CURRICULUM:  
TOOLS FOR EMPOWERING YOUNG CHILDREN  
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Both in school and out, young children are exposed to racist and sexist attitudes. These attitudes--expressed over and over in books and in other media--gradually distort their perceptions until stereotypes and myths about minorities and women are accepted as reality. It is difficult for a librarian or teacher to convince children to question society's attitudes. But if a child can be shown how to detect racism and sexism in a book, the child can proceed to transfer the perception to wider areas. The following ten guidelines are offered as a starting point in evaluation of children's books from this perspective.

## **1. Check the Illustrations**

***Look for Stereotypes.*** A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race, or sex, which usually carries derogatory implications. Some infamous (overt) stereotypes of Blacks are the happy-go-lucky, watermelon-eating Sambo and the fat, eye-rolling "mammy"; of Chicanos, the sombrero-wearing peon, or the fiesta-loving, macho bandito; of Asian Americans, the inscrutable, slant-eyed "Oriental"; of Native Americans, the naked savage or "primitive" craftsman and his "squaw"; of Puerto Ricans, the switchblade-toting, teenage gang member; of women, the completely domesticated mother, the demure, doll-loving little girl or the

wicked stepmother. While you may not always find stereotypes in the blatant forms described, look for variations which in any way demean or ridicule characters because of their race or sex.

**Look for Tokenism.** If there are minority characters in the illustrations, do they look just like whites except for being tinted or colored in? Do all minority faces look stereotypically alike, or are they depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features?

**Who's Doing What?** Do the illustrations depict minorities in subservient and passive roles or in leadership and action roles? Are males the active "doers" and females the inactive observers?

## **2. Check the Story Line**

The liberation movements have led publishers to weed out many insulting passages, particularly from stories with Black themes and from books depicting female characters; however, racist and sexist attitudes still find expression in less obvious ways. The following checklist suggests some of the subtle, covert forms of bias to watch for.

**Standard for Success.** Does it take "white" behavior standards for a minority person to "get ahead"? Is "making it" in the dominant white society projected as the only ideal? To gain acceptance and approval, do third world persons have to exhibit extraordinary qualities - excel in sports, get A's, etc.? In friendships between white and third world children, is it the third world child who does most of the understanding and forgiving?

**Resolution of Problems.** How are problems presented, conceived, and resolved in the story? Are minority people considered to be "the problem"? Are the oppressions faced by minorities and women represented as casually related to an unjust society? Are the reasons for poverty and oppression explained, or are they accepted as inevitable? Does the story line encourage passive acceptance or active resistance? Is a particular problem that is faced by a minority person resolved through the benevolent intervention of a white person?

**Role of Women.** Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence, or are they due to their good looks or to their relationship with boys? Are sex roles incidental or critical to characterization and plot? Could the same story be told if the sex roles were reversed?

### **3. Look at the Lifestyles**

Are third world persons and their setting depicted in such a way that they contrast unfavorably with the unstated norm of white, middle-class suburbia? If the minority group in question is depicted as "different," are negative value judgments implied? Are minorities depicted exclusively in ghettos, barrios, or migrant camps? If the illustrations and text attempt to depict another culture, do they go beyond over-simplifications and offer genuine insights into another lifestyle? Look for inaccuracy and inappropriateness in the depiction of other cultures. Watch for instances of the "quaint-natives-in-costume" syndrome (most noticeable in areas like clothing and custom, but extending to behavior and personality traits as well).

### **4. Weigh the Relationships Between People**

Do the whites in the story possess the power, take the leadership, and make the important decisions? Do minorities and females function in essentially supporting, subservient roles?

How are family relationships depicted? In Black families, is the mother always dominant? In Latino families, are there always lots of children? If the family is separated, are societal conditions -unemployment, poverty-cited among the reasons for the separation?

### **5. Note the Heroes**

For many years, books showed only "safe" minority heroes-those who avoided serious conflict with the white establishment of their time. Minority groups today are insisting on the right to define their own heroes (of both sexes) based on their own concepts and struggles for justice.

When minority heroes do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous or because what they have done has benefited white people? Ask this question: "Whose interests is a particular hero really serving?" The interests of the hero's own people? Or the interests of white people?

### **6. Consider the Effects on a Child's Self-image**

Are norms established which limit any child's aspirations and self-concepts? What effect can it have on third world children to be continuously bombarded with images of the color white as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, virtue, etc., and the color black as evil, dirty, menacing, etc.?

Does the book reinforce or counteract positive associations with the color white and negative associations with the color black?

What happens to a girl's self-image when she reads that boys perform all of the brave and important deeds? What about a girl's self-esteem if she is not "fair" of skin and slim of body?

In a particular story, is there one or more persons with whom a minority child can readily identify to a positive and constructive end?

## **7. Consider the Author's or Illustrator's Background**

Analyze the biographical material on the jacket flap or the back of the book. If a story deals with a minority theme, what qualifies the author or illustrator to deal with the subject? If the author and illustrator are not members of the minority being written about, is there anything in their background that would specifically recommend them as the creators of this book?

## **8. Check Out the Author's Perspective**

No author can be entirely objective. All authors write from a cultural as well as from a personal context. Children's books in the past have traditionally come from authors who were white and who were members of the middle class, with one result being that a single ethnocentric perspective has dominated children's literature in the United States. With any book in question, read carefully to determine whether the direction of the author's perspective substantially weakens or strengthens the value of his/her written work. Is the perspective patriarchal or feminist? Is it solely Eurocentric or do third world perspectives also surface?

## **9. Watch for Loaded Words**

A word is loaded when it has offensive overtones. Examples of loaded adjectives (usually racist) are "savage," "primitive," "conniving," "lazy," "superstitious," "treacherous," "wily," "crafty," "inscrutable," "docile," and "backward."

Look for sexist language and adjectives that exclude or in any way demean girls or women. Look for use of the male pronoun to refer to both males and females. While the generic use of the word "man" was accepted in the past, its use today is outmoded. The following examples show how sexist language can be avoided: ancestors instead of forefathers; chairperson instead of chairman; community instead of brotherhood; fire fighters instead of firemen; manufactured instead of manmade; human family instead of family of man.

## **10. Look at the Copyright Date**

Books on minority themes-usually hastily conceived-suddenly began appearing in the mid and late 1960's. There followed a growing number of "minority experience" books to meet the new market demand, but these books were still written by white authors, edited by white editors, and published by white publishers. They therefore reflected a white point of view. Not until the early 1970's did the children's book world begin to even remotely reflect the realities of a pluralistic society. The new direction resulted from the emergence of third world authors writing about their own experiences in an oppressive society. This promising direction has been

reversing in the late 1970's. Non-sexist books, with rare exceptions, were not published before 1972 to 1974.

The copyright dates, therefore, can be a clue as to how likely the book is to be overtly racist or sexist, although a recent copyright date, of course, is no guarantee of a book's relevance or sensitivity. The copyright date only means the year the book was published. It usually takes two years-and often much more than that-from the time a manuscript is submitted to the publisher to the time it is actually printed and put on the market. This time lag meant very little in the past, but in a period of rapid change and new consciousness, when children's book publishing is attempting to be "relevant," it is becoming increasingly significant.

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