



The Sampler

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE COUNCIL OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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“We Need Diverse Books,” The CLC Spring Workshop: A Thought-Provoking Afternoon

by Rita Zaboyan

The Children's Literature Council of Southern California's "We Need Diverse Books" spring workshop took place on May 2, 2015. President Laurie Reese gave a warm welcome and acknowledged the hard work of the volunteers, the Board and especially Betsy Kahn in putting this event together. And what an important event it was—a forum to discuss why the publishing industry and we need We Need Diverse Books.



Lisa Yee, Rodolfo Montalvo, Joe Cepeda

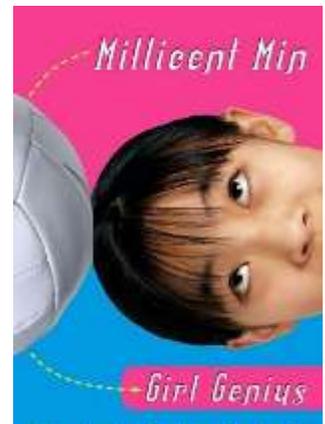
Stacey Lee, author of *Under a Painted Sky*, and a founding member and the legal director of the We Need Diverse Books organization, kicked off the event with an explanation of the campaign's history. With two million social media impressions on the first day of its campaign in 2013, the non-profit organization speaks to a need. It has awards for diverse authors writing diverse books, grants for unpublished authors and for diverse students to intern in publishing, and a book talking kit to help educators and librarians talk to their readers about diversity.

A Diversity Festival is planned for 2016 in Washington, D.C. with commitments from almost all the major publishers. The hope is to move beyond diversity, because diverse books will be established as part of the canon. For more information on the organization and its mission, please go to <http://www.weneeddiversebooks.org/>. For statistics on diversity in the children's book publishing industry, please go to <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/65628-ccbc-stats-show-children-s-books-shifting-toward-diversity.html>.

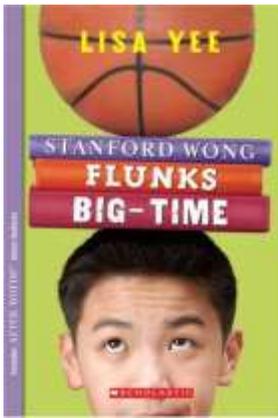


Local foodie and author (*The Kidney Hypothetical*), Lisa Yee, divulged a secret: "I was not always Asian. It happened once I became an author. Prior to that, race was something I wore; it was like my hair, my eyes. I didn't really think about it. Once my new novel came out in 2003, I ceased to become Lisa Yee and I became Lisa Yee, Chinese-American author." Ms. Yee went on to describe she has been mistaken for other Asian-American authors, such as Grace Lin and Lisa See, and how she began to feel limited in what she could write because of the expectation of addressing Asian topics. "It began to constrict me because it sometimes tried to limit who I was and what I could write. Things were expected of me. Because I was Asian, I was expected to write about that. I thought, 'Why is race so important? Why does this even matter? Why can't I just write what I want to write?'

I mean, my being an Asian-American is no big deal, not to me." After all, she had written her first book, *Millicent Min, Girl Genius*, without a political agenda and not to break political barriers. "I just wanted to write a book about a girl who was Chinese-American because that's who I was... Her race is just part of the fabric of the story, and by no means the focus." However, Ms. Yee was told that *Millicent Min* was the first book to feature an Asian-American girl on the cover of a contemporary book (in 2003).



She related an occasion when she spoke at a practically all-white school in the Midwest. "After I spoke, this young Korean boy pushed his way up to the front, just to see me. And he stood there, and he just was grinning. At first, I didn't know what to say. Finally, he said, 'You look like me.' And, you see, ... here in this small town in the Midwest, it was just the two of us, just me and that boy. And for that boy, who'd been adopted, so he didn't even have parents who looked like him, to see another Asian-American, one who'd just stood on a stage and spoke to his whole school, well, that was a big deal for him."



