What's Trending in Children's Literature and Why It Matters

An inquiry into recent trends in children's books and their implications for educators reveals the increasing influence of visual culture and continuing concerns about cultural diversity.

Children's and young adult literature occupy what is considered the "sweet spot" within publishing, evidencing strong growth and new opportunities. While other readerships have stagnated, the sales of children's books have continued to rise, particularly young adult and middle grade books (Gilmore & Burnett, 2014; Jarrard, 2016). Strong sales, combined with new technologies that encourage innovation in book format and design, have enticed new authors and illustrators, some of whom are transnational and thus move across global contexts, to provide a greater range of books for children.

Given this generative context, publishing trends are emerging with significant implications for children and teachers. Some trends bring new challenges, such as shifting the strategies needed by readers to create meaning effectively from books in unusual formats, while others provide new options for classroom engagements and critical response. For teachers and teacher educators, these changes provide new possibilities for connecting readers with books that matter in their lives.

In this article, I present research related to children as readers as well as book market analysis. Then I explore two recent trends, the first of which is the animating influence of visual culture on children's books, particularly middle grade novels, graphic novel formats, visual narratives, and book design. The second trend relates to the continued limited availability of books that reflect the diversity of our society and world. I conclude with final reflections about these two trends and others discovered during my inquiry. Throughout, my focus is on books published in print, recognizing that major changes in book apps, e-books, and digital fiction are beyond the scope of this article.

Children as Readers of Books and the Children's Book Market

A common public perception is that the book as a printed object is on its way to extinction, much like vinyl records and 8-track tapes—dinosaurs that will die out in a digital future—and that the future is e-books and digital devices. Even at the university where I am a professor of children's literature, students report they rarely visit the library, getting their resources online. When new acquaintances ask what I do, they often comment that children's books will soon be archaic. Their assumption is that children today, particularly teens, no longer read print books.

Statistics from the book industry indicate that this assumption is not correct. E-books are growing in popularity as an important source of reading materials, but have stabilized at 25 percent of the market (Kellogg, 2015). Popular books, such as the best-selling Wimpy Kid series by Jeff Kinney, report that 95 percent of their sales are print. Researchers at the PEW Research Center (Zickuhr, Rainie, & Purcell, 2013) found that teens who own e-books report also owning these books as print copies. They like the convenience of e-books, but want a physical

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copy of the book to read and revisit. Nielsen reports 67 percent of children read for fun, and only 18 percent of teens prefer e-books over print (Gilmore & Burnett, 2014). In other words, e-books and other digital content provide readers with a wider range of choices and easy accessibility, rather than replacing print books. Instead of print and digital content being in competition, they offer differing experiences and alternative avenues for engaging readers.

The popularity of Harry Potter led to a major shift in publishers' awareness of books for teens as a significant market (Reno, 2008). Prior to Harry Potter, teens were viewed as a minor market, primarily for high-interest series books. Because high school teachers often focus on adult classics and are not perceived as promoting books for teens in the same way that elementary teachers promote reading children's books for pleasure and discussion, publishers viewed the potential market as small. Harry Potter produced a demand from teens—"We want more books like these"—and publishers realized they had an audience. Young adult literature (YA) quickly became a major area of growth in readership (Reno, 2008).

The popularity of YA continued to grow as many new writers entered the field and books like The Hunger Games trilogy became a popular source for movies. Readership grew, not only among teens, but among adults who are now 55 percent of the YA readership. Both teens and adults are drawn to the purity of the storytelling and the strength of the writing, particularly the fantastical worlds, inventiveness, and imagination in YA books (Howlett, 2015). YA is characterized by innovations that include multiple narrators, alternative text structures, novels in verse, and trilogies/series (Koss & Teale, 2009). In addition, the many new authors entering the field engage with their audience through all kinds of social media, making themselves available for constant interactions.

