

Spring 5-2017

Let the Dodo Bird Speak: A Rejoinder on Diversity in Children's Books

Kafi Kumasi

Wayne State University, ak4901@wayne.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/slisfrp>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#), [Library and Information Science Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#)

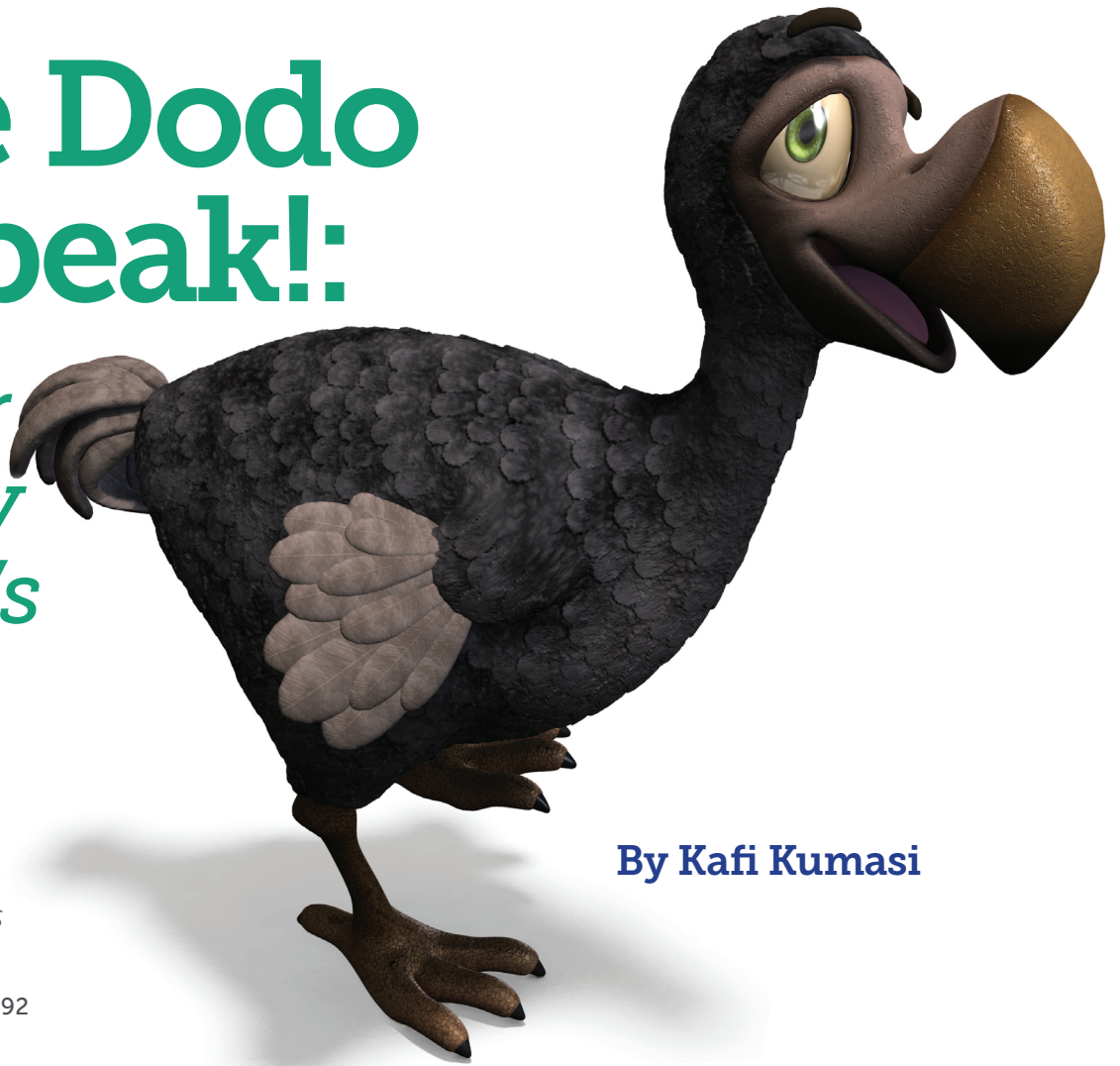
Recommended Citation

Kumasi, K. (2017). Let the dodo bird speak: A rejoinder on diversity in children's books. *School Library Connection*, 2017(May/June). Available from <https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2073485>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Information Sciences at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Information Sciences Faculty Research Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

