



Understanding Diversity: Avoiding Harmful Depictions in Your Writing

Our webinar presenters will demonstrate the best practices to: avoid harmful tropes and offensive stereotypes; discover the meaning of publishing industry terms such as Cultural Appropriation and Own Voice; and add valuable resources to your writing toolbox to better navigate writing across difference.

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UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY: AVOIDING HARMFUL DEPICTIONS IN YOUR WRITING

WFWA Webinar ~ October 8, 2020

Moderator: Lisa Montanaro

Panelists: Nancy Johnson, Patricia Green & Kim Lionetti

Webinar Overview

Creating characters who reflect the diversity of the world we live in is important for fiction writers. But writers often find it difficult to represent people whose race, gender, sexual orientation, mental and physical ability, or other aspect of identity is very different from their own. This can lead to mistakes that are harmful to marginalized communities. It is possible to write stories that reflect the true diversity of our world sensitively and responsibly.

In this webinar, you'll hear from a diversity consultant, an author of color who writes about the intersection of class and race, an agent who is committed to fostering diversity and inclusion in publishing, and a former employment discrimination lawyer.

WFWA is committed to assisting its members with understanding, respecting, and furthering diversity and inclusion in our writing community and the publishing industry.

Defining Key Terms

"Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance." ~ Vernā Myers, VP of Inclusion Strategy for Netflix

- Diversity
 - Diversity in the writing community and publishing industry is about who is represented, whereas inclusion speaks more to who is respected, expected, and integrated.
 - One of the most common mistakes is treating diversity and inclusion as an afterthought—rather than as a long-term commitment.
- Inclusion

- Are you reading and promoting books by marginalized authors?
- Do you network and connect with authors of marginalized groups?
- Representation
 - Powerful for someone to see themselves in a book or movie if they are underrepresented in society.
 - Fiction can expose readers to worlds, people, and ideas they may not normally experience. It is revelatory. It creates empathy.
 - We have a responsibility to be sensitive to creating art outside our own personal experiences and to do it with a deep respect—in a way that bridges understanding of differences and doesn't promote harm or further marginalization.

The Diversity Landscape of the Writing Community and Publishing Industry

Within the writing community and publishing industry, important conversations have changed the landscape:

- Corinne Duyvis coined the term #OwnVoices in 2015 to highlight books where the creator and main character share some form of marginalization.
 - It's not about leaving people out, it's about letting people in! Those authors who've traditionally been kept out of publishing
- Agent Beth Phelan created #DVpit in 2016 to help diverse creators pitch their work to agents and editors.
 - #DVpit is a Twitter event created to showcase pitches from marginalized voices that have been historically underrepresented in publishing. This includes (but is not limited to): Native peoples and people of color; people living and/or born/raised in underrepresented cultures and countries; disabled persons (including neurodiverse); people living with illness; people on marginalized ends of the cultural and/or religious spectrum; people identifying within LGBTQIA+; and more.
 - Any decisions regarding eligibility are the authors to make. Authors are not obligated to disclose anything they do not feel comfortable with and are not required to pitch only #ownvoices work, though that is certainly welcome!
- Authors of color became more vocal about their place in the industry and their exhaustion with the diversity conversation.
- Cultural Appropriation and Cancel Culture
 - Authors from marginalized groups now have a voice due to social media to share that they want their own voices heard and they don't want others to speak for them. Or they at least don't want others to speak for them incorrectly.
 - The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas, and other diverse titles became New York Times bestsellers.
 - Problematic books were canceled, re-illustrated, or rewritten. Some were published, but highly criticized, such as American Dirt. The American Dirt controversy involved a white author who wrote about Mexican immigrants in a way that others felt promotes harmful stereotypes. She also made a comment in her author's note that she wishes a brown author had written the story, but since none did, she felt the need to. It incensed the Latinx community, who then provided many books by Latinx authors as examples.
- The Romance Writers Association was forced to reckon with its own biases.

Avoiding Harmful Tropes and Stereotypes

Regardless of what genre you write, authenticity is needed—if you want to be a sensitive, responsible writer. For writers who care about equity, writing responsibly requires due diligence and deep reflection. Writers tend to default to the familiar, and that can bring into play stereotypes, tropes, and assumptions that can do harm to others.

“We are always writing the other, we are always writing the self. We bump into this basic, impossible riddle every time we tell stories. When we create characters from backgrounds different than our own, we’re really telling the deeper story of our own perception.” ~ Daniel José Older

- **Tokenism** - When you add in a character that is “other” just for the sake of trying to promote diversity.
- **White Savior Trope** - When the white character saves the black character. It has also been extended to disability when the disabled character is saved by an abled character.
- **Magical Negro Trope** - When the person of color has magical powers. Examples: Green Mile, Baggar Vance.
- **Sensitivity (Beta) Readers** - Help you avoid outdated stereotypes and cultural appropriation.

