

# Maureen Langloss

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## Why Kids Need Diverse Books

Each year, the Cooperative Children's Book Center studies how many children's books were published in that year by or about African Americans, American Indians, Latinos and Asians. And, each year, the statistics are rather sobering. As you have probably already heard by this point, only 93 out of 3,200 children's titles published in 2013 were about Africans and African Americans. I encourage you to refer to [the study](#) itself, because the historical tables illustrate quite well that this trend is not improving. In fact, the 2013 numbers were even worse than the already meager numbers of years past.

The good news is that this year the problem is getting lots of media attention. In April, a group of activists and writers started the **#WeNeedDiverseBooks** movement to raise awareness about the lack of diversity in children's literature.

The CCBC's study also prompted Christopher Myers to write "[The Apartheid of Children's Literature](#)," a moving editorial in the *New York Times* about the toll this absence of black faces in literature takes on black children. Myers explains that, not only are black kids unable to find themselves in the characters they read about, but they are left without a roadmap of where they might go in life, what they might dream about.

I would extend Myer's article a bit further to say that the pale skin of children's literature is also damaging to white children. One of the most beautiful gifts that literature bestows is to allow us to step into the shoes of someone else, to attain a deeper understanding of the human experience. Children should be exposed to perspectives that are not exactly like their own, not only because this exposure enriches their own minds and understanding, but, more importantly, because it will make them better citizens of the world. In exposing children to challenges and issues they might not have confronted themselves or might not have even been conscious of, we help them build empathy, learn to act without and against prejudice, develop a strong sense of the dignity of each and every individual, and improve their moral reasoning skills.

When I read Myers's editorial, I swallowed real hard. Shame spread through me. Between them, my three white kids have read hundreds of books over the last year. I spend hours in bookstores and libraries and reading reviews to supply them with the most captivating books I can find. I care very deeply about what they read. And, yet, as I sweep through those hundreds of titles, I find precious few characters and authors of color. My own kids' bookshelves reflect the very curse that Myers bemoans.

As my ten-year-old son and I rifled through our shelves, searching for race, one encouraging trend shone through. His very favorite books over the last year have been exactly those that

are under-represented on his shelf: the books with characters of color. I cannot help but wonder if the fact that these books were more than just good stories, but also included the added dimension of difference, of otherness, of cultures that were new to him, was what made them more engaging and dynamic.

My son regularly ranks the books he reads and below you will find what made it into his top eight this year – all middle grade novels. I encourage you to load up on these titles, gift them, review them on Amazon, ask your local librarian to stock them. Let's show the publishing world that there is demand for excellent works of literature by and about people of color.

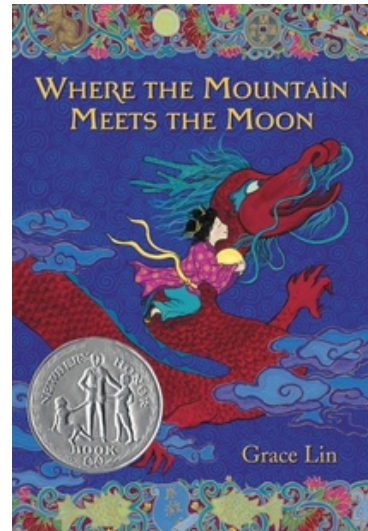
1. *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*, by Grace Lin, has become my son's gold standard. He compares every other novel to it. I've often heard him say, "X book was good, but nowhere in the same league as *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*."

It was not love at first sight. My son did, in fact, judge the book by its cover and refused to start it. Perhaps he was put off by the girl wearing pink on the cover, perhaps he didn't feel a connection with the cover artist's rendering of her Asian face, perhaps the book simply looked too long. But I started reading it aloud one night, and lo and behold the next day he picked it up on his own. He was hooked.

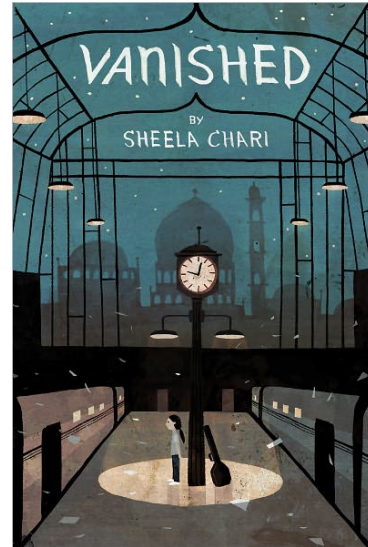
I mention this because sometimes it will take a bit of cajoling to get your kid to open a book with someone on the cover who does not remind him of himself. Kids are, after all, rather narcissistic. So sell it a little!

