Name: Class: Date:

***Young dreamers*** AUGUST 6, 2013 BY [CHRISTOPHER MYERS](https://www.hbook.com/author/christopher-myers/)

I had wanted to write something funny.

I thought I had something to add to recent discussions about the diversity and lack thereof in children’s literature — a unique perspective, perhaps.

I was raised in the midst of these conversations about cultural diversity in children’s media. My father, Walter Dean Myers, has been on the frontlines of this debate since he published his first book in 1969. Mealtime conversations were a steady diet of thinking about the effects and importance of images of people of color, of women, of poor people, of queer people. As a child I was allowed to watch as much television as I could stand, but I would have to keep a yellow legal pad beside me and record what I saw black people doing, or women doing, or Asian people doing. I learned how so much storytelling uses stereotypes and how media shapes our perceptions of others and ourselves. This type of activity was common in my childhood, and so there are moments in this particular debate (which regularly creeps to the front pages, every four years or so, like the Olympics or the World Cup) when there are incongruities that I find humorous.

It’s strange that we pretend shock at the stagnation, that the numbers of books explicitly dealing with the lives of children of color have not changed significantly in years, though we all purport to keep our fingers on the pulse of this dynamic industry. It’s strange that we search high and wide for causes and solutions, when the solutions are in our very hands and the causes as well.

I thought I would write an essay that would lace some of this “real talk” with humor, because this conversation, as we have been having it, is old and dry and dour; it is full of chastening, scapegoats, and ashes. And if there’s one thing I know about children, and children’s literature, guilt and self-flagellation are not gifts I want to give to young people.

I really wanted to write something funny.

But today I cannot find a smile.

Last night, the man who shot and killed a young brother, Trayvon Martin, was found not guilty. I have since been vacillating between emotions — sadness, frustration, an acute sense of my own vulnerability as a black man (the police stops, the endless debates with security at publishers as to why I don’t need to go to the messenger entrance), and finally a sense of responsibility.

It is that sense of responsibility I want to share with you.

The recent release of [figures by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center](http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/pcstats.asp) is filled with percentages. The good folks in Madison have taken the time to compile statistics, breaking down the numbers of books that feature children of color. Those numbers are dismal and symptomatic of the stagnation that has taken hold of our well-meaning industry. But as with most metrics, they only tell part of the story, and rely on some underlying and underexplored assumptions.

There is some idea that the percentage of books featuring children of color ought to reflect the percentage of children of color in the country. One hears echoes of this idea in all of the “mirroring, reflecting” rhetoric that pervades discussions of literature for young people. From the countless literacy programs that tout the “one good book” notion of creating lifelong readers to the endless anecdotes of authors, illustrators, and readers who identify this or that book in which “they saw themselves for the first time.” While these narratives are often true and heart-warming in their way, this shock of recognition, I think, misses the major point of literature. Literature is a place for imagination and intellect, for stretching the boundaries of our own narrow lives, for contextualizing the facts of our nonfictions within constellations of understanding that we would not be able to experience from the ground, for bringing our dreams and fictions into detail, clarity, and focus. Books allow us a bird’s-eye view of our own lives, and especially how our lives relate to those lives around us.

Part of me would like to make an individual book for each and every child I come across, draw careful sweet portraits of all the Trayvons, Sams, Chitras, Sheilas, and Sadias. But I am less interested in that simple mirroring than in making stories that define the kinds of communities in which those children will grow up. The dual impulse and constant stress of our industry is this tension between the way our work *shapes* culture, our innovation and imagination, and the way it *reflects* culture, our inclusion in the amorphous and ever-blameworthy scapegoat that is “the market.” As important as that shock of recognition may be to a child of color, I believe that creating an understanding of what a diverse society ought to look like for *all* children is more important. I want the kids who read my books to have a framework with which to understand the people they might meet, or even the people that they are becoming. I want the children who see my books to see an encounter with the other as an opportunity, not a threat.

The rhetoric of the trial hinged on precisely this question: whether or not this young black boy, with his bag of candy and his iced tea and his sweatshirt, was a threat. Here is also where I see my responsibility. Although it is unfair, and although it comes with an intricate history, I have the opportunity with every book I make to write this boy as even less a threat than he already isn’t. I get to do in a very public way, that which I do personally every day.