Let the Dodo Bird Speak!:

A Rejoinder on Diversity in Children's Books



By Kafi Kumasi

"At stake in each axis of conflict is a contest over whose narrative structure will prevail in the interpretation of events in the social world."

—Crenshaw and Peller 1992

"Until lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter"

—Igbo proverb, Nigeria

Dear Meg,

I came across your comments on social media and wanted to take this opportunity to respectfully disagree with your statement that "there are not too few books for marginalised young people...good literature...doesn't have the 'job' of being a mirror" (<https://www.facebook.com/CrazyQuiltEdi/posts/1006468086083304>). I strongly disagree with this idea.

Your comments reignited a longstanding debate about diversity (or lack thereof) in children's literature. Many of the published rejoinders have been curated by children's lit scholar Debbie Reese on her blog (<https://americanindiansinchil->

drensliterature.blogspot.com/2015/10/about-meg-rosoffs-next-book.html). However, I thought I would add another layer to this conversation by examining a piece you wrote through the lens of literary criticism. I decided to employ this approach after I read an interview in which you seemed to dismiss critics of your comments as people who "weren't readers, or not MY readers" (Armitstead 2016).

I wanted you to hear from someone who represents and advocates for the young

readers whose voices are often silenced and overlooked in children's and young adult literature. As a credentialed school librarian and a professor of library and information science, I can assure you that I am a reader, if not one you would claim as YOURS. I tell my younger students that reading a new book is like meeting a new person; sometimes you want to keep reading and other times you want to walk away. This time, I decided not to simply walk away after reading your short story "Dodo Diary" (<http://www.>

I wanted you to hear from someone who represents and advocates for the young readers whose voices are often silenced and overlooked in children's and young adult literature.

The WNBD campaign is a metaphorical 'help wanted' ad seeking writers who have an unapologetic agenda to create stories featuring people from marginalized walks of life that validate their existence as human beings.

megrossoff.co.uk/2016/05/03/dodo-diary). I decided to take a moment to talk back to the text and share with you how one of your stories "does the job" of mirroring a white supremacist agenda that has been well-employed in the history of children's books (MacCann 2013). Perhaps you will benefit from seeing how readers who happen to fall outside your presumed audience feel after an initial encounter with your writing.

The WNBD campaign is a metaphorical 'help wanted' ad seeking writers who have an unapologetic agenda to create stories featuring people from marginalized walks of life that validate their existence as human beings. I believe your complaint about WNBD rests not only on the way diversity is centered, but also on your understanding of the purpose of fictional stories. It seems you believe that writers should focus on subtleties of the story and not explicitly seek to incorporate any specific social reality or social location (race, class, gender, etc.) in the plot development. You stated, "You don't have to read about a queer black boy to read a book about a marginalised child. The children's book world is getting far too literal about what 'needs' to be represented. You don't read *Crime and Punishment* to find out about Russian criminals. Or *Alice in Wonderland* to know about rabbits."

The problem with this statement, however, is that these textual examples illustrate the point that fictional stories are never

solely metaphorical and virtually always employ characters that are analogous to real world events and people. In that sense, people DO want to see themselves and their perspectives "literally" represented in stories, even in the imaginary world of fiction—where animals and beasts abound.

Besides, the creatures often depicted in fictional works tend to serve as convenient substitutes for different groups of people in the real world. Your reference to *Crime and Punishment* was particularly ironic given that the novel has a number of similarities to the actual murder case of Pierre François Lacenaire, which clearly inspired Dostoyevsky's writing. Why then is a book inspired by a murder case held up as "good literature" while a book inspired by a gay Black male warrants derision?