Ms. Yee also spoke about the importance of children relating to characters, and about a Caucasian boy who told her, “I’ve never finished a book before, but I finished yours, and I loved it because Stanford [the protagonist in *Stanford Wong Flunks Big-Time*] is exactly like me.” The boy didn’t identify with Stanford’s race; he identified with Stanford as a person.

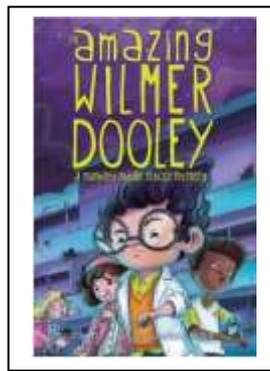
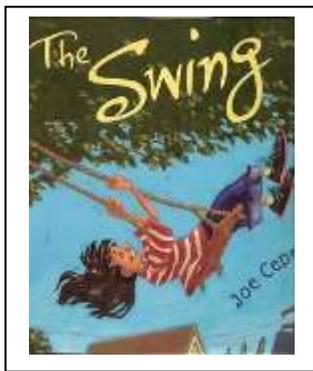
Good storytelling and a well-rounded character engage a reader, a bond is drawn, and an understanding of the character’s race, sexual orientation, religion, etc., will follow. Ms. Yee cautions, “If an author does write about race, they have to get it right...This goes for religion, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity...you have to get it right. You should not automatically assume that you know exactly how somebody feels because you don’t. Do not presume, but do dare to imagine. And so go seek out the experts and talk to people. There is innate knowledge one can gain from experience, from living a life one reads about.”

Ms. Yee ended her presentation with the advice that the publishing industry and readers need to be less exclusive and more inclusive. “We can offer our readers more books with more diversity, so that they are not denied the opportunity to read more, to learn more, and to understand more. When a kid asks for a book, hold out three, and one of those is a diverse book. If they don’t see them [diverse books], they can’t read them. They have to be able to see them. Let’s put those books and authors front and center, and see what happens because there is room for all of us.”



Illustrator Panel with Rodolfo Montalvo, Joe Cepeda, Dan Santat

The illustrator panel featured Joe Cepeda (*The Swing*), Rodolfo Montalvo (*The Amazing Wilmer Dooley*), and 2015 Caldecott winner, Dan Santat (*The Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend*), and was moderated by Ms. Yee.



Each of the illustrators spoke about their artistic and literary influences. Mr. Montalvo described that despite not having artists around him, he liked to draw comic books and had great teachers. He started meeting people in the field and SCBWI has been instrumental in his career. Mr. Cepeda drew a lot at a young age and attended the Los Angeles Music and Art School. He had overt exposure to art making and knew Mexican muralists. He didn't think of art as a real career, as a way to make a living. He studied engineering and made his way back to art. His real influences as an image maker were The Brady Bunch, The Partridge Family, and Pepe Le Pew. Mr. Santat was actually shown Mr. Cepeda's thumbnails as an example of how to create a dummy book. His influences were Calvin and Hobbes, Peanuts, Blondie and Marvel Comics, as his parents didn't allow him to take art classes. He'd look at the images and copy them as a way to teach himself. Mr. Santat also watched Tom Hatton draw on Sunday morning TV and read manga in middle school.

Next, the panelists discussed whether there were artists/illustrators around them growing up and if there was cultural pressure to follow a different career. Mr. Santat related how "it was relentless. My dad, when he would buy me toys, would buy me a doctor's playset. I was not a big reader when I was a child because every book that I was given was a very utility type of reading. 'Hey, why don't you get better at math? Here's a math book. Why don't you read some history?'" His parents turned him away from UC Davis' graphic design program. Instead, he went to UC San Diego and earned a degree in microbiology, and was accepted into dental school. At a job fair, he saw a booth for the Academy of Arts in San Francisco and was intrigued. At San Diego, he attended art workshops, created a portfolio, and applied to art school. At his UCSD graduation dinner, he told his parents that he would attend Art College Center of Design. His parents accepted his change of plans and supported him.

