

Editorial: The Power & Brilliance of Black, Indigenous and All Children of Color

Allison Segarra Hansen

When we acknowledge and celebrate physical differences like skin color, hair texture, eye shape, etc., we teach our children that everyone is uniquely beautiful. We teach our children self-acceptance and, moreover, self-love. There are many children's books written in this vein, specifically for children of color. Books such as *Hair Like Mine*, *Eyes That Kiss in the Corners*, and *I Am Enough*. These books are all beautiful and important contributions to the world of children's literature. Teachers and parents alike should share these stories with their kids, but not without asking themselves the question, "Why?" Why do we have to emphasize that children of color are "enough?" Why do we have to tell them that their hair texture and skin color are beautiful? Why aren't there more books about children of color going on adventures, solving problems, or simply "just being kids?" It should not have been a struggle to find books such as this for this issue of *First Opinions*, *Second Reactions*, but it was. Multicultural children's literature too often focuses solely on skin, hair, eyes, food, and historical figures.

Amidst a tumultuous 2020 teeming with civil unrest, a dual pandemic (Coronavirus + undeniable, widespread, outward racism), an international mobilization of the Black Lives Matter Movement, and more recently, just as this issue was being reviewed, an insurrection at our nation's Capital, we have heard the call to "lift Black voices," to face the hard truth of systemic, pervasive racism in our country and to acknowledge the fact that this land does not truly belong to ALL of us. The future most certainly has its eyes on us, and those eyes may be 5, 8, and 10 years old. We cannot take back what they have already seen, and for many reasons, we should not. But we can teach our children that their gorgeous textured hair, their velvety chocolate skin, and/or their "Eyes that Kiss in the Corners" are simply outward representations of the manifestation of their inner beauty and, most importantly, their inner power.

All Black, Indigenous, Children of Color (BIPOC) are brilliant and powerful. They are brilliantly powerful and powerfully brilliant. This is what should be highlighted in children's literature: sisters working together to plan and execute a playground project, children honoring

the true spirit of our country by taking the “Earth Steward and Water Protector Pledge,” a child finding the soul of her name, and a child co-authoring a book with her mother. These are the types of stories we share in this review: *Kamala & Maya’s Big Day*, *100 Days Inside*, *Alma and How She Got Her Name*, *Dreamers*, *We Are Water Protectors*, and *All Because You Matter*.

Pennie Gregory’s First Opinion of *Kamala & Maya’s Big Day* highlights the two sisters’ persistence as they work to realize their dream of a new playground for their apartment complex. Gregory also brings forward the power of community, specifically BIPOC communities, “It is now more important than ever for Black, Indigenous and children of color to know they hold the power to impact positive change in their respective communities.” Gregory reminds us that the power of a collective is stronger than that of individuals, “We need books that show the power of children persisting. Persisting within their own beautiful and brilliant communities where no one can do everything, but everyone can do something.”

Denise Morrow’s second graders’ reaction to *Kamala & Maya’s Big Day* was one of excitement to learn that one of the characters will soon be our Vice President. Through their teacher and the text, they could trace the familiar mantra passed down from parents (like Ms. Morrow’s) “You can do anything you put your mind to,” to the actions taken by the characters, all the way to the White House. How powerful is that?

Dr. Francita McMichel describes *100 Days Inside* as a snapshot of what kids and parents, specifically mothers, have been going through during the pandemic. Martin & Wright, a mother-daughter team, co-author the text from the perspective of Martin, a 5-year-old child. There has been so much discussion of the “learning loss” students are experiencing during this pandemic; however, *100 Days Inside* demonstrates that even in a pandemic, without traditional schooling, our children of color are reading, writing, learning, growing, and becoming authors. As Gregory said in the introduction to her review, “The idea of abolishing racist educational practices and replacing them with “woke” education as a way to cultivate the genius in Black, Indigenous, and children of color is gaining traction nationally.” The notion that children of color, specifically Black children, can and do learn at home is certainly one of those radical, “woke” ideas that educators and education policymakers may want to consider.

