

## Race Matters:

A Collaborative Conversation

**From the Editors:** In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation between several YA authors who have addressed explicitly issues of race in their presentations and writings. We appreciate the generous response of these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage with a difficult, highly personal topic in a very public way.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to all of the authors at once. We compiled the initial responses they shared into a single document and then, over several iterations over several months, sent the compiled version back and forth to authors to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result.

We hope this piece both challenges readers and gives them hope.

**There is repeated suggestion in the media that people are resistant to talking about race. Such conversations are described as too difficult, unnecessary, too complicated, too emotional. What do you think?**

**Cynthia:** The resistance is akin to that felt when talking about gender, culture, faith, law, politics, or socioeconomics. Not coincidentally, it's tough to discuss any of those subjects without touching on all of them. They demand patience, empathy, nuanced expression, and listening that facilitates critical thinking—a high calling in an increasingly fast-paced, immediate-gratification world.

Yet it's still a conversation that comes more comfortably to me than to my parents, more readily to them than my grandparents.

As a child, my grandfather schemed with his siblings to escape an abusive Indian boarding school in dustbowl Oklahoma. Two generations later, *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*, my contemporary novel about a mixed-blood Native girl, was celebrated at a Library of Congress event in Washington D.C. Though work remains to be done, that demonstrates improvement and offers me hope.

**Walter:** While the questions are difficult, there is an element of racial stereotyping underpinning the silence. A case in point was my brief conversation with Governor Rick Perry at a librarians' meeting in Austin. Governor Perry asked me how we could get more African American and Latino children up to grade level. He was amenable to my suggestions of diversity and inclusion but seemed less convinced when I told him that I felt it was absolutely necessary to involve the African American and Latino communities. "You really think that's going to happen?" he asked. I did then, and I still do. I believe that Governor Perry is interested in solving these problems, but I don't believe he has sufficient faith in the communities to engage them from that perspective. He sees the needy communities, I believe, as too passive to help their own children.

History simply doesn't support this view. All of the historically Black colleges were created shortly after the Civil War when the opposition to these institutions was both legal and violent. Within 15 years after the war, there was a Black educated class. Does anybody need a book about how Black colleges were established?

**Matt:** Many people try and diffuse the energy of racially focused conversations by pointing out how far we've come as a country in terms of tolerance and equity. It's tempting to roll with that line of thinking because it's so much easier. We can all smile and nod and go on our way. But progress (when it comes to almost anything worthwhile) hurts. If I avoid issues of race in my books (considering the fact that my POV characters tend to be mixed race), I feel like I'm taking the easy way out. I'm not saying I have to stop the story all the time and overtly discuss racial issues. That's bad writing. But I'm always aware of who's brushing up against whom—because *they are aware*, both consciously and unconsciously. And I pay attention to the way scenes are laid out against each other. So much of today's racial tension is subtle and sophisticated. You have to find ways to show that in fiction. At the end of the day, I think it's completely naïve to think we'll ever live in some kind of racial harmony, which is why I don't look to arc beliefs too much over the course of a story.

**Coe:** Talking about race *is* hard; it makes a lot of people uncomfortable, which makes them want to avoid the subject altogether. That's completely understandable. However, it's important to realize there are many, *many* groups of people who don't have the luxury of being so uneasy with the subject of race that they get to opt out of dealing with it. They live the history and reality of racism on a daily basis. So when people express resistance to talking about race, I always wonder what that must be like, to be able to just not deal with it. Personally, that's never been something I've been able to do.

**Cynthia:** Building on what Coe said about opting out (or not) . . .

Early on, as a children's writer, I received repeated feedback that my Native-driven manuscripts were too crowded with brushstroke cultural references and allusions. I was urged not to risk overwhelming or confusing non-Indian readers and to block out explanations for any content that might not be readily digestible to them.

Prioritizing the outsider audience cheats all kids. First, it distorts the fictional heroes and stories

that should mirror young insider (and intersecting) readers. But it underestimates and shortchanges outsider kids, too.

I took five years of French language classes at my US high school and college. But I greatly increased my fluency during the summer I lived in Paris. Submersion served me far better than piece-meal servings.

**Gene:** Americans are simultaneously obsessed with and avoidant of race. Race is a big part of how we analyze weekend box office results, how we judge educational institutions, how we market products, how our comedians make us laugh. Yet, how many of us have had an honest, quiet conversation about race with a friend of a different background? We know it might get messy, so we avoid it.

