



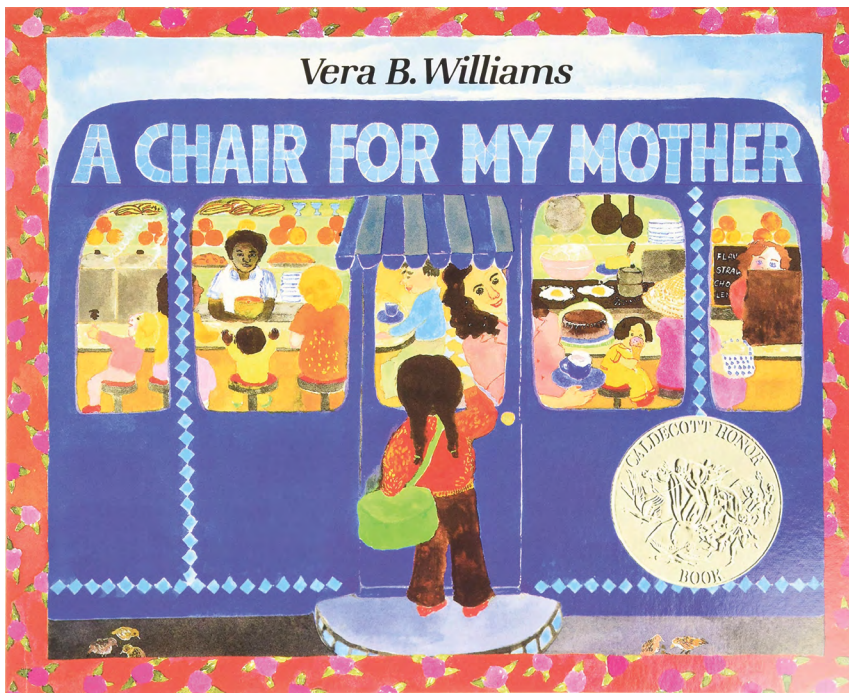
Racial & Cultural

Representation in Children's & Young Adult Library Collections

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When I was in elementary school, a librarian read the book *A Chair for My Mother* by Vera B. Williams to my class. It was about a little girl who helps save money to buy her mother a comfortable chair to sit in when she comes home from work. I think the reason this story stands out to me is that I clearly remember that the characters in the story looked different than me. Looking back, it may have been the first story I read or had read to me that featured non-white characters. I remember feeling empathy for the little girl and her mother. I remember wondering if the kids in my class who looked different than me had ever seen someone who looked like them in stories they read. I realized that I had taken for granted that as a young white girl, the overwhelming majority of children's books had white characters.



Now that I help oversee the children's and young adult collection in the Education Library, I want to help ensure that future generations of children have books where they can see themselves represented. (Rachael Elrod).

I remember being read *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats in Kindergarten, but thinking back on my elementary school experience, that is the only book that I remember with a main character of color. Books with animal characters, personified inanimate objects, and white main characters were the norm in the classrooms. As a 5-year-old, it did not occur to me to think about the fact that the only book featuring a character of color was a book being used to teach about snow, but as I grew up, I began to understand that my classmates

of different backgrounds, races, religions, and identities should see themselves in the books read to them in their classrooms. This is one of the main reasons that I am so passionate about representation in children's and young adult literature and



ensuring that these books are available in school libraries and classrooms. (Brittany Kester).

Why does representation in children's and young adult books matter? It is perhaps best explained by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, who created the concept of *mirrors* and *windows* to describe children's literature (1990). "Mirror" books allow the reader to see themselves reflected in the story, whereas "window" books offer the reader a view of a world different from their own. Research shows that diverse books support Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) youth in developing positive identities (Myers, 2014a), a critical component of achieving academic success (Chavous et al., 2003).

When we first found out about the Diverse BookFinder, we knew that we wanted to be involved in some way. The Diverse BookFinder was created to help "librarians, educators, parents, book creators, and publishers...create collections in which all children can see themselves - and each other - reflected in the picture books they read" (Diverse BookFinder, 2021a). The Diverse BookFinder was conceived and established at Bates College and includes an online database, (<https://diversebookfinder.org/books/>) that identifies how BIPOC characters are represented in picture books as well as a Collection Analysis Tool, (<https://cat.diversebookfinder.org/>).

