

INSPIRATION GUIDE

Every Story Matters

Making books
more inclusive



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Introduction: What was the project?

Every Story Matters – Making books more inclusive was a European collaborative project that ran from 2019 to 2022. The project aimed to encourage the creation of more inclusive books for children and young adults, and to equip book professionals – including publishers, librarians and editors – with the tools and strategies needed to achieve this. Our overarching goal was to contribute to a more inclusive European book sector, where the representation of diversity and inclusion would become mainstream and self-evident.

Every Story Matters was supported by Creative Europe and coordinated by Flanders Literature, in partnership with organisations from Croatia (Mediart International), Germany (BlueDar), the Netherlands (Dutch Foundation for Literature and ROSE Stories), Portugal (Acesso Cultura) and Slovenia (Slovenian Book Agency).

Partners of Every Story Matters at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2022.





Activities: What did we do?

Between 2019 and 2022 Every Story Matters organised 34 training and networking events, took part in 3 major international book fairs, and coached 6 emerging writers and illustrators – guiding them from the initial concept for an inclusive children's book to presenting their stories at literary festivals and book fairs.

Talent development programme

In order to gain hands-on experience with inclusive storytelling and actively contribute to a more inclusive literary landscape, Every Story Matters launched a talent development programme designed to coach 6 emerging authors and illustrators from our partner countries in creating their first inclusive children's book.

We issued an open call at the end of 2019 and received over 170 applications. Each partner organisation formed a selection committee comprising an expert in children's literature and diversity, and was responsible for selecting one author or illustrator. We offered the selected participants opportunities to develop their skills and grow professionally as authors and illustrators.

Each participant was paired with an experienced mentor from their home country and supported through a series of workshops and online masterclasses to guide them in their creative process. We invited authors, publishers, illustrators

and other professionals with diverse expertise to lead a session on a wide range of topics – from technical aspects of storytelling and illustrating to finding one's voice and promoting work to publishers.

Here's an overview of the masterclasses provided:

- **'How to tell stories to children'** by Mylo Freeman, an author and illustrator from the Netherlands;
- **'How perspective shapes your story'** by Neske Beks, an author and director from Belgium working internationally;
- **'The impact of reading and storytelling to children'** by Winny Ang, an author and child psychiatrist from Belgium;
- **'Transmedia storytelling'** by Špela Frlic, a performance storyteller and artistic educationalist from Slovenia;
- **'The business side of inclusive storytelling'** by Alice Curry, founder and CEO of UK-based publishing house Lantana;
- Feedback sessions by ambassadors from Inclusive Minds, UK.



In 2022, we brought all participants together in Amsterdam for a team-building event and a workshop to prepare them for a pitching session aimed at a professional audience at the Frankfurt Book Fair 2022. We also introduced all participants to the audience of the Zagreb Book Festival 2022.

Our approach was designed to equip the participants with the knowledge and experience needed to independently create their own story and to embark on their careers as professional authors and illustrators. Over the course of the programme, we observed significant growth in all participants: they became more confident in public speaking, built productive professional relationships, and gained assurance in their work. Four out of six stories were matched with renowned publishing houses, resulting in publication, and in some cases, translations.



Watch our video about the Every Story Matters talent development programme.



Participants of the talent development programme.



6 inclusive children's books from emerging authors and illustrators

These are the six books that were created thanks to the talent development programme.



'The Duel'

by Inês Viegas Oliveira,
an illustrator from
Portugal



'Confused Much?'

by Manaf Alattar,
an illustrator from
Germany



'My Neighbour Is a Ninja!'

by Najiba Abdellaoui,
a writer from the
Netherlands



'Lana's School'

by Mirna Brođanac,
a writer from Croatia



'Sentinels'

by Staša Guček,
an illustrator from
Slovenia



'The Very Best Invention in the Whole Wide World'

by Shamisa Debroey,
an illustrator from
Belgium



Read more about the content and the creators of the books further on in this PDF.