Mr. Cepeda didn't feel pressure one way or another because he was the first in his family to attend college. He earned a full ride to Cornell, which was "out of the realm." He was a pathfinder in that sense. He explained, "The other aspect of it is that I grew up in the '60s and '70s...in East LA. I used to see the 'We Are Not a Minority' mural all the time. Art was these statements about who we

were and what we're going to do. It might have even been a political backdrop to art making, the art making that I saw." Mr. Cepeda started out by creating editorial and political cartoons. The folks at the *LA Herald* helped him realize that storytelling and the making of things were what he really liked. "Some of the big influences of my life were not so much in the craft of making art but my next door neighbor was a woodworker, my grandfather was a woodworker who made wooden toys in Mexico, and everybody on my block made something...people made stuff. I realized many, many years later that at the core of what I do is that I make things. If there's a cultural influence, I think that's the undercurrent of everything, I suppose."

Mr. Montalvo would find the things he liked to draw as a child and would draw them. His father wanted to be a professional—a doctor or a lawyer. It took a while to convince his father that he was going to be an artist. He said, "For me, right now is the time to find my way and explore those parts of art making and my life, really. Early on, they weren't really so pressing as I grew up. I think, in a way, it feels like perfect timing for me to confront those types of subjects."

The final question centered on whether the panelists felt that their cultural identity or background in any way is a part of why they have been selected to illustrate someone else's book. Mr. Montalvo doesn't believe that there's been a case when they've talked to that specific point, that it's never been an issue. Mr. Cepeda said that he's sure it happens often enough, especially in the school textbook market, as they are so specific as to what they want. He stated, "I don't think you can remove yourself or who you are when you're making a picture...I'm thrilled to do stories with people of color and I know who I am for the most part, and some stories are very familiar to me and I can access that very easily, but I tried to preserve that I'm an illustrator. I don't want to be considered the illustrator who does only stories of color. I've tried to nurture over time a career that allows me to illustrate in formats that I want to illustrate, where I can access those voices, those things that I want to say from a full spectrum." He went on to say that he's endeared to stories that speak to his culture and experience, and he doesn't apologize for any of his story making. He has given dignity to every character that he's illustrated. His advice is that over time as an illustrator, it's important to seek out your authentic voice so you can make statements that are true. "The few books that are about diverse people bear the weight of having to be the spokesperson for cultural diversity. When the numbers are so small, that's unfair. There should be plenty of books that speak that where they discussion can be real, can be across many lines. It runs the gamut. The reason we need a lot of titles is so that the criticism could be fairer."

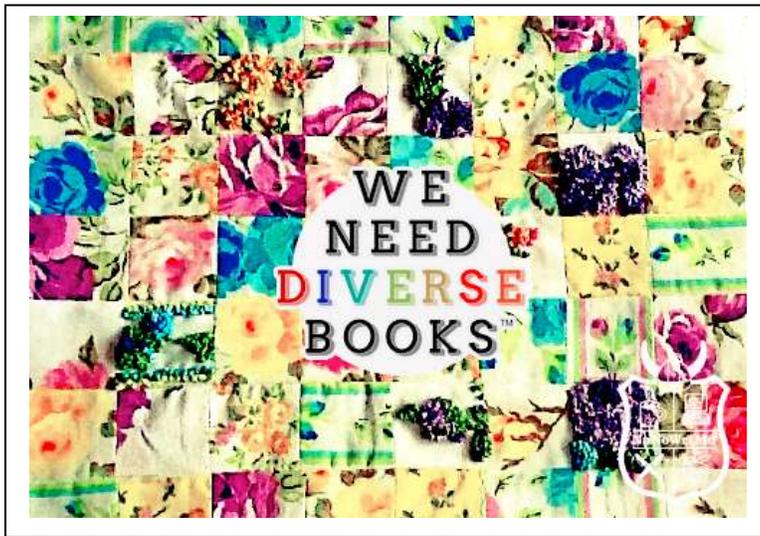
Mr. Santat has never been in a situation where he's been deprived of a project because of his heritage. He questioned if it's helped, and believed he's been fortunate enough to build a reputation around his name. He doesn't consider himself an "Asian author, but I'm an author who happens to be Asian." He tries to encapsulate his stories around things that children can relate to and casts a wider net because of that. He does look at other artists who are well known for doing material of a certain race, such as Kadir Nelson.