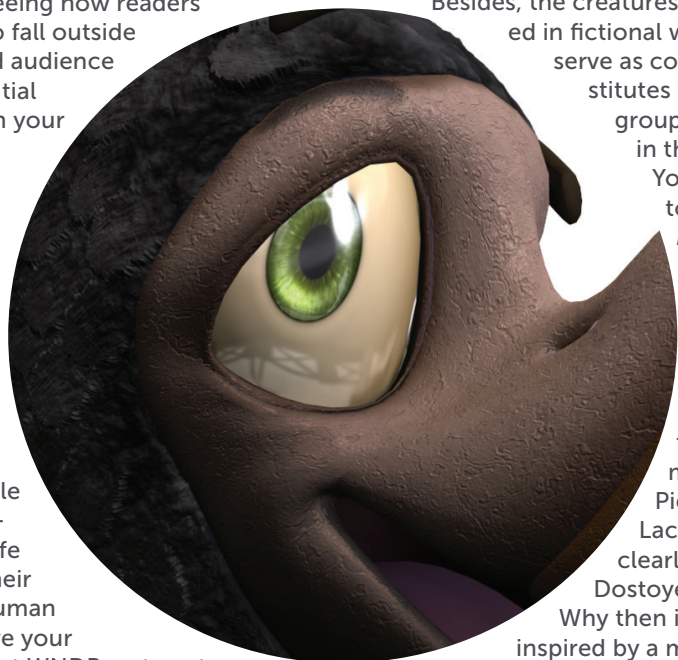
I contend that our disagreement about the need for diversity in children's books stems from our respective desire to see certain narrative structures prevail. To be clear, I do not think that the WNBD campaign is merely about substituting the lion's story for the hunter's—although we need more of that as well. I believe it is about seeing greater diversity in the narrative structures that get published and seeing more stories that feature complex and richly diverse characters who occupy both central and marginal spaces in the story without reducing diversity to superficial representation.

Your short story "Dodo Diary" covers five

days from the diary of a young person who has recently adopted a rare dodo bird. When I read it, I immediately noticed that despite the centrality of the bird in the narrative, its voice was functionally silenced. This was an uncomfortable feeling as I read on and began to realize that the bird was being constructed in ways that are eerily similar to they way classic American fiction writers have positioned Black and Brown people in their narratives. Anyone unaware of how silencing the dark "other" has been an organizing feature of whiteness in the imaginative toolkit of famous white American writers, should read Toni Morrison's seminal book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

Reading your story through Morrison's conceptual framework of whiteness, it was hard to ignore the many analogies of race, power, and white privilege that jumped off the page. People of color tend to read their world through a racialized lens because of the way society has constructed whites as the default cultural norm. We are trained to be bicultural and see through both the mainstream white cultural perspective that is projected to us in popular media and through our own culturally specific lens. We readily spot ourselves in stories and also are keenly aware when we are missing. It is understandable, however, for someone whose culture is the default societal norm to believe in the fallacy of colorblindness or a postracial society. Perhaps this is why you oppose WNBD, as its basic premise sits in direct opposition to the ideology of colorblindness.

Let's turn to an analysis of how "Dodo Diary" exemplifies the narrative structures of whiteness. The first narrative structure is the presence of a character that is constructed as a dark, silenced "other" whose positionality allows whiteness and white identity to become visible as the default central voice in the narrative. In the first diary entry, the concept of "racial otherness" is established when dodo birds



are described by the narrator as: “poor unfortunate creatures [who] were deformed and hunted to extinction by sailors in 1662 of course.” Here, whiteness becomes visible only insofar as a dark “other” gets named in the story. This passage sets up a binary relationship in which the bird owner’s race can be inferred as representative of the sailors’ European colonialist point of view. In her forthcoming book, *The Dark Fantastic*, Ebony Thomas argues that darkness has never been just a metaphor in fantasy stories. Instead, she argues, “Darkness is personified, embodied, and most assuredly racialized.... Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s frequently cited 1996 edited volume *Monster Theory* is but one of many influential texts that views fantastic beasts, witches, zombies, vampires, dragons, manticores, shades, and the rest of monstrous menagerie as analogous to those who are positioned as different in the real world.” For me, your dodo bird fits well into the monster theory and is perhaps even more troubling given the historical and derogatory use of the term “dodo” to refer to someone as lazy, dumb, and on the verge of extinction.