Zagreb Book Festival: a stage for inclusive literature

To raise public awareness about the importance of diversity, and to stimulate dialogue around the emancipatory power of literature for social inclusion, Every Story Matters organised 6 public events across 2 editions of the Zagreb Book Festival, in collaboration with our Croatian partner Mediart International.

For each edition, we invited an internationally acclaimed author to be an ambassador for both the festival and the Every Story Matters project, and to be interviewed as part of the programme.

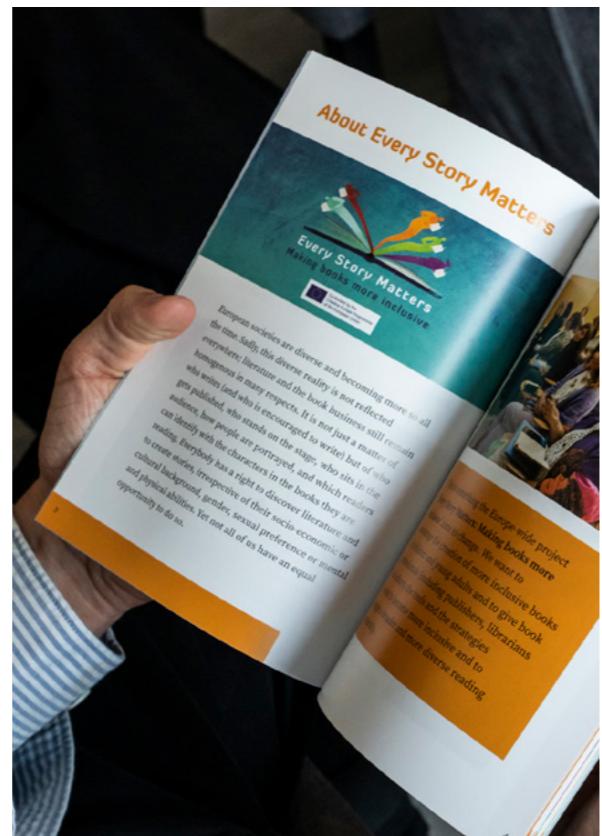
In 2021, we hosted an interview with Jul March, the French-Belgian author of the graphic novel 'Blue is the Warmest Colour', which gained international fame through its film adaptation.

In 2022, Moroccan-Belgian author Rachida Lamrabet was invited to mark the Croatian publication of her book 'Tell Someone'.

Both authors advocate for greater diversity in literature and have published work that contributes to this cause.

In addition to March and Lamrabet, four Croatian authors and cultural figures acted as ambassadors for Every Story Matters at the Zagreb Book Festival, with a particular focus on inclusion. Both the 2021 and 2022 editions featured panel discussions exploring the role of books as mirrors and windows for readers, and promoting awareness of diversity and inclusion in literature education.





The festival also served as a platform to connect with our talent development programme. In 2021, Croatian participant Mirna Brođanac and her mentor Olja Savičević Ivančević shared a heartfelt conversation about their collaboration. In 2022, Brođanac's book 'Lana's School' was officially launched at the festival. It became the best-selling children's book in Croatia in the final quarter of 2022 and received significant media attention. Notably, it was the first Croatian children's book featuring a protagonist with a disability, written by an author with a disability.

Three other writers and illustrators from the talent development programme joined Brođanac in Zagreb to present their work during a panel discussion.

To engage younger audiences, Mediart International also organised workshops in schools and universities with the participating ambassadors.

The events were widely covered by Croatian media, and the 2021 panel discussion was broadcast on national television channel HRT, reaching approximately 450,000 viewers.



Watch our video of the panel discussion at the Zagreb Book Festival 2021.



School workshops: fostering creative storytelling

In 2020, our German partner BlueDar organised 5 augmented reality storytelling workshops in collaboration with the Redi School for Digital Integration in Berlin. These workshops welcomed children from different cultural backgrounds, with a particular focus on those with a refugee background, and combined technology with traditional narrative methods.

