WINDOWS AND MIRRORS: 
THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF PROTAGONISTS OF COLOR IN UPPER-ELEMENTARY CHAPTER BOOKS

Text Set Collection by Erica Gott
Elementary 4th & 5th Grade

Latín Protagonist

Under the Mambo Moon by Julia Durango

On summer nights Marisol helps out in Papa’s music store. As customers come and go, they share memories of the Latin music and dance of their viva childhoods, expressed in a dazzling array of poetry. The diversity of Latin American music is brought to life in poems that move, sway, and sing with the rhythms of tango, son, vals, and bolero.

The Ugly One by Leann Stallard Ellis

Thirteen-year-old Mónica visits around her fifteenth-century Inca village with her family, a task that involves the casual name Mili, or “Ugly One.” She escapes to her music, avoiding the village problems. Her world is transformed when a stranger gives her a pseudo-baby monkey. The bird becomes her companion on her journey that ultimately leads her to a new life as a musician in Machu Picchu. Accepting Cup Cey, told in an engaging storyteller’s voice, this is a stirring tale of a girl who finds her own strength.

Native American Protagonist

The Dreamer by Pam Muñoz Ryan

From the time he was a young boy, Mattie has heard the call of a mysterious voice. Even when the neighborhood children count him, and when his heart, authorization letter, and voice alone have him true, he defies them. Mattie becomes a heron boy and follows as it needs him to encounter the mystery of the lake. From the songs, he initiates the boy to the ways of self-discovery that will transform his life and, ultimately, the world.

Call Me Maria: A Novel in Letters, Poems, and Prose by Judith Ortiz Cofer

Maria is a girl caught between two worlds: Puerto Rico, where she was born, and New York, where she now lives in a brownstone apartment on the island. While her mother remains on the island, Maria lives with her father, the super of the building. As she struggles to lose her local accent, Maria also tries to find her place within the new city's culture. Finally, with the help of a neighbor from Puerto Rico, she finds the voice within herself.

African American Protagonist

Hurricane Child by Tiffany Danel

Caroline Murphy is a Hurricane Child.

Being born during a hurricane is unlucky, and two-year-old Caroline has had her share of bad luck lately. She’s been abandoned by everyone in her small town on St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands, a spirit only can be seen when following her, and—scary of all—Caroline’s mother left her one day and never came back.

But when a new student named Kallie arrives, Caroline’s luck begins to turn around. Kallie, a dreamer from the Indiana woods with a special gift for everyone, includes Caroline’s first and only friend —and the person for whom Caroline has begun to develop a crush.

Now, Caroline must find the strength to confront her feelings for Kallie, brave the storm raging through the island, and face the man who has stolen her mother away from her. Together, Caroline and Kallie must set sail on a hurricane to find Caroline’s missing mother—before Caroline loses her forever.

Asian Protagonist

The Year of the Book by Andrea Cheng

In Chinese, you mean friends, but no language, all Anna knows for certain is friendship is complicated. When Anna needs company, she turns to her books. Whether traveling through a limited time or, at times, over an entire mountain, books provide a real life escape—constant companionship and insight into an ever-changing world. Books, however, can’t tell Anna how to find a true friend. She’ll have to discover that on her own. In the tradition of classics like Madeleine L’Engle’s A Wrinkle in Time and Eleanor Estes’ One Hundred Dresses, this novel subtly explores what it takes to make friends and what it means to be one.

The Great Wall of Lucy Wu, by Wendy Wan-Long Shah

Lucy Wu, aspiring basketball star and interior designer, is on the verge of having the best year of her life. She’s ready to rule the school as a sixth grader, go out for captain of her school basketball team, and take over the bedroom she has always shared with her sister. In an instant, though, her plans are shattered when she finds out that Yi Fu, her beloved grandmother’s sister, is coming to visit for several months—and is staying in Lucy’s room.
After taking a course titled “Centering Race and Unlearning Racism,” it is impossible not to analyze my own student teaching experience in these contexts. In my student teaching experience, I noticed consistently that my students of color struggled to find books that represented their racial identities, resulting in their appeared lack of interest in reading. As their teacher, especially as their white teacher, I struggled to find books to recommend to these students of color and found myself falling back on books that I had read as a 4th or 5th grade student. These books featured overwhelmingly white protagonists, only furthering the systemic racism in the world of publishing and children’s literature on an interpersonal level. As a result of these experiences, I have designed a text set of 63 chapter books for upper elementary students that feature protagonists of color. It is designed to be a classroom resource for both teacher and student.

In order to make more sense of the observations I was making in my own classroom, I decided to do further research into the books that were available for my students, especially my students of color. In my student teaching placement’s library, only about 7% of chapter books featured a protagonist of color. While this is not necessarily far off of the national publishing rates, 82% of the students at this school are identified as students of color by OSPI. This is extremely problematic. 82% of students are sharing 7% of the books. At the same time, the 18% of students identifying as white are sharing 93% of the books. This is one example at one school, but it speaks to the overall lack of opportunities for students of color to see themselves represented in the books they are reading. Every child, regardless of their race, ethnicity, identity, religion, social class, etc., deserves to be presented with both windows—lenses into other people’s identities and realities—and mirrors—reflections of their own realities and identities. Students of color are inundated with window after window and see very few mirrors.

Moving forward into the teaching profession, I can use this text set as a starting place to fill these gaps and provide more mirrors, but not an ending place. It is by no means a comprehensive list of the available books that may function as mirrors for my students of color, but I have certainly enhanced my own understandings and knowledge about what books are out there. I can also use this as a resource to share with other educators and other students and I hope to continue adding to these lists as I discover more and more books.

In creating this project, I had to really interrogate the ways in which my own personal biases and individual racism impacted the interpersonal racism that I perpetuated by recommending books with white protagonists to my students of color. I also had to think about the ways in which systemic racism has infiltrated the world of children’s literature and become deeply embedded in the culture of school. In the end, I have made a commitment to be consciously aware of the messages I am sending my students through the physical books in my classroom as well as a commitment to maintaining and growing a resource for myself and others in order to achieve this goal.

References
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