Recently the focus of publishers has moved to tweens and middle grade novels (Jarrard, 2016). Children ages 8–12 are viewed as an overlooked market, and publishers are rushing to fill that need, with many YA authors now writing books for middle grade readers. This market is dominated by series books, with loyal fans asking for the next Origami Yoda, Wimpy Kid, or Wings of Fire book. Because this age level of reader is transitioning from picturebooks and short chapter books into longer novels, books in a series provide more support as readers follow characters and plots across multiple books (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2016). Some of these books can be quite long, as evidenced by Shannon Messenger's 700-page novels in the Keeper of the Lost Cities series.

The downside has been the publication of fewer picturebooks. This trend has been so strong that some have declared the picturebook as endangered. In 2010, the *New York Times* commented on the demise of the picturebook, reporting that publishers were producing 10 to 15 percent fewer picturebooks, and bookstores were reducing shelf space due to declining sales as they expanded their YA sections (Bosma, 2010). This decline in sales was attributed to parents pressuring their children to quickly move to text-heavy chapter books, believing this would provide an academic advantage.

More recent figures provide hope for the future of picturebooks. The *New York Times* reported that only 14 percent of the children's books published in 2015 were picturebooks (Alter, 2016). At the same time, 40 percent of the top 100 best-selling books on the 2015 *New York Times* list were picturebooks, indicating that publishers are underestimating this market. Several publishers, such as Candlewick, launched initiatives to promote picturebooks. Award-winning authors such as Jane Smiley and Sherman Alexie entered the picturebook field, reporting that writing short but meaningful and enduring texts is far more difficult than they imagined (Alter, 2016).

An additional indicator is that board book sales have a 20 percent growth rate since 2013, suggesting that parents and grandparents are investing in books and recognize the significance of reading aloud to young children (Gilmore & Burnett, 2014). Publishers responded by publishing more board books in innovative formats. One other positive indicator is that the number of children's bookstores is finally back on the rise. The numbers declined precipitously from a high of 750 nationwide in the

1990s to fewer than 100 in 2010. Rosen (2016) reports that children's specialty stores are reemerging and having an influence through their significant community presence.

These market trends indicate how closely publishers pay attention to who is buying books and their constant search for the next big best seller. Hade and Edmondson (2003) point out that as publishing houses were acquired by large entertainment conglomerates, more books based on products and movie tie-ins were published. Children came to be viewed as consumers rather than as readers, and the emphasis changed from books that contain ideas to books that will sell. The 2008 economic crisis and downturn in book sales led to the further absorption of independent publishers and small presses by larger publishing houses. These shifts contributed to the paucity of cultural diversity of children's books, a trend discussed later. The point here is that market analyses and publishers' beliefs about audience impact what is available for children.

Identifying Recent Trends in Children's Books

Within this broader context of market research, I wanted to examine recent changes in children's books. My goal was not to count numbers of books around specific categories, but instead to identify trends significant to teachers and teacher educators. My positionality as a teacher grows out of many years of teaching and researching in elementary classrooms as well as my immersion in the field of children's literature and my passion as a reader of these books.

My inquiry processes for this review of trends revolved around my work in children's literature. As a professor of children's literature and director of Worlds of Words, a center for global literature, I receive review copies of the majority of books published for children and teens and distributed in the United States, including books from many small presses and independent publishing houses. In addition, I am senior author of a textbook on children's literature, so I do an extensive review of what is published every 3–4 years. The most recent review consisted of identifying children's books for ages 0–14 that received at least one starred review in *Horn Book*, *School Library Journal,* and/or *Kirkus* between 2013–2016. I collected and read these reviews, sorting them by genre, theme, and type of book, reading as many of the books as possible. Because I found that books reflecting diverse cultures are consistently underrepresented in starred reviews, I searched award lists for literature reflecting a diversity of cultures, such as the American Indian Youth Literature Award, the Middle East Book Awards, and the Outstanding International Book List. To challenge my own biases as a white female academic, I examined blog posts and online discussions of diversity issues in children's books in addition to awards and reviews by cultural insiders.

Books with strong visual images hold special appeal and meaning because children are constantly immersed in a visual culture in which images are central to their experiences and interactions.

The market analyses reassured me that children are reading, but they also identified problems, such as the view of children and teens as consumers and the priority given to sales figures. For this inquiry, I focused on recent changes—both those that reflect innovation and those that expand or limit what children have available as readers. Out of a long list, two major trends emerged with important implications for elementary and teacher education classrooms.

