
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

**Ellen Oh: Diverse Books Benefit Everyone
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Excerpt Transcribed**



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Joshua Herring, USED*

Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time might just be the most powerful words in the world. Because you know what's coming next. Once upon a time means you're going to get transported to another world. another dimension, another time period even. And who doesn't need that? You see, truth is, we all need that. Stories are what connect us to each other, and how we share the human experience. And we share a lot of stories, millions of them. Yet in this country, there's a similarity to all of these stories. There's a sameness. Once upon a time, there was a straight, white, cis-gendered, able-bodied boy or girl who lived in an upper middle-class neighborhood and was always the heroes of their adventure stories. now don't get me wrong; these are *great* stories, and we all love them. but there's something missing.

On November 9, 1986, the great Walter Dean Myers wrote an op ed piece in the *NY Times*. *And it was* called "Children's Books: I Actually Thought We Would Revolutionize the Industry." In that piece he said, "if we continue to make black children non-persons by excluding them from books and by degrading the black experience, and if we continue to neglect white children by not exposing them to any aspect of other racial and ethnic experiences in a meaningful way, we will have the next racial crisis."

Now flash forward to 2012: Despite census data that shows 37% of the US population consists of people of color, children's book publishing did not keep pace. The Cooperative Children's Book Center, which gathers statistics on these every year, shows that in 2012, out of 3,600 children's books published, only 7% were about children of color. And that's what's missing: diversity.

But why, why is it still missing? Now, Sarwat Chadda, who is a British Indian author, tells this story, and I love to steal this story from him. He was once talking to a bookseller about his new middle grades series; it's called the Ash Mystery Series, and as he's telling the story, the bookseller stops him and says, "Yeah, but I don't see the point of stocking your book, because we don't have an Indians in our neighborhood." To which he replied, "I bet you don't have any hobbits, either." [laughter] You see, that's the disconnect. People seem to think that a diverse book is not for them, that white audiences won't read a book about a nonwhite character.

But who is it that won't read a nonwhite character? The child or the gatekeeper? A few years ago, I was at the bookstore, and I saw a young girl absorbed, a young white girl, absorbed in reading this beautiful book, *My Miss Malone*, by Christopher Paul Curtis. And I was just about to tell her what a great book it was, when her mother snatched it out of her hands, saying, "Oh honey, this book's not for you."

Now, we've seen a variation of that happen over and over again. A ballerina book is not a book for a boy. Or a truck book is not a book for a girl. or a sports book is not a book for a girl. There is constant censorship that gatekeepers do because, you see, the child doesn't care who the character in the book is. They just want to read a good story. It's always the gatekeeper. And the truth is that diversity is important because racism still exists in our world.

And racism comes from ignorance.

Now, I've been asked to talk about diversity a lot, and usually I focus on why minority kids need to see themselves represented in the country, in literature, in movies, and tv. but more and more i realize that's only part of the problem. Diversity is not only for the underrepresented. the truth is, diversity is important for everyone. All people need to be exposed to other races and other cultures in positive ways. All people need to learn tolerance, and acceptance of differences. When we promote only a homogenous view of society in our literature and our media, and deem books and movies about minorities as unsuccessful, it harms everyone. But worse, we fail in our duty to educate and inspire the minds of our children.

And I can't help but wonder if the rise in racism, Islamaphobia, flat-out bigotry, is not somehow related to this very lack of positive representation in children's literature. when we hear second graders bullying a Muslim boy, or high school students screaming "Build a wall" against a team of Mexican American players, who will take responsibility? And I say: it is the responsibility of all of us.