In the classroom, Ms. Laryn Morgan’s first graders were able to connect with the character Madison’s outward appearance as a Black child as well as the “big emotions” she shares throughout the story *100 Days Inside*. The class was able to adopt some of Madison’s

coping strategies and come up with some of their own for these difficult times. I would also like to draw attention to something of significance Ms. Morgan refers to so nonchalantly in her review: virtual learning. Ms. Morgan and her students have been in and out of virtual learning for the greater part of a year by now, like so many of our children. The experience of uncertainty in a time of virtual learning has undoubtedly challenged the students, but, through her reflection, we can glimpse the students' resilience and brilliance in Ms. Morgan's description of their interactions with a text through their screens.

The story *Alma and How She Got Her Name* focuses on another character who is experiencing big feelings. Alma Sofía Esperanza José Pura Candela believes her name does not “fit,” which Dr. Santamaría Graff points out is a “double entendre to mean both the actual space Alma's name takes up on paper as well as to Alma's potential of living up to a name...” We can see Alma come into her power as she gathers the stories of the legacy of her name, inviting her ancestors to live within her (as Dr. Santamaría Graff writes). In the end, Alma realizes that she gets to write her own story. Bilingual preschool teacher Janet Moritz shares the story's impact on her young daughter, who, after reading the story, realizes that she also has a unique and special story.

We also see the transfer of generational power in the story *We Are Water Protectors*. Ms. Kayla Johnson's class was able to research an Indigenous culture in order to build the background knowledge needed to engage with the text fully. They were able to apply their prior knowledge of figurative language to decipher the messages presented within the text. Ms. Johnson stated that the book was a “call to arms showing students the importance of their voice and speaking up for those who cannot.” Students were able to identify their responsibility to our Earth and the power they have to protect it.

Dreamers, tells the story of a brave, resilient, hopeful mother bringing her baby from Mexico to the United States. Ms. Angelica Arizmendi and her dual-language class in Illinois could relate to the story, share their own family stories of immigration, and find a sense of pride in their collective narrative. The theme of power is present in the text in the power of a mom with a dream, the power of literature, and the power of language. The brilliant, bilingual children in Ms. Arizmendi's class harbor all of this same power.

We close this issue with reviews of *All Because You Matter*, which is a story that should not have to be told. Dr. Smith-Mutegi deems it “unfortunate that any child would ever have to

wonder if they mattered.” However, we live in a world where we seem to have come to an impasse on who and what matters. Power is both identified and questioned by Dr. Smith-Mutegi in her review of this text. She describes the book as “a fresh take on the realistic experiences of some youth, especially youth of color, that artistically embraces their power, their resilience, and their existence, despite traumatic and unwelcomed events.” Later she states, “The author-illustrator team aims to uplift and empower the assumed powerless.” I would argue that perhaps what the author is trying to do is not to empower but draw recognition to the power held deep within our children of color, especially Black children.

Dr. Smith-Mutegi brings attention to the connection between science and literature present in the book and closes with an allusion to that connection stating:

In almost every sense, this book is a tribute to every little Black, Indigenous, and child of color out there who has ever doubted their worth, who has been consistently exposed to negative images of themselves, who is struggling with self-confidence, who wants to know that someone loves them, who needs to know that they come from greatness, and who is eager to know that they are important in this universe, despite what they see. . .

Indeed, all of our children of color are infinitely important in and to our universe. They are brilliant, powerful, beautiful, and they are integral to the future of our world. They are watching and listening as we muddle through the mess of our current context. Most importantly, they are writing, reading, experimenting, and creating. It is our job to open our eyes and ears wide so that we may truly hear and see them. We must shine a light on their brilliance, rather than trying to stifle it within the confines of ‘norms.’ They will change the world if we let them... and if we are lucky, they will do it even if we do not.

Editor’s note: This issue of FOSR has been purposefully curated to center BIPOC voices. All of the books selected were written by authors of color and contain main characters of color. The reviewers are also all BIPOC. We are brilliant, our voices are powerful, and they will be heard.