

Beware The Cat in the Hat: How Children's Literature is the Modern Form of Segregation

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Beware *The Cat in the Hat*:
How Children's Literature is a Reflection of a Bleak Society

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According to Martha Crippen, “Children’s literature is important because it provides students with opportunities to respond to literature; it gives students appreciation about their own cultural heritage as well as those of others; it helps students develop emotional intelligence and creativity; it nurtures growth and development of the student’s personality and social skills; and it transmits important literature and themes from one generation to the next.”¹ Unfortunately, this statement is often impossible to obtain, as many of the most beloved children’s books contain text, images, and undertones that are potentially harmful to the growth of a child. Often, issues such as race, sexuality, ethnicity, consent, and identity are portrayed in ways that are harmful. These values are sometimes hidden and sometimes blatant, but regardless, they are being advertised as harmless to the youngest among us. Children’s literature is often propaganda that reflects society and its refusal to accept race, identity, and ethnicity.

When conducting my research, I created a few rules: 1) I excluded fairy tales, as there are many versions of similar ones from different cultures. While some provide excellent examples, others require a level of interpretation that would need to be explored through another paper. 2) Many historic novels have lots of issues revolving around race. When I began my research, I intended to avoid these books because of the argument that racial issues are only a product of the historical time. This became impossible when I analyzed *Little House on the Prairie*, as this novel challenged the previously mentioned argument. 3) Finally, the books I mention within this paper are not the only ones that I analyzed. These books were picked because I believed that they were a good representation of a variety of styles of books, illustrations, publishing years, positives and negatives, and popularity. Since the beginning of this project, I have now analyzed thousands of children’s literature pieces. I have connected them to a myriad of other academic

¹ Martha Crippen. “The Value of Children’s Literature.” *Oneota Reading Journal*, (2012).

disciplines, including education, sociology, and religion. I especially considered education, as I am studying to become a primary educator, and religion, as this paper began in my Womanist Ethics class at Augustana College.

What I learned is children's literature is full of problematic material that is given to society's most impressionable. To demonstrate this, I first analyzed a few hundred children's books from Augustana College's Thomas Treadway Library collection. After only a few minutes into my initial research, it was apparent that more children's literature includes problematic material and images than not. Augustana's collection is not unique. In this paper I analyze seven representative books: three that had obvious, cultural appropriation; three that demonstrated what positive, inclusive literature is, and one that is representative of both positive and harmful messaging. As such, this is a critical and constructive report of my findings. I made sure to include positive examples because while children's literature is extremely problematic, only acknowledging these issues does not attempt to solve the issue in society. Therefore, I included some positive works to show how the problem is not inevitable. Progressive writing will hopefully help move society forward on the issue, not just leave it as a static problem.

Not only is the issue of appropriation within children's literature currently a fixed issue, but it is also a majority issue. First, I will discuss the issue of cultural appropriation as it appears in children's literature. Three popular children's books that illustrate this matter are: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl, *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss.² Beginning with the most straight-forward of the issues, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* includes derogatory images, both illustrated and verbal, of what kind

² I specifically chose these three examples because they are considered classic, well-known pieces of children's literature. My hope is that anyone who reads this paper would have a basic understanding of the plot and/or themes of these examples.

of beings the Oompa-Loompas represent. The famous, fun-loving character of Willy Wonka himself even tells the visitors in his factory about how he took the Oompa-Loompas from a far land, promising them a better life if they agreed to be enslaved in his factory for eternity.³ Suddenly, the energetic, dancing chocolatiers parallel the vast history of slavery. Wonka represents a slave master, who enslaves people he describes as only the strongest, hardest-working of the race. He only allowed them to dress in primitive deer skins while he wore elaborate, colorful clothing.⁴ Thus, Dahl is comparing the Oompa-Loompas lives to enslavement, but instead of critiquing it, he is endorsing it. Consistently within the novel, the Oompa Loompas are portrayed as overjoyed to be enslaved by Wonka. Such imagery helps to brainwash the reader into believing what Wonka is doing is acceptable. This is especially problematic because *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is a classic piece of children's literature. Thousands of people read it every year, and there is little critique of enslavement in spite of its prominent presence in the book.