The book's main character, Min, grows up in a very poor home, and my son was outraged and troubled by the poverty of her rice-farming family. Min's home is, however, rich with story. Every night, her father tells tales that my son found mesmerizing. When her father spins a yarn about the "Old Man on the Moon" who can change people's fortunes, Min sets off on a journey to find this man so that he might improve her family's lot in life. The stories that Grace Lin beautifully weaves in and out of Min's journey are based on Chinese folktales. Of course, Min learns many things along the way, most importantly that generosity offers greater rewards than selfishness.

My son would say that his favorite things about the book were the brave Min, the magical adventures and the dragon. While he would never express it this way, I think what actually transfixed him to this book was Grace Lin's remarkable use of language, which was certainly influenced by the sounds and structures of the Asian folk stories she drew upon.

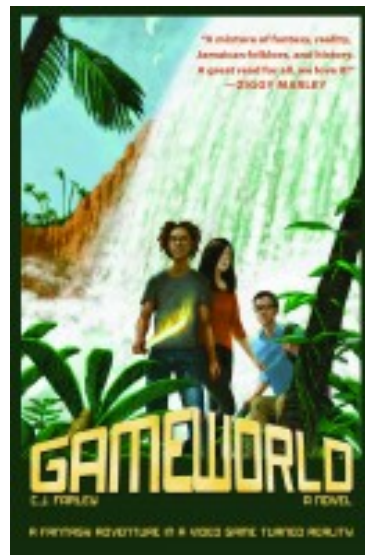


2. *Vanished*, by Sheela Chari, was a book my son could not put down. I can understand why he loved this page-turner. It is chock full of vivid characters who aren't always what they first seem. It was easy to relate to the captivating main character, Neela. She is a sixth-grader of Indian descent living in Massachusetts who dreams of becoming a veena virtuoso on the antique veena that her grandmother recently handed down to her. A veena is a traditional Indian string instrument that your child will learn loads about in the book. When the veena disappears, Neela is thrust into a complex, suspenseful mystery to retrieve the family heirloom, a mystery that can only be resolved by a trip to India.



The book gracefully (and without heavy hand) touches upon what it is like to be Indian in an American school. It incorporates many elements of Indian culture and tradition. But it also raises themes that are universal – honesty versus deceit, rivalry between friends and siblings, the sources of artistic talent and how to achieve greatness. The novel makes excellent use of humor and dialogue. In the end, Neela must make an important moral decision about her grandmother's veena that will surely cause your child to grapple with what is right and wrong.

3. *Game World*, by *Wall Street Journal* editor C.J. Farley, is the inventive tale of a sixth-grade boy who enters the real-life version of his favorite video game, Xamaica, and sets out on a dangerous quest to find his sister who has disappeared into the game. The Xamaica setting is loosely based on Jamaica, the author's birthplace. Reminiscent of *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*, many of the characters and stories told in the book are derived from actual Caribbean history and myth. But *Game World* does not wear this history on its sleeve. I believe children see through books that are overly didactic, and instinctively turn away.



Instead, my son was drawn deeper into the fantasy world of Xamaica with each passing chapter. What modern child hasn't fantasized about stepping inside a video game? And this one offers a particularly lush world – with enormous spider webs, evil hummingbird soldiers, a female pirate, creatures that turn into vegetation, tattoos that become video screens. Farley's lush writing style matches his oversized landscape perfectly. His book will expose your child to creative turns of phrase and unusual metaphors.

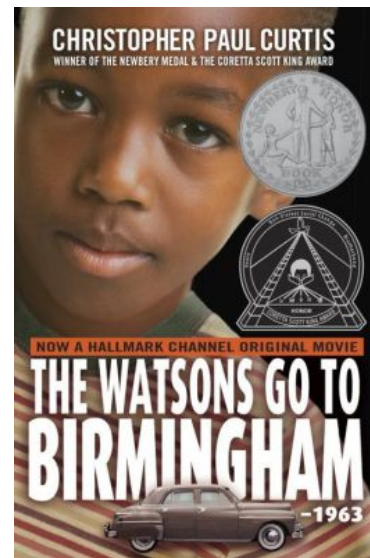
My son's favorite character was the comic, story-telling spider, Nestuh, who can't spin a decent web to save his life, but who offers many sage lessons to make a kid stop and think. "The world always shifty-shifty," Nestuh shrugged. "Making sure you're in the right is hard as fighting for it. Truth."

