

“I could relate to her religion”: Problematizing Empathy as Response to Children’s Literature

When students in children’s literature course were asked to explicitly engage with a window or mirror (Bishop, 2012) aspect of *Brown Girl Dreaming* (Woodson, 2016), almost all focused on the main character’s religious identity (Jehovah’s Witness). Many students expressed similar ideas, I don’t know anything about Jehovah’s Witness, but my religion is important to me too. When readers empathize it literally means they “understand and appreciate another person’s experience” (“Empathy”, n.d)., and to that end these students connected the text to themselves, thus centering themselves and their own experience.

Ultimately empathy must be about decentering the self. Empathy should not be conditional on relating, nor understanding the other by way of one’s self. For teachers who are privileged by the educational system, relating to an experience is a centering act that perpetuates the marginalization of mis- and underrepresented people, even when done under the guise of empathy (DiAngelo, 2018). Relating is an act of privilege because it relies on unexamined ideologies including history, experience, and subjective reality.

By relying on privileged (White, straight, cis, able, middle class and patriarchal) histories, experiences, and realities a barrier is created that prevents the reader from seeing, listening, and ultimately, critically engaging with serious examination of those systems. When unexamined ideologies are the basis of response to children’s literature; the outcome is not empathy; at best it is pity and at worst it is judgement. This paper will reveal the ways that empathy is not the panacea many believe it to be through analyses of children’s literature read and the reader responses.

References

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