

8 tips for choosing “good” picture books featuring Black and Indigenous people and People of Color (BIPOC)¹

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If you’re an adult who understands the importance of seeking out picture books that feature Black and Indigenous people and People of Color (BIPOC), it can still be challenging to know *how to choose a good book* from among what’s available on the “diverse books” market.

The most common advice is to avoid books with stereotypical or negative portrayals, and to seek out books by authors/illustrators who share an identity with the characters in the book. There’s not a whole lot more guidance out there. Here’s some additional advice for how you can evaluate the quality of picture books featuring BIPOC. Give these tips a try using the Diverse BookFinder’s comprehensive collection of picture books! The [collection](#) is coded using nine [categories](#) that capture the dominant messages conveyed by books featuring BIPOC, many of which are highlighted in the tips below.

1. Choose a compelling book & consider your audience.
2. Include books in which BIPOC characters are the stars.
3. Scaffold your approach when introducing new material.
4. Consider the experience and/or expertise of the creators
5. Look for books that depict positive interactions across differences
6. Aim for a balanced set of portrayals.
7. Feel free to wear a critical lens while reading any book.
8. Do ongoing research.

1. Choose a compelling book & consider your audience.

There’s no such thing as a perfect book featuring BIPOC that will appeal to every child! Choosing books only because they’re recommended could cause children to experience them as obligatory, “good-for-you” materials...like medicine. So ask yourself: Does this book have an engaging story that *grabs your attention*? Will children respond to the content in some way? Would they enjoy an inspiring biography? An adventure, fantasy, or something historical? A nonfiction informational book? Does the book use meaningful topics and themes that will *speak to children*? Does it have vivid language, images, and well-developed characters that will *make them feel something*? Will they be drawn to the characters? Can the book build on current levels of knowledge or experience?

Related Resource:

[Looking for Excellent “Diverse” Books for Young Children? Start Here!](#)

2. Include books in which BIPOC characters are the stars.

Who is telling the story? Who has the power? This matters as much as, if not more than, who shows up in the story. Picture books that feature a white main character with BIPOC as secondary or background characters can send the message that BIPOC are only ever incidental to the lives and experiences of white people.

The Diverse BookFinder [data](#) also shows an increase in the amount of picture books being published that feature characters of color whose race/culture is unspecified (e.g. “brown-skinned”). While it’s OK to read books in which characters’ racial or cultural identifications are not central to the story, they shouldn’t be substituted for books featuring clearly-identified BIPOC as the stars who drive the action and/or meaning.

3. Scaffold your approach when introducing new material.

If your child/ren are quite young, or you’re just beginning to expand the diversity of the books you’re reading to include people who don’t look like your family, start with titles that **introduce and celebrate human differences** (Race/Culture Concepts), and that star BIPOC children **in everyday situations** (Any Child). When sharing challenging stories of racism (Oppression & Resilience), it’s important that children already have a foundation of curiosity, knowledge, and respect for differences, so that they don’t absorb the idea that the lives of BIPOC are only about struggle.

Who is telling the story? Who has the power? This matters as much as, if not more than, who shows up in the story.



4. Consider the experience and/or expertise of the creators, especially when assessing a book that explicitly explores human difference(s) (Beautiful Life and Folklore).

Ask yourself: Whose knowledge is being drawn on? Are there author/illustrator notes about the process of creating the book? Was there research undertaken, or does the story draw on personal experience, or both? If it’s not an #OwnVoices book: Are there notes explaining how/why the author or illustrator came to the material? Do they have a personal connection or direct experience with the characters they’re portraying? Were members of the portrayed group involved or consulted in the creation of the book? Are there #OwnVoices reviews of the book that might aid in your assessment?

5. Look for books that depict positive interactions across differences (Cross-Group).

These books can be hard to find since there aren't many, so special effort may be necessary here – but it's definitely worth it! The Diverse BookFinder's [research](#) (and others') has shown that early and sustained exposure to such stories can reduce the intergroup anxiety that leads to prejudice.

6. Aim for a balanced set of portrayals.

How BIPOC characters are represented in books matters as much as *who* is represented. The Diverse BookFinder categories can guide you in making selections to broadly represent the rich and complex humanity and experiences of BIPOC. You can apply these categories to do an inventory/audit of the books you share with children. You may discover, for instance, that nearly all of your books featuring African American characters are about Oppression, unintentionally sending the message that struggle alone defines the Black experience. Or maybe you'll find that most of the books you've been sharing with your preschoolers actually avoid an explicit exploration of human differences (Any Child).

7. Feel free to wear a critical lens while reading *any* book.

When possible the Diverse BookFinder flags books in our collection that have been noted by #OwnVoices reviewers as having misrepresentation issues (negative or inaccurate portrayals). But it's not uncommon to discover that a much-loved or even recommended book has its own issues. Any of these books can offer the opportunity to analyze the book with children and help grow their critical thinking skills. As you're reading, don't shy away from explicitly pointing out the problems you find with a particular representation in language children can understand.

8. Do ongoing research.

Talk to librarians and book sellers about diverse picture books they recommend and why. Explore current and past diverse picture book honorees. The Texas Woman's University libraries provide a helpful collection of relevant links [here](#). Check out the articles on the Diverse BookFinder's [resource list](#) for evaluating the quality of racially/culturally diverse books and peruse our [blog](#).

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