Another narrative feature of whiteness in the story is the portrayal of the main character as benevolent, innocent, and repentant. We only come to know the plight of the dodo bird through the altruistic, yet deficit-oriented eyes of its adopted owner. The diary reads: “Despite the fact that I was not one of the actual persons involved in this shameful episode, I hope it will not seem grandiose here to apologise on behalf of homo sapiens for any and all senseless brutality perpetrated upon this noble beast.” The use of the term noble beast is eerily reminiscent of the way Native Americans were referred to as noble savages in earlier American literature. This is a dangerous trope to reify in a seemingly benign story written for children who may not have the background knowledge to interrogate this racist language. This notion of white guilt appears again when the narrator writes: “I would like to think that this opportunity to Adopt-A-Dodo will help assuage some of the guilt I have carried, ever since becoming interested in the plight of the Dodo as a child—and possibly even to make some modest amends.”

The author and publisher b. binoahan theorizes about this kind of condescending benevolence that whites unwittingly offer

to people of color in a 2014 blog post discussing the problem of “nice white ladies.” This concept is linked to the white savior complex and refers to “well-meaning white women who, by failing to understand their relative position of privilege over people of colour, end up doing nothing at all to help” (<https://epicfails.xyz/posts/2014-10-03-the-problem-with-nice-white-ladiesm.html>). Both of these concepts come to light in the first diary entry, which reads: “I’d like to begin this journey by saying how uniquely privileged I feel to have been chosen by your curators over the many well-qualified applicants I’m certain will have applied, and I solemnly undertake to care for my Dodo with the utmost responsibility and respect over the period of the home stay.” The adoption of this rare bird is itself reminiscent of the recent phenomenon in Hollywood, where white celebrities adopt children of color from “exotic” places like Africa or Asia while Black American children languish in foster homes and inner city adoption agencies. In the end of the story, the character flippantly suggests, “we draw a line under the whole extinction episode.” In a final affront, the previous sentiments of guilt and empathy for the “poor” dodo bird are replaced by a “brief flash of guilty compassion for Mauritian sailors.”

I am not a fiction writer, but I do understand and respect the idea that narratives should have subtleties and that readers should not always know the point of the piece they read. However, as a reader of color, I am also sensitive to the dangers of the “single story” that novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns about in her TED talk (http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story) and its impact on the impressionable minds of youth, particularly those who are too often depicted as villains, monsters—and yes, even stereotypically dumb dodo birds—in popular stories. Perhaps your next fictional work can set a different agenda that remixes the centrality and marginality of your characters while being cognizant of how whiteness serves as a default mirror in your literary imagination. Or, if that’s not part of your professional agenda as a writer, maybe you can appreciate (rather than criticize) other writers who have chosen to take that job of giving the dodo bird a chance to speak back and providing

more colorful mirrors to young people in literature.



Kafi Kumasi, PhD, MLIS, is an associate professor at Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. She earned her doctorate from Indiana University, Bloomington, and her master’s from Wayne State. Kumasi’s research interests

revolve around issues of literacy, equity, and diversity. Her publications include book chapters and numerous articles in professional journals.

Works Cited

Armitstead, Claire. “Meg Rosoff: ‘It Took 12 Years for the Hate to Compost Down into Comedy,’” *The Guardian* February 13, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/13/meg-rosoff-i-think-ive-said-what-i-have-to-say-about-adolescence-but-comedies-for-adults>.

Crenshaw, Kimberle, and Gary Peller. “Reel Time/Real Justice.” *Denver University Law Review* 70 (1992): 283.

MacCann, Donnarae. *White Supremacy in Children’s Literature: Characterizations of African Americans, 1830-1900*. Routledge, 2013.