The Irresponsibility of Oversimplification:

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation between Kwame Alexander and Jason Reynolds, award-winning authors who have given readers some of the most lyrical writing in middle-grade and YA fiction. We appreciate the generous responses of these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage with challenging, important questions of difference, diversity, and representation.

As authors, how do you use language to describe the varied characters and settings you create? How do you craft people and places that are potentially unfamiliar to readers without falling into stereotypical representations?

Kwame: This is definitely a Jason question, as he's a lot more conscious of his audience and his responsibility to them in his writing. In my opinion, that is. I just try to be authentic. I write about the kinds of things I like and have some passion for. And mostly that's characters. I'm not overly concerned with, or rather interested in, setting because I want the reader to be able to step in those shoes as a participant, not an observer, wherever they may live. Bottom line for me is we are all more alike than we are different, so I'm much more interested in putting soul on paper, on showing the beauty and tragedy and hopefulness of our lives. That's something we can all connect with. I like to think I am an authentic person who genuinely cares about people and wants the world to be better. So that's the space I write from. It may sound all hokey and whatnot, but that's it. Like I said, this is a Jason question.

Jason: Oh please, Kwame. You nailed it. I feel the same way. I also try to really provide sensory details. How does an environment sound? How does it smell? How does it feel? How does it look? The key is to build a world, even if that world already exists, and to approach characters as if they themselves are in fact settings and as if each setting is a character. I also think stereotypes are problematic—not because they are untrue, which is not always the case, but because they are one-dimensional, oversimplified, and often devoid of complexity and nuance. So if I describe a "poor" neighborhood, I can't describe the stereotypical, though often real, pain and struggle without also exploring the joy, love, and connectivity that are just as real. Just as we connect with hopefulness, we also connect through the depiction of balance.

Is there ever a place for stereotyping in storytelling?

Jason: Nope, I don't think so. As a writer, to oversimplify anything—especially people and places—is to be lazy and/or cowardly and/or irresponsible. Actually, as a HUMAN, to oversimplify anything—especially people and places—is to be lazy and/or cowardly and/or irresponsible. What you think, Kwame?

Kwame: Hey look, I'm trying to help young people imagine a better world. Imagine what's possible for them, for us. To do that, I work to be fresh, new, exciting, and sometimes wonderfully complex, and so to spend energy on stereotyping characters, situations, cultures, takes away from that focus. Plus, yeah, it's lazy. Sure, one might say, well sometimes in order to change something, you have to expose it, and I get that. Thing is, stereotypes are what they are because we all already know about them. They're always exposed, aren't they? This is a prime reason why I think writers of children's literature who use the n-word ought to rethink that. We get the connotation, its offensiveness, its volatility. I'm not sure there's anything new you can bring to us that's going to bring your storytelling, and our connection to it, to life. In some cases, it might even be irresponsible writing. I say show us a new groove, write a poem that dances wild and free. Write a story that travels, steps outside of your cramped apartment, leaves all that tired baggage at home, and catches a train somewhere.

Finally, stereotyping, especially in picturebooks, doesn't allow for nuance, and that leads to oversimplification, which is basically what happened with those two problematic children's books featuring smiling, enslaved Africans, but that's a whole other thing, so yeah, Jason, don't get me started.

How might language, woven through story, invite exploration of difference centered on (dis)ability, sexual identity or orientation, gender, race, nationality, culture, age, and/or physical appearance?

Jason: One of the most powerful things about story is that in story, language has a spacious framework to stretch out in, to really get beneath the surface in ways not many other mediums have the scope to do. Language can obviously be used to describe and lay out differences explicitly, but it can also be used to draw attention to differences implicitly simply by how the language exists on the page as far as word choice, syntax, vernacular, punctuation, and format go. We've seen it several times, such as in Emma Donoghue's (2010) *Room*, where the language is used to create the voice of a traumatized toddler. Or in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Haddon, 2003) where language and format are just as integral to the plot as the climax, visually (with language) providing us a window into the mind of an (assumed) autistic child.

Kwame: I think the more interesting question is how language might invite exploration of similarity, of unity, of humanity. The differences have been explored and magnified and are ultimately responsible for why we don't see a lot of diverse books. If I view you as being different, as being other, then I am less open to seeing you in my circle of inclusion. It may not even be intentional, but it has the same effect. You become invisible.