The Diverse BookFinder creators identified nine categories, or overarching themes, prevalent in picture books featuring BIPOC characters. These categories are: Any Child, Beautiful Life, Biography, Cross Group, Folklore, Incidental, Informational, Oppression & Resilience, and Race/Culture Concepts. Two of these categories, Any Child and Beautiful Life, were created specifically for the Diverse BookFinder.

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Any Child Books

Any Child books are defined as books where BIPOC “elements may be present, but they are *not* essential to the plot and could be changed without changing the story” (Diverse BookFinder, 2021b). A good example of an “Any Child” book is *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats. In this story, a young African American boy named Peter wanders around his neighborhood exploring the first snowfall of the year. While

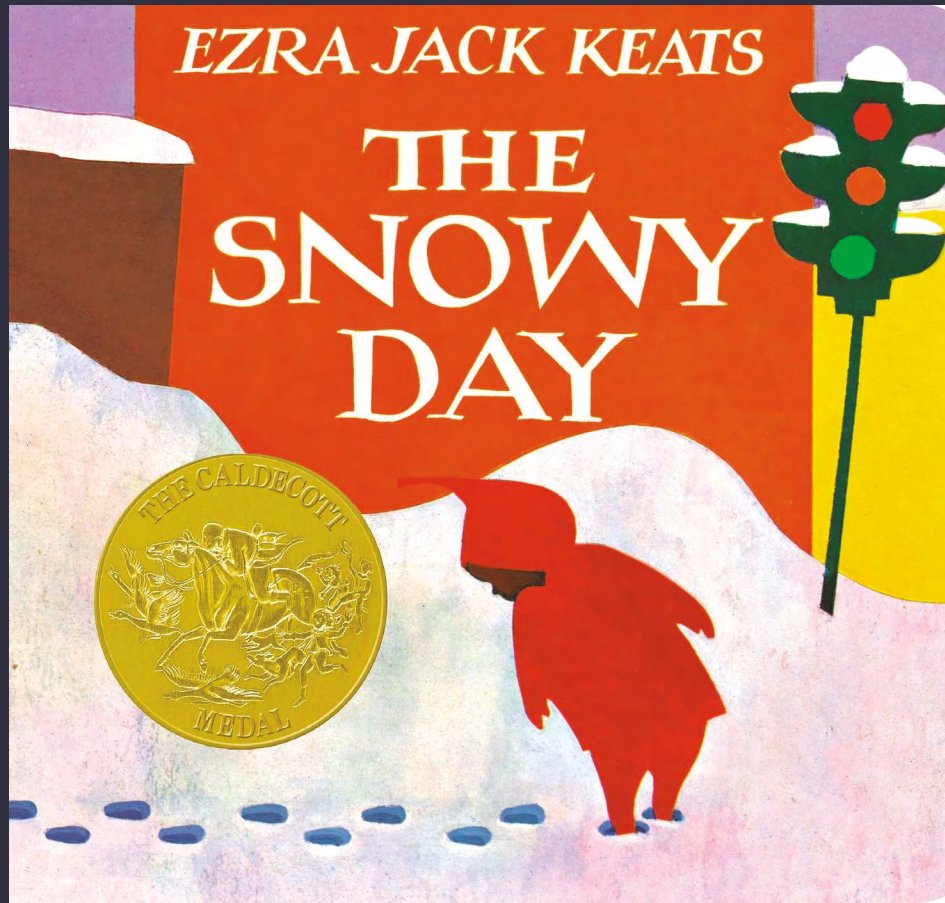
this book was groundbreaking at the time, the plot of the story would remain the same even if Peter was a different race. It would still be a story about a little boy playing in the snow.

The importance of Any Child books is highlighted in the work of Alam (2016) who states: “We need diverse books to be sure, but those must be part of a literature that reflects our reality, books in which little black boys push one another on the swings, in which little black girls daydream about working in the zoo, in which kids of every color do what kids of every color do every day: tromp through the woods, obsess about trucks, love their parents, refuse to eat dinner. We need more books in which our kids are simply themselves, and in which that is enough.”

Beautiful Life books are defined as those that “explicitly focus on the diverse expressions of human experience” and depend on BIPOC elements “to drive the plot” (Diverse BookFinder, 2021b). A good example of a *Beautiful Life* book is *Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story* by Kevin

Noble Maillard and Juana Martinez-Neal. This book tells the importance of fry bread for a contemporary Native American family. If the characters of this story were another race, the plot of the story would be completely different.

