

# 10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism

By the Council on Interracial Books for Children

Both in schools and out, young children are exposed to racist and sexist attitudes. These attitudes — expressed over and over in books and in other media — gradually distort their perceptions until stereotypes and myths about minorities and women are accepted as reality. It is difficult for a librarian or teacher to convince children to question society's attitudes. But if a child can be shown how to detect racism and sexism in a book, the child can proceed to transfer the perception to wider areas. The following ten guidelines are offered as a starting point in evaluating children's books from this perspective.

## 1. Check the Illustrations

**Look for Stereotypes.** A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race, or sex, which usually carries derogatory implications. In addition to blatant stereotypes, look for variations which in any way demean or ridicule characters because of their race or sex.

**Look for Tokenism.** If there are non-white characters in the illustrations, do they look just like whites except for being tinted or colored in? Do all minority faces look stereotypically alike, or are they depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features?

**Who's Doing What?** Do the illustrations depict minorities in subservient and passive roles or in leadership and action roles? Are males the active "doers" and females the inactive observers?

## 2. Check the Story Line

The Civil Rights Movement led publishers to weed out many insulting passages, particularly from stories with Black themes, but the attitudes still find expression in less obvious ways. The following checklist suggests some of the subtle (covert) forms of bias to watch for.

**Standard for Success.** Does it take "white" behavior standards for a person of color to "get ahead"? Is "making it" in the dominant white society projected as the only idea? To gain acceptance and approval, do people of color have to exhibit extraordinary qualities — excel in sports, get A's, etc.? In friendships between white children and children of color, is it the child of color who does most of the understanding and forgiving?

### Resolution of Problems.

How are problems presented, conceived, and resolved in the story? Are people of color considered to be the "problem?" Are the oppressions faced by people of color and women represented as causally related to an unjust society? Are the reasons for poverty and oppression explained, or are they just accepted as inevitable? Does the story line encourage passive acceptance or active resistance? Is a particular problem that is faced by a person of color resolved through the benevolent intervention of a white person?

**Role of Women.** Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence, or are they due to

their good looks or to their relationship with boys? Are sex roles incidental or critical to characterization and plot? Could the same story be told if the sex roles were reversed?

## 3. Look at the Lifestyles

Are the people of color and their setting depicted in such a way that they contrast unfavorably with the unstated norm of white middle-class suburbia? If the non-white group is depicted as "different," are negative value judgments implied? Are people of color depicted exclusively in ghettos, barrios, or migrant camps? If the illustrations and text attempt to depict another culture, do they go beyond oversimplifications and offer genuine insights into another lifestyle? Look for inaccuracy and inappropriateness in the depiction of other cultures. Watch for instances of the "quaint-natives-in-costume" syndrome (most noticeable in areas like costume and custom, but extending to behavior and personality traits as well).

## 4. Weigh the Relationships Between People

- Do the whites in the story possess the power, take the leadership, and make the important decisions? Do people of color and females function in essentially supporting roles?

- How are family relationships depicted? In African-American families, is the mother always dominant? In Latino families, are there always lots of children? If the family is sepa-

rated, are societal conditions — unemployment, poverty — cited among the reasons for separation?

### 5. Note the Heroes

For many years, books showed only “safe” non-white heroes — those who avoided serious conflict with the white establishment of their time. People of color are insisting on the right to define their own heroes (of both sexes) based on their own concepts and struggles for justice.

- When minority heroes do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous or because what they have done has benefited white people? Ask this question: “Whose interest is a particular figure really serving?”

### 6. Consider the Effects on a Child’s Self Image

- Are norms established which limit the child’s aspirations and self-concepts? What effect can it have on African-American children to be continuously bombarded with images of the color white as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, virtue, etc., and the color black as evil, dirty, menacing, etc.? Does the book counteract or reinforce this positive association with the color white and negative association with black?

- What happens to a girl’s self esteem when she reads that boys perform all of the brave and important deeds? What about a girl’s self-esteem if she is not “fair” of skin and slim of body?

- In a particular story, is there one or more person with whom a child of color can readily identify to a positive and constructive end?

### 7. Consider the Author or Illustrator’s Background

Analyze the biographical material on the jacket flap or the back of the book. If a story deals with a multicultural theme, what qualifies the author or illustrator to deal with the subject? If the author and illustrator are not members of the group being written about, is there anything in their background that would specifically recommend them as the creators of this book? The same criteria apply to a book that deals with the feelings and insights of women or girls.

### 8. Check Out the Author’s Perspective

No author can be wholly objective. All authors write out of a cultural as well as personal context. Children’s books in the past have traditionally come from white, middle-class authors, with one result being that a single ethnocentric perspective has dominated American children’s literature. With the book in question, look carefully to determine whether the direction of the author’s perspective substantially weakens or strengthens the value of his/her written work. Are omissions and distortions central to the overall character or “message” of the book?

### 9. Watch for Loaded Words

A word is loaded when it has insulting overtones. Examples of loaded adjectives (usually racist) are “savage,” “primitive,” “con-ning,” “lazy,” “superstitious,” “treacherous,” “wily,” “crafty,” “inscrutable,” “docile,” and “backward.”

- Look for sexist language and adjectives that exclude or ridicule women. Look for use of the male pronoun to refer to both male and females. The following examples show how sexist language can be avoided: “ancestors” instead of “forefathers;” “firefighters” instead of “firemen;” “manufactured” instead of

“manmade;” the “human family” instead of the “family of man.”

### 10. Look at the Copyright Date

Books on “minority” themes — usually hastily conceived — suddenly began appearing in the mid-1960s. There followed a growing number of “minority experience” books to meet the new market demand, but most of these were still written by white authors, edited by white editors, and published by white publishers. They therefore reflected a white point of view. Only recently has the children’s book world begun to even remotely reflect the realities of a multiracial society or the concerns of feminists.

The copyright dates, therefore, can be a clue as to how likely the book is to be overtly racist or sexist, although a recent copyright date is no guarantee of a book’s relevance or sensitivity. The copyright date only means the year the book was published. It usually take a minimum of a year — and often much more than that — from the time a manuscript is submitted to the publisher to the time it is actually printed and put on the market. This time-lag meant very little in the past, but in a time of rapid change and changing consciousness, when children’s book publishing is attempting to be “relevant,” it is increasingly significant. □