Issues to Consider When Writing a Character From a Marginalized Group

Cultural and identity appropriation is taken seriously, and your manuscript is not as likely to be accepted by an agent or a publisher if it contains these issues.

That is not to say that your manuscript can’t intersect with different cultures and experiences that you haven’t personally had. But you must do research, learn how to write across difference responsibly, seek other people’s opinions, and take them into consideration. Treat anyone you talk to with the utmost respect.

Cultural Fluency - Having personal experience with a marginalized community, or a particular social justice issue, even if you’re not an Own Voices author. You can get cultural fluency in many ways: family, friendships, research, career choices, etc.

When stories don't emerge from an author's own lived experience, they need to pay careful attention to intention, process, and execution.

3 Key Considerations:

1) Necessity - If your protagonist is from a marginalized group, and you aren’t, ask yourself why you feel the need to tell the story from that particular perspective. Could you tell the story from your own perspective, just as well, or better? Could you consider making a secondary POV character from a marginalized group instead of the protagonist? You would still need to do the work of writing across difference and writing the other well, but you wouldn’t be taking on the task of making your protagonist someone from a marginalized group and possibly causing harm in the process.

2) Authenticity - Can you write across difference really well? Are you reading works by authors of those marginalized groups? Do you have any family, friends, colleagues that belong to those marginalized groups? Have you ever worked with those groups? Did you do copious amounts of research with those marginalized groups?

3) Equity and Representation - Have you considered that with the under-representation of marginalized groups in publishing, and sometimes even downright quotas, that you may be taking an opportunity away from an author of a marginalized group getting their own book published?

Alexander Chee, author of How to Write an Autobiographical Novel

“If you’re not in community with people like those you want to write about, chances are you are on your way to intruding.” ~ Alexander Chee

1. Why do you want to write from this character’s POV?
2. Do you read writers from this community currently?
3. Why do you want to tell this story?
4. Does this story contain a damaging stereotype of a marginalized group?
5. Does the story need that stereotype?
6. If so, does this story need to exist?

Rebecca Makkai, author of *The Great Believers*

- 1) Am I reinforcing stereotypes, or combatting them?
- 2) Am I stealing attention from first-hand narratives, or shedding light on them?

Role of Allies & Advocates

Marginalized communities want to be able to have their voices heard and read. They welcome allies and advocates from outside their community, but they don’t want others to help in a way that subjugates the marginalized group. To be a true ally means to stand next to someone or behind them in order to support them. To be an advocate goes one step further and means to push someone forward and let them stand in front of you, while you amplify their voice.

Crossing Bridges Beautifully - Writing the Other Well

“For the duration a reader is engaging with your work, they are trusting you with a piece of themselves. You are responsible for that little piece. You can choose to build people up, or tear them down. To ignore this is, at best, an act of gross negligence.” ~ Mo Black

Pay attention to authors that write across difference well, depicting fully-fleshed out characters, and not falling into harmful tropes and stereotypes.

A few examples of authors that have written the other well as inspiration.

- *Run, Bel Canto, Taft, State of Wonder* by Ann Patchett (White woman writing protagonists that are Black, Asian, and Latinx)
- *The Great Believers* by Rebecca Makkai (Straight woman writing a gay man)
- *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara (Straight woman writing a gay man)
- *The Kingmaker Series* by Kennedy Ryan (Black author writing a Native American protagonist)

Resources

“When there is something you do not understand, you must go humbly to it.” ~ John Coltrane

Cultural Awareness

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYyvbglNZkQ> (Verna Myers TED Talk: How to Overcome our Biases? Walk Boldly Toward Them)
- <https://time.com/4544356/jodi-picoult-confronts-racism/> (Jodi Picoult discusses her book *Small Great Things*)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8jUA7JBkF4> (Video series on You Tube and Twitter: *Conversations with a Black Man* by Emmanuel Acho)

Writing & Publishing Industry

- <https://blog.leeandlow.com/2020/01/28/2019diversitybaselinesurvey/> (Diversity Survey in Publishing)
- <https://www.litagentsofcolor.com> (Literary Agents of Color)
- <https://writerunboxed.com/2020/09/01/writing-while-black-in-times-like-this/> (Nancy Johnson's piece)

