An Annotated Bibliography on #OwnVoices

An Introduction to #OwnVoices

Duyvis, C. (2021). *#OwnVoices FAQ*. Corinne Duyvis: Sci-Fi & Fantasy. <https://www.corinneduyvis.net>

The hashtag #OwnVoices began in 2015 when Corinne Duyvis, author of young adult sci-fi and fantasy novels, used the hashtag to recommend “kidlit about diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group.” The term has since grown to be used widely for book recommendations and discussions revolving the concept. Although Duyvis does not moderate the use of #OwnVoices, she shares that the hashtag can be used “as long as the protagonist and the author share a marginalized identity.” For example, the phrase “Cool Heist Book features a Chinese-American trans girl – the trans aspect is #OwnVoices” appropriately uses the hashtag without misleading readers into believing that the author and protagonist also share the same cultural identity. #OwnVoices is not limited to children’s literature and can be applied to a variety of other literature and media as well. Duyvis cautions that #OwnVoices does not mean that authors must only write about their own experiences, disclose their identities, nor does it automatically credit their writing quality or authenticity. #OwnVoices is meant to be a neutral term used to describe the piece of work that follows the concept.

Further Readings on #OwnVoices

Abad, J.M. (2021). The paratextual labeling of autistic-authored YA fiction as #OwnVoices: How YA literary culture creates space for neurodivergent authorship. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 41*(2), No. 2. https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v41i2.7050

The use of #OwnVoices has grown controversial due to the “its perceived tendency to invalidate certain voices rather than validate them.” The danger is that it limits authors to which identities and narratives they can call their own. However, #OwnVoices can be used for increasing representation, particularly in books written by autistic authors. Using #OwnVoices for autistic-authored fiction can destigmatize autism by signaling that the story is drawn from lived experiences of an autistic person, prompt readers to reflect on those experiences, and give authority to the author who wrote it. The use of #OwnVoices in the paratext, such as in the author’s note, can strategically enable the author to share however much they would like about their own identity, without disclosing their position in the course of the story. Due to the lack of autistic representation in YA fiction, Abad states that “many autistic people who support #OwnVoices do so because they believe that seeing oneself reflected in literature in a positive way can be life affirming.” For example, Abad shares about a time when an autistic reader met an autistic author and was ecstatic to discover their YA graphic novel featuring an autistic protagonist. Their conversation led the reader to feeling more comfortable addressing her autism as an identity, rather than a disorder. Therefore, using #OwnVoices is encouraged to signify books written by autistic authors to destigmatize autism and encourage readers who share the same or similar identity.

Connection: Using #OwnVoices should be considered to validate authors, rather than invalidate them. It can be especially powerful when used to promote books about autistic characters written by autistic authors to act as “mirrors” for some readers.

Acevedo-Aquino, M.V, Bowles, D., Eisenberg, J., Elliott, Z., Gainer, J., & Valedez-Gainer, N. (2020). Reflections on the #OwnVoices movement. *Journal of Children’s Literature, 46*(2), 27-35. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=eue&AN=146744154&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s5672194

The #OwnVoices movement is described as “an act of resilience toward historical and systematic misrepresentation and underrepresentation, an individual and collective responsibility to challenge what is considered ‘normal’ and what is okay, and a call to validate different ways of living and thinking.” However, all books should be read critically to not assume that text conveying a lived experience is representing the experience well or that text written outside of the author’s experience is not representing the experience well. Readers can read critically by considering the following elements of a book:

1. The **visibility** of who is included and excluded
2. The messages conveyed through the **illustrations**
3. Who holds the **power** (e.g. to solve problems)
4. The **representation** of the book standalone and in a collection
5. Where the **author/illustrator** drew inspiration from
6. How the **integration of another language** is portrayed

The #OwnVoices movement is limited by the publishing industry that is prominently “straight, white, cisgender women who don’t have disabilities” and are marketing to white middle-class readers. Even if books with diverse characters are written, they may not reach readers who share that identity. Books currently fit into an expected mould, such as a specific page count, heft, trim size, visual art, and design. Editors should consider how each culture has their own storytelling traditions and publish books in various ways. As mentioned, “There are many variables that need to be considered – we can’t check the #OwnVoices box and think we’re done.” Professionals in children’s literature must ask “who is the intended audience?” and continue using #OwnVoices to reach a wider audience.

Connection: #OwnVoices is much needed and a great place to start when offering children’s literature with a variety of accurate representation and lived experiences. However, there is more to consider in publishing, marketing, and the questioning the reasoning behind why books are written in the first place.

Arnold, J.M., & Sableski, M. (2020). Where are you from? Building bridges over walls with #OwnVoices literature. *Journal of Children’s Literature, 46*(2), 19-26. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=eue&AN=146744153&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s5672194

The question “Where are you from?” can cause a sense of otherness and unbelonging to the receiver; however, #OwnVoices can build the bridge between children with different backgrounds and identities. Although the #OwnVoices movement has been growing, the literature is yet to be fully integrated into classroom library collections. Educators should include more books written by #OwnVoices authors because the books are more likely to become what Rudine Sims Bishop describes as “sliding glass doors,” meaning children may be motivated to change by reading about an experience outside their own. #OwnVoices spark discussions as educators encourage children to share stories and value one another’s contributions. When children gain a wider understanding of the world and realize that their lives matter, they have a greater potential to step out into the community with confidence. Ultimately, by including more #OwnVoices literature in classroom libraries, children can “see that their stories are meant to be heard, and that they can, and should, be the ones to share them with the world.”

