

Some presses ‘embarrassed’

KIDS’ BOOKS from E1

each of those categories how many featured main characters who identified as one of the following: Black characters, Indigenous characters, East Asian characters, South Asian characters, white characters, and other ethnicity. We also asked for them to let us know for each category how many were LGBTQ characters, visibly disabled characters, invisibly disabled (mental illness, learning disabilities) or animals (no ethnicity).

When asking about characters, we kept to main characters simply because if there is a white main character with characters in minor roles who are people of colour, the white person is still the dominant person in the story. That needs to be measured. There are more characters than books (560 main characters in 463 books) because some books may contain more than one main character, and main characters might fit in more than one category (Black and LGBTQ, for example).

Finally, we asked in a separate survey how many of the writers/illustrators were persons of colour.

The survey has its limitations. It didn’t measure what types of stories were told, nor did it drill down further to give more granular information on who wrote which books. Still, it provides a starting platform, a base from which to measure in the future.

“This survey looks to be an interesting project that could be developed further over time,” said Laura Rock Gaughan, executive director of the Literary Press Group, a small press industry association. “Diverse representation in our stories is important, and so efforts to document what is happening across the sector are welcome.”

The survey was sent to some 45 book publishers and distributors, small and large, across Canada. We received back 34 completed surveys — a return rate of about 76 per cent. The completed surveys represented about 46 publishers as some of the distributors took care of multiple publishers. Most of the 11 or so who didn’t respond were small publishers who may or may not have published a kids’ book in 2018.

Most publishers were eager to participate and the reaction was generally positive.

Email responses included “Thank you so much for doing this.” One publisher responded

that they don’t publish children’s books based on “skin colour, gender or any sort of identity politics” and that “this sort of thinking is becoming so pervasive and ruining children’s publishing.”

So, what did we find?

At all three age levels, the main characters were predominantly white — but the difference was less pronounced at the picture book level, where it was 34.9 per cent white main characters and 28.7 per cent POC main characters. At the middle grade level the breakdown was 58.1 per cent white and 17.3 per cent POC, and at the YA level there was a ratio of 50.4 per cent white to 26 per cent POC.

Do these numbers reflect the population of Canada? The short answer is: it depends on the age of the kids.

According to Statistics Canada, 7,674,580 people, or just more than 22 per cent of those who filled out the 2016 Census, identify as a visible minority out of a total population of 34,460,065. Of those, 1,198,545, or 3.5 per cent, identify as Black; 1,924,635, or 5.6 per cent, as South Asian; 1,858,690, or 5.4 per cent, as East Asian; and 2,692,715, or eight per cent, as another visible minority. Those who identified as Aboriginal made up just under five per cent of the population at 1,673,785.

Almost 78 per cent of the population, or 26,785,485 people, identify as not a visible minority.

So, in picture books, 11.7 per cent of main characters were Black, compared with 3.5 per cent of the population. By the time we get to middle-grade books, that number shrinks to 5.2 per cent, and eight per cent for YA books. (Keep in mind that there might be more than one main character in a book.)

When we look at Indigenous characters, people who identify as Indigenous represent five per cent of the population, according to Statistics Canada’s 2016 Census, while in picture books 9.7 per cent of main characters are Indigenous, in middle-grade books just 1.7 per cent and in YA books 5.7 per cent.

Answers citing “other ethnicity” included mostly other non-white ethnicities with a few white ethnicities (Ukrainian, Jewish) also being mentioned.

We also wanted to see how LGBTQ persons were reflected in the kids’ books published in 2018. As you might expect, the number of main characters who identify as LGBTQ increased as the age range of the



DREAMSTIME

Laura Rock Gaughan, executive director of the Literary Press Group, says diverse representation in our stories is important.

Diversity in Canadian children’s books in 2018

Of the Canadian authored and/or illustrated children’s books published in Canada in 2018 — Picture Books (ages 0-8), Middle Grade Books (ages 8-12) and Young Adult Books (ages 13 and older) — the number of books and number of main characters who were Black, Indigenous, People of Colour or who were simply animal characters.

	Picture Books	Middle Grade	Young Adults	Total
Number of books	241	149	73	463
Characters	258	179	123	560
White	90	104	62	256
POC	74	31	32	137
Black	31	9	10	50
Indigenous	25	3	7	35
East Asian	11	10	11	32
South Asian	7	9	4	20
Other ethnicity	13	20	5	38
LGBTQ	1	3	12	16
Invisibly Disabled	7	7	9	23
Visibly Disabled	1	3	1	5
Animals (no ethnicity)	72	11	2	85

SOURCE: DATA GATHERED IN TORONTO STAR SURVEY
TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

books did. So, in picture books, just 0.4 per cent of main characters identified as LGBTQ; 1.7 per cent in middle grade, and 9.8 per cent in YA books.