The Influence of Visual Culture on Children's Books

Books with strong visual images hold special appeal and meaning because children are completely immersed in a visual culture in which images are central to their experiences and interactions. A visual culture is one in which images, as distinguished from text, are central to how meaning is created in the world. Duncam (2002) argues that "Today, more than at any time in history, we are living our everyday lives through visual imagery" (p. 15). This visual way of life influences what

children know and how they think and feel about the world.

Visual image is no longer limited to a specialized form of expression in an art class, museum, or picturebook, but is instead an essential form of daily communication reflecting multiple ways of knowing. Duncam (2002) notes that this visual culture offers new freedom of expression and a willingness to play at signification, but can also be self-referential and depthless, with an emphasis on immediate, short, intense sensations. This shift in visual culture has influenced trends in middle grade novels, graphic novels, wordless books, and book design.

Middle Grade Novels as Illustrated Books

Illustrations and visual images are playing an increasingly significant role across age levels and genres. Typically, illustrations immediately bring to mind picturebooks, where both text and image are essential to the telling of the story. Looking closely at recent middle grade novels, however, I noted that many integrate more visual images to enhance the story. Michael Foreman's (2015) middle grade novel *The Tortoise and the Soldier: A Story of Courage and Friendship in World War I* tells a World War I story through chapters that include full-page watercolors along with small watercolor vignettes and occasional sketches. These illustrations enhance the text and provide context, but do not add new information essential to the story, so this book is considered an illustrated book rather than a picturebook. This distinction, however, is an increasingly blurred line.

The number of illustrated books is growing, a response to the saturation of children's lives with visual images. Children's comfort with a complex interplay of words and images encourages authors of middle grade novels to integrate different types of illustrations, such as the cartoon drawings in the margins of Tom Angleberger's Origami Yoda books and the full-color illustrations and chapter-openers in Grace Lin's *When the Sea Turned to Silver* (2016). Others integrate cartoon strips between text, as in Adam Rex's (2016) *Smek for President,* and still others use a visual journal/novel hybrid format, such as found in Rachel Renée Russell's Dork Diaries and Lincoln Peirce's Big Nate series.

This use of visual image within novels is a natural extension of children's experiences in their everyday and online worlds, so they seem to easily weave between print and visual image as readers. As adult readers and educators, however, our backgrounds tend to focus us on words and teaching reading strategies, literary elements, and genres, often leading us to skim visual images (Lambert, 2015). The changing role of illustrations in novels challenges our understandings about how visual elements such as color, line, and shape create meaning and how they provide cues for readers to define character, establish setting, and carry the action. What comes naturally to many children as readers in their use of visual image is often not integrated into our talk about books with children. At the same time, many children have not yet learned how to critically read visual image and may not be aware of how illustrators might use gaze, for example, to signal power relations. Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2014) provide language and conceptual frames that can encourage more critical reading of visual images in books.

Graphic Novels as Literature

The rising popularity of graphic novels for all ages is another indicator of the significance of visual culture (Jarrard, 2016). Graphic novels now cut across genres and age levels to include high-interest series books as well as memoir, historical fiction, informational books, and contemporary fiction. The use of panels to facilitate the telling of a story also regularly appears in picturebooks, such as *Bluebird* (Staake, 2013) and *Mr. Wuffles* (Wiesner, 2013).

Graphic novels are often viewed as materials for struggling readers and language learners because of their reliance on visual images and dialogue and the relatively low density of print (Cary, 2004). A close look at current graphic novels, however, indicates that these novels are for all readers and often contain content that addresses difficult issues at a high level of complexity. *El Deafo* (Bell, 2014), *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015), *Snow White: A*

Graphic Novel (Phelan, 2016), *Sisters* (Telgemeier, 2014), and *March: Book III* (Lewis & Aydin, 2016) reflect the range of difficult social issues and genres recently published as graphic novels.

This trend challenges the belief that these books are comic strips with popular appeal but little literary value, and recognizes that many are high-quality literature addressing important social issues (Cary, 2004). Graphic novels also challenge text difficulty as measured by Lexile Levels, since these formulas do not accurately measure conceptual complexity embedded in images and dialogue.