Connection: Books with characters who share the same marginalized identity with the author should be included in classrooms. Educators can use the books to spark conversations around diversity and empower students to grow in self-confidence, value, and to support one another.

Bishop, R.S. (2010). African American children’s literature: Researching its development, exploring its voices. *Handbook of Research on Children’s and Young Adult Literature,* 225-236. DOI: 10.4324/9780203843543-23

Historically, children’s literature often depicted African Americans with stereotypes, such as the “comic Negro” or the “local colour Negro”, even to the point where African American children in a kindergarten class perceived that Black children in books did not reflect their own lives. The first comprehensive study on Black characters in American children’s literature by Dorothy Broderick in the 1970s revealed that children’s literature portrayed African Americans as how White authors wanted White children to view Black people. Bishop argues that it is essential to have more literature by Black authors on what Black people would like all children to know about Black people. More discussion needs to revolve around “Black lives and experiences – in their own voices and for their own purposes” so that children and youth are provided a body of rich and diverse representation in American literature.

Connection: African American characters written by non-Black authors often have inaccurate representations and stereotypes of African Americans in real life. The importance of literature written in #OwnVoices is that Black authors can share what they would like people in the world to know about themselves, their people, and their stories while demonstrating to young Black children that their reality can be reflected in American literature too.

Bittner, R. (2018). Queer Christian voices in YA literature: A scholar’s account of #OwnVoices positioning in the 21st century. *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature, 1*(1), Article 5. <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol1/iss1/5>

Bittner analyzes young adult literature with characters that wrestle with their Christian faith and sexuality and were written by gay-identified or straight authors. Interestingly, early queer Christian novels were written by authors who identified with the same sexual orientation as the main character (#OwnVoices), whereas novels written in the 21st century were more often written by straight cisgender authors. Although Bittner still identifies some of the recent novels as “mirrors” for himself, they were mostly written as intended “windows” for people who do not experience queerness or Christianity. He also notices that “the #OwnVoices authors focus more on acceptance narratives and less on sexual intimacy than the non-#OwnVoices author.” More #OwnVoices queer YA literature is called for to offer more authentic lived experiences of non-heterosexual teens, especially at an age where they are discovering themselves or who they should be. The conversation is especially critical for those who are “concerned with ethical, moral, and spiritual ideologies” such as the Christian faith. With more #OwnVoices authorship, the readers can develop a “mirror” more reflective of themselves in the larger context of queerness.

Connection: Literature written in #OwnVoices is essential for teen readership in the developing stage of discovering their identities, spirituality, and morals. Especially for teens who are wrestling to make sense of their sexuality and faith, more authentic queer Christian novels with diverse views and outcomes can support young adults who share similar experiences.

Garrison, K.L., Carmichael, P., & Manck, K. (2018). #OwnVoices for IASL: Curating a list of authentic voices for Indigenous children’s and young adult literature. *International Association of School Librarianship: Selected Papers from the …Annual Conference,* 1-9. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/ownvoices-iasl-curating-list-authentic-voices/docview/2257637870/se-2?accountid=14656

The Children’s and Young Adult Literature Special Interest Group (CYAL SIG) aims to share about trends in information practice, children and young adult reading interests, methods to promote literature in personal development and curricula, and the latest research or research gaps in children and young adult literature. The paper focused on the need for “Authentic Voices” by overviewing Rudine Sims Bishop’s “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass door,” statistics by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC), and Twitter movements #WeNeedDiverseBooks (#WNDB) and #OwnVoices. The CCBC identified that although there have been increasingly more diverse books about Africans/African Americans, Asian Pacific Islanders/Asian Pacific Americans, Latinos, and American Indians/First Nations since 2014, there is still “an imbalance between the books written by people from these groups and books written about people from these groups.” Many of the books are written by authors who do not identify with the same experiences as their characters. #WNDB advocates for changes in publishing because many people working in the industry are “79% White/Caucasian, 78% Woman/Cis-woman, 88% Straight/Heterosexual, and 92% Nondisabled,” which does not account for diverse readership. #OwnVoices signifies authors who share their own experiences as an authentic perspective for readers. The CYAL SIG listed exemplars of authentic voices by Indigenous authors and encourage teachers and librarians to consider books written in authentic voices for their classrooms and libraries.

Connection: This article shared multiple resources and statistics as to why literature written in #OwnVoices is important. Some of the books addressed as exemplars for Indigenous literature in authentic voices can be considered for the booklist.

Jimenez, L.M. (2018). The overwhelmingly white, straight, and able face of children’s literature. *Michigan Reading Journal, 51*(1), 64-69.