How do you get to know your characters, especially those whose lives and experiences are different from your own?

Kwame: Think. Study. Research. Dream. Imagine. Live.

Also, I practice this thing called Butt. In. Chair. And so I sit in a chair for five hours for five days a week and write (though lately that chair has been on a plane or in a hotel), and eventually the characters move into my head. They live with me. They sleep with me. They tell me things. We talk. We laugh together. I spend a lot of time with them. I spent *five years* with Josh and JB. You spend that amount of time with anybody, trust me, you know them.

But, you gotta be authentic. I was listening to Doreen Rappaport recently, and she was talking about her career as a White writer writing children's picturebooks about Black historical figures. She was sharing her life experiences, and it was clear that she lives an authentic life and is able to put her feet into the shoes of these figures who have had very different experiences from hers because of her sensibilities and her sensitivities and her awareness and, of course, her study. But, I think most of all, it's her humanity.

Jason: I agree, but there are all sorts of ways to reach that authenticity. I try to vet my characters as much as I can. I also like to draw from people I know well—outside of the vetting process—making sure that I don't assume I know everything based on our relationship, but using moments of intimacy

and honesty to flesh out some of the intricacies of a person outside of myself based on the experiences I've had being on the receiving end. For instance, if one has never been a teacher, one must question what can be deduced about being a teacher, having been a student. Of course, this deduction has to be coupled with research and vetting, but it's the deduction that can take the character from being a bundle of checked boxes to an interesting, whole character on the page. The other thing I do is remember that no matter who my characters are, they are still human. They still need to have basic human components. Fear and ambition. Passion and vulnerability. Joy and pain. If we write characters as human first, we'll be 75% on the mark, every time. That being said, I've also made mistakes. They're inevitable. And when they happen, I learn from them and try not to make them again.

What accepted ways of thinking and understanding would you most like to have challenged through your writings?

Jason: That boys and men are unemotional and lack the ability to be introspective and vulnerable. Such a big deal for me. Also, I'd like to continue to add to the tradition of showing Black people as well-rounded and intricate. We're an elaborate, complicated people with *every* kind of story.

Kwame: I'm writing a middle-grade trilogy set in the mid-1800s about a swimmer because I want kids (and adults) to know that Black history begins before slavery. There were families and children and bullies and friendships and sports and communities blossoming way before Africans were kidnapped and taken to America.

Also, I want my readers to know that poetry rocks! That boys love poetry. That girls love poetry. That teachers and librarians love it. That we all love it, even though we may have forgotten that we do. And that ultimately it can be the bridge to get our children to become engaged writers and readers.

For whom do you write?

Kwame: I write for me. For you. For kids. For my daughter. For librarians. For my parents. For my twelve-year-old self. For my adult self. Heck, there's a scene in the new book, *Booked* (2016), that I couldn't wait to show Jackie Woodson because I knew she would enjoy it, appreciate it, connect with it. Whether I'm writing a picturebook or a middle-grade novel or a love poem, I am ultimately writing to understand myself a little better, to understand the world and my place in it a little better. When I write, I try to impress myself, all of my selves, and I figure if I love it, then there's a good chance the reader will, too. I write for the human soul entire.

Jason: I agree. First and foremost, I write for me. But I only write for me in the sense that I sincerely want these stories to exist . . . for us. And by us, I mean all of us. For the mom who just wants her son to see himself. For the son who didn't know he really *didn't* hate reading. For the suburban lady who has been afraid of certain people in certain environments. For the young girl who wants to be proud of where she's from. For the misunderstood and the proud and the troubled and the scared and the gritty and the curious. And yes, even for you, Kwame. All of us.

Kwame Alexander *is a poet, educator, and* New York Times *bestselling author of 21 books, including* The Crossover, *which received the 2015 John Newbery Medal, the Coretta Scott King Author Award Honor, the NCTE Charlotte Huck Honor, the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, and the Paterson Poetry Prize. His other works include* Surf's Up, *a picturebook, and* Booked, *a middle-grade novel-in-verse.*

Jason Reynolds *is the critically acclaimed author of* When I Was the Greatest, *recipient of the Coretta Scott King/ John Steptoe Award, the Coretta Scott King Honor book,* The Boy in the Black Suit, *and* All American Boys, *co-written with Brendan Kiely. His debut middle-grade novel,* As Brave as You, *hits shelves in May.*

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