Cultural Appropriation

- <https://writerunboxed.com/2019/06/04/what-white-writers-should-know-about-telling-black-stories/> (Nancy Johnson's piece)
- <https://www.tor.com/2020/10/06/never-say-you-cant-survive-when-is-it-okay-to-write-about-someone-elses-culture-or-experience/> (When Is It Okay To Write About Someone Else's Culture or Experience?)
- <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/craig-silvey-s-new-novel-is-bound-to-face-intense-scrutiny-he-s-ok-with-that-20200925-p55z4h.html> (Author's gender identity different than protagonist)
- <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/1/22/21075629/american-dirt-controversy-explained-jeanine-cummins-oprah-flatiron> (Article on the American Dirt controversy in the publishing industry)
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1KJRRSB_XA&feature=youtu.be (Video by actress, Amandla Stenberg: Don't Cash Crop On My Cornrows - Cultural Appropriation)

Amplifying Marginalized Voices

- <https://www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices/> (Corinne Duyvis - Co-founder and editor of Disability in Kidlit as well as the originator of the #OwnVoices hashtag)
- <https://www.dvpit.com> (Annual Twitter pitch event hosted and moderated by agent Beth Phelan for self-identifying, historically marginalized authors)
- Net Galley's new OwnVoices Category & Newsletter
 - As part of our commitment to raise awareness for books from diverse voices, we added a new Category to NetGalley earlier this year for OwnVoices. This Category is used to indicate books where the protagonist and the author share a historically marginalized identity. Add OwnVoices, Multicultural Interest, and many more categories to your Reading Preferences within your NetGalley Profile to indicate that you're interested in hearing about and reviewing those books.
 - Latinx Heritage Month is celebrated between September 15 and October 15 each year. To honor the occasion, Net Galley has rounded up new and upcoming 2020 books by Latinx authors for your TBR.
- Mighty Blaze Pledge
 - Dear Blaze Community,
 - In honor of Juneteenth and our country's ongoing reckoning with racial justice, we present this pledge that will help us ALL do our parts to amplify the voices of our peers of color and make publishing more diverse. Helping right a wrong isn't an instant fix; it's a persistent effort over time. Please join us in taking the pledge to support these initiatives going forward in any way you can. Who's with us?
 - Biggest thanks to Nancy Johnson, Blaze Interviewer/Advisor and author of THE KINDEST LIE, for providing us with these wise and durable guidelines.
 - Thank you and be well, The AMB Team

Writing Across Difference

- <https://www.vulture.com/2019/10/author-alexander-chee-on-his-advice-to-writers.html> (Alexander Chee on Writing the Other)
- <https://writingtheother.com/> (website)
- Writing the Other by Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward (book)

- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/779217692216226/> (Writers for Diversity founded in 2017 by Eliana West; also offers workshops)
- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1456675944444093/> (Disability and Romance Readers & Authors)
- <https://writershelpingwriters.net/2019/10/diversity-in-fiction-writing-the-character-youre-afraid-to-write/> (Plethora of resources on writing across difference, including podcasts, websites and more)

Beta Readers/Sensitivity Readers/Diversity Readers

- <http://www.quiethouseediting.com/betareading.html>
- <https://writingtheother.com/> (For students of their courses only at this time)
- <https://thespunyarn.com>

Presenter Bios

Nancy Johnson

A native of Chicago's South Side, Nancy Johnson worked for more than a decade as an Emmy-nominated, award-winning television journalist at CBS and ABC affiliates in markets nationwide. A graduate of Northwestern University and The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she lives in downtown Chicago and manages brand communications for a large nonprofit. *The Kindest Lie* is her first novel.

Kim Lionetti

With over twenty-five years of publishing experience, Kim Lionetti has worked with award winners and bestsellers in a variety of genres, including women's fiction, romance, mystery, and young adult. Having started out on the editorial side of the business, she loves helping authors bring their works to their fullest potentials. Representing authors such as USA-Today-bestselling Helen Hoang and Kennedy Ryan, Kim is eager to continue adding diverse voices to her list. As an Autism mom, she is also dedicated to representing the stories and voices of individuals with special needs and their families.

Patricia Green

Patricia Green is a public relations professional and founder of The Patricia Green Group. She incorporates diversity and inclusion in her practice recognizing that an interconnected global community dictates that words and images resonate with who people are culturally. Patricia, a woman of color, also offers her expertise to the WFWA board. Her son, Elwin Michael Cotman, is a published fantasy writer.

Lisa Montanaro

A former employment discrimination lawyer and instructor and interpreter of deaf students, Lisa Montanaro is an inclusive writer whose current manuscript features a social justice issue at the core of the story. She is committed to equitable access and success in the writing and publishing industry.