
Decentering Whiteness in Children's Literature

Introduced by David Valente

Recent research highlights the serious lack of representation of people of colour among published children's literature creators. Analysis of data focusing on a decade of children's book publishing (2007-2017) reveals that, '...white children's book creators had twice as many books published compared to creators of colour' (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019, p. 8). The centrality of whiteness is further perpetuated by the main characters featured in children's books, where over a quarter of the fiction and non-fiction books submitted to a 2018 survey of children's literature published in the UK have characters depicting people of colour in peripheral spaces (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2019, p. 5). The recommended reads in each issue of this journal aim to offer some inspiration particularly for educators engaged in selecting recent children's literary formats for English education. However, considering the prominence of whiteness in children's literature, there remains a major risk of rendering some children's ethnic identities invisible in ELT, unless judicious book selection is undertaken, both regarding the creators and the characterization.

Referring to the ELT context specifically, Gerald further argues for the urgent, compelling need to decenter whiteness. His robust call to action on the part of ELT educators emphasizes how, 'We must bring whiteness into the light and drag it out from behind the scenes where it has long pulled the strings' (2020, p. 51), and this is where well-chosen and then skilfully mediated 'child-empowering' (Mourão, 2020) literature can provide far-reaching intercultural resonance in the classroom and beyond. As the children's novelist, Onjali Raúf maintains in her *Guardian* interview with Flood (2019):

Children's books are lifelong touchstones and carry messages that ingrain themselves deeply in ways we are only now beginning to understand. Any act to enhance empathy and understanding, do away with the 'other' and help diminish fears and prejudice has to begin early. It is utterly crucial that cultures, voices and characters from all spectrums be gifted to us.

In order to approach the decentering whiteness in children's literature in ELT in a principled manner, Sanders' (n.d.) concepts of 'usualizing' and 'actualizing' are valuable. She proposes these psychological constructs through her work on mainstreaming LGBTQ+ identities in education, and highlights how they can be extended to Other marginalized groups – enabling learners with diverse ethnicities to occupy a visible and central position in ELT. Such intersectionality is also reflected by the theme of the upcoming IATEFL Global Issues and Teacher Education Special Interest Groups' joint web carnival, *Race and Queerness in ELT*: <https://tdsig.org/webcarnival/>.

From this perspective then, 'usualizing' involves selecting children's literature where diverse characters are commonplace and lead everyday lives. A striking example is Jessica Love's (2020) latest picturebook, *Julián at the Wedding*, during which the marriage of the brides, incidentally both Afro-Latinx, is positioned as a perfectly usual event which further acts as a visually significant backdrop, rather than having an overly didactic focus on people of colour and their same-sex wedding. 'Actualizing' further builds on usualizing with its links to deeper learning, as English language learners can engage in meaningful tasks and activities in response to children's literature and personalize, empathize and even prompt action-taking beyond the ELT classroom. Thus, when literature by creators of colour becomes commonplace in ELT, mediated via age-relevant interpretations and responses, this can realize the decentering of whiteness and become a potential catalyst for civic action.

The recommended reads in this issue reflect both usualizing and actualizing in the recommendations of four formats: a picturebook, an illustrated chapter book, a graphic stories collection and a young adult novel, all created by authors and illustrators who are people of colour. The rich pedagogical ideas proposed by the contributors shine a light on the possibilities for decentering whiteness in ELT that critically selected and meaningful child- and teen-empowering literature can offer.

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Bryon, Nathan & Adeola, Dapo (2019)

Look Up!

London: Puffin.

Recommended by Amanda Jane Hawthorne

At a time when everyone is looking down at their smartphones, this picturebook is about a young girl, who simply cannot stop looking up. Winner of the Waterstones 2020 Children’s Book of the Year prize, *Look Up!* is written from the perspective of nine-year-old Rocket, who dreams of space travel and is always looking

up at the stars, unlike her older brother Jamal, who is always looking down at his phone. Such juxtaposition of a child's galactic imagination in contrast to an older sibling's fixation on a screen offers a relatable scene for many young readers globally. Space is the main theme of the book, interspersed with recurring images of Jamal on his phone on the double-page spreads. These images encourage children to contemplate the themes of family and emphasize the importance of noticing and paying attention to the world around us.

