

We Need Diverse Book Reviews

Building on important work in children's literary studies, I argue that literature dealing with race and racism requires further attention from educators, scholars, librarians, publishers – and book reviewers – in the spirit of not only producing but also interpreting a broad array of “Diverse Books” for child (and adult) readers. This paper will read how historical fiction about racism is discussed in reviews of Denise Lewis Patrick's 2014 YA short story collection, *A Matter of Souls*. Patrick's collection comprises eight vignettes depicting not only black people's experiences of racism but also their dignity and humanity. Popular professional reviews of this collection, however, undermine projects of diversifying the authors and characters of children's literature by repeating some of the very problems racial diversity may hope to correct. Reviews of *A Matter of Souls* include a claim that “the emotions and messaging often hit too hard...but a bit more subtlety would have gone a long way;” and the complaint that Patrick's depictions of racist violence “veer dangerously close to melodrama.” Others problematically repeat archaic language (like the word “Negro”) without attendant contextualization and misread one of Patrick's mixed-race characters as white. These problems, I argue, are not simply those of “bad” reviews (as either negative opinions of Patrick's collection or indicating individual reviewers' sloppiness), but speak to widespread difficulties discussing racism in children's literature and elsewhere. Such reviews exhibit a continued and common discomfort with U.S. histories of antiblack racism and its effects on black people, difficulty grasping the nuances of language used to talk about race, and an unfamiliarity with literary and cultural histories of depicting racism. Because historical fiction is a dominant genre for literature about racism, understanding and being able to write about race's historical contexts is necessary for framing these texts. Moreover, teaching and encouraging antiracist practices for discussing – and reviewing – children's and young adult literature is a necessary complement to the project of increasing racial diversity in children's literature. We still need diverse books; likewise, we need diverse reviews to appropriately frame them.