

Are There Biases In Your Story?

5 Quick Ways to Analyze Your Book for Racism and Sexism

Adapted from an [article](#) by Louise Derman-Sparks for socialjusticebooks.org.

The following checklist suggests some of the subtle forms of bias to watch for.

1. Check the Story Line

Standards for Success

Does it take “white” behavior for a minority person to “get ahead”? Is “making it” in the dominant white society projected as the only ideal? To gain acceptance and approval, do persons of color have to exhibit extraordinary qualities? In friendships between white and non-white characters, is it the person of color who does most of the understanding and forgiving?

Does handicapped or differently-abled characters’ joy come only from others? Is their idea of success centered around overcoming their physical limitations? For example, a paraplegic who wishes to be “normal and healthy”; a blind character who only wants to see.

Resolution of Problems

How are problems presented, conceived and resolved in the story? Are minority people considered to be “the problem”? Are the oppressions faced by minorities and women represented as related to social injustice? Are the reasons for poverty and oppression explained, or are they accepted as inevitable? Does the story line encourage passive acceptance or active resistance? Is a particular problem that is faced by a minority person or female resolved through the benevolent intervention of a white person or male?

Role of Women

Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence, or are they due to their good looks or to their relationship with men? Are sex roles incidental or critical to characterization and plot? Could the same story be told if the sex roles were reversed?

2. Look at the Lifestyles

Are minority persons and their setting depicted in such a way that they contrast unfavorably with the unstated norm of white middle-class suburbia? If the minority group in question is depicted as “different”, are negative value judgments implied? Are minorities depicted exclusively in ghettos, barrios, or migrant camps? If the text attempts to depict another culture, does it go beyond over-simplifications and offer genuine insight into another lifestyle? Look for inaccuracy and inappropriateness in the depiction of other cultures. Watch for instances of the “quaint-natives-in-costume” syndrome (most noticeable in areas like clothing and custom, but extending to behavior and personality traits as well).

3. Weigh the Relationships Between People

Do the whites in the story possess the power, take the leadership, and make the important decisions? Do racial minorities and females function in supporting roles?

How are family relationships depicted? In Black families, is the mother always dominant? In Hispanic families, are there always lots of children? If the family is separated, are societal conditions – unemployment, poverty, for example – cited among the reasons for the separation?

How are LGBTQ relationships shown? Are the characters stereotyped as mannish or effeminate? Are the characters portrayed as promiscuous or deceptive, or otherwise unlikeable because of their sexuality?

4. Note the Heroes

For many years, books showed only “safe” minority heroes – those who avoided serious conflict with the white establishment. Minority groups today are insisting on the right to define their own heroes (of both sexes) based on their own concepts and struggles for justice. When minority heroes do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous or because what they have done has benefited white people? Ask, “Whose interest is a particular hero really serving?”

5. Watch for Loaded Words

A word is loaded when it has insulting overtones. Examples of loaded adjectives (usually racist) when describing characters’ traits are “savage,” “primitive,” “wily” and “crafty.”

Look for sexist or racist language, dialogue, adjectives or actions that exclude or ridicule a particular gender. Don't compare characters' physical traits to food (i.e. chocolate colored skin, or olive toned, etc.).

Every book needs to be accurate, caring, and respectful. Avoid invisibility or tokenism of any group.