

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

Adapted from The Council on Interracial Books for Children and posted on wowlit.org

Both in school and out children are exposed to racist and sexist attitudes. These attitudes—expressed over and over in books and other media—gradually distort their perceptions until stereotypes and myths about people of color and women are accepted as reality. These ten guidelines are offered as a starting point in evaluating children's books from this perspective.

The 10 guidelines were adapted from a 1980 brochure by the Council on Interracial Books for Children (citation follows). The Worlds of Words Center adaptation also updates the language to reflect current terminology as of publishing on our website. The issues of racist and sexist representations in books, however, continue to remain relevant, and genderism has emerged as a critical area of analysis for misrepresentations in children's books.

1. Check the Illustrations

- **Look for Stereotypes.** A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race, sex, or gender, which usually carries derogatory or inaccurate messages, and is applied to all members of a group. While you may not find stereotypes in blatant forms, look for variations that demean, ridicule, or patronize characters because of their race, sex, or gender.
- **Look for Tokenism.** If there are Indigenous characters or characters of color in the illustrations, do they look just like white people except for the color of their skin? Is there one token character of color amidst many white faces? Do people of color look stereotypically alike, or are they depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features?
- **Look for Active Doers.** Do the illustrations depict Indigenous characters or characters of color in subservient and passive roles or in leadership and action roles? Who is depicted as needing help and who takes action? Are males the active doers and females the inactive observers? Are gender identities portrayed that go beyond a female/male binary?

2. Check the Story Line

Although blatant racist and sexist representations are no longer prevalent, racist and sexist attitudes and assumptions still find more subtle expression in books. Some of the subtle forms of bias include the following.

- **Standards for Success.** Does it take “white” behavior for a person of color to get ahead? Is “making it” in the dominant white society projected as the only ideal? To gain acceptance and approval, do Indigenous persons or persons of color have to exhibit extraordinary qualities—excel in sports, get As, etc.? In friendships between white children and children of color, does the child of color have to do 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 related to social injustice? Are the reasons for poverty and oppression explained, or are they 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? Who causes and who resolves the problem?
- **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 gender roles incidental or critical to characterization and plot? Could the same story be told if the gender roles are shifted? Are there characters with a range of gender identities?

3. Look at the Lifestyles

Are Indigenous people or 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 people of color are 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 a particular culture, do they go beyond oversimplifications and offer genuine insight into the lifestyles of the characters?

Look for inaccuracy and inappropriateness in the depiction of cultures outside of dominant white society. Watch for instances of the “quaint-natives-in-costume” syndrome, which is most noticeable in areas like clothing and customs and also extends to behavior and personality traits.

4. Weigh the Relationships Between People

Do the white people in the story possess the power, take the leadership, and make the important decisions? Do Indigenous people, people of color, and females primarily function in supporting roles?

How are family relationships depicted? In African American families, is the mother always dominant? In Latine/x families, is the family always portrayed as struggling? If the family is separated, are societal conditions—unemployment, poverty, for example—cited among the reasons for the separation? Are characters from a range of genders portrayed in nurturing roles?

5. Note the Heroes

For many years, books showed only “safe” heroes of color, in particular those who avoided serious conflict with the white establishment of their time. People of color today insist on the right to define their own heroes (of any gender) based on their own concepts and struggles for justice. When heroes of color 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, “Whose interest is a particular hero really serving?”

6. Consider the Effect on a Child's Self-Image

Are norms established that limit any child's aspirations and self-concept? Children of color and Indigenous children are often 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? Will all children of color from a range of backgrounds find one or more characters with whom they can readily and positively identify?

Are there gender associations based on who performs brave and important deeds? What concept of beauty is portrayed and does that concept of beauty vary by gender?

7. Consider the Author or Illustrator Background

Analyze the biographical material on the jacket flap or the back of the book. If a story deals with a theme related to a specific minoritized group, what qualifies the author or illustrator to deal with the subject? If the author or illustrator are not members of the minoritized group being written about, is there anything in their background that would recommend them as the creators of this book? Also, consider the same issues related to other members of the bookmaking team—e.g. translator, editor, publicist.

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. In the past, children's books were created by white, middle-class authors and illustrators, so that a single ethnocentric perspective dominated children's literature in the United States. Read carefully to determine whether the direction of the author's perspective substantially weakens or strengthens the value of the book. Are omissions and distortions central to the character or message of the book? Check the websites of the author and illustrator to read their statements and perspectives in discussing their creation 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, lazy, conniving, superstitious, treacherous, wily, crafty, docile, and backward*.

Look for sexist and gendered language and adjectives that exclude or ridicule women or exclude gender identities beyond male/female. Look for use of the male pronoun to refer to both males and females or the use of binary language that signals that the only two options for gender identity are male or female. While the generic use of the word "man" was accepted in the past, its use today is outmoded. The following examples show how sexist language can be avoided: substitute ancestors for forefathers; chairperson for chairman; community for brotherhood; firefighters for firemen; manufactured for man-made; the human family instead of the family of man. Examples of how gendered language can be avoided include substituting siblings for brother and sister, parents for mom and dad, children for boys and girls, and they for he/she.

10. Look at the Copyright Date

Only a few books with characters of color appeared prior to the mid-1960s, many of which were published to meet the new market demand but were still written by white authors, edited by white editors, and published by white publishers. They therefore reflected a white point of view. Authors of color and Indigenous authors writing about their own experiences emerged in the 1970s, but this trend has fluctuated with the market over the years. Non-sexist books, with rare exceptions, were not published before 1973.

The copyright dates, therefore, can be a clue as to how likely the book is to be overtly racist or sexist or gendered, 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 takes several years from the time a manuscript is submitted to the publisher to the time it is actually printed. This time lag meant little in the past but is significant in a period of rapid change and evolving consciousness as children's book publishing attempts to be relevant.

Adapted by Worlds of Words (2020) from *10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Book for Racism and Sexism* (1980), published as a brochure by the Council on Interracial Books for Children (New York). The brochure is out of print and the organization no longer exists.

Another adaptation of these guidelines was created by Louise Derman-Sparks, [A Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books](#).

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