Years ago I stopped wearing hoodies. I found that particular article of clothing would often run me afoul of authorities and had women in elevators clutching their purses ever tighter. But I have found that even when I am not wearing this supposedly threatening piece of clothing, I still wear it metaphorically. My speech, my bearing — so much of it is calculated to direct others’ expectations of me, the associations that come from my race, my metaphorical hoodie. Every meeting with a publisher or media person in which I surprise them with my knowledge of ballet, Vietnamese history, classical mythology, international development, or semiotic theory (topics that I suppose I am not expected to know); every “surprise” of my own identity serves to take that metaphorical hoodie off.

And my work, our work, can serve to do the same for boys like me, like Trayvon Martin. I started as an illustrator, someone who is concerned with images and originality. I habitually catalog images, collecting the clichés so as to avoid them or invert them or play with them. I work to change the popular images of those who have suffered violence to their image, of young women, of working-class people, and especially of young black men, of myself. Images matter. They linger in our hearts, vast “image libraries” that color our actions and ideas, even if we don’t recognize them on a conscious level. The plethora of threatening images of young black people has real-life effects. But if people can see us as young dreamers, boys with hopes and doubts and playfulness, instead of potential threats or icons of societal ills, perhaps they will feel less inclined to kill us.

Immediately after this latest boy was shot, as the pundits and commentators circled like vultures, one said that Trayvon’s hoodie had killed him. I thought this statement to be an odd bit of rhetorical misdirection, a cynical sidestepping of the hollow-point bullet that pierced the boy’s chest. But the illustrator in me couldn’t help but mentally catalog images of black boys in hoods. I wondered: if the man who killed Trayvon Martin had read *The Snowy Day* as a kid, would it have been as easy for him to see a seventeen-year-old in a hoodie, pockets full of rainbow candies and sweet tea, as a threat? What might have been different if images of round-headed Peter and his red hood and his snow angels were already dancing in his head?



So here, then, is my responsibility. To make images, to tell stories, to trouble the narratives that pervade so many people’s secret hearts and minds. To make books in which black people are not flat emblems of our divided nation, flag bearers for guilt or fractious history, but instead humans full of laughter and love and care for one another and their diverse communities. To augment and enrich the image libraries people carry in their hearts; to give them more than slain civil rights leaders and escaped slaves, people whose lives are steeped in violence both literal and figurative, akin to a McGuffey Reader of tolerance and just as desiccate. Instead, I want to give my readers spaceships, clowns, and unicorns, to depict whole human beings, to allow the children in my books to have the childhoods they ought to have, where surely there are lessons and context and history, but there is also fantasy and giggling and play. To encourage them to open their hearts when they see someone who looks like me, even if that person is in the mirror.

It is a responsibility I hope we share, all of us who love literature and children. It is the responsibility that lies behind the percentages, behind the numbers, beyond the market. When we make books, or write about books, or purchase books, we are affirming a vision of the communities in which we want to live. Through books, we outline a vision for our future. We can no longer stand for our futures to be isolated, segregated, lonely, and angry. We can no longer turn a blind eye to stories that create worlds in which difference is viewed as a burden, a dry educational tool, a threat — or, worse, is simply rendered silent and invisible. Those fictional worlds have very real effects. There are children with fear in their hearts, there are children in caskets, and it is up to us to help the next generations avoid those fates.

Now I will go and write something for those kids, all of them, and it will be funny, I hope, because there are enough sad things in the world, because we are most human when we laugh with one another, feel with one another. This is the point of literature, to widen our view beyond ourselves, to take part in that implied and idyllic community of readers. As a lucky member of that community, who also can *make* such books, I have a responsibility, one I share with all of you, to create that world in which we want to live, a world with fewer children in caskets. The stories we tell and support the ones that are funny, or sweet, or heartfelt, are the best way to turn that responsibility into a reality.

 **Christopher Myers** is an artist, essayist and writer who lives in Brooklyn. His latest book is My Pen published by Disney Press, and the forthcoming Know What You Know: A dialogue between Father and Son, a conversation with an unfinished text by his father Walter Dean Myers.

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