On March 15, 2014, the New York Times published two op-ed pieces, one by author Walter Dean Myers and the other by his son, author-illustrator Christopher Myers, both asking, “Where are the people of color in children’s books?” It’s not the first time the question has been asked. It’s not even the first time Walter Dean Myers, a former National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, has asked it. Almost 30 years earlier, he had raised the same issue in an op-ed piece, “I Actually Thought We Would Revolutionize the Industry,” published in the Times on November 9, 1986.

Twenty years earlier, Nancy Larrick had posed the same question in the September 11, 1965 issue of The Saturday Review. Her article, “The All-White World of Children’s Books,” outlined the problem by providing statistics. Larrick, an educator and founder of the International Reading Association, examined 5,206 children’s books produced by 63 publishers from 1962 through 1964, and found that only 349 of them, or 6.4 percent, included one or more blacks in the illustrations. Of these, 60 percent were set outside the United States or took place before World War II, which meant that only four-fifths of one percent of the children’s trade books published in the U.S. from 1962 to 1964 were about contemporary African Americans.

Larrick’s study was a wake-up call for the publishing industry, and in the years that followed its publication, we began to see actual change. It was a hopeful era, so aptly described by Myers in “We Actually Thought We Would Revolutionize the Industry.” It was a time that saw the first books by African-American authors and illustrators, including powerhouses such as Virginia Hamilton, John Steptoe, Jerry Pinkney, Tom Feelings, Leo and Diane Dillon, Ashley Bryan, Mildred D. Taylor, and Myers himself.

By 1984, Myers noted, the number of books about the black experience had plummeted. This was about the time the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison started to track statistics that documented books by black authors, and our numbers backed this up. In 1985, there were just 18 such books and in 1986, there were 18 again. Since then, the number increased a bit each year until it reached 94 in 1992. And then it appears to have hit some sort of glass ceiling, set at 100. It’s as if there’s some sort of unwritten rule that there can be no more than 100 books published in any given year by black authors and illustrators. That’s about three percent of the total number of books.
In the meantime, where are the new black authors and illustrators? Where is the next Virginia Hamilton? Or the next Tom Feelings? How do publishers expect to find them? If the next John Steptoe is out there somewhere, and he enters a bookstore or library to see what’s there, will he feel at all encouraged? Will he be led to believe that there might be a place for his own work on the shelves? This is not to say that there haven’t been talented young black artists and writers published more recently. But how many of them are sons and daughters of the first generation of black artists and writers for children? Is it not enough for Donald Crews, Jerry Pinkney, Virginia Hamilton, and Walter Dean Myers to create books for children? Are they also expected to create the children who will grow up to take their places as the next generation of black authors and illustrators?

Because the latest New York Times essays were accompanied by a link to the CCBC’s statistics, we got a lot of questions. Some came from researchers with an academic interest in the subject matter. Some parents asked us for book recommendations. About half of the questions came from people who wanted to know if we also counted the number of books with animal characters. This was actually first posed in July 2013 by Horn Book editor-in-chief Roger Sutton on his blog “Read Roger.” “I want to know what percentage of children’s books are in the first place about people (as opposed to talking rabbits or creatures from outer space, for example). Things may look worse than they are,” he wrote.

So that summer, I counted. Although it may seem like there are a whole lot of animal characters populating children’s books, there really weren’t as many as even I thought. Most of them were in picture books, but those titles made up only about 23 percent of the 2013 books CCBC received. Nearly half of the books were fiction, both middle grade and young adult. As of July 11, we had received 1,509 trade books published in 2013. I found that 1,183 (78.3 percent) were about human beings. And just 124 of those (10.5 percent) featured a person of color. And that also means that 1,059 of the books about humankind (89.5 percent) are about white people.

The numbers tell us that in the 50 years since Larrick first documented the all-white world of kids’ books, we’ve made some progress, but children’s literature still represents a mostly white world in a real one that’s becoming increasingly diverse. Why has change come so slowly? What are the barriers? And can anything be done to diversify children’s books?

A lot of people are quick to blame the publishing industry. But publishers can’t just make manuscripts magically appear. So how did they do it in the 1960s and 1970s, when we saw such a sudden growth in multicultural books, African-American literature in particular? What did they have then that we don’t have now? They had the Council on Interracial Books for Children, for one thing. Much as the Council was
viewed then—and now—as a thorn in the side of publishing (a CIBC founder, Elinor Sinnette, was quoted in *The Saturday Review* as saying “Publishers have participated in a cultural lobotomy”), it deserves credit for helping to foster much-needed diversity in children’s literature. CIBC’s annual contests for unpublished writers of color launched the careers of Walter Dean Myers, Sharon Bell Mathis, Kristin Hunter, and Mildred D. Taylor, and their regular “Art Directors: Take Note” column brought visibility to new illustrators such as Donald Crews, Leo and Diane Dillon, and Pat Cummings.

A few publishers have tried their own contests for unpublished authors of color, but the only one that’s still around is *Lee & Low’s New Voices Award*, recently joined by the *New Visions Award* for their imprint Tu Books. Literary agent Barry Goldblatt recently partnered with the Vermont College of Fine Arts to launch the *Angela Johnson Scholarship* for writers of color. That’s the sort of support and mentoring that needs to happen, and Goldblatt is demonstrating that the efforts of one person can make a difference.

The other thing multicultural literature had going for it in the ’60s was a strong library market. The demand we see today comes mostly from teachers and librarians, trying to meet the needs of the diverse populations they serve. In his 1986 essay, Myers stated: “The libraries were the major markets for black children’s books, and when they began to suffer cutbacks it was books on the black experience that were affected most.” And we all know that budgets, particularly among schools, make it an ongoing challenge to meet these needs.

The most obvious solution for increasing diversity in children’s books is to bolster that library funding so that we have a bigger impact on the market. That is, of course, easier said than done.

But one thing that librarians can do is to buy the books that are out there now. Read them. Know them well enough that they become the go-to books when making recommendations or creating bibliographies. Share them with children of all kinds, not just because they are multicultural, but because they are good books.

The children’s book field is full of smart, committed people in editing and in marketing, but publishing is still a business, and they have to consider the bottom line. Right now the lion’s share of the market goes to bookstores, and that means the big-box bricks-and-mortar outlets that are lapping up whatever is popular.

The buyers at *Barnes & Noble* have a lot of power. They can have an impact on what gets published and what jacket art looks like. And more than one publisher has told me that they’ve heard *Barnes & Noble* buyers say that black books don’t sell. And then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: How can the books sell if they are not on the shelves?

Again it comes back to buying the books. I often quote the poet Alexis DeVeaux who once said “Buying a book is a political act.” That has never been truer than it is today. If we want to see change, if we want to see more diversity in literature, we have to buy the books. Buy them for our schools, for our libraries, for our families, for our friends. We must be the agents of change. Otherwise, we are all participants in the “cultural lobotomy.” And it won’t be technology that threatens the very existence of books. It’ll be their complete and utter irrelevance in the real world that never was and never will be all white.

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