Statistics Canada numbers for sexual orientation in the Canadian population (excluding the Territories) aged 15 and older in 2018 is 96.6 per cent heterosexual, 1.4 per cent homosexual and two per cent bisexual.

Equally important is who, exactly, is telling these stories. Are they being told on behalf of people of colour, or by people of

colour? And, what stories are being told? As Elliott puts it, “do the books by (Indigenous creators and other POC) reflect a range of realities or do they merely reflect the worn narratives about marginalized groups that the dominant group prefers?”

The numbers in terms of who told the stories vary somewhat from who is reflected in the books. Again, we simply asked for a raw number: how many of the writers and/or illustrators working on these books were people of colour?

The answer was: In the 463 books published according to our survey, 90 writers and/or illustrators working on them were people of colour.

Keep in mind that some of these books will have both a writer and an illustrator, and also some of the writers/illustrators may have worked on more than one book. So while it might at first glance appear that 20 per cent of the books were written/illustrated by people of colour, the actual number is smaller.

In fact, at least four of the presses who reported having books that feature main characters of colour also reported that

none of the authors or illustrators were people of colour. Many of the responses back from other presses were accompanied by phrases such as “embarrassed to say” or “we’re on track to do better next year.”

There were also a few small publishers, however, who reported all of their books were written by people of colour.

“These numbers are good to see for Canada and these statistics are a first step,” said Nadia Hohn, a children’s educator and author of books including “A Likkle Miss Lou.” “We see that there is still a need of more books that feature particular groups. I would also like to see organizations in Canada that are focused on children’s books and literacy tracking this issue. However, I think (we need) a followup study with numbers to see who are the creators of this work and which groups are under-represented. Then we need to ask why this is the case.”

Another question is who is choosing which stories are told. “I think Canadian publishers still favour narratives that situate Black children *outside* of Canada or as fugitive slaves from another era,” says Elliott in an email. While reflecting the person is important, so is reflecting a multitude of experiences.

A recent survey from BookNet Canada confirmed that people actually want to buy books that reflected cultures other than their own — whether they are already considered well-represented in books or not. The online survey of 500 adults from across Canada asked, among other things, whether diverse books are important.

Overall, 31 per cent of respondents said they would read more if they were able to get access to more diverse books. Sixty-two per cent said they actively seek out books about diverse topics or by diverse authors. It defined diverse books as “books about or from the point of view of Black, Indigenous and/or people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, people who are disabled or differently abled, religious minorities, and/or books by authors who identify as members of one or more of the listed groups.”

People want to read these types of books — there just aren’t enough of them.

And we don’t know yet exactly who, as Elliott points out, “the gatekeepers are — who gets to decide which stories become the books we offer our kids at home, in school, and in libraries and bookstores.”

Still, it’s a start to a conversation and provides some numbers that the publishing community can use to measure and improve by.

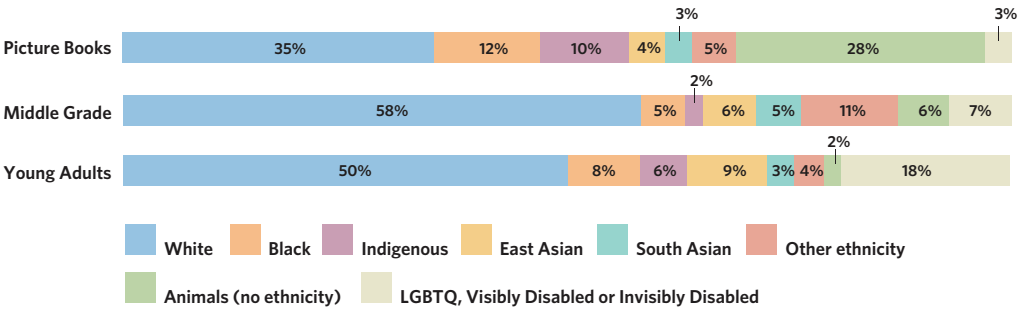
“That representation is important in and of itself,” said Edwards, “but if it also encourages kids to engage with books and reading at a young age, and in turn contributes to creating lifelong readers, so much the better.”

“We need to invite all the stakeholders to come together and create a vision for the future of Canadian kid lit,” said Elliott. “We need greater diversity within the publishing industry so that one group (white women) doesn’t decide what everyone else gets to read.”

“And we need to ask young readers what they’re looking for — it’s unfair that adults make all the decisions about what kids and teens get to read. Every publisher, library and school should have an advisory group made up of young readers.”

Breakdown by representation

Of the Canadian authored and/or illustrated children’s books published in Canada in 2018 — Picture Books (ages 0-8), Middle Grade Books (ages 8-12) and Young Adult Books (ages 13 and older) — the percentage that feature main characters who were Black, Indigenous, People of Colour or who were simply animal characters.



SOURCE: DATA GATHERED IN TORONTO STAR SURVEY

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