Each student created a short story on paper using a mix of drawing, collage and writing, and then applied augmented reality techniques to bring their story to life. The workshops were facilitated by Sulafa Hejazi, visual artist and founder of BlueDar, and were attended by 51 children.





Opening conference in Lisbon

During our opening conference in Lisbon in 2019, organised by our Portuguese partner Acesso Cultura, Every Story Matters hosted 4 panels discussions and lectures featuring 13 speakers from across Europe – including Belgium, Denmark, Portugal, Sweden, The Netherlands and the UK – each bringing distinct areas of expertise.

The central question that we explored was: how can children's books become more inclusive? This question was approached from multiple perspectives:

- library professionals and teachers discussed their role in bringing inclusive books to young audiences;
- writers and publishers discussed how inclusive content can be created;
- Portuguese publishing house Orfeu Negro shared its approach to breaking stereotypes;
- professor Temi Odumosu highlighted the underlying biases that shape many of the challenges and questions raised.

The conference was organised in local partnership with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the José Saramago Foundation and Casa Fernando Pessoa. The event was sold out, welcoming 109 attendees and offering both participants and project partners an opportunity to reflect on and discuss the state of inclusive publishing – both in Portugal and abroad. Topics included barriers to the creation and distribution of inclusive books, and the roles of various stakeholders such as writers, publishers, booksellers, librarians, teachers, parents and readers.

The event was livestreamed and recorded, with the 2 panel discussion reaching over 3.000 and 1.800 people.



[➡ VIDEO 1](#)

[➡ VIDEO 2](#)

Watch our videos of the panel discussions in Lisbon in 2019.





Library workshops in Portugal

In 2020 and 2021, we continued to explore the theme of the panel discussion with librarians and teachers at the opening conference in Lisbon in 2019. We organised 15 workshops for librarians and teachers across 14 different Portuguese cities and municipalities, facilitated by Acesso Cultura.

To support the workshops, Every Story Matters invited reading mediator Andreia Brites to guide the participants in offering a plurality of voices to their readers. The workshops reached 228 professionals and aimed to:

- clarify key concepts related to diversity;
- identify barriers, including the lack of representation of marginalised groups in literature;
- establish practical tools for working on inclusion;
- define strategies to ensure inclusive books reach young readers.



B2B-events at international book fairs: creating channels for international exchange

To promote the international exchange of children's books that reflect diversity and to increase the visibility of inclusive titles that are currently available, Every Story Matters participated in the Bologna Children's Book Fair (2022) and the Frankfurt Book Fair (2021 and 2022). These fairs are among the largest professionals gatherings for the global sale and exchange of children's literature.

With the support of our Slovenian partner, the Slovenian Book Agency, Every Story Matters hosted networking events for international publishers interested in exchanging high-quality children's and young adult books with a focus on inclusion.

In 2020, due to COVID-19 restrictions, we adapted our plans by creating a dedicated section on our website to replace the in-person pitching originally scheduled for Bologna. In 2021, we organised 2 digital lectures:

- **'Diversity and inclusion: questions to ask ourselves'**
by Maria Vlachou;
- **'Ebooks, audiobooks and accessibility'** by Marko Hercog.

We curated a selection of 37 titles for our online exchange, received 124 registrations for the lectures, and welcomed 119 publishers to our live events. Each event included a presentation of the project and speed dating sessions to foster connections between professionals.





In 2021, Every Story Matters also participated in the international IBBY-conference in Moscow, one of the industry's leading events, where we showcased our project to a global audience.

Our efforts culminated in a collaboration with the Frankfurt Book Fair. In 2022, we co-organised the first Frankfurt Kids Conference, an event aimed at professionals in the children's

publishing industry. Every Story Matters contributed its expertise on diversity and inclusion, invited international keynote speakers and panel guests, and participated in a panel discussions ourselves. This allowed us to schedule meetings, share our learnings, and disseminate the outcomes of the project to a wide professional audience.