I understand the impulse to avoid. I've been conflict avoidant all my life. Just the other day, I ate a salad I didn't order because I didn't want to offend the waiter who brought it to me. And let's be honest, sometimes avoiding the mess is a practical necessity. We've got bills to pay and children to raise. Who has the emotional energy to get messy?

But maybe story can play a part here. Walter talked about the importance of community, and I completely agree. The Chinese have a tradition of tackling current issues by referencing stories held in common by the community, stories that may even define the community. The stories can be historical or fictional, and they serve as a dispassionate starting point for discussing difficult, complicated, emotional topics.

Maybe our stories can do the same. Maybe they can ease us into those honest, quiet conversations.

**We are often quick to affix labels to authors. Are you a Black or Latino or Asian American or Native American author, or are you an author who is Black, Latino, Asian American, or Native American? Does it matter?**

**Gene:** I've noodled this question through before at various points in my career. I don't have a good answer. I'm an author. I'm Asian American. Regardless of whether I'm writing directly about Asian American issues, my cultural heritage finds its way

into my work. Like most writers, I draw heavily from my own life for my stories, even when I'm writing about century-old wars or talking frogs or teenagers who are able to manipulate the elements. I've lived an Asian American life, so it shows up in my writing, consciously or not.

This question—am I an Asian American author or an author who is Asian American?—stems from a fear of being pigeonholed. Will the market accept a book from me that isn't explicitly Asian American? Will I be considered for a licensed property that does not have an Asian or Asian American protagonist? Are my characters too Asian or not Asian enough?

If I spend too much of my energy thinking about all that, it will kill me creatively. I need to write the stories inside of me, let them come out the way they want to come out. Someone else can worry about the labels.

**Cynthia:** I'm a mixed-blood citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. "American Indian" and "Native American" are umbrella terms, the former of which is defined by US federal Indian law. In casual conversation, I use them interchangeably. In writing dialogue, I go with whatever makes the most sense for the individual speaker.

As a Native writer, personal experiences and insights fuel my stories. They offer a springboard for creating characters that are both like and different from me in that way. They suggest certain themes and inform my worldview.

But so does my background as a Mid-to-Southwesterner, a lower-middle class kid, a Wonder Woman fanatic, someone who saw "Star Wars" in the theater over 380 times and covered race as a journalist and co-founded a gender-rights law journal and adores the "Xanadu" album and married a cute Eurasian man and is awakened each morning by tabby cats.

**Matt:** Is it legal to quote rapper Eminem in this piece? "I am whoever you say I am." The biggest waste of time for any writer is to try and control the label affixed to his or her work by outside groups. I think it's better to focus on telling well-crafted, thoughtful stories driven by authentic characters. I'm almost always described as a Hispanic author,

which is fine, but my books seem more focused on the mixed-race experience. My first two books have sports elements, and sometimes I am referred to as a "sports book author." That used to bother me—because it seemed to marginalize the stories, and I was aiming at literature—but I left sports out of my next four books. My label seemed to change, but I still hate the idea that perception may have influenced my path as a writer.

**Walter:** It's important for us to be authors first. We develop our skills as authors so that we can then turn to our particular interests and present them meaningfully. Within the African American community, I've seen too many young authors encounter resistance because they were not writing what some critics described as being their purview.

**Coe:** Actually, all of those labels exhaust me. Why are they necessary for authors of color and not for White authors? If there's ever going to be hope for equality, we need to stop defaulting to White and labeling everyone who isn't.

**The industry has been increasingly criticized for not publishing works by and/or about a diverse array of people, particularly given the changing demographics of potential readers. Do you share this critique?**

**Gene:** I do, but we need to remember what the industry is. In books, in the storytelling arts in general, the relationship between the storyteller and her audience is sacrosanct. The entire publishing industry, when it's at its best, exists to facilitate that relationship.

There are certainly visionary publishers, but ultimately the book market is driven by the creators and the readers. If you want more diverse books, buy more diverse books. Buy them for yourself, your friends, your children, your coworkers. Rave about them on the Internet. Cosplay your favorite characters. Make t-shirts of your favorite lines.

And write more diverse books. Make them loud, make them beautiful, make them unstoppable. Invite readers into an unfamiliar world and compel them to stay.