Another children's book that illustrates culture appropriation in a harmful way, *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss, presents an entirely different issue that is concerning: the subject of consent. The book centers around two children, who on a rainy afternoon are visited by the Cat in the Hat. This book is often read to teach children the life skill of patience, the importance of rules, and it could even be used to teach the risk of "stranger danger". While these are all important lessons to teach, the idea of consent in books such as *The Cat in the Hat* has become a significant issue since the birth of the #metoo movement in 2006. As the public becomes increasingly aware of representations of consent in media, they must also consider the books they read and the books children read. Throughout the story, the two children in the book

³ Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1964) p 75.

⁴ Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, 85.

repeatedly ask the Cat to leave. They tell him they do not like his games; they tell him that they do not want to be involved in his chaos. Every time this happens, the Cat replies with a phrase such as the following: ““But I like to be here. Oh, I like it a lot!” (said the Cat in the Hat to the fish in the pot). “I will not go away. I do NOT wish to go! And so,” (said the Cat in the Hat), “So so so...I will show you another good game that I know.”⁵ This is demonstrative of how the Cat verbally coerces the children into allowing him to stay and show them games, even when the children do not consent to the Cat’s plans. The children and the fish in the house do not want what he is doing to them, but the Cat continues only because it is what he wants. Reading this instantly conveys a lesson that society should *never* want to teach to their young. *Not* in the last century, *not* now, and *not* in any foreseeable future.⁶ Children should feel safe, even when they are reading, especially when their books are marketed as vessels delivering moral lessons. Thus, it is dangerous to teach stories such as *The Cat in the Hat* as a moral story because it includes blunt immoral themes, as well as scary element of non-consensual acts from dominating figures. Tying back into the #metoo movement, *The Cat in the Hat* is a story that sadly parallels many of the stories that are being presented in the mainstream media: women being sexually harassed and abused by the men who are deemed more powerful.

While it may not seem like it can get much worse than the promotion on non-consensual acts by authority figures in Seuss’ *The Cat in the Hat*, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*, is one of the most controversial pieces of children’s literature ever written. Written in 1935, Wilder’s historical piece of literature contains blatant discriminatory portrayals of Native

⁵ Dr. Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1957), p 27.

⁶ It could be argued that *The Cat in the Hat* illustrates obedience to children. The children and the fish are only anxious about breaking the rules that their parents have set in place for them, but they are ultimately obligated to conform to the overpowering adult. This argument still shows how the children are uncomfortable as they are being coerced into activities that they do not want to do – but they do it anyway.

Americans. Reevaluation of this has resulted in an award named after Wilder to be renamed by the American Library Association in the previous year. Learning this information for the first time was particularly distressing to me, as this was a favorite childhood book of mine. I was both curious and scared to reread the book to see problematic themes that I accepted without questioning when I was a child. The result not only shocked me but caused quite a bit of distress to the people around me.⁷

People who have reviewed this book recently were horrified when they heard the text from *Little House on the Prairie*, for it is not even subtly racist. It is unashamedly barbaric. Not even ten pages into the novel, the father, Pa, of the main character, a little girl named Laura, explains to her the meaning of a “papoose.” Pa tells her that “a papoose is a little, brown, Indian baby.”⁸ After that, he goes on to continually promise Laura that she can see one, and eventually even have one of her own.⁹ If this is not disturbing enough¹⁰, the illustrations that exemplify out Wilder’s text certainly prove the racist nature of the story. Three times within the course of the narrative, the Native Americans¹¹ enter the Wilder house. Every time, the descriptions of them get more racist; these descriptions coincide with the family’s building intolerance of different cultures. When they first enter the house, Laura describes the Native Americans as “tall, thin, fierce-looking men. Their skin was brownish-red. Their heads seemed to go up to a peak, and the

⁷ While doing my initial research, many of my friends, family, fellow classmates, and professors became closely involved in this research. Many of them have been distressed at the issues in the books I am choosing because they loved them as a child or love reading them to their children. When they saw the negative messages in books they cherished, they were equally concerned that they enjoyed the books contained such language and images, as well as the idea that they were passing on these books to future generations with the mindsets that they represented positive morals and/or historical lessons.