Partners of Every Story Matters and participants of the talent development programme at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2022.



Every Effort Matters: sharing and connecting good practices

One of the goals of Every Story Matters was to develop a tool that would foster ongoing dialogue around diversity and inclusion in the book sector, and to facilitate knowledge exchange across European countries and different segments of the book industry.

In 2021, we organised 6 online inspiration sessions, consulting 151 professionals – including publishers, librarians, teachers, literary event organisers, translators and readers – to better understand on their needs and expectations for a diversity charter.



Our conclusion was clear: rather than a static document, we needed a flexible, evolving and open format that anyone in the industry could consult and subscribe to. This led to the launch of the platform and campaign Every Effort Matters, where we shared our own process and compiled the knowledge acquired throughout the development of the Every Story Matters project.

The platform allowed like-minded professionals to register and interact with other subscribers. It also served as a regularly updated database of good practices and resources on diversity and inclusion in the book industry. In total, we published more than 40 articles aimed to inspire literary professionals. These included:

- practical 'how to' articles (e.g. how to make your website accessible, how to write an inclusive job advert, how to select diverse and inclusive books for your library);
- interviews with industry professionals under the series #InConversationWith (e.g. publishers Michiel Kolman and D'Avellonne Van Dijk, diversity expert Mark Jennet, Spanish reading and integration project Abriendo Fronteras);
- good practices from other creative industries (e.g. the performing arts).



Read all the articles further on in this PDF.



Conclusion: What have we achieved?

Every Story Matters aimed to contribute meaningfully to the conversation around diversity and inclusion in the book industry. More specifically, the project offered a wide range of workshops and training opportunities for publishers, librarians, authors and other professionals working in literature. These activities helped deepen the understanding of these important topics – from raising awareness to providing practical methods and models.

By engaging readers and writers through literary festivals, book presentations, school workshops and the development of a dedicated platform on diversity in publishing, Every Story Matters cultivated an audience actively seeking children's books that reflect diversity. We also demonstrated that there is strong market potential and a clear demand for inclusive books to be published and translated – as evidenced by the enthusiastic audiences at the Zagreb Book Festival and the sales figures of the books published through our talent development programme.

The positive feedback from participants at our events highlighted a significant need for specific tools, opportunities for knowledge exchange, and guidance on these topics. As a result, we were able to help bring diversity and inclusion to the forefront of discussion within the European book sector.

We mobilised publishers and key stakeholders, and influenced the broader debate – a prime example being our collaboration with the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2022, where we co-developed a dedicated conference programme on inclusion.

Every Story Matters strongly advocated for a sustainable approach to policy development and knowledge-sharing around inclusion. We remain committed to continuing this work beyond the formal end of the project.

Every Story Begins in Flanders

In Flanders, Every Story Matters continues under the Dutch name Elk verhaal telt, a collaborative effort supported by the entire book sector. Together, they are working towards a more inclusive literary and publishing landscape in Flanders. As part of this ongoing trajectory, two masterclasses have been launched in 2024: one aimed at organisations, focusing on inclusive recruitment practices, and another tailored to emerging literary creators – Elk verhaal begint (Every Story Begins). The latter is a free learning programme that guides aspiring authors and illustrators in taking their first steps into the literary field. Hopefully, this programme will be as successful as the European Every Story Matters talent development programme.





Belonging Matters around the world

It fills us with hope to see other organisations joining forces around inclusion. In 2025, the statement [Belonging Matters](#) was launched at the Frankfurt Book Fair by International Publishers Association (IPA), International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), Frankfurt Book Fair, PEN International, European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF). The statement emphasizes that belonging is central to advancing the exchange of ideas, promoting democratic values, and supporting the free flow of information worldwide. By embedding inclusion at the heart of publishing and books, the sector seeks to ensure that all participants can contribute meaningfully, while readers can access stories and knowledge from diverse perspectives. We hope that similar efforts will continue to grow, in every corner of the book world.