Like picturebooks, visual images in graphic novels are essential to the telling of the story, but use different conventions and require an expanded repertoire of reading strategies (Pagliaro, 2014). Information is included in text through dialogue as well as through conventions such as narrator voices at the top of a panel, speech and thought bubbles, and embedded sound effects. The arrangement of panels on a page can vary in size, color, and shape to convey mood or action, such as asymmetrical and irregular panels signaling a chaotic scene. Scenes in which the characters break outside the frame can signal strong emotions or actions. Although many articles provide suggestions for teachers, books about how to create comics are especially useful, particularly McCloud's (2006) book using comic strips to explain storytelling strategies.

Visual Narratives as Story Worlds

Another reflection of the influence of visual culture is the increasing publication of visual narratives—wordless books in which the story is told completely through visual images (some do have a few words). Visual narratives have long had a strong presence in the field, with educators promoting their use with young children and language learners to develop language and knowledge of story structures. This view has shifted as a greater number and range of visual narratives cut across genres and age levels, with books that carry straightforward storylines directed to young children, such as *Flora and the Penguin* (Idle, 2013), and others that are directed to older readers, such as *Moletown* (Kuhlmann, 2015). This opening up of visual narratives was influenced by Shaun Tan's (2007) *The Arrival*, a complex story of immigration through visual images that cannot be easily classified as either a picturebook or a graphic novel.

Despite the availability of increasingly rich visual narratives, their potential as engaging stories is often underestimated. In a recent interaction with parents and community volunteers, several expressed concerns to me about the lack of words and their view that visual narratives do not support academic achievement in reading. These comments reflect the continued overemphasis on books as a way to teach reading. The ultimate purpose of literature is not to teach something, but to illuminate what it means to be human and to make accessible the fundamental experiences of life—love, hope, loneliness, despair, fear, belonging. Children read literature to experience life, and their experiences within story worlds challenge them to think in new ways about their lives and world (Short, Lynch-Brown, & Tomlinson, 2017). Books are also a tool for teaching reading and writing strategies as well as content in different subject areas, but their effectiveness is based on their role, first and foremost, as literature. Visual narratives carry this same power as story worlds in which viewers can be immersed, and they should be valued for their invitation to readers to experience life through a new lens.

As educators, we need examples of how to engage children with visual narratives, particularly how to encourage children to think critically. Since visual narratives do not have words, they require a different approach to a read-aloud, and discussions around these narratives require terminology about visual image. Professional literature provides many strategies for using visual narratives to develop literacy with young children and bilingual children (Schick, 2015), but we also need to know how to invite critical response through books that tell a story totally through visual images. One example of using visual narratives as conceptually complex texts for critical thinking is Martínez-Roldán and Newcomer (2011), where children reflected on their immigration experiences through responses to *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007).

The Influence of Book Design

Book design has always been viewed as a significant element of picturebooks; one must consider design elements such as the size and shape of the book, the cover and dust jacket, endpapers, page layout, and typeface, as well as the interaction of these elements with the book's meaning. Technological advances and societal immersion in visual culture have opened book design to greater experimentation and innovation by illustrators and art directors. Due to their own immersion in visual culture, children delight in this greater variety of design structures, especially the increased use of interactive features (Lambert, 2015).

One recent change in picturebooks that I have noted is the expanded variety of sizes and lengths, as well as different kinds of flaps, folds, die-cuts, and pop-ups—a result of technology making options for engineered and interactive books more accessible and affordable. Many were first published outside the United States, with European publishers regularly producing books of different sizes and lengths. Picturebooks range from the 128 pages of Kuhlmann's (2016) *Armstrong: The Adventures of a Mouse to the Moon* translated from German, to the 11" × 15" Alemagna's (2014) *A Lion in Paris*, translated from French. *Megalopolis: And the Visitor from Outer Space (*Dieudonné, 2016), translated from French, unfolds as a vertical story that is 10 feet tall.

