

Marvelous Variety: Diversity in Picture Books

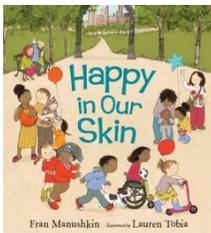
By Susie Wilde

It's been a year and a half since "We need Diverse Books" began a grassroots campaign calling for a more equal representation of colors, cultures and issues in children's books. While it may take a while for this movement have a discernible impact on books, in the past year I've seen an increase in meaningful conversations on the subject. Children's book writers, illustrators, publishers and readers are having candid discussions.

Many of 2015's picture books provide adults and children with opportunities to learn and grow together. Below find picture books sure to spark curiosity and stimulate discussion.

What is diversity?

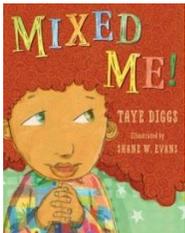
Get conversations rolling with titles that help define diversity while artfully escaping didactic tones.



Happy in Our Skin, Manushkin, Fran

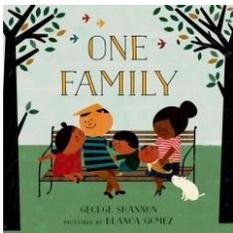
"This is how we all begin: small and happy in our skin," the author starts and illustrator Lauren Tobia fills the first page with a mixed-race family adoring a smiling baby. More scenes of this loving family and continued rhymes present a bouncy, positive peek at a rainbow of skin colors.

(ages 2-5)



Mixed Me! Diggs, Taye

The dynamic first person narration describes a young boy who zips around "as the wind combs through my zigzag curly 'do." His parents love for their son is as clear as their differing colors—his dad a "deep brown and my mom's rich cream and honey" and their belief that they "mixed you perfectly and got you just right." The rhythms and the family love are both strong in this story (ages 3-6)

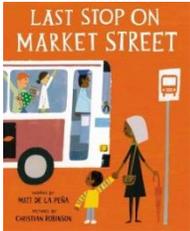


One Family, Shannon, George

This lyrical counting book describes ten different families-- from a single elderly woman to an extended family of ten. These families represent diversity in age, culture, ethnicity and gender orientation. For example, Blanca Gomez illustrates a single-parent Asian family riding imaginary horses as the text states: "One is two. One pair of shoes. One team of horses. One family." Each description ends with the phrase "one family," setting up for the conclusion, "One is one and everyone. One earth. One World. One family." The few words allow for multiple readings and more complex conversations as a child grows. (ages 2-5)

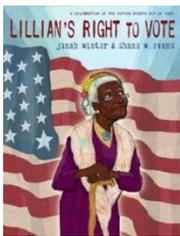
Diversity Can Lead to Conflict

Successful authors make these titles poignant by creating real characters who face difficult problems and grow in understanding.



Last Stop on Market Street, Matt De La Pena

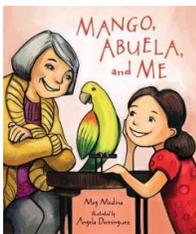
CJ and his grandmother travel by bus each Sunday after church to a location not disclosed until the final pages. Their conversations define both characters and the different ways they view the world. CJ voices disappointment and resentment about all he doesn't have while his grandmother's point of view is more lyrical and positive. CJ wonders why a neighborhood is so dirty. His grandmother tells him, "Sometimes when you're surrounded by dirt, CJ, you're a better witness for what's beautiful." Sensory details and poignant imagery show two engaging characters, their close relationship and many intriguing ideas. (ages 5-8)



Lillian's Right to Vote, Jonah Winter

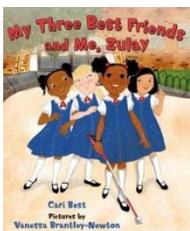
The book begins as a 100-year-old woman stands at the bottom of a steep hill on voting day. As she climbs the hill, struggling with the physical challenge, she also thinks about the long difficult history of her ancestors, starting with her great-great-grandparents who were sold into slavery. The images that assault her are painful and poignant and give deeper meaning to what the right to vote means to her.

