

The case for a Mexican-American Holden Caulfield

Children should have literary role models that are as diverse as they are

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I loved to read when I was a girl. I would stay up all night enthralled with coming-of-age novels about characters in far-flung settings — the English moor, New York City, the American South. All I knew was my Mexican neighborhood on the border of the West Side of Chicago. I saw books as a way to escape my circumstances. Although some of the themes were universal, none of the literature ever spoke to my experience as a working-class Mexican-American girl.

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Judy Blume was one of my favorite authors. I remember reading her young adult novel “Then Again, Maybe I Won’t,” about an Italian-American family in the suburbs, and being confused by their two-story house, their maid and their tendency to throw out leftovers. It seemed so foreign, decadent and wasteful to me. Did people really live like that? I wondered. And did other kids live the way my friends and I did?

Life can be lonely and perplexing for girls of color. We rarely see people who look like us in the media, and if we do, they’re rarely depicted in a positive light. I now realize that because I never saw my reality reflected while growing up, I subconsciously learned to believe that my experiences were not valid or important. I knew I was different but didn’t fully grasp why. “The Baby-Sitters Club” was one of my favorite series in grade school, and I fantasized about starting my own club — that is, until I realized that everyone in my community was poor and could not afford a baby sitter. Many of the kids I grew up with were unsupervised because their parents were always working. As the feminist documentary “Miss Representation (<http://therepresentationproject.org/films/miss-representation/>)” points out, “You can’t be what you can’t see.” How are we supposed to know what we can achieve when we don’t see people like us overcome adversity and succeed? We need to know that we are not alone.

In high school, thanks to teachers who noticed and cultivated my love of reading, I began to find books that I related to. I consumed classics such as “The Catcher in the Rye,” “The Old Man and the Sea,” “To Kill a Mockingbird” and “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.” These books shaped me

profoundly and inspired me to become a writer. I'm sure they had this effect on many children. But the protagonists I admired were primarily white — Huckleberry Finn, Mary Lennox from "The Secret Garden," Holden Caulfield — and it was difficult to see what kind of life was possible for people like me.

Though I was in college by the time I read it, "Caramelo" by Sandra Cisneros was a book that deeply resonated with me because I was able to connect to the Mexican-American female protagonist from Chicago. Her world was completely familiar to me, and I finally felt understood. As an adult, I also read Sherman Alexie's "The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian," a bildungsroman that left me weeping because I profoundly empathized with the Native-American protagonist, Arnold Spirit Jr., a 14-year-old fledgling cartoonist who transfers from a school on the reservation to an all-white school.

Children who read are better able to absorb new information and concepts

(<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/sep/16/reading-improves-childrens-brains>) 1/19/22, 12:34

Case for a Mexican-American Holden Caulfield | Al Jazeera America <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/8/the-case-for-a-mexican-brains>). Reading helps develop children's brains (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/sep/16/reading-improves-childrens-brains>) and encourages them to be better human beings; it teaches children how to be empathetic. According to studies (<http://ideas.time.com/2013/06/03/why-we-should-read-literature/>), people who read fiction are better equipped to understand others and their worldviews. Consequently, those who read books about different cultures and environments will be more likely to be sensitive to the circumstances and needs of diverse groups of people. This can make a profound difference in our society.

While the publishing landscape is certainly evolving and becoming more inclusive, it's not shifting fast enough. In 2014 the number of books in the U.S. by or about people of color was still only 14 percent (<http://blog.leeandlow.com/2015/03/05/the-diversity-gap-in-childrens-publishing-2015/>), though minorities currently make up 37 percent of the U.S. population and are expected to be the majority by 2020 (<http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/03/04/390672196/for-u-s-children-minorities-will-be-the-majority-by-2020-census-says>). The New York Times' recent summer reading list (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/22/books/cool-beach-books-for-hot-summer-days.html?_r=0), compiled by book critic Janet Maslin, did not include any writers of color, causing a great deal of backlash (<http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/05/28/410015276/the-worst-groundhog-s-day-time-to-talk-again-about-diversity-in-publishing>). Its lists in the previous three years were not much better. In 2011, 90 percent of the books (<http://therumpus.net/2012/06/where-things-stand/>) it reviewed were written by white authors, and in 2012 only three people of color were among the 124 writers (<http://blog.leeandlow.com/2013/12/10/wheres-the-diversity-the-ny-times-top-10-bestsellers-list/>) who made the paper's best-seller lists. Amazon's top picks of 2014 (<http://www.amazon.com/b?node=10207069011>) included only three nonwhite writers.

It's also alarming that many schools are banning books by diverse authors. According to the American Library Association, several of the most banned or challenged books (<http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-challenged-banned-books-2014-20150413-story.html>) of 2014 were by writers of color, including "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian," "Persepolis" by Marjane Satrapi, "The Bluest Eye" by Toni Morrison and "The Kite Runner" by Khaled Hosseini. The same year, the children's book "And Tango Makes Three" was repeatedly challenged for its portrayal of two male penguins in the Central Park Zoo who raise a chick together. Many commonly banned books deal with issues of diversity and marginalization. In 2011 Arizona banned (<http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/bills/hb2281s.pdf>) (PDF) Mexican-American studies in its public schools, with conservative politicians claiming that a program in Tucson schools cultivated resentment toward white people. The city's school board then prohibited a number of titles (<http://azethnicstudies.com/banned-books>) — including "Woman Hollering Creek" by Sandra Cisneros, "Drown" by Junot Díaz, "So Far From God" by Ana Castillo and "The Fire Next Time" by James Baldwin — several of which shaped me as a person and writer.

e Case for a Mexican-American Holden Caulfield | Al Jazeera America <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/8/the-case-for-a-mexican-american-holden-caulfield> Although in 2013 the board allowed seven banned titles (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/23/mexican-american-studies-book-ban_n_4149048.html) to be reintroduced, the rest remain prohibited.

Such uniform whiteness and heteronormativity in our education system and literary world should not continue. Our literature needs to reflect the rapidly changing demographics of our country. Fortunately, many writers have been calling out (<http://weneeddiversebooks.tumblr.com/tagged/Mission>) the discriminatory nature of the publishing industry with campaigns and op-eds. But we must keep the momentum going and continue to hold those in power accountable. Those who work in publishing should make concrete efforts (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/awards-and-prizes/article/65043-got-diversity-six-hacks-that-address-book-industry-diversity-21st-century-style.html>) to diversify their staffs and seek out writers of color. We should also support diverse authors by buying their books, and established writers of color should mentor emerging writers. The next generation deserves to know — and see — that they matter.

Erika L. Sánchez is a poet and writer living in Chicago. Her work has been published in Cosmopolitan, Salon, Rolling Stone, The Guardian and other publications. She is a recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship and a "Discovery"/Boston Review poetry prize. Find her at [www.erikalsanchez.com](http://erikalsanchez.com) (<http://erikalsanchez.com/>) or on Twitter at @ErikaLSanchez. (<https://twitter.com/ErikaLSanchez>)