These trends in book design are also evident in US books. Molly Idle, who comes from an animation background (another interesting trend among illustrators), uses flaps that open in different directions in each of her Flora books, varying the flap by the character's movement within a book. Lizi Boyd uses delicate die-cuts and cut pages in her visual narratives, such as *Flashlight* (2014) and *Inside Outside* (2013), to provide readers with insights into her character's actions and perspectives. This attention to design is also found in novels, with elements such as endpapers, chapter title pages, and front matter. Nicholas Gannon's (2015) *The Doldrums* is a middle-grade adventure containing 20 full-color, full-page illustrations along with black-and-white spot illustrations integral to the design of the book around 3 sections and 17 chapters.

Another interesting trend is books that play with young children's knowledge of digital culture and the physicality of the book to encourage interaction with the page. The exemplar is Hervé Tullet's (2011) *Press Here*, translated from French, in which readers are encouraged to press the dots, shake the pages, or tilt the book, and then turn the page to see what magic has unfolded. The popularity of this book has encouraged other authors to play with the book as a physical object that children can manipulate; some are imitations and others use this concept in innovative ways—for example, to shake out characters caught in the book's gutter (Byrne, 2014). These books play with page layout in interesting ways, rather than with cut-outs and folds.

Book design challenges us as educators to add these perspectives and terminologies to our talk about books with readers. Pantaleo (2015) describes a pedagogy on visual design and composition principles and documents how explicit instruction influences children's responses and understandings of images in books. Lambert (2015) provides examples of talk with young children about endpapers, book jackets and covers, front matter, typography, and page design.

Today's visual culture of fast-moving visual images and digital content in everyday life are creating new possibilities for authors, illustrators, and art directors and supporting increased innovation that builds on children's ways of interacting with the world. As educators, many of us grew up in a different cultural milieu in which words were dominant and stories were told in more straightforward, linear narratives. Our challenge is educating ourselves on how to read, view, make meaning, and talk about visual images and design in books. Our students need a language to talk about their experiences within visual story worlds and space in order for them to engage more critically and deeply with books.

Literature for a Diverse Society

A great deal has been written about a problematic trend: the continuing lack of cultural diversity in children's books. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) publishes annual statistics indicating the percentage of books in which a character of

color features significantly in the narrative. Their data shows a gradual increase to 13 percent in 2008 when the economic crisis hit, then a resulting decrease to 7 percent in 2013. That number is rising, so the latest figures show 21 percent of books published in 2016 feature characters of color (Horning, 2017). Given, however, that the US Department of Education (2015) reports that children of color are 49 percent of the total population in schools, that increase still reflects a major underrepresentation.

The numbers do not indicate the experiences that are missing from children's books; for example, I found a few books on contemporary American Indian experiences, such as the notable *Thunder Boy Jr.* (Alexie, 2016), but most continue to focus on history and traditional stories. It's also important to note that books on the experiences of Persian-Americans and Arab-Americans are so low that they are not included in the data from CCBC.

The continued lack of diversity in children's literature is devastating for children as readers, many of whom rarely see their lives and cultural identities within a book. Children who are missing and underrepresented may either take on deficit societal notions of their culture or reject literacy as relevant for their lives (Bishop, 2003). Children who constantly see themselves in books, primarily white middle-class children from the United States and Europe, are also negatively affected, as they develop perspectives of privilege and superiority based on false impressions of the world. Brooks and McNair (2009) point out that books reflecting the lives of children of color do more than represent a culture, they also can contest negative racial depictions in the media and invite discussions about social injustice.

These trends are market-driven and fed by misconceptions of children as readers. Publishing has long been driven by a market mentality of publishing books that will sell to the largest audience, and that mentality is based in societal hierarchies (Bishop, 2007). In the 1950s, most children's books featured boys as main characters because market data indicated that boys would not read books about girls, but girls, who had lower social status, would read books with either boys or girls as main characters. This same rationalization led to fewer books with children of color, since market research seemed to indicate that white children did not read books about children of color, while children of color read more broadly. To sell more books and ensure profits, books with white characters came to dominate the market (Bishop, 2007). This focus on marketability also has resulted in problematic YA and middle-grade book covers, in which characters of color are depicted as white or racially ambiguous or are shown at a distance or in silhouette to influence sales to a wider market (Hart, 2012). One positive trend that caught my attention is more transitional chapter books featuring characters of color, such as the Lola Levine series by Monica Brown and the Nikki and Deja books by Karen English.