Do you have questions about Every Story Matters?
Don't hesitate to get in touch with us via
team@flandersliterature.be.

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Appendix 1

6 inclusive children's books from emerging authors and illustrators

In this appendix you will find more information about the six books that were created as a result of the Every Story Matters talent development programme.

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by Inês Viegas Oliveira

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by Staša Guček



‘The Duel’

by Inês Viegas Oliveira

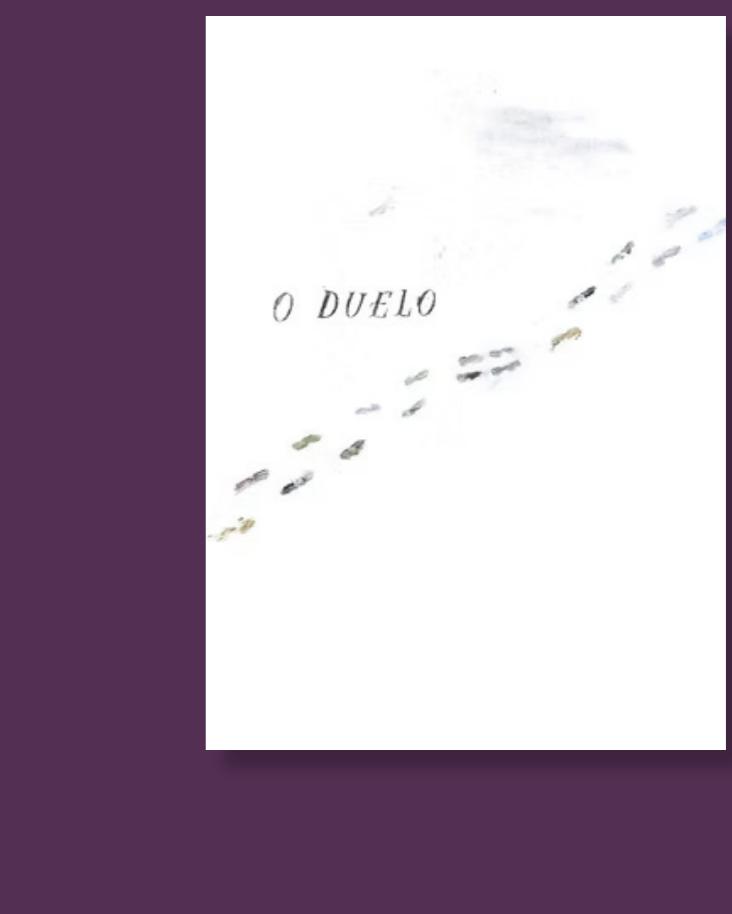
Synopsis

In an old, cold country, two men have been arguing for so long they can't remember what they're fighting about. To put a stop to their fight, they call a duel. Starting together, back-to-back, they will have to walk one hundred steps before turning and firing.

The reader follows one of them as the counting of the footsteps takes place. With each step, a new sign of life appears in front of the character. Suddenly he feels lost in the world. Will he turn back to fight, or will he forgive and forget?

We visually accompany him on his journey through snowy pages that are gradually filled with trees, flowers, animals, buildings, skyscrapers, and many different people. The monochromatic shapes grow into free and organic brush strokes as the anger gives way to a sense of peace and forgiveness.

This book is for all ages and shows us that the different kinds of beauty in the world can help us turn angry feelings and disagreements into peace, affection, and forgiveness.



“From the very beginning, I loved the idea behind this book. Physical violence and war are indeed stupid things, and the world badly needs us to devote our attention to other matters.”

Isabel Minhós Martins, Inês' mentor



About the author

Inês Viegas Oliveira was born in 1995, in the sunny southern city of Tavira, Portugal. In an