Comics culture has a long tradition of taking

things into our own hands. Back when the Comics Code Authority was still policing content, Robert Crumb sold copies of *Zap Comix #1* out of a baby stroller in the streets of San Francisco. Jeff Smith self-published *Bone* at a time when most American comic shops wouldn't touch a book without capes in it. Jeff flew to a retailer convention on his own dime, stood outside the convention hall, and handed out samples of his book to shop owners.

Don't wait for the gatekeepers. Don't wait for some executive in a New York office to have an epiphany. Nothing against executives in New York—many of them are smart, talented, maybe even a little visionary. But you can do something about it. On your own. Right now.

**Cynthia:** Yes, diversifying the creators and champions of books—authors, artists, industry professionals, booksellers, educators, etc.—should be a priority.

**Coe:** When you look at the percentage of books published each year by authors of color, it's clear the industry has a lot more work to do. Things are slowly getting better—*very* slowly—but there's still a long way to go before the books being published truly reflect the diversity of this country.

**Cynthia:** I'd love to hear more conversation about industry outreach that still includes gatekeepers and affluent suburban girls but also reaches beyond them.

**Matt:** "If you build it, they will come." At the end of the day, our industry is focused on one thing: remaining viable (i.e., making money). Many publishing industry decision makers, in my opinion, believe publishing a diverse list of books is the right thing to do—just not at the expense of profit margins. But it's a fact that the face of the consumer is changing. Hispanics, for instance, are the fastest growing demographic in the country. So why are there so few books written by Hispanic authors, featuring Hispanic characters? Just wait a sec. Soon there will be a tipping point, and publishers will be competing for Hispanic readers. Eventually publishing diverse stories, written by diverse authors, will not only be the right thing to do, it will be the *lucrative* thing to do. We're not quite there yet.

Today is when authors, publishers, booksellers, educators, reviewers, and readers need to take a leap of faith, to get out in front of this change, to push. "If you build it, they will come."

**Walter:** Publishers have not been diligent in encouraging diversity or in having their editors expand their reading and cultural contacts so that they can discover new talent. Editorial staffs would do well to hold at least one meeting a month to discuss what they are reading in general. I can already hear the complaint that they are too busy for such a meeting! Diversity from the publisher's point of view would be fine, but I'm thinking that we also need to expand the market by creating more demand.

**Matt:** I am worried about one thing: that tomorrow's diverse storytellers will find a different medium. If publishing hasn't been historically welcoming of new diverse voices, maybe these voices skip right on past "the novel." But we need these future storytellers more than they need us. If the traditional novel is going to remain viable, we need the best talent out there.

**Coe:** I know what you mean, Matt. I have so many writer friends who have completely given up on getting their novels published by a "traditional" publisher. They have either taken to self-publishing, or they have found a different platform altogether—stage plays, screenplays, etc. As a people, especially a people of color, we are storytellers. It's part of our traditions. I wish the publishing world would catch up because we have a lot to say!

**The common narrative of minoritized youth is couched in deficit perspectives. Could/do your works serve as counter-narratives that challenge negative assumptions about youth/communities of color?**

**Coe:** I hope so! I want my work to show readers the complexity of the lives of kids and teens of color, that there's more there than what's shown in the media where their representation is far more negative than positive. My characters are often going through tough, true-to-life situations, and I

want readers to see this up close and know what it feels like. It's my belief that it's only through that kind of firsthand knowledge that there can be true understanding. While I never set out to write something that will serve the purpose of changing people's assumptions, I hope my novels give readers a more complete window into the lives—and hearts—of these kids.

**Walter:** I see my work not so much as counter-narratives but rather as expanded depictions of minorities. It's not unusual for teachers to come to me and say that some Black student did not read until they read one of my books, and then follow up the comment by saying that the book was about basketball (*Hoops*, *The Outside Shot*, *Slam*, *Game*), and that's what attracted the reader to the book. They don't realize that what attracts people to my books is that readers see images of themselves and of their families and communities that they are not going to find in other books. The teachers who find plenty of positive images of themselves in books don't understand how important just having cultural references is to young people who usually don't see themselves between the pages of a book.

