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The FULL story

WHY INCLUSIVE BOOKS NEED TO FILL YOUR CHILDREN’S SHELVES

By Bethia Wyborn

From The ‘Rainbow Fish’ to ‘Elmer’, most people can name a book from their early childhood which really resonated with them. But as literature mirrors the world around it, are children’s books keeping up?

Even with at least 130,000 same-sex couples in the UK, it seems like queer representation is playing hide-and-seek in children’s books. This can send a damaging message to kids finding their feet in the world. Surely every voice deserves attention, even if that voice isn’t white, straight or gender-conforming.

I mean, if we can have talking caterpillars and Gruffalos, a queer child purely existing in a book isn’t that outrageous, right?

Trailblazers not only in the UK but across the world are putting their pens to paper and making a difference in the book scene.

When Kate Levett (she/her) scanned the school library to find the next read for her year two class, she noticed there was only one type of family on the shelves. A mum, a dad, and their

children- all of whom were white. As a primary school teacher, Kate’s class was full of children who didn’t fit this model. So she set out to create a book series that included all types of families. Her book called ‘There’s a Baby in the Family’ features fostering, single parents, two mums, two dads and mixed-race families.

“I knew I wanted to write a book that includes everybody, so whoever you are, you can look at a page and go ‘Oh yeah that’s a kid like me’. Kate, 42, says.

“There was a little boy in one of the classes I read it to and he pricked his eyes up as soon as he heard the family that related to him and I thought that’s why I’m doing this, you probably don’t experience that very often and you should.”

“Then on the other side of it, I want to make it more commonplace, because it’s not a big deal is it?”

But it’s not all sunshine and rainbows, some parents are throwing a hissy-fit over queer kids in books.

Last March The Telegraph published an article titled “Parents withdraw four-year-old boy from school’s World Book Day in row over gender identity theme” which detailed a family who was in uproar over “confusing and harmful” gender identity lessons. The book in question, called ‘My Shadow is Pink’, follows a young boy with a pink shadow who likes things that are ‘not for boys’. Through support from his dad, the boy discovers that at times, everyone has a shadow they wish was different and he must embrace his shadow just the way it is.

Wait until they find out about ‘HeartStopper’... Even though this scenario may seem like some playground squabbles, across the pond banning books because they touch on LGBTQ+ topics is a lot more than a horror story.

Someone who has experienced their book being banned in four

states across the US is bigender author,



◀ Carlise Malone (They/Them)

Carlisle Malone (they/them). Their book, 'A Costume for Charly', features a non-binary main character called Charly who finds Halloween difficult as they struggle to find a costume that expresses both their masculine and feminine halves. Through a bit of creativity and thinking outside the box, Charly finds a costume which allows them to present as 100% themselves.

"When my publisher posted about the book on Twitter I had trolls come after me, calling me a groomer or a predator for writing a book that talks about gender identity. As an educator, it was quite upsetting to see that but it wasn't a shock, I had seen other authors go through similar treatment. Carlisle says.

"Then my book became banned in a couple of states. I went to a school board meeting where they discussed the book. They were saying it was about sexuality and I was like, 'This is identity!' That hurt a lot, Charly just puts a costume together.

"To see people standing up for my book and getting the ban overturned in that school was really cool."

Trying to censor artists and authors is unfortunately a common occurrence. According to PEN America, 317 picture books for young readers were banned in 2021-2022, with

most of these books including a protagonist of colour or characters who reflect the LGBTQ+ experience.

Just don't read the books to your children? When Ashley Dawson (she/her) was growing up in Mississippi and Tennessee, she went to schools where the shelves were not filled with literature that reflected her identity. After teaching for over five years in China and the States, she is now using her experience to help pioneer the future of inclusive books in Illinois.

"It would have meant a lot to me to see other types of families and other types of identities being explored, embraced and discussed in the classroom when I was growing up, it's not enough to just include LGBTQ+ inclusive literature or any other type of literature that's more diverse than what we traditionally see in the

Western canon. It also needs to be discussed and it needs to be explored, and the discussion must be driven by student inquiry." Says Ashley.

Realistically having a book which blankets all children together is inaccurate, the world is not full of white, straight and cis people. It's full of colour, pride, and difference.

Most parents will know that no two children are the same. So why do our children books not reflect this?

Associate Professor of Language and Literacy at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Karla Möller (she/her) has done extensive work on inclusivity in literature within elementary schools across the US.

"Inclusivity in books to me is showing we all need to be valued. Karla, 61, says. "If we don't see ourselves and we don't see that we are valued in that space. Are we likely to engage? Are we likely to feel positive learning in that space? Absolutely not.

"It's about feeling like you are a person in that learning space who is fully valued, fully appreciated, and fully respected, and if you don't see yourselves, it's hard to know that support is there.

"When I go into the classroom, we sometimes hear parents say, 'We don't want you pushing an agenda with these books' and I think 'What are you talking about?'

"If I had a photo on my desk, of me and my wife, they would say that was pushing an agenda but if I have a photo on my desk of me and a cis-gendered male husband, I wouldn't be pushing an agenda.

"We are choosing to let certain things be considered normal and inclusive and certain things we're calling pushing agenda when really everything we're doing is modelling our beliefs of the world."

According to the Centre for literacy in primary education, ethnic representation in fiction remains low and lags significantly behind picture books and non-fiction. But, even more so the representation of non-white AND queer protagonists in children's books is *almost* non-existent.

However, authors such as

Shamima (She/Her) with her son Adam ▼



Shamima Khatun (she/her) are working to change this narrative.

Shamima is a single mum and student from Brighton who is paving the way in writing inclusive primary school books. Her newest release titled 'I Love My Mummies' is about a mixed-race girl called Mia who loves spending time with her two mums. Shamima decided to start writing children's books when her son, Adam, was little to introduce him to new topics such as identity and non-heteronormative family structures.

"Living in Brighton there's a mixture of different beliefs and backgrounds but my son doesn't see any difference which is lovely to see. Shamima, 39, says.

"Unfortunately, back in my day we didn't really have any inclusive books. Being from an Asian background it was quite strict. Even though I had nothing against people being gay, I couldn't really show that.

"Through my book, I just wanted to put out a positive message about acceptance and a family who are no different to other families."

One of the greatest things about children's stories is that they serve as powerful tools for parents to navigate difficult topics with their little ones. It's so much easier for parents to prepare their children for the world, if their children are aware that not everyone has the same experience as them.

As authors continue to challenge the status quo and advocate for more inclusive children's literature, hopefully, future generations will grow up surrounded by stories that reflect the diverse world they inhabit. In doing so, these authors are not just telling stories; they are shaping the future landscape of empathy, understanding, and acceptance.