⁸ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1935), p 6.

⁹ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 308.

¹⁰ Those around me found this disturbing to know that Laura thought it was acceptable to take a child from their mother, as well as did not see anything wrong with owning another human as her own.

¹¹ Wilder never states what tribe these Native Americans are from. Instead, they are just referred to as “Indians” throughout the entire novel.

peak was a tuft of hair that stood straight up and ended in feathers. Their eyes were black and still glittering, like snake's eyes."¹² The illustration that accompanies this imagery is stereotypical of the racist nineteenth and twentieth century depiction of Native Americans (Fig. 1). It even notes subtle details in the text, such as their snake-like eyes. This is an especially concerning detail when one ties the connection between the poisonous snakes the Pa points out to his daughters earlier in the novel. He describes the snakes as deadly, and he even notes that such awful snakes are only found in areas inhabited by Native Americans.¹³ The parallel of Native Americans and poisonous snakes worsens when Laura admits that she wanted to set their family dog loose on the indigenous people, hoping that he would shred them like he did snakes.¹⁴

The previous passages are only a couple examples of how Native Americans are negatively perceived in historical stories such as *Little House on the Prairie*. The reason for much of the concern occurs for a few different reasons. First, in only three hundred pages of text, there are over one hundred derogatory comments, songs, or actions carried out towards the indigenous people of the plains. This is unacceptable for any book, let alone a children's book. If it were just a couple comments here and there, it might be able to pass as historical context that has not been corrected, but the sheer number of racist references eliminates history as an excuse. Second, while *Little House on the Prairie* was published in 1935, the illustrations were not added until 1953. This almost twenty-year difference does not show any historical progress, but instead, reinforces the negative portrayals of other races that were plentiful in the 1950s. This is further exemplified by other children's novels. Many of the books I analyzed, regardless of their original publishing dates, were illustrated in the 1950-1960s; the images provide disputable evidence of

¹² Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 134.

¹³ Wilder, 110.

¹⁴ Wilder, 145.

reform (Fig. 1). They indicate stereotypical images of Native Americans that risk being engrained into children's minds as the correct representation. Lastly, the major issue with *Little House on the Prairie* is that it creates a no-win situation when reading it to innocent, young children. The large amount of negative references must all be explained, which after time, takes away from any positives that one may receive from

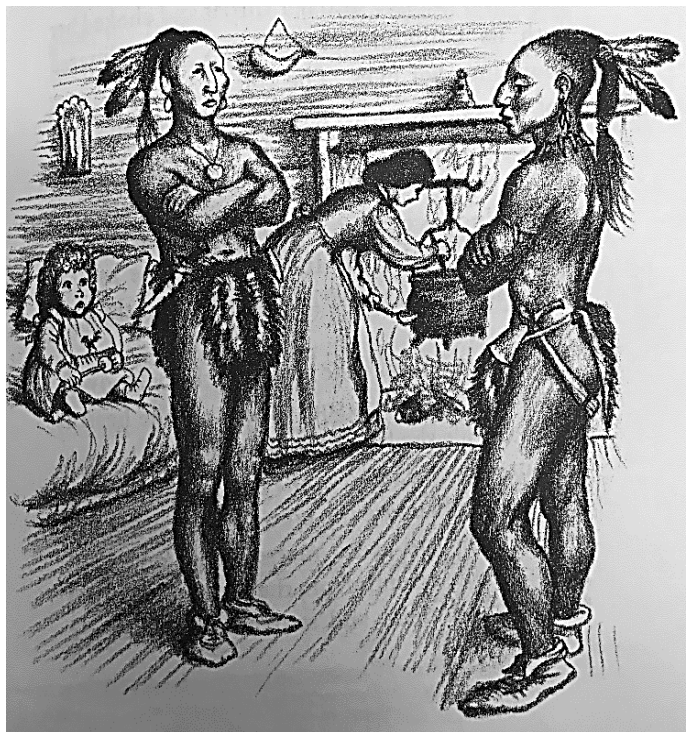


Figure 1: Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1935), p 139.

reading this book. For example, a parent or teacher may be comfortable explaining to a child that Native Americans should not be referred to as “Indians,” as they are in this text, but they may not be comfortable explaining the more subtle negative details: the stereotypical images, the slang used to describe them, the desire for the children to want to hurt and mistreat those who are not like them. They are taught to stereotype other cultures, something that parallels to an important theme in womanism: Sapphire.