One of my favorite books is called *Now Is Your Time: The African American Struggle for Freedom*. One critic complained that I didn't understand who the important figures were in African American history. I guess she thought she did. What she overlooked completely was my depiction of African American heroes within a family structure. I was so tired (and still am) of hearing African Americans from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Rosa Parks to Frederick Douglass praised as outstanding and exceptional individuals. Too many White historians depict every Black hero as someone who has done something *despite* the fact that he was Black and not because he was part of a Black family or society that led him to his accomplishments. So in *Now Is Your Time*, I used Malcolm Little's parents to show his development as an orator and activist, Frederick Douglass and his warrior sons, the escaped slave George Latimer and his son Lewis Latimer. I use families—not basketball!—whenever I can in my books because they represent the cultural substance that creates true readers.

**Cynthia:** I craft characters as individuals, not representations. However, some non-Indian adults may struggle (before failing) to reconcile my Native characters with the pervasive and persistent mainstream Wild-West-New-Age mythos. Non-Indian children and teen readers, on the other hand, tend to catch on quickly.

That said, I'm weary of the narrow default vision of Native teens as pitiable victims of reservation life. Do they face serious challenges? Of course (don't all teens?), but that stereotype underestimates their individuality, complexity, and communities. It dismisses their triumphs and potential. Furthermore, it fails to consider the hundreds of Native nations without reservations and the 80-plus percent of Indians who live in big cities.

According to *Indian Country Today*, the urban areas with the largest Native populations are (in descending order) New York City, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Oklahoma City, and Anchorage. Where are the stories of those kids?

In the Tantalize and Feral series, I've written African American, Asian American, and Mexican American main characters as well—not romanticized or exoticized or stereotyped, but rather grounded in multilayered identities and communities.

**Gene:** I hope [that my works serve as counter-narratives], but the readers themselves have more of a say in how my books are read and how they're used. The narratives surrounding Asian American youth are probably different from those surrounding the youth of other minority communities, but they can be limiting nonetheless.

More than anything, though, I hope I'm telling stories about human beings. I like what Cynthia said about crafting characters as individuals rather than representations. If we do that, counteracting preexisting narratives becomes a happy by-product, a side benefit. In fact, that's probably the only effective way to create counter-narratives.

**Matt:** When I read a novel where the author is overtly setting out to "challenge negative assumptions" or stereotypes, I cringe. My principal stance is this: story first. I try to take what I see and hear in the

world and then position these observations in such a way that, by the end of the novel, the reader sees what is already there in a slightly different light. An example of this strategy that has always moved me is the vignette “Darius and the Clouds” from Sandra Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street*. In it, Cisneros describes a boy, Darius, as someone who doesn’t like school, who is “sometimes stupid and mostly a fool,”—in other words, he’s the kind of boy you’d expect to see in this kind of neighborhood. But at the end of the vignette, Cisneros gives Darius a moment of wisdom that is magical and surprises the other kids. I try to keep this in mind in my own work. Sometimes the “thug” in the story is also capable of poetry.

#### For whom do you write?

**Walter:** I write for the person I am: Harlem-raised, from a foster family, from a family mired in poverty, who stumbled through many teenage adventures and who, somewhere along the way, discovered books.

**Matt:** I mostly write for a younger, more thoughtful version of myself. I write what I want to read. But over the past several years, I’ve had the opportunity to meet so many inspiring young men and women in high schools around the country—especially those at underprivileged high schools—that I now (secretly) write for them, too. They’re starved for books that feature characters that look and sound like them and their friends. I can’t tell you how moving it is when a young “mixed race” kid comes up to me after a presentation and riffs off my novel, *Mexican WhiteBoy*. “Hey, I’m like you. I’m a Korean WhiteGirl.” Or, “I’m a Colombian WhiteBoy.” Or, “I’m a Chinese BrownGirl.”

**Gene:** I write for the 14-year-old me. I make the comics I wanted to read when I was a kid. I write for the friends and family who read my early drafts. When I’m working on a book, I picture them laughing or gasping or rolling their eyes at certain panels.

And I write for anyone who’s willing to read one of my books.

**Cynthia:** First, I serve Story and then young readers, including Native readers and those of color. I appreciate grown-up enthusiasts, but if it comes down to what will resonate most with my target audience or fellow adults, the kids will win every time.

**Coe:** I started out writing for those teens who don’t see themselves reflected in literature, mostly black and brown kids who live in the inner city. I still have that audience in mind, but now that I’ve talked to so many kids and adults who have read my books, I realize I was being too narrow. I get emails and letters from teenagers of all races and backgrounds who tell me they relate to my books because, like my character Tyrell, they don’t have a father in the home or they also have family problems, etc. It’s a nice reminder that people read books for many reasons, not only to see their own lives. So, I guess you can say, I write for everyone!