Writer Panel: Brandy Colbert, Nicola Yoon, Stephanie Diaz

Next, authors Nicola Yoon (*Everything, Everything*) and Brandy Colbert (*Pointe*) presented information on We Need Diverse Books' initiatives and the "Book Talking Kit." Ms. Colbert noted that the mission of the campaign is to "promote or amplify diversification efforts in reading. We want to increase the visibility of diverse books. It empowers readers when they see someone who looks like them in these books." At a time when 37% of the US population includes people of color, only 10% of the children's books in the last 21 years have included multicultural content.

Ms. Yoon presented the many reasons we need diverse books. They reflect the world around us. They teach respect, and serve as a window and mirror. They teach us something about someone else. We have more in common than we think we do. The more we understand each other, the more we read about each other, we will discover that as well. They promote a wider curiosity about the world. All children are born with this instinct, and it should be fostered. Finally, practically speaking, this is the world we live in.



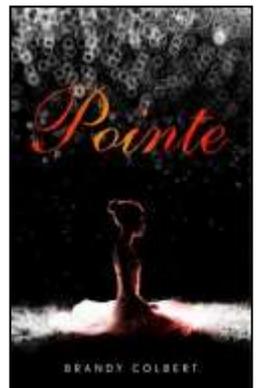
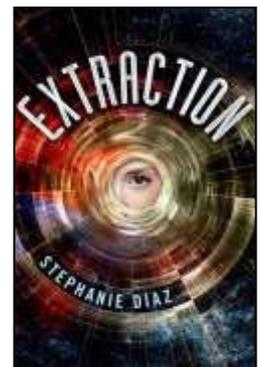
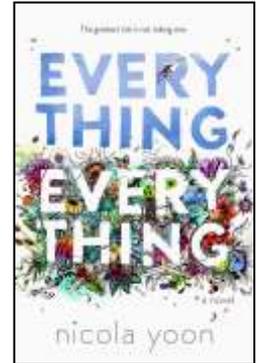
The Book Talking Kit introduces teachers, librarians, educators, and booksellers to tools and resources on how to get diverse books into the hands of children. The kit will have picture book, middle grade, and young adult book lists that have been vetted by the WNDB librarians. Shelf Talkers are downloadable materials that you can put next to books.

The comp title component is very powerful. For example, if you like *Harry Potter*, you might like *Akata Witch*, an epic adventure about magic, love, and friendship. Other examples include if you like *Eleanor and Park*, you might like *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. If you like *Cinder*, you might like *Ash*. If you like *The Day the Crayons Quit*, you might like *A Day with No Crayons*.

Ms. Yoon briefly explained the difference between issue books and non-issue books. For example, in an issue book, the main character is gay and the book is about him coming out or dealing with the consequences of him coming out. In a non-issue book, the main character is gay, but his sexual orientation is not the focus of the book. Both types of books are important for children to see and experience.

A lively Q & A ensued with Ms. Colbert and Ms. Yoon moderating. The audience agreed that often times, parents are more resistant to diverse books. Their challenges are a bigger barrier. The tactic of pushing the story, and not necessarily the characters, worked for one librarian. The idea of inclusivity, as opposed to diversity, was proposed, so that diverse books aren't set aside as "other." An audience member stated that her students are writing to publishers and expressing what they want to see in a book and what's important to them. The notion of "boy books" versus "girl books" was mentioned with the idea that the differentiation "fosters a lack of empathy," as Ms. Yoon noted. Ms. Lee mentioned that the majority of banned books are within the diverse category, so advocacy is incredibly important. Another member noted that the diversity label can be a double-edged sword, as some readers look for it and others will pass on a book because of it. Ms. Colbert stated that the main purpose of the kit is to get people to pick up the books. Ms. Yoon added that educators and librarians know their students best and can help pick books that will benefit their students.