Beautiful Life books are crucial as well. The Anti-Defamation League (2001) explains: “Children’s books, at their best, invite children to use their imaginations, expand their vocabularies and gain a better understanding of themselves and others. And, if the titles reflect the diverse groups of people in the world around them, children can learn to respect not only their own cultural groups, but also the cultural groups of others.”



Down fell the snow —
plop!
— on top of Peter’s head.





COLLECTION ANALYSIS TOOL (CAT)

Helping you
diversify
picture book
collections.



Proud to be recognized as a
2021 Best Digital Tool
by the American Association of School Librarians

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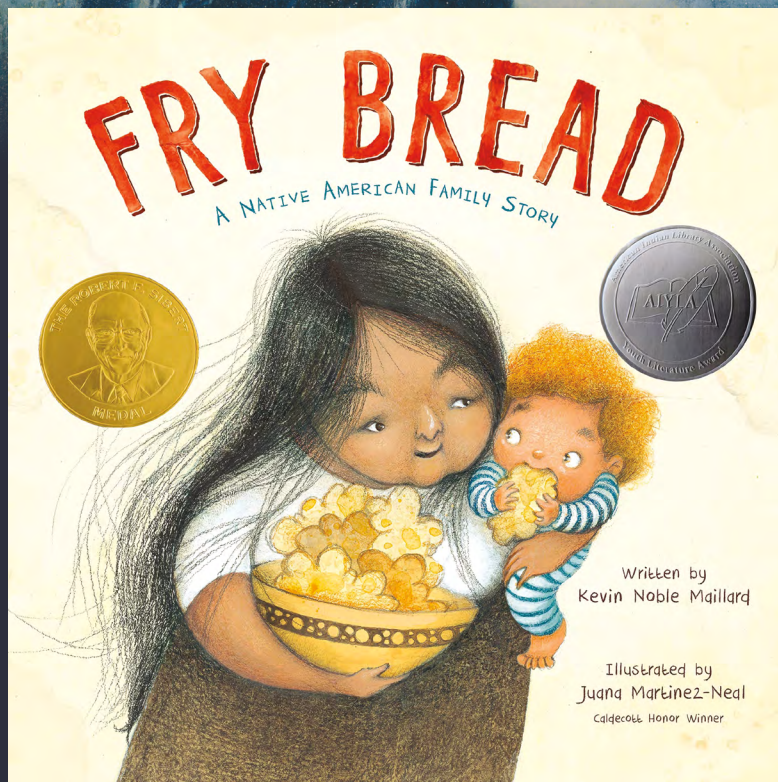
<https://www.ala.org/news/member-news/2021/06/aasl-announces-best-digital-tools-teaching-learning>



To assist educators and librarians, the Diverse BookFinder includes the Collection Analysis Tool (CAT), which allows users to generate a report of their picture book collections in terms of race/culture and the nine categories. The CAT is used to conduct diversity audits, to see not just *who* is represented in the collection, but how they are represented. For example, we, the Education Librarians at the University of Florida used the CAT to identify gaps in our picture book collection. We found that the majority of the picture books featuring BIPOC characters centered around Black/African/African American characters and the category of Oppression & Resilience. Using this data, we purchased 280 picture books to enhance the diversity of stories in the collection.


FRY BREAD IS EVERYTHING

Round, flat, large, small
North, South, East, West
Brown, yellow, black, white
Familiar and foreign, old and new
We come together



Growing the Diverse BookFinder

The most frequently asked question about the picture book version of the Diverse BookFinder is “what about middle grade and young adult books?” Now, UF Smathers libraries, in collaboration with Bates College and California State University, Fresno, have been awarded a 3-year, \$427,100 Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant to expand the Diverse BookFinder to include middle grade & young adult books. The expansion will give libraries access

to an online database featuring middle grade & young adult books with BIPOC characters that will include expanded categories and quality ratings, which can be used to inform collection development. The expansion will also extend to the Collection Analysis Tool, allowing librarians to further analyze their collections. We hope that the Diverse BookFinder and its expansion will encourage librarians and educators to think about not only what BIPOC characters are represented, but how they are represented including with a variety of backgrounds, identities, and storylines. Funding: Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) LG-250070-OLS-21. 

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