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Critics have pointed out that the mostly white world of publishing companies has also influenced this trend, with only a handful of staff and editors of color (Low, 2016). Social movements such as #WeNeedDiverseBooks have adopted multipronged efforts to promote the participation of authors of color at conferences and festivals, provide support for emerging authors of color, and offer opportunities for the development of publicists and editors of color.

One notable exception to market-driven decisions is the commitment to diversity of certain independent publishers and small presses. Setterington (2016) argues that one reason Canada publishes so many diverse books is that the majority of books are published by independent houses, the opposite of the United States. He notes that publishers such as Groundwood concentrate on making the very best books, instead of considering sales and marketing.

One positive trend is an increase in books representing a range of children's experiences as they explore societal expectations of gender identity and

expression, although problems persist in how characters are depicted, particularly related to gender fluidity (Bittner, Ingrey, & Stamper, 2016). *Morris Mickelwhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino, 2014) uses the familiar motif of a boy wearing a dress, but focuses on gender creativity rather than gender identity, and *George* (Gino, 2016) is a rare example of a book about a trans child written by a trans author. LGBT-themed books can play a significant role in provoking discussions about sexual identity and gender diversity and in creating a pedagogy of possibility (Blackburn, Clark, & Martino, 2016).

Books depicting children who face physical, emotional, mental, and behavioral challenges have moved away from primarily "problem-focused" books in which the plot centers around how the character deals with a disability, to characters for whom this challenge is part of who they are, not the major plot line, such as the socially awkward Suzy in *The Thing about Jellyfish* (Benjamin, 2016). Another interesting trend is books told from that character's perspective rather than through an abled person's perspective, such as *Rain Reign* (Martin, 2014).

Global literature—books set in global cultures outside the United States—are increasingly important to developing empathy and intercultural understanding in an interconnected world characterized by global mobility, fear, and intolerance (Short, Day, & Schroeder, 2016). Because I pay very close attention to global literature, I was thrilled to find more books being published in that category, but discouraged that most continue to be published by Americans *about* global cultures rather than as international books published first in that global culture by insiders.

Even though many are books published first in the United States, I noted that their authorship has diversified. Some are authors who are transnational, moving across national boundaries on a regular basis, such as Cornelia Funke and Suzy Lee. Others are immigrants who write out of their immigrant experiences, such as Kashmira Sheth and Eugene Yelchin, while still others draw from their family heritage, even though they were born in the United States, such as Margarita Engle and Linda Sue Park. Some are Americans who live in a global context for long periods of time or engage in repeated visits over an extended period, like J. L. Powers and Kate Banks. Another trend is writing in collaboration with an insider from that culture, such as Karin Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohamed. A large number continue to be authored by writers and illustrators with no particular ties to a culture and who (with varied success) engage in research in an attempt to authentically depict that culture.

In terms of international books—books first published outside of the United States—an examination of the Outstanding International Book List from USBBY reflects the dominance of books from English-speaking countries. This award was established in 2006 to encourage US publishers to bring more books from other countries into the United States. Each year, 40 books across age levels are named to an award list, indicating the original country of publication. Books from the UK, Australia, and Canada continue to dominate these lists, although close examination also indicates the presence of more translated books in the most recent lists. The percentage of translated children's books has been a "best guess" for many years, but according to an estimate based on CCBC logs, it is now 3 to 4 percent (Bird, 2017). This number is higher than the 1 to 2 percent of previous estimates, but it still clearly indicates a problem. In European countries, for example, the average number of translated books is 30 to 40 percent of the total books published.

In looking closely at what is translated, I noted several patterns. One is that the majority of books are from Europe, primarily Germany, France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Korea, Japan, India, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are appearing more frequently, but in small numbers. Another pattern is that many have a generic setting; the specific global setting is not obvious or integral to the story. Often, they are picturebooks in which the main characters are animals, or novels of fantasy set in imaginary lands.