Ms. Lee moderated the writer panel, and Stephanie Diaz (*Extraction*) joined Ms. Colbert. The panelists were asked to share their first mirror or window book. Ms. Diaz mentioned *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and *Roots*, and stated that they “gave a really interesting viewpoint into other cultures that I didn’t know about.” Ms. Yoon listed *The Bluest Eye* and the movie *Harold and Kumar*. She explained “that movie was so important to me to see my experience. I have friends who are everything, and this world does exist. It was really important that this movie existed.” Ms. Colbert related that growing up, she didn’t read anything in which she saw people that looked like her. In college, “I started reading things that kind of reflected, at least had black people. Toni Morrison’s *Sula* was the first book I read where I was ‘Wow, she really captured this and she’s writing about someone who looks like me.’ But, I read outside of my experience for pretty much all of my childhood. I read a lot of *Sweet Valley High*.” Ms. Lee stated that she didn’t find a lot of mirror books while growing up. She read *Five Chinese Brothers* over and over because she loved seeing Chinese people and saw herself in the book.



Next, the panelists discussed their intent when they write about marginalized characters. Ms. Diaz explained that within the science fiction genre, she pays attention to “how diverse my worlds are. Obviously, the world realistically is diverse, and so I want to be true to that. When I come up with my own books, I think about the different cultures, and sometimes I’ll base a specific area of a world on a specific culture.” She states that she tried to be realistic and true to that world.

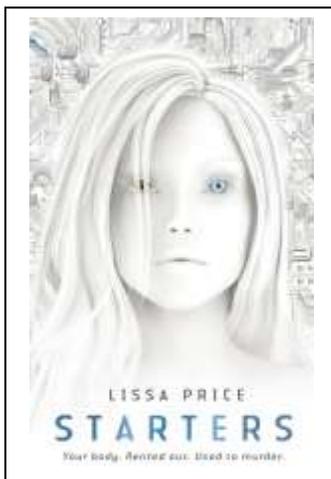
Ms. Yoon tries to be authentic to whoever she’s writing. She consciously made her protagonist bi-racial because she was certain that she wanted her daughter to read the book and wanted her to see herself in the book. For her second book, she stated, “I’m very aware of writing the Korean mom, and to try to be respectful and not get things wrong.”

Ms. Colbert explained that she gets a lot of comments about the diverse cast in her book. “To me, that’s real life. When I moved to LA, most of my friends were Mexican and El Salvadorian. To me, it was natural to write about someone who’s a different race that was her friend. But it’s important to me to get that right and that it was authentic as to who he would be as a Mexican-American living in a suburb in Chicago.”

The topic of diverse/ethnic characters on book covers was raised. Ms. Diaz stated that her biggest issue was that publishers try to make cover characters look more like the beauty standard. However, her publisher listened to her and changed the image to look more realistic. “I tend to like covers more that don’t show the character because they tend to mess them up. I love covers more textual based or setting based, illustrations.” For Ms. Yoon, illustrated covers are preferable. She is happy with her book cover. Ms. Colbert agreed with the others that she doesn’t like faces on covers. “I like to imagine the character myself, so I prefer font based or illustration, as well.” She related that at the time of her novel’s publication, she had been nervous about whitewashing a black character as lighter, but that her publisher did a great job.

Reader response to diversity in the authors’ books varied. Ms. Colbert said she wanted to write about a marginalized character as she’d had those experiences. She received a lot of positive feedback, and some comments mentioned the wish for more focus on the character being black. Because *Everything, Everything* has yet to be published, Ms. Yoon hasn’t received a lot of feedback. She did say that she’d gotten a letter from a girl who is biracial who loved that the main character is biracial, also. Ms. Diaz has not really gotten any comments about the racial aspect of her characters. However, she has heard that people are happy with the representation of the love interest as being disabled.