In reference to Rudine Sims Bishop’s “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors,” author Jimenez emphasizes the necessity for having literature that reflect children’s own identity and the conversations and education that can arise from literature written in #OwnVoices. Too often, children see a negative or inaccurate depiction or an absence of their own identity, community, or cultural background in literature. In 2018, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center statistics revealed that 50% of children’s literature had white characters, while 10% books or less have African/African American, Asian Pacific Islander/Asian Pacific American, Latinx, and American Indians/First Nations characters. Jiminez asserts that there is potential harm when children do not see themselves reflected in a positive light. #OwnVoices is a way for underrepresented authors to share their own experiences, which can potentially “act as mirrors for students who rarely see themselves, and… as windows for students that need to see the rest of the world.” The role of librarians and educators is to curate a selection that will help all children grow and learn about themselves and others.

Connection: #OwnVoices is highly recommended so that authors can share about their own authentic experiences and children can hear from people who may share the same or similar experiences. When children see a wider representation of themselves in books, they will grow to have a higher self-esteem and to see more potential in themselves. Children who experience the books written in #OwnVoices as “windows” or “sliding glass doors” will learn more about others without stereotypes and hopefully, grow to appreciate others’ communities and different cultural backgrounds.

Lavoie, A. (2021, June 6). Why We Need Diverse Books is no longer using the term #OwnVoices. *We Need Diverse Books*. https://diversebooks.org/why-we-need-diverse-books-is-no-longer-using-the-term-ownvoices/

The non-profit and grassroots organization of children’s literature, We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), has removed the term #OwnVoices from previous posts and will cease to use the term any further due to how the movement developed into a “catch all” marketing term by publishers. This use of the term can be problematic “due to the vagueness of the term, which has then been used to place diverse creators in uncomfortable and potentially unsafe situations.” WNDB continue to support diverse authors and instead, will use “specific descriptions that authors use for themselves and their characters.”

Further resources: WNDB provided the link to a [YouTube video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dk7uaIWgx_w) by the Pride Book Fest, which features a panel discussion on how the harassment and questioning of LGBTQ+ authors have resulted from the #OwnVoices movement.

[Pérez](https://www.hbook.com/author?query=Celia%20C.%20P%C3%A9rez), C.C. (2017, Mar 08). *When Google Translate gives you arroz con mango: Erroneous Español and the need for #OwnVoices.* The Horn Book Magazine. <https://www.hbook.com/story/when-google-translate-gives-you-arroz-con-mango-erroneous-espanol-and-the-need-for-ownvoices>

As a Spanish speaker, [Pérez](https://www.hbook.com/author?query=Celia%20C.%20P%C3%A9rez) has repeatedly found mistakes in Spanish in children’s and young adult literature including picture books, graphic novels, middle grade novels, and young adult novels. Although there is a trend in offering more diversity in books, the mistakes cause frustration and disappointment in Spanish readers and teach inaccurate Spanish to readers. The mistakes are largely due to having authors who do not speak the language to try to fill the gaps where diversity is lacking. [Pérez](https://www.hbook.com/author?query=Celia%20C.%20P%C3%A9rez) calls for more diversity and representation in all steps to creating new literature: in writing, editing, reviewing, publishing, and librarianship. It is important to keep in mind that the language differs by region and that not all Latinx have the same level of fluency. She supports authors who write in #OwnVoices and recommends editors and reviewers who speak, read, and write both Spanish and English fluently to check for accuracy and flow in code switching. Creators must ask themselves why they are inspired to write a character in that specific culture and to remember that accuracy is as important as diversity. If an author chooses to write a character whose language they do not speak, they must pay for translation services and to openly receive feedback and/or criticism.

Connection: [Pérez](https://www.hbook.com/author?query=Celia%20C.%20P%C3%A9rez) emphasizes how #OwnVoices is not only important in authorship, but also every step of the way from creation to the reader’s hands. Accuracy and flow in code switching are essential components in books to fully create “mirrors” and support readers with the same or similar experiences as the characters.

Sterritt, A. (2019, June). *Reconciling the power of one story* [Video]. TED Conferences. <https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_sterritt_reconciling_the_power_of_one_story>

Sterritt shares her journey of how the Indigenous culture was absent in children’s literature growing up and in her secondary school, the Indigenous peoples were depicted as inhumane. To fight the victim narrative and one-dimensional representation, she became a journalist to share stories that accurately portrayed Indigenous people. After a number of rejections and omittance of her work, Sterritt achieves ripples of victories that touched the Indigenous communities as they finally saw themselves accurately represented on media. By interviewing a range of Indigenous people such as doctors, mechanics, and single moms, and by working on a series of projects to have these stories heard, Sterritt emphasizes the importance of educating the public, recognizing that Indigenous people are resilient survivors, and changing the world, one ripple at a time.

Connection: Indigenous culture and history are often hidden, misrepresented in a negative light, and/or neglected in children’s and young adult literature. Indigenous work needs to be valued and recognized as #OwnVoices so that the Indigenous peoples are accurately represented without having to fight for their right to be heard.