The Sapphire is a label that is often explored with the division of religion known as womanist method. The Sapphire stereotype is a negative one that depicts the loud and abrupt, haughty nature of black women that has been stereotypically connected to them. Womanist scholar Emilie Townes wishes to reclaim these negative stereotypes, instead letting them stand as

positive examples of ethical life.¹⁵ Like Wilder's depictions of Native Americans, the Sapphire image has been created by a culture that is not the one being represented.¹⁶ Thus, these representations are insulting and continue to teach untrue stereotypes to the youngest in society. The image of Sapphire also raises an important argument; it is reproduced easily and often. Townes suggests this idea when she states, "in many ways, whiteness has been made an abstraction – it has been distanced from our immediate concrete material experience We see it, we experience it, but we cannot define it our codify it like we do so easily with dark-skinned peoples."¹⁷ Thus, Sapphire signals to society the need for moving on from cultural appropriation, as her sassy characteristics make others aware of similar societal stereotypes today. Once the cultural appropriation is acknowledged, Sapphire urges for society to come up with a solution. An example of this solution are the more progressive books that are in the following paragraph.

Despite the overwhelming number of negative pieces of children's literature, there are also several good examples of children's literature that exemplify a positive message while retaining just and inclusive plots. Within Augustana's library, the three best examples of this type of literature I found were: *I Am Jazz* by Jazz Jennings and Jessica Herthel, a reimagined story of *The Three Pigs* by Bobbi Salinas and *Can I Touch Your Hair?* by Irene Latham and Charles Waters. All of these books filled me with just as much surprise as the negative examples did.¹⁸ Moreover, they all found a way to touch me. The first book, *I Am Jazz*, tells the real-life story of Jazz Jennings, a young transgender girl. The book follows Jazz through the beginning of her transition and pays special attention to teaching others how it is respectful to treat family,

¹⁵ Emilie M Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006,) p 71-78.

¹⁶ Emilie M Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 47, 70.

¹⁷ Emilie M Townes, 76.

¹⁸ This surprise was of some concern to me. It was concerning that I was just as shocked to read straightforward, inclusive children's literature as I was when I read negative children's literature.

friends, and strangers. The illustrations by Shelagh McNicholas also depict how hard it was for Jazz to explain to her family and friends that she wanted to be a little girl. Furthermore, the images also serve as an excellent pseudo-story for children who not old enough to read on their own. That is, even without the text, the images tell a beautiful story of a young girl finding confidence in herself (Fig. 2). The only critique I could make of this book hardly counts as such. The book was written in alliances with the TransKids Purple Rainbow Foundation. While this is wonderful, my only concern was that positive books such as *I Am Jazz* are only written when foundations push for them and help significantly in the publishing process. My hope is that, in the future, society will evolve enough so that such books will be written

independently; they will no longer be written just to be a positive in a library shelved with negatives.¹⁹