When asked about comp titles and pitches for their books, Ms. Diaz answered with *Divergent* meets *Ender’s Game* and *The Hunger Games* meets *Star Wars*. Ms. Yoon proposed *Bubble Boy* meets *Say Anything*. *Black Swan* meets *Speak* was Ms. Colbert’s take on her book, and Ms. Lee offered up her book as a young adult version of *Thelma & Louise*.



The packed event concluded with a presentation by author Lissa Price (*Starters*), fresh from her trip to Europe. She talked about the conundrum of answering ethnicity questions on surveys as a *hapa* (Hawaiian for person of mixed heritage; partial roots in Hawaiian/Asian ancestry). “What do I do, right? It depended on how I felt that day. Did I feel white or did I feel more Japanese that day? What would happen if I checked both? Would alarms go off, and would they send me to the principal’s office where I’d have to explain myself in ways of course I wouldn’t want to do.”

Next, came the survey's "other" option, which offered cold comfort. Furthermore, although Ms. Price had good friends, none of them were like her, even if they were diverse. They had entire groups they could relate to, but she didn't. She describes, "I wasn't Asian enough to fit in there, and it was clear that I wasn't white. I was Asian enough to suffer the racist taunts by cruel white boys that could go on for hours. But when it was over, I didn't have my own tribe to comfort me." As a result, Ms. Price found comfort in books and was a constant fixture in the library. She began writing stories at age eight, and proclaimed that "Books saved me."

As an adult, she went to Hawai and experienced a revelation. "For me, it meant the first time that I did not feel like I was the only one. I met many *hapas* like me, so many that it was like looking into a mirror. Now, mind you, I was still different... I was a mainlander. But, still, I would never feel like a freak again." She became aware of *The Hapa Project* by Kip Fulbeck, and was inspired by the different faces and mixed races in the book.

In the last Census, nine million Americans identified as "mixed race." As scientists state that the concept of race doesn't exist, Ms. Price tries to avoid that term. She listed questions and comments that she's heard regarding her heritage. For example, "You are so good with chopsticks. I'd never be that good." "Which one of your parents is white?" "Do you identify more with one parent or the other?" "What are you?" and "Where are you from?" Ms. Price responds better to the question, "Are you *hapa*?" because it suggests that the questioner has some knowledge and sensitivity.

The talk turned to adolescence and the isolation and identity searching that youth often face. "We need books that deal with diversity. Non fiction, of course. We need fiction characters of all colors. In *Starters*, I never designated Callie's hair color on purpose. I wanted readers to make her their own. I opted for brunette [on the book trailer], and that's because I see Callie as Hailee Steinfeld, who is another *hapa*. I defined Callie's trio of friends by clues and names as African-American, East Indian, and Chinese because I wanted the body bank to have a full range of beautiful teen bodies to rent. I didn't want readers to think that senior citizens would only choose to live inside a white body, and some of these rich renters are going to be non-whites and they would want to stay the same."

Ms. Price explained that her current project deals with diversity in a much more direct way. “That has me questioning identity every single day. I’m weighing cultural truths and identifiers against stereotypes that, of course, I want to avoid. I hope it will be thought-provoking, but also a lot of fun because the disenfranchised readers, both teens and adults, are now my tribe.”

This workshop was a lot to process. It both inspired and questioned. It provoked and comforted. Hearing the presenters’ stories and opinions provided much to think about, regardless of background and heritage. One thing, however, is very clear: we need diverse books.

Awards and Honors

If you are a member of the Children’s Literature Council of Southern California and have recently received an honor or an award, please share your good news by emailing TheSampler@childrensliteraturecouncil.org

“Wet Print”

A list of books published in 2013 and 2014 by authors and illustrators living in Southern California can be found at the following links:

[2013 Wet Print](#)
[2014 Wet Print](#)

If you are an author or illustrator and have had or will have a book published in 2014, please let our Wet Print editor know: WetPrint@childrensliteraturecouncil.org .

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