

Diversity and adversity

Roopa Farooki calls for more diverse heroes in books written for children and young adults

I was sharing a stage at a literary festival, and the interviewer asked my fellow writer about his influences. We'd been put together for the event because we both write culturally diverse novels. Marquez, said my fellow writer, and Rushdie. The audience nodded with satisfaction; the influences spoke to the magic realism in his writing.

I was asked the same question. Tolkien, I said, and Homer. The audience seemed surprised. There was no obvious connection to the modern multicultural literary novels that I write. I hastily explained my choice. I told them that I'd read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* when I was ten, which started a life-long obsession with Greek mythology. And that *The Lord of the Rings* was the first book I stayed up all night to read, hidden under my duvet with a torch; when I fell asleep, I could still hear heavy hooves pounding, the whispered hiss of the Dark Riders in my ears.

If I had to name my other favourite authors growing up, I'd have to say C. S. Lewis, Ursula Le Guin, Isaac Asimov, Douglas Adams, Virgil and Euripides. I wondered later if the reason I leaned so heavily towards fantasy, science fiction and myth in what I read for pleasure was because none of the children's books set in the 'real world' represented my own present-day reality. I think that only *Adrian Mole* came close: a stoical under-funded teen in the middle of the break-up of a middle-class marriage. He didn't look or sound like me, but at least we both wrote pretentious poetry.

I recently gave a lecture about the representation of black and ethnic minority women in the media, snazzily titled by the Cambridge organisers as, 'If she can't see it, she can't be it'; looking back, I think that was the issue. In the 'real world' books that I read as a child, I couldn't see me. I'm not sure how conscious I was of this at the time; I just knew that many of the books my friends were reading left me cold, but that when I read fantasy, where fantastical difference was the norm, I could walk into those worlds as easily as Lucy stepping into the wardrobe, and lose myself there entirely.

When I began writing, this lack of representation in much of western literature bothered me. It's why, when I was first published, I chose to write under my maiden name, Farooki, and not my married name, which is Richards. Teenagers from schools in Birmingham and Bordeaux, ethnic minorities themselves, have asked me about this with pointed frankness – wouldn't my books do better, if I didn't have such a funny foreign name? I don't take offence; it's not like I've never thought of it myself. It's possible that they're right. But quite apart

from the fact that I think that Roopa Richards sounds like a superhero's girlfriend, I strongly feel that readers need a chance to get used to funny foreign names, and that won't happen if we scrub them off the spines of our books.

And the issue of representation is why I've always written novels with protagonists who are Asian, like me, or half-Asian, like my children. I've occasionally been criticised or questioned about this, even by my own mother; why haven't I ever had a white hero? (And that throbbing undercurrent... wouldn't my books do better if...?) Particularly as many of my novels don't rely on culture. In my third novel, *The Way Things Look to Me*, a book about autism and sibling carers, the main characters were young Londoners called Asif, Lila and Yasmin, but they could just as easily have been Adam, Lily and Jasmine.

There are benefits, I guess, to being packed into a South Asian box, even when I'm writing novels about subjects as varied as the World Cup or bipolar disorder or the psychology of obedience, as it gives a sort of brand consistency to my body of work. And the simple response is that there are plenty of authors out there who are highly qualified to write about the white middle-class male, but if someone like me doesn't put British-Asian men and women in contemporary western fiction, who will? I'm not saying that other authors only write about their own ethnicity, but I think most don't feel any particular duty to write about the ethnicity of others. So writing about minorities has become something of a duty for me. I want my children to be able to find themselves in fiction, to see themselves, sometimes, as the heroes of the stories they read.

When my oldest child began to read for himself, I was frustrated by how little popular fiction had mixed-race children as protagonists. And when I began to be touched by the experiences of children beyond my own, I realised that even fewer protagonists came from tougher backgrounds. I couldn't see who was telling the stories of the children on the rough council estates where I'd once lived, in the challenging schools where my mother and husband taught, the stories of the children in foster care that my sister visits.

I started doing school visits in disadvantaged areas with diverse populations. I tried to communicate my love of stories to street-wise and smart children who had never been too bothered about fiction in the past; it seemed it was because they couldn't see the books that were offered to them as relevant to their own lives. Malorie Blackman promised to 'bang the drum for

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diversity' when she took over as Children's Laureate; once I was within schools, I saw how important a mission this was.

I decided to write a book set in a gritty inner-city council estate, featuring diverse children, who turn out to be the heroes of their own narratives; street-wise and smart children who overcome legendary challenges with talent and teamwork, in a modern re-telling of the Greek myths.

The big decision I had to make was about the lead. I was tempted to have a girl, inspired by Philip Pullman's gutsy and gritty Lyra, who to my mind, had filled a gaping hole in children's fiction previously dominated by middle-class males. But my research told me that it was ethnic minority inner-city boys, more than girls, who were most likely to be lost to literature, because they couldn't find themselves there in a positive light. If they did see themselves, they were the victims, the chancers, the upstairs neighbour, the comic relief, the edgy friend, the outsider.

I had an image, that grew increasingly clear, of a thirteen-year-old boy, with golden brown skin and dark curly hair. He had a mixed-race anywhere appearance, much like my own children. I didn't know where he was from, but I knew that he was British. A South Londoner. He was living in the same bedroom in the same third floor flat in the same Elephant and Castle council estate where I once lived. He was lying on his bed, looking up at his ceiling, which was papered with superheroes photocopied from comic books. He stared up at them like they were gods looking down on him from the sky....

I'd made my choice. Jay Zed Black, a mixed-race inner-city teen in foster care, stamped with special needs, would take on a contemporary version of the twelve tasks of Heracles, with a gang of local friends. He'd be transformed by adversity and prove himself capable of more extraordinary things than he could have ever imagined.

The Arts Council agreed with me that diverse books needed to be written for children, and helped fund the writing time, for which I'm hugely grateful. I was lucky that my two oldest children had just reached a post-Potter reading age, so I could read out my chapters to them. They took the catchphrases and football chants into school, and I heard other kids repeating them back to each other on the school run. I heard one of my older son's school friends talking to a girl in their class: 'Haven't you heard of Jay Black?' My son's friend is mixed race, from a troubled family background. He hadn't even read the story, but he already felt that he owned it.

Encouraged, I carried on. When the first book was completed, I went on to write a sequel, which followed the voyage of the Argonauts. And then I finished a third book, a modern version of *The Odyssey*, Jay's final journey home. I finished writing just as the We Need Diverse Books campaign began to make waves

last summer. The movement started in the US, and featured families of all ethnicities calling for writers and publishers to create diverse stories for their children. I felt vindicated. It wasn't just me. There were lots of readers, at home and abroad, who felt as I did.

The first *Jay Black* novel is going out on submission now. I don't know when, or even if, it'll ever get published. It's a damning thing to consider after all the costly emotion and effort, but these three books are written for a market that doesn't exist, in any significant commercial sense. Diverse inner-city teens aren't big readers of fiction; at least, not yet. But whatever happens, I'll always be glad that I wrote the books. As readers, writers and lovers of stories, we should be the change we want to see. Because the books we read as children are the books that stay with us when other words fade. They are the books that make us who we are.