4. Rick Riordan doesn't need any help marketing his best-selling Percy Jackson books. But I thought I would nonetheless point out that Riordan introduced an African American character into his mainstream series in 2011. Indeed, one of the three narrators in *The Son of Neptune* is a black character named Hazel. Hazel also plays a significant role in subsequent books, *The Mark of Athena* and *The House of Hades*. Like many characters in the Percy Jackson books, she is a half-blood – half-human and half-descendent from a god. She is compelling because she is complex: on the one hand she can be quite funny, but, on the other, her difficult past has left her with an abiding sadness. Riordan does not dwell on her race in his novels, which I think is a huge positive. It would be terrible if every time a black character appeared in a book, that book was about race.



5. My son's teacher began reading *The Watsons Go To Birmingham – 1963* to his class the week of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. It is about a black family that travels from Michigan to Alabama to visit their grandmother. Unfortunately, soon after they arrive, their grandmother's historic church is blown up.

My son simply adored this book, because it managed to be extremely funny despite its serious topic. Humor is such an important feature in middle grade literature, and this book nails it. More importantly, my son related to the characters, empathizing with them and recognizing himself in them, despite their differences in skin color. Its author, Christopher Paul Curtis, also wrote *Bud, Not Buddy*, which won a Newbery, and would be another great addition to your shopping list.



In his *New York Times* article, Myers defines the apartheid of literature as a phenomenon "in which characters of color are limited to the townships of occasional historical books that

concern themselves with the legacies of civil rights and slavery but are never given a pass card to traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination or personal growth.” While *The Watsons Go To Birmingham* certainly places itself squarely in the category of a civil rights book, it is, at its heart, a great story about personal growth.

All the writers on my son’s list have created characters of color that not only traverse, but soar, into “the lands of adventure and curiosity.” It is because these books are full-bodied tales with complex characters and intriguing adventure plots that they landed on his favorites list – a list rounded out by such greats as *The Hobbit*, *The One and Only Ivan* and *Flora & Ulysses* (the latter two are Newbery Medalists).

Myers writes that “The Market,” is often blamed for the dearth of children’s books about black people; publishers claim these books don’t sell. Regardless of whether this amorphous excuse is true or not, we can certainly do something to change that perception. After all, we are the market – you, me, parents, teachers, Kindle-users, Amazon cart-holders, MeeGenius subscribers. If we make a point of supporting works like *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* and *Game World*, perhaps our kids can look forward to a future without literary apartheid.

The next books I have bought for my kids are *The Dreamer* and *Esperanza Rising*, both by Pam Munoz Ryan, as well as Gary Soto’s poems, *A Fire in My Hands*. Summer reading is right around the corner. What titles will you bring home for your kids?

*[This essay originally appeared in the MeeGenius.com blog on May 13, 2014.]*

## Resources

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I'm sure I haven't come close to satisfying your appetite for good books by or about people of color. For more information, please visit: [The Children's Book Council](#). You will also find helpful compilations on Goodreads (such as this [list of books with Hispanic characters](#)) and on local library websites (for example, [this great list from the Ann Arbor District Library](#) and [this one from the New York Public Library](#)).

And if you are looking for picture books for the younger set, might I suggest:

*Yo! Yes!* By Chris Raschka

*The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats

*The Little Piano Girl* by Ann Ingalls & Maryann Macdonald

*Henry's Freedom Box* by Ellen Levine

*Corduroy* by Don Freeman

*Grandfather and I* by Helen Buckley

*Soccer Star* by Mina Javaherbin

*Too Many Tamales* by Gary Soto

*How the Stars Fell into the Sky: A Navajo Legend* by Jerrie Oughton

The works of Joseph Bruchac (such as *The Story of the Milky Way*)

Grace Lin's picture books (such as *Thanking the Moon*)

*The Little Red Fish* by Tae-Eun Yoo (one of my personal favorites)

*Yoko* (and other books in the series) by *Max & Ruby* author Rosemary Wells

*Ganesha's Sweet Tooth* by Emily Haynes

For [MeeGenius.com](#) subscribers, also try these excellent, diverse titles:

*The Naming of Lan Caihe*

*Bumoni's Banana Trees*

*Antonio's Dream*

*Over in Harlem*