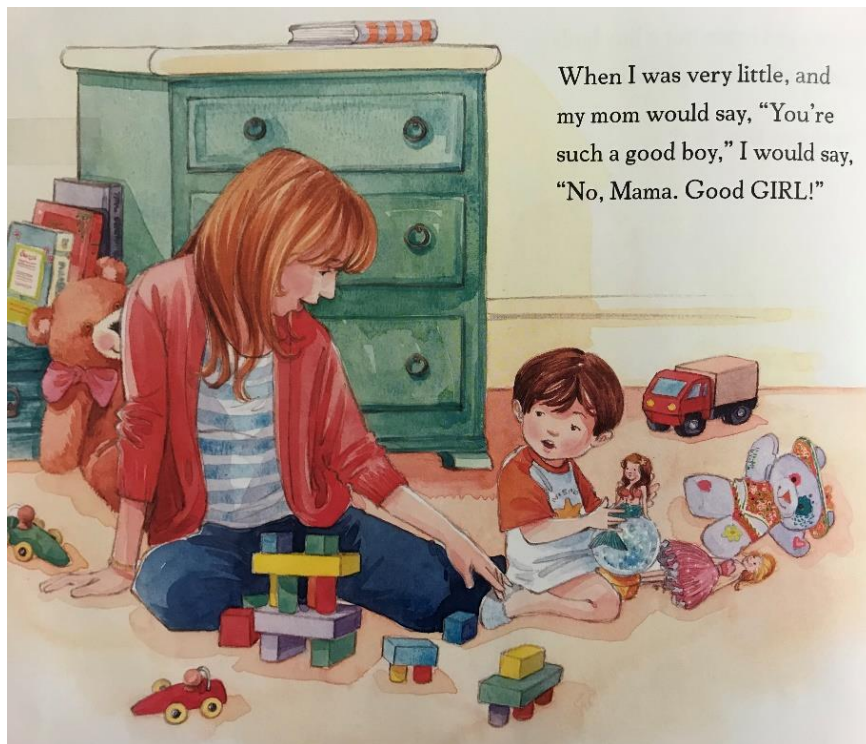


Figure 2: Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings. *I Am Jazz* (New York: Penguin Group, 2014).

¹⁹ *I Am Jazz* was brought into the library in a process to create a more diversely-inclusive children's literature collection.

Continuing with the positive children books, *The Three Pigs* by Bobbi Salinas provides the most interesting example of inclusive literature that I found in the library. When the librarians and I first pulled this book from the shelves, we were disturbed. The story follows three pigs, Nacho, Tito, and Miguel as they build houses with adobe and straw because that is all they can afford. The wolf's name is José, allowing the author to cleverly use the phrase "No way, José," when the wolf comes knocking at the pigs' doors. The images are also concerning upon first view. They are drawn in a Mexican style that appears almost insulting. Celebrities are listed by their Spanish names, and carts line the streets with names such as "Juan's Juanderful Sombreros." This upset everyone who came across this book, especially me.²⁰ The cultural appropriation seemed more than apparent and not the slightest bit subtle. Something strange occurred with this book, when the librarians and I finally sat down to really read it. On the cover, there is a notice that the book is for people of all ages, genders, and races. It has also won a prestigious Mexican-American children's literacy award. We questioned how this was possible with our assumed view of the book. After looking at the inside cover, our perception of this book completely changed. The text inside the cover provides a brief explanation of the author's intentions in writing her Mexican version of the *Three Little Pigs*. Bobbi Salinas explains that the book is supposed to represent a non-violent version of a classic story that also shows children the problems with immigration into our country; the United States immigration system may be well intended but is not successfully executed. The three pigs in the book repeatedly try to build lives for themselves, but the wolf, who symbolizes the United States government, continually knocks them down and tries to send them home.²¹ All three pigs are educated, and when the images are

²⁰ The more people I showed this version, the angrier the Augustana community became about my research and what it was revealing. They could not believe that our library had books that were culturally-appropriated.

²¹ This version of the *Three Little Pigs* was written in 1998, showing how the issues revolving around immigration were topics of dispute long before the Trump administration.

examined closely, they contain many clever connections to Mexican culture. In conclusion, this book is clever. It is fun, it is smart, and it teaches important lessons about the immigration crisis.

My final positive example was, *Can I Touch Your Hair?: Poems of Race, Mistake, and Friendship* by Irene Latham and Charles Water. This book impacted me the most, as it is the best example of using power of children’s literature for creating a positive society. In fact, I have already ordered this book for my own classroom because I saw so much value in it.²² Written in 2018, this story is told in all poems, one from a little white girl and one from a little black boy on the adjoining page. The story follows them through a poetry unit in school. Both of them love poetry, but fear being partnered together because of the race of the other. When fate brings them together, they recognize difference in privilege, attitudes, fear, opinions on police brutality and the n-word. Ultimately, they recognize how to forgive. The book even goes as far to demonstrate societal issues of race, not just personal ones. It is extremely powerful, especially in the poetic format. To illustrate the power of the poetry, here are some of the most influential examples of how the conflicts that revolve around race can be shared with children:

“Why Aunt Sarah Doesn’t Go Downtown After Dark: sky **BLACK** streets
BLACK faces **BLACK** fear  white.”²³

“**Officer Brassard**: When I watch the **news**, I can’t believe when I see people
 who could pass as my *family* being **choked**, **PUMMELED**, **shot**,
KILLED by police officers. I remember the time when I tried to hop a chain-link

²² *Can I Touch Your Hair?*, like *I Am Jazz*, is another book that has been part of the effort to create a more diversely-inclusive children’s literature collection at the Thomas Treadway Library.