#### Words of Tribute

**Matt:** I just wanted to take a minute also to express my profound gratitude for all the writers of color who have paved the way for us to do what we do. Walter Dean Myers has always been a huge inspiration to me—because of his books, but also because of the way he’s carried himself throughout his career. I study his interviews and pay attention to everything educators and booksellers say about him. What an incredible honor to be a part of this discussion with one of my (our) writing heroes.

**Cynthia:** Allow me to echo Matt’s sentiment. More personally, I first heard Walter Dean Myers speak at the Texas Book Festival in 2004 and was so inspired that I began scribbling notes on my work in progress during his presentation. I recall feeling guilty that I couldn’t give him my full attention and grateful that he had fueled such a fire in me.

I also jotted down his statement, “*People say you should write what you know, and I don’t think that’s true. I think you should write what you can imagine. That ability, that’s what makes you an author.*” At the time, I was writing my first fantasy—my first non-Native-themed novel—and his words felt like a blessing. Some giants cast shadows. Walter Dean Myers was a blazing sun.

**Coe Booth** is the author of *Tyrell*, which won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Best Young Adult Novel, and was named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults and a New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age. Her new middle grade novel, *Kinda Like Brothers*, is the story of two boys who really don't get along—but have to find a way to figure it out. Her other books include *Kendra* and *Bronxwood*. She was born in the Bronx and still lives there. For more, check out [www.coebooth.com](http://www.coebooth.com).

**Matt de la Peña** is the author of five critically acclaimed young adult novels: *Ball Don't Lie*, *Mexican WhiteBoy*, *We Were Here*, *I Will Save You*, and *The Living*, for which he received the Pura Belpré Author Honor Award. His next book, *The Hunted*, will be published this May. Matt received his MFA in creative writing from San Diego State University and his BA from the University of the Pacific where he attended school on a full basketball scholarship. Matt teaches creative writing and visits high schools and colleges throughout the country. He has also published short fiction and essays in various newspapers and literary journals, including *The New York Times* and *NPR.org*.

**Walter Dean Myers** (1937–2014) was a prolific author of more than 100 fiction and nonfiction titles. He received every single major award in the field of children's literature. He was the author of 2 Newbery Honor books; 11 Coretta Scott King Author Award/Honor Books; 3 National Book Award Finalists, and the first ever Michael L. Printz Award. He was also the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in writing for young adults and was the first-ever recipient of the Coretta Scott King–Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement. He was the 2010 United States nominee for the Hans Christian Andersen Award and was nominated for the Astrid Lindgren Award numerous times. From 2012–2013, he served as the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature with the platform, "Reading Is Not Optional." *On a Clear Day* (Crown/Random House) was published posthumously.

**Cynthia Leitich Smith** is the New York Times and Publishers Weekly bestselling YA author of the *Feral* trilogy, which includes *Feral Nights*, *Feral Curse*, and *Feral Pride*

as well as the *Tantalize* series, which includes *Tantalize*, *Eternal*, *Blessed*, *Diabolical*, and two graphic novels, *Tantalize: Kieren's Story* and *Eternal: Zachary's Story* (all Candlewick). Her acclaimed novels are often noted for their diverse protagonists, humor, social conscience, and compelling action. Cynthia is also the author of several children's books, including *Jingle Dancer*, *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*, and *Indian Shoes* (all HarperChildrens). She is a citizen of the Muscogee Nation and has been named *Writer of the Year* by *Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers*. She also serves on the advisory board for *We Need Diverse Books*. Her website at [www.cynthialeitichsmith.com](http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com) was named an ALA Great Website for Kids. Her *Cynsations* blog at [cynthialeitichsmith.blogspot.com/](http://cynthialeitichsmith.blogspot.com/) was listed as among the top two read by the children's/YA publishing community by SCBWI.

**Gene Luen Yang's** first book with *First Second*, *American Born Chinese*, is now in print in over 10 languages and was a National Book Award finalist and winner of the Printz Award. Yang's other works include the popular comics adaptation of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and the New York Times bestselling graphic novel diptych, *Boxers & Saints*. *The Shadow Hero*, the story of the first Asian American superhero, is his most recent graphic novel.

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