The main outer space theme provides a fascinating topic for cross-curricular work in English language lessons by incorporating art and craft activities, such as making rockets and space paintings, and having children describe their creations orally. I used this picturebook with primary learners of English aged 7–9 to enrich a coursebook topic on the home and furniture. The first page has lively, colourful images of children's bedrooms and toys – relevant and accessible lexis for beginner-level primary children. I first asked the learners to look closely at the bedroom scene and memorize the visuals, before covering up each item for them to recall. I also introduced the adjectives 'messy' and 'tidy' via this spread, then had the children draw and label their own bedrooms, and finally, they repeated the memory recall activity in pairs using their own personalized drawings.

Later in the picturebook, Rocket talks about the astronaut Mae Jemison, and with older primary learners, this could be used as a springboard to an illuminating webquest about outer space and/or famous women. For teachers who are working online, this freely downloadable e-lesson from the Picturebooks in European Primary English Language Teaching website is worth exploring: <https://pepelt21.com/mini-picturebook-lesson-14-look-up-by-nathan-bryon-dapo-adeola/>

In 2019, the UK's Centre for Literacy in Primary Education reported that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) children are seriously underrepresented in UK children's books, highlighting that, 'Out of 11,011 children's books published in 2018, only 743 featured BAME characters (7%). Only 4% contained a BAME main character.' Byron and Adeola's picturebook can make a potentially rich contribution to redressing this lack of visibility by usualizing Black families in children's literature. Furthermore, by using the book with tasks and activities in

primary ELT, we can help to actualize inspiration of young Black girls who are learning English to reach for the stars.

I highly recommend *Look Up!* for primary English teachers aiming to diversify the literature in their classrooms with this contemporary, highly engaging and stereotype-breaking picturebook.

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Amanda Jane Hawthorne is an English teacher, a diversity consultant and a national diversity coordinator for the British Council’s teaching centres in Spain. Amanda recently graduated with a master’s degree in Education and Social Justice and has over a decade’s experience of delivering diversity workshops for educators.



Mian, Zanib & Mafaridik, Nasaya (2019)

Planet Omar: Accidental Trouble Magnet

London: Hodder Children’s Books.

Recommended by Rashi Rohatgi

Omar has a huge imagination, and it helps tremendously as he moves to London with his scientist parents, his older sister, and his younger brother: it allows him to recognize, as his mother doesn’t, that giving his little brother a toy whistle just before visiting a new mosque is a bad idea! It motivates him to try fasting for Ramadan even though his parents say he’s still too young. And it helps him

avoid and eventually counter trouble from his new bully, Daniel. In this gentle illustrated novel, for children aged 8-12, by former science teacher Zanib Mian – featuring accessible illustrations by Nasaya Mafaridik and the first in a currently two-book series also including *Planet Omar: Unexpected Super Spy* – a new environment gives Omar the chance to test the hypothesis his loving family has put forward: kindness and generosity can carry the day. As his parents win over their initially Islamophobic neighbor, Omar works out how to disarm Daniel by making him feel heard and included at school while things are hard at home. But he finds it more difficult to take the sting out of Daniel's insistence that the government is going to make all Muslims leave the country...

While the notion that children who are marginalized should be responsible for showing themselves as good neighbors can add to pressures that they already face, books in which parents espouse this view without straining relationships can serve as prisms for learners navigating this dynamic in their own lives. In the context of the current British educational climate where the book is set, government policy is to teach commonly-held values as explicitly 'British' and implicitly white / Judeo-Christian. Consequently, Omar's family's insistence that kindness and generosity are values fostered specifically through their practice of Islam is both necessary and welcome.

