Race, Perspective, and Bookstores
Local Shops Promote “A Fuller Picture of Life”

by Virginia Avniel Spatz

American children are growing up with a distorted sense of reality, says children’s author and activist Zeta Elliott. In children’s books published today, white children see themselves reflected endlessly, whereas children of color rarely see themselves at all.” Elliott’s claim, and the statistics that support it, may surprise DC readers familiar with Sankofa and Teaching For Change (TFC) bookstores. These stores, as well as our public library system, highlight voices of color through a variety of cultural activities as well as books. But this access to diversity may obscure an important fact: Less than 10% of children’s books published each year in the U.S. are by or about people of color. (See sidebar.)

“When you think that people of color make up 75% of the world, this tells you that what is being written about and offered to children is a very small part of humanity,” says Enid Lee, international consultant on anti-racist, inclusionary and equitable education.

Moreover, Elliott and Lee agree, children’s books about people of color tend to focus on oppression, primarily slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. Missing, says Elliott, are fantasy, time-travel, dystopian stories and other novels. “Where are the books that get kids so excited that they want more? Those are the stories they’re being denied...that truly empower and light the imagination of our kids.”

Seeing themselves reflected in literature is essential to sense of self for children of color and promotes literacy. In addition, Lee says: “All of our children, regardless of background, deserve better and a fuller picture of life.”

Mainstream publishers’ unwillingness to carry books by authors of color means that outlets willing to carry books by independent and self-publishers are doubly important in bringing diverse authors to the public. And without community support, these resources may not survive.

Book-selling for Change

Founded as a nonprofit in 1989, TFC’s mission is to help create “schools where students learn to read, write and change the world.” The organization publishes anti-bias materials and other resources for educators and operates a variety of progressive education programs nationally and locally.

Ten years ago, Andy Shallal, then a TFC board member, asked the organization to help him develop a new gathering place. Since 2005, TFC has operated a bookstore at Busboys and Poets, 2021 14th St, NW. A second, smaller shop later located at Busboys’ 5th Street restaurant.

The nonprofit is thriving, but the bookstores – like all brick-n-mortar stores, particularly independent and niche bookstores – face strong competition from online, discount outlets. “We’re struggling,” says TFC director Deborah Menkart. “We’re not sure that we can continue to operate our bookstores.”

“The books we carry through TFC are those that are frequently hard to find in other bookstores,” says Shallal, noting that unusual children’s books are the biggest sellers.

Shallal also stresses the link between bookstore and community: “We invite our community to be partners in our bookstore by offering our space for book events and cultural events around books.”

A Matter of Perception

Educator and activist Allison R. Brown adds that the TFC bookstore is more than its books or events. “Between the titles, book signings, and patrons looking for smart titles to add to their libraries,” Brown argues, TFC bookstore changes perceptions. “TFC helps bridge the divide between perception and reality for those who don’t perceive of people of color as intellectuals.” She adds a concern that gentrification will lead to loss of “places for people to make that connection. I think DC is a model of bridging that perception with reality solely because of the Teaching for Change bookstore. There isn’t another place like it in the city.”

Barrie Moorman, 10-12th grade teacher at EL Haynes PCS, takes groups to TFC book events. She describes student surprise on finding various ages and backgrounds packing the house. “Ms. Moorman, real people read this book, too?” one asked.

“School can sometimes feel isolated,” Moorman explains. And TFC resources “make what we learn meaningful.”

Now in her tenth year, Moorman sees TFC’s bookstore “aligned with [her] own growth as a teacher.” She credits TFC staff with lessons that are “more culturally responsive and equitable” and says she has been “inspired, humbled, enlightened, and awakened by Teaching for Change.”

Only in Person

TFC is part of an online network of independent bookstores. Readers can purchase any book (including those by

Ayanna Gregory and young singers gather outside Sankofa, Watermelon Day 2014
Rush Limbaugh, who complained vociferously on-air that his books are not on TFC shelves, through that system. Buying any book through TFC's IndieBound site, is a great way to support the enterprise, Menkart explains. Sankofa is not part of IndieBound, but its collection is available online. Regulars insist, however, that nothing substitutes for the real thing.

“Being in a bookstore is an experience,” Brown explains. “To be in a bookstore with compelling, progressive, forward thinking titles focused on social justice and racial justice is powerful.”

“My intellectual life has always evolved around niche bookstores,” including Sankofa, TFC, and the now-defunct Karibu, says Bomani Armah, educator, hip-hop performer, and homeschooling dad. “Unlike online and generic bookstores, the people who own, manage and run these stores have a sense of passion for their topics that usually exceeds their perceived economic value. The exchange of ideas between the bookshelves rivals the exchange of money at the sales counter...Being constantly updated with new books on African culture and history, or the latest philosophies and statistics on teaching has been the intellectual fuel that has fostered a whole community here in Washington, DC.”

“Buying books online does not help build community,” says Shallal, adding: “Independent bookstores are a valuable community resource and must be preserved through support by the community.”

“These stores will continue to thrive in these communities,” Armah concludes, “because their books aren’t about escaping reality, they are about embracing it, shaping it, celebrating it. Those things can only truly be done in person.”

Visit Teaching for Change bookstore at 2021 14th St, NW and teachingforchange.org.

Visit Sankofa Video Books & Cafe at 2714 Georgia Ave, NW and Sankofa.com.

Virginia Spatz is feature reporter for We Act Radio’s Education Town Hall. Visit educationtownhall.org for more on #WeNeedDiverseBooks. 

Since 1985, the Cooperative Children’s Book Council (CCBC) has reviewed U.S. children’s books published each year and noted which were written and/or illustrated by African Americans. They now track other non-white authors and characters. CCBC finds that early 95% of books published for children each year are still by and about white people.

Publishers Weekly reported, early in 2014, that the number of African-American bookstores nationwide had dropped from 300 in 2002 to just 85. Despite losses in recent years – Karibu, Sisterspace, and others – DC still has more African-American bookstores than most states, according to the African American Literary Book Club. AALBC.com now lists three DC stores: Children of the Sun (jewelry, oils, and books), DC Bookdiva (publisher and Mobile Bookstore), and Sankofa Video, Books & Cafe. Sankofa, 2714 Georgia Ave, NW, specializes in materials about people of African descent around the world; founded in 1997 by filmmakers Haile and Shirikiana Gerima, it is a self-described “liberated zone or sanctuary for provocative black film and literature, that is all too rare around the country.”

TFC’s collection has always been heavily weighted (90% of titles, at present) toward books that are by and about people of color, including American Indian, Asian, Latin, and other voices as well as African and African-American.

For comparison, the entire state of Missouri, e.g., has one African-American bookstore, down from four a few years ago.

Children’s author Eloise Greenfield at Teaching for Change Bookstore event (photo: TFC)