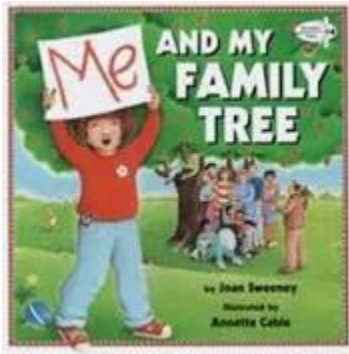


## First Opinion: *Me and My Family*

Sweeney, Joan. *Me and My Family Tree*. Random House Children's Books.

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Dr. Michelle Fry



*Me and My Family* is a children's picture book that is aimed at students in preschool through second grade. There are two publications of the book, the first was published in 1999 and the latest was in 2018. Although the narrative stayed the same in the 2018 publication the illustrations changed adding cultural diversity to the images and removing the cultural inclusivity of those individuals with physical disabilities.

Both books portray vibrant colors that engage young readers from the start. Teaching young children about extended family might be difficult, but the author can create explicit family connections through repetition and continued visuals of how the main character's family tree is created. The narrative is focused on teaching the readers about what a family tree entails and its complexity. The illustrations that accompany the text are simplistic and do not move beyond traditional binary roles. Although there are few images of diverse characters in the first publication, the illustrations predominately highlight a single culture until the end of the book. There are two pages at the end of the text, pages 22 & 23, that state, "*Everyone in the world has a family tree,*" with snapshots of traditional families from diverse locations. The first publication

has more images and includes a man in a wheelchair on page 23 and in the 2018 publication the image is removed.

Both books are in first person and the main character is a young female sharing who is in her family tree. The book introduces her immediate family and then shares who makes up her extended family. In the first publication, the main character, Mom, Dad, and her brother represent one ethnicity, Caucasian. As the book continues, an illustration is shown depicting an interracial marriage, the main character's aunt and uncle, located on page 10. Although the pictures show images of different ethnicities, the narrative simply states who the characters are and does not dig deeper.

In the 2018 publication, on page three the main character is drawing a picture of herself and is holding a brown crayon and her family represents two ethnicities, Caucasian and African American representing the ideology of interracial marriage. The images on pages six and seven support the narrative through the depiction of parents of different races. Following this introduction the book continues to introduce the grandparents, the mother's parents grandma, and grandpa, who are Caucasian and the father's parents are African American, nana, and poppa.

Toward the end of both books, multiple images of culturally diverse families are shown, are pages 22 & 23, as well as two images of men in wheelchairs in the 1999 publication, on pages 23 & 25, again limiting the opportunity to discuss cultural inclusivity and the text relies on the images. To ensure a text provides genuine inclusivity, characters with disabilities need to move beyond being represented as an illustration or minor role and developed as a character. Still, the narrative is superficial and only talks about the types of family members that represent the main character's family tree. The books do an adequate job of narrating an overview of what a family tree entails while the illustrations attempt to represent diverse characters but lack depth in the first publication. Limiting a text to rely on the drawings to promote an inclusive perception delineates a negative portrayal of certain aspects of cultural inclusivity creating a feeling of, "checking a box." The 2018 publication does introduce interracial marriage but does go beyond the traditional family dynamic, for example, pages 1 and 10 show images of characters from different ethnicities married.

One limitation of the first publication is that it does not provide ample opportunities for multicultural children to mirror or make a connection to themselves due to the primary character being Caucasian and only providing sporadic images of characters from other cultures. The second publication rectifies this limitation. Another limitation of both texts is the underrepresentation of individuals with special needs. When cultivating a true culturally responsive text, characters should have well-developed characters that move beyond being placed on a page as background support. Although the 2018 publication removes the men in wheelchairs it poses another limitation, limiting the representation to only individuals without disabilities.

Overall, both books provide illustrations that depict accurate and authentic representations of minority races but are limited in the 1999 publication due to the main character being Caucasian as well as the majority of her family members. The narrative does not specifically address cultural diversity or authenticity therefore excluding the use of culturally relevant vocabulary.

### **About the Author**

**Michelle Fry** is a wife and mother of four children. Michelle started her educational career working in early childhood centers until she obtained her elementary education degree. She then went on to teach third grade in a western suburb of Chicago, Illinois. Michelle took a break from teaching in the classroom to teaching college courses part-time for the past 14 years. She went back into the classroom as an English Language teacher at the middle school level for six years. In 2022 Michelle joined Purdue University and has continued her educational journey through research, online course development, and teaching virtual for higher education institutions.