This book has several pedagogical affordances for exploring cultures and intercultural learning in ELT. Despite the young age of the protagonists, the wide age range and developed characterization of the supporting characters would also make this a useful book for lower secondary students. As 'Omar's' illustrations are such an integral part of the novel, this provides an engaging way for learners to contribute by creating their own illustrations for scenarios from the book and discussing their parallel versions of the illustrated scenes. When nemesis Daniel compares Omar's mother (who wears hijab) to a witch, Omar draws his own depiction of a witch next to his mother, and, underneath, a chart comparing the two, '*eats kids for dinner / would never eat a kid*' (p. 90). Lower secondary students could illustrate any intercultural misunderstandings they have experienced, which could have cathartic as well as educational benefits, and primary children may find it enjoyable to draw and then contrast their own mother

to a witch! In either case, they would be engaging in discussions about their comparative understandings of witches and using the language of comparison and contrast in English.

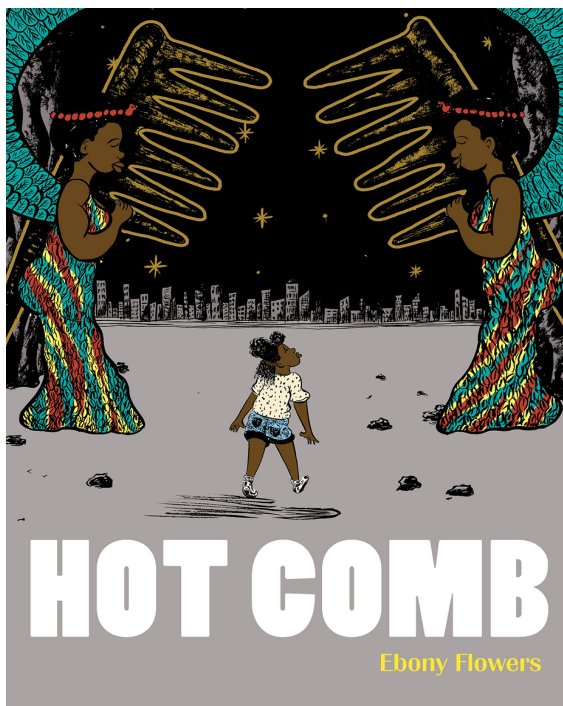
I recommend this book for its warm #ownvoices depiction of boys' friendship struggles and its thoughtful consideration of contemporary Islamophobia.

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Flowers, Ebony (2019) *Hot Comb*

Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly.

Recommended by Jacob Vinodh Philip & Laura McWilliams



Hot Comb is a collection of short graphic stories offering teen readers glimpses into girls' and women's lives, relationships, and coming-of-age stories, all set in the context of the African American community hub, a hair salon. For example, the titular *Hot Comb*, the initial story in the collection, recounts a girl's memory of getting her first 'relaxer' due to peer pressure. Each story can stand alone, but read together, their themes of ethnicity, class and identity are even more powerful as teen readers witness how the lives of the various protagonists are united by common situations and experiences. The illustrations are stylistically distinctive, in ink and ink wash, and

perhaps learners could reflect on whether this is a visual allusion to the theme of ethnicity as well as brainstorm what Flowers' other artwork choices may represent. Interspersed between the stories are spoof adverts for Black hair products, which tie the stories together, and could also be purposefully used as an intertextual learning resource, with learners identifying and categorizing the genre features of magazine ads.

The slightly mature content (occasional swearing and references to physical relationships) would make the book suitable for upper secondary learners (ca. 15–17-year-olds). This is a cohesive collection of short stories that could be usefully exploited in the face-to-face or online English language classroom. Different groups could have individual stories to read and to present via oral storytelling or dramatization (rather than simply summarizing); then the whole class could discover and discuss the salient emerging themes and ideas. This graphic novel additionally offers teachers possibilities for differentiation, as the stories vary in both length and complexity. The characters use the language of African American speech communities, such as '*How come Ellie-Mae don't live with her mom and dad?*' (p.11), '*So you think you grown, huh?*' (p.18), '*You ain't given me no more rotten teeth*' (p.127). Learners could highlight examples as a noticing task, then transfer these extracts into more formal English collaboratively to explore register differences as well as the impact and/or effect. This would provide deeper insight into English as it is authentically used by diverse speech communities, and thereby raise teen learners' awareness beyond the ubiquitous language models they often encounter in secondary English language coursebooks.

