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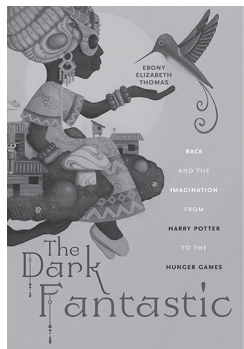
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# The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games

by Kathleen Crawford-McKinney, Ph.D.,  
Lindsay McAllister, Megan Thrasher,  
and Jennifer Willbanks



Thomas, E. E. (2019). *The dark fantastic: Race and the imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games*. New York, NY: New York University Press. ISBN: 9781479800650



*There is an imagination gap when nine out of every ten books published in the juvenile market feature the same kinds of characters that have been spotlighted since the inception of children's publishing in the United States (p. 6).*

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas brings our awareness to the forefront by reminding us that when children and youth do not see themselves in the books they read, they fall into a trap of a single story about the world around them, which affects the development of their imagination. She is not referring to the failure of the imagination of young people, she is referring to the *failure in adults* who limit the way we view, in particular, Black females in young adult and children's literature and thereby averting the need for our youth to see diverse images in mirrors, windows, and doors in literature and media.



**Kathleen Crawford-McKinney, Ph.D.**



**Lindsay McAllister**



**Megan Thrasher**



**Jennifer Willbanks**

Dr. Thomas opens up a conversation in which Black women characters move from the edges of a storyline to a centralized focus, with the hope of influencing a shift in what is written about and how Black females are portrayed in young adult literature and media. She explores the concept of race and the way it is portrayed in popular culture. In her book she conveys that people of color can be protagonists, action heroes, and role models in the realm of children's literature, television

## Must Read Texts

shows, and movies. She addresses critical race theory and the “imagination gap” that has formed between White and “Dark” characters in stories. Through this book, she sheds light on the stereotyped roles that people of color play in the “magical” world (part of the fantasy genre) and how by muting some voices while amplifying others, we further exacerbate the inequity between people of different races not only in popular culture, but in society as a whole.

This work is enlightening and endarkening at the same time; both being positive. Thomas is successful in educating readers that there is something major going on in literature and it has been going on for hundreds of years; there are racial issues in literature, especially fantasy, where the evil is dark and therefore Black. She poses that any evil thing is a dark thing and therefore to be used, abused, and finally ended, existing only to serve the light. Thomas points out this cycle so that readers are aware of what is happening and why and can be critical as they read fantasy. She explains how, even when protagonists are written as Black, the White population denies and fights tooth and nail against that fact unless the character seems to fit whatever idea or stereotype they think they should. Racism is alive and well in our imaginations, fantasies, and literature on bookshelves. Thomas pushes us to be critical of the power imbalance in the books on our shelves and how they shape perceptions and social process in our youth.

Thomas writes, and we agree, that students would be more likely to be engaged in the text by seeing themselves reflected positively in books and television. But we also recognize, as Thomas points out, that there have been few and small gains made in regard to diversity in fantasy and imagination in children’s literature books, television shows, and movies. Thomas pushes us to address this lack of diversity in popular culture, which erases and mutes the agencies of Black characters. We recognize through our own teaching experiences that it extends far beyond just that genre.

We recommend this book for all educators from elementary to high school teachers. Even though the books highlighted in *The Dark Fantastic* are aimed at

young adults, the concepts in the book are important for all teachers. We commend Dr. Ebony Thomas for writing this book and have nothing but praise to offer for the discussions it has prompted for us about how the “dark other” is viewed in terms of value in the world. The “dark other” keeps the fantastic cycle going. We recognize the importance of including books that are diverse and emulate people of color in a positive light in our classroom libraries. People of color can be protagonists, action heroes, and role models in the realm of children’s literature, television shows, and movies. One of our reviewers of this book review is an African American woman and educator, who recognizes the topics addressed in *The Dark Fantastic* as of substance and importance because they are real-life experiences that she has seen and witnessed. As educators, we all support the need for all students to see themselves reflected positively through windows and doors into literature and other forms of media.

Thomas concludes this text by stating, “But, ultimately, emancipating the dark fantastic requires decolonizing our fantasies and our dreams. It means liberating magic itself. For resolving the crisis of race in our storied imagination has the potential to make our world anew” (p. 169). This speaks not only to her belief about courage, but also her genius and the power of this text. Historically and in the present, literature has perpetuated racism and colonizing ways of delivering knowledge, but literature also has the power to liberate us from those ideas. Can you imagine that? Freedom from the beliefs we have been born and bred into. As Thomas states, through literature, we can “make our world anew.” Thomas encourages us to break the cycle of oppression as much as we can. So, let’s continue to do what we do; read books to our children, youth, and for ourselves; but close the “imagination gap” by being critical consumers, as well as facilitate a more critical stance with, and for our students through literature and media.

## Author Biographies

**Dr. Kathleen Crawford-McKinney** is an avid children’s book lover, poetry writer, and storyteller. She

works in the city of Detroit, at Wayne State University, with students and teachers to explore global children's literature as an avenue to reflect and connect to people around the globe. Her path has led her to work with marginalized communities to provide materials and tools to explore their literate lives. She can be reached at [kmcrawf@wayne.edu](mailto:kmcrawf@wayne.edu).

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