(ages 7-10)



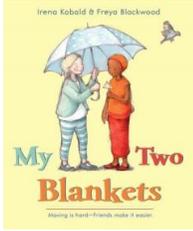
Mango, Abuela, and Me, Meg Medina

Mia's "far-away grandmother" has left her sunny house between two snaking rivers to live with Mia's family. But "she can't unlock English words" and Mia's "espanol is not good enough to tell her things an abuela should know." Both want to communicate, but neither can breach the language barriers until Mia comes up with a plan to care for a parrot named Mango together. Medina's interweaving of languages becomes one more facet of her poetic writing. (ages 5-8)



My Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay, Cari Best

This exuberant narrative introduces Zulay, a girl who's independent, proud, observant, and valued by friends and teachers. She is also blind, but because that is not how she views herself, it's not initially revealed. Only later, in this well-paced book, do readers gain a clearer view of her internal feelings and struggles and how she eventually triumphs over them. (ages 5-8)



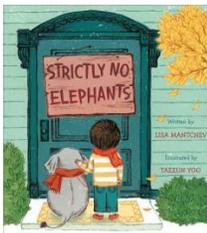
My Two Blankets, Irena Kobald

"My aunt used to call me Cartwheel. Then came the war. Auntie didn't call me Cartwheel anymore," begins the narration of a young Sudanese girl. Cartwheel is trying to right herself after moving from her war-torn world to an English-speaking country that feels alien to her. The sophistication of ideas, sparseness of language and symbolic imagery is better for sharing with older children. (ages 7-10)

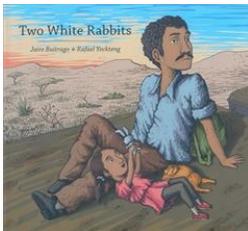


Stella Brings the Family, Schiffer, Miriam

Stella's teacher announces a Mother's Day celebration and this sends Stella into a tailspin because she has two fathers. The author strengthens the story by staying firmly in young Stella's very literal point of view. While her classmates are curious about the way her fathers fill both roles, Stella's only concern is that she will "be the only one without a mother" at the celebration. (ages 5-8)



Strictly No Elephants, Mantchev, Lisa
Prejudice finds an unusual treatment when a young boy faces exclusion based on his unusual pet elephant. It only takes one person, a girl with a skunk who has also faced bias, to find understanding. The two begin a club that welcomes all. (ages 3-5)



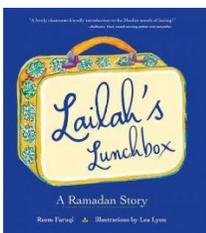
Two White Rabbits, Jairo Buitrago

Minimal text recounts the travels of an innocent young girl perched on the shoulders of her father. To entertain herself, she counts what she sees, looks for shapes in the clouds, and delights in the movements of the train they ride atop. Her first person narration changes as officials stop the train. Then she and her father begin a new journey by truck to a place she doesn't know.

Illustrations by Rafael Yockteng reveal more than the girl's words; she and her father are refugees in flight. (ages 4-8)

Diversity Means Richness

Different cultures' customs bring a richness that enhances the lives of others. The books below reveal customs that may be new to most Western children.



Lailah's Lunchbox, Faruqi, Reem

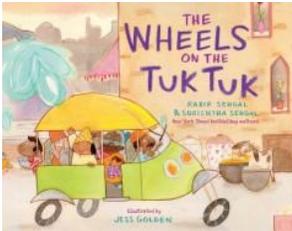
For the first time, Lailah is allowed to fast for Ramadan, just like the older friends she envied in Abu Dhabi. Now that she lives in Peachtree City, Georgia, she has as much anxiety as excitement. She already feels different in her new home, but how will she explain fasting to her classmates? Lailah's struggles with her feelings are portrayed as strongly as her hunger. (ages 5-7)



Sona and the Wedding Game, Kasmira Sheth

The sensory richness and specifics of an Indian wedding come alive in Sona's first person narration. She views the beauty doorway garlands and relishes having her palms painted with vines and peacocks with the "glue sticky and moonlight-cool" brown paste at the bride's mehndi party. But Sona is worried about her responsibility; as the bride's sister, she must steal the groom's shoes.

Her ongoing quandary makes the situations and settings understandable to children. (ages 5-7)



The Wheels on the Tuk Tuk, Kabir Sehgal & Surishtha Sehgal

The familiar preschool song finds a new setting in the busy world of an Indian city where rupees go "ching, ching, ching," the riders say "namaste-ji," and the tuk tuk driver calls to his passengers, "squish together." The crowded tuk tuk bobbles past a moo-moo cow, an om-om chanting yogi, a spraying elephant, and, finally, Diwali fireworks. The very singable book is

rich with customs to discuss. (ages 0-5)

Certainly more can be done to increase the representation of cultures and colors in children's books, but if this sampling of 2015 picture books provides a peek at the future, there is hope on our horizon.

Susie Wilde (ignitingwriting.com), a read-aloud advocate and children's book crusader for over thirty years, has reviewed for magazines and newspapers and shared her favorite titles with children, parents and teachers.