We highly recommend this graphic compilation by Ebony Flowers as a fascinating window into the real world experienced by some Black girls and women – life worlds which remain largely under-explored in graphic novels. Black teen readers will have the opportunity to see something of themselves mirrored in literature, and other learners encounter cultures in a meaningful, human way. Teenage English language learners will also have exposure to natural spoken Englishes, appropriately legitimized by their inclusion in this age-accessible literary format.

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Laura McWilliams works as an Academic Manager in Paris, France, having previously held the same role in Egypt. Prior to becoming an English teacher, she worked in theatre and brings her passion for drama and storytelling into the English language classroom.

Thomas, Angie (2017) *The Hate U Give (THUG)*

New York: Balzer + Bray.

Recommended by Mauricio Souza Neto



Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give (THUG)* was inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and entered the New York Times Bestseller list at number one, remaining there for 50 weeks. Thomas' debut novel also won the 2018 Waterstones Children's Book Prize which showcases new talent in children's literature. It is set in Garden Heights, a fictional inner-city neighbourhood in the southwest of the US, and at the outset readers are introduced to the main protagonist, 16-year-old Starr Carter and her best friend, Khalil. As the friends are stopped by the police while driving home, we see Starr struggling to find her voice as she freezes, then starts to shake. This powerfully captures the realities experienced by Black teenagers when encountering the police.

Khalil's subsequent murder by the police officer is perhaps a window for some teenagers, but, tragically, a mirror for others, as it reflects the prevalence of police brutality against Black

communities in the US and elsewhere around the world. The book unflinchingly explores the persistent lack of agency for Black teenagers as well as unfairness and bias in the US legal system, highly apparent as Starr fights to take Khalil's killers to justice.

The Hate U Give (THUG) is a must-read, particularly for secondary teachers of English and their learners, to raise awareness of the struggles faced by marginalized teenagers and young adults as they call for recognition, social justice and increased accountability of the powerful and privileged in society. Viewed from this perspective, Khalil's body represents the bodies of people of colour killed by violent authorities globally, he is George Floyd, he is Breonna Taylor, he is Stephon Clark, he is João Pedro Matos... he is all marginalized Others whose voices the powerful have attempted to silence, but which movements such as Black Lives Matter ensure will never be forgotten. The novel has considerable pedagogical potential for upper secondary English language learners (ca. 15–17 years old). An entry point could be for learners to notice the initial letters in each word of the title (T-H-U-G) and brainstorm why Thomas has chosen this, then consider which groups are frequently labelled as 'thugs' and by whom. For a beyond-the-book activity, learners could complete a KWL chart about the Black Lives Matter movement (What do you **K**now about the topic? What do you **W**ant to know? What did you **L**earn?), to activate schemata pre-reading, provide real-world links during reading and concrete reflection tasks post-reading. Focusing learners on pivotal plot moments such as when Starr admits to being present during Khalil's murder, illuminates the characters' use of code-switching and helps teenagers notice how language acts as an identity marker which they then could relate to their own personalized code switching.

An engaging multimodal activity could be for learners to create Carter family tree posters in groups, including a quote to represent each family member as well as adjectives to describe their appearances and personalities. These could then be displayed and explored via a gallery walk activity to consider their interpretations. To promote deep reading and creative writing, the learners could collaboratively craft news segments on the story behind Khalil's murder. They could also choose how to share their news stories (photo journal, podcast, social media post, etc). Finally, a powerfully visual / physical idea which appeals to teenagers' current

passion for TikTok videos could be for pairs to participate in a TikTok-style ‘check your privilege’ challenge. The teens start by holding up ten fingers and ask each other in pairs to ‘*put your finger down if...*’, followed by statements related to ethnicity and privilege. This links clearly to the book’s themes and could give teen learners further insights into privilege and encourage potential perspective shifting.

I highly recommend *The Hate U Give (THUG)* for teachers of upper secondary English to enable their learners to better understand the need for and aims behind a global movement and inspire action-taking beyond the language classroom.

Mauricio Souza Neto is a primary, secondary and university English teacher based in Brazil. He specializes in teaching English through the language arts to promote social justice and is a Fulbright Program alumnus and board member of REPENSE – Black Language Scholars Network.