Translated books with a specific global location are primarily historical fiction novels and traditional literature, with few contemporary depictions of global cultures outside of English-speaking countries. This trend seems to be driven by publisher beliefs that teachers use international literature to

teach history or folklore and so only these books have a market. This absence of contemporary depictions is evident across global novels, not just in translations. For example, in searching for contemporary middle grade novels on China, I located only historical novels, most set during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. This lack of contemporary depictions is problematic in that children may develop the misconception that other parts of the world are set back in time. This trend differs, however, for picturebooks. Liang, Watkins, and Williams (2013) found that 43.5 percent of the global picturebooks they examined were contemporary fiction, but only 22.6 percent had plots embedded in a specific culture, with most containing generic plots and settings.

A related issue is that many global books are set in rural or small village contexts, with few urban depictions and with an overemphasis on particular social issues. Most books in African countries, for example, are set in small villages and rural areas with a focus on violence and hunger, clearly present in the experiences in those countries but not the whole of life. Picturebooks set in Mexico are almost entirely in small rural villages, and contemporary novels focus on crossing the border into the United States. The issue is one of overrepresentation of certain experiences, so that the actual range of life within these contexts is missing. These patterns remain similar to those noted by Freeman and Lehman in 2001, despite recent increases in the publication of global books.

In sharing global literature with children in Tucson, I realized their default assumption is that the author is American, even when the setting is clearly a specific global culture. As a result, I began providing brief information about the author and illustrator (using the book jacket) before reading aloud. This small change in practice had a major influence on children's perceptions about authorship. They also became more critical about the need to know the positionality of the author in relation to a book's focus, asking for that information if I forgot to overview how the author's experiences and knowledge connected to the content.

The continued issues of representation within multicultural and global literature indicate the need to be selective in the books shared in classrooms to avoid establishing and reinforcing stereotypes. The low percentage of books available requires a careful search for books reflecting culturally diverse experiences, while the continuing overrepresentation of certain experiences reflects the importance of locating multiple books along with online photographs and visual images of a specific global community. These decisions become even more critical given research indicating that only 5.7 percent of the books available to children in early childhood classroom libraries have a person of color as a leading character, a lower percentage of diverse representations than available in published books (Crisp et al., 2016).

Final Reflections

Although visual culture and the lack of cultural diversity are two trends that stood out in children's books published in recent years, other trends are interesting to consider. Some reflect the influence of a particular book, such as *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012), whose success seems associated with an increase in realistic fiction on themes of kindness, tolerance, and acceptance of difference and characters who act with courage, determination, and defiance. Jon Klassen's success with books such as *We Found a Hat* (2016) appears to have influenced more smart, funny picturebooks with ambiguous or surprise endings, a move away from the long domination of "happily ever after" endings. Other trends are continuing ones, such as the popularity of fantasy, but with an increase in certain types, including magical realism, adventures, and historical fantasy. Still other trends relate to current issues, such as an increase in books on refugee and immigrant experiences. Finally, the author's process of research is increasingly explicitly discussed, either within the text itself or in an author's note, reflecting greater concerns with authenticity and accuracy and reader interest in an author's processes.

This inquiry into recent trends in children's literature was an interesting journey. I found that my first impressions were challenged by a closer look. It was exciting to find new books that provide opportunities to engage children and teachers in thoughtful interactions around literature. At other

times, the journey was discouraging, particularly in trends related to cultural diversity and in the reliance of publishers on market analysis. I came away with renewed respect for small presses and independent publishers and an appreciation for their views of readers and their commitment to diversity. These trends also made clear the ways in which publishing as an institution is influenced by societal changes, particularly the problematic perspectives sometimes imposed on interpretations of those changes.

I was also reminded that, as educators, we *are* consumers. We need to challenge market-driven decisions and provide critical perspectives, but we also need to put our money into books that make a difference in children's lives. Too often, we are followers of trends rather than makers of trends. Collectively, we can act through examining and critiquing current trends and, out of that knowledge, make decisions on which books to highlight in our interactions in classrooms.

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