²³ Irene Latham and Charles Waters. *Can I Touch Your Hair?: Poems of Race, Mistake, and Friendship* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, Inc., 2018), p .29.

fence, my low-top sneakers got caught, and I couldn't get down. That's when Officer Brassard happened to drive by. He stopped, **helped me** untwist myself, and promised to keep that embarrassing moment to himself. He even **bought me a Popsicle** later that day to help me cool off my shame, a gift for being awesome, he said. Yet, when the police officers on TV are **pale as a cloud**, just like Officer Brassard, it makes my heart *twist* without any hope of being **disentangled**.²⁴

These examples show how children's literature can be used to create a positive impact. Poems like these are so simple, yet they have the ability to change the future of our society, starting with its youngest members. The poems above give children insight into societal problems that must be addressed by their generation as they grow older. Early knowledge encourages children to make a bigger impact sooner in their lives. Examples such as *Can I Touch Your Hair?*, *I Am Jazz*, and *The Three Pigs* show what the ideal future of children's literature. Inclusive and diverse children's books are powerful, especially as they coexist with many books that do not reflect contemporary progressive values. They create an obligation for educators and parents to present children with books that are teaching them positive morals, not just providing negative entertainment. Literature such as these books may not be considered "classic" but continues to tell engaging stories with memorable characters. They prove that there is no point in continuing to create negative children's literature, when there is a proven need for good literature. This is especially important when authors, such as Jennings, Latham and Waters, and Salinas have showed society that it is possible.

²⁴ Latham and Waters. *Can I Touch Your Hair?: Poems of Race, Mistake, and Friendship*, 24.

These examples of positive children's literature showcase the importance of the seven virtues to live by, as outlined by womanist scholar Dr. Melanie L. Harris. The virtues apply to the topic of graciousness, compassion, audacious courage, justice, and good community.²⁵ First, graciousness can be seen through all the authors of the positive literature. By writing, illustrating, and publishing books with good messages, the authors are displaying grace and kindness towards society. Compassion ties neatly into this idea as well. The authors must have an awareness of the injustice in societal to want to combat it. For example, in *I Am Jazz*, Jennings brings awareness to her own suffering so that it may help other children in the same position. Audacious courage can be applied to these books when one realizes the radical nature of them. They are not common yet, as positive literature is still in the minority of children's literature. For the authors to recognize this shows that they are fighting for a cause that is greater than themselves. This idea also applies to the virtue of justice, which speaks about equality, freedom, and human rights. In *Can I Touch Your Hair?*, the two children battle with issues of racial segregation. Thus, the virtue of justice can be seen through the eyes of the children as they realize their wrongdoings and confront injustice. Finally, the virtue of good community applies because these books are living out the virtue of promoting justice in the community.²⁶

To conclude the idea of problematic children's literature, it is vital to include one more topic: *The Magic School Bus Syndrome*.²⁷ This is when books include diversity only for the sake of diversity, as in the case of the children on the popular children's animated series, *The Magic School Bus*. It is an extremely problematic within children's literature especially within

²⁵ Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) p 114-123.

²⁶ Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics*, 114-123.

²⁷ I created this term, as it became a good example for what most people could recognize as a group of illustrated children that represented all different races.

illustrations. Thus, to best demonstrate this concept, I decided to find a book with illustrations that were obviously created only for diversity's sake. The book I settled on was entitled *Bully*. The book has no credited author, but instead the entire publishing company is credited with the creation of the idea and text. But *Bully* does have an illustrator, Naomi Tipping. By only having an identified illustrator and no identified author, it shows that there was intention within the images. Starting with the cover, five children

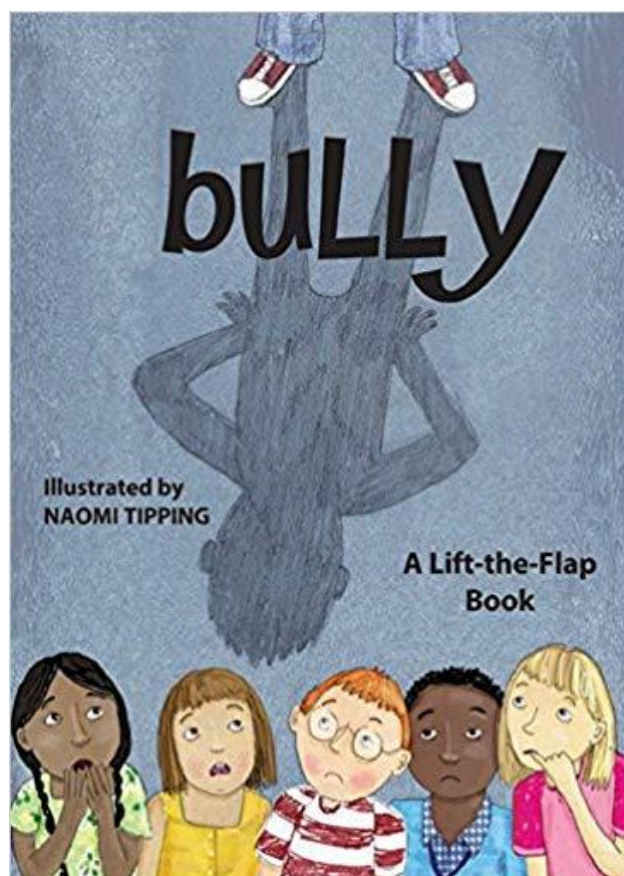


Figure 3: *Bully* (Great Britain: Tango Books LTD, 2008).

are looking up and covering at the shadow of a presumed bully. All five children look as diverse as possible, with no two children who have the same skin-tones or hair color standing next to each other (Fig. 3). The hope is that society will one day reflect this image, but currently, the image looks forced. To further this concept, there is a section of the book that is supposed to explain why bullies do what they do. It consists of a turning wheel that can be spun to show possible secrets in a bully's life that are affecting them. On the wheel are eleven different children. Once again, these children could not be more different. Clothing symbolizes the religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, and every race and ethnicity is represented. This shows that all of these people could potentially be bullies. The real problem lies on the next page. Above the image is four words: Portrait of a Victim. Below is one giant image of a single person, a white girl. This then implies that victims can only be white

because the book is telling you that *the white girl is what a victim looks like*.²⁸ This is extremely problematic, indicating racial bias even in works that are intended to be diverse.

The idea of the *Magic School Bus Syndrome* parallels with some information from Emilie M. Towne's explanation of identity as property. Like the stereotype of the Mammy, the stereotypes of the children featured in works such as *Bully* are wrong. The book illustrates most bullies as African Americans and Muslims, with only a few as Caucasian males. The victims are predominately white. These stereotypes are hurtful and usually wrong. Like the children in the book, people view the Mammy figure in a particular way. They view her as a housekeeper, a good cook, and a woman who has had all of her sexuality stripped from her own being.²⁹ For example, the Mammy figure of Aunt Jemima represents great pancakes for thousands of people. Likewise, the image of five children who are only illustrated for the sake of diversity should not represent a positive image, but a negative one.

Children's literature is filled with many issues that matter because they form social imagination. While most are negative, there are a few positive pieces that give hope to how society is shaping its youngest generation. This is an exploration of how womanist ethics gives society the knowledge and courage to combat the propaganda that is placed in the hands of children. The Sapphire image inspires change through her bold image, the virtues create an appropriate outline, and the Mammy image reminds us of what is true diversity versus diversity for diversity's sake. Together, the tenets of womanism form the solution to the problems associated in children's literature.

²⁸ *Bully* (Great Britain: Tango Books LTD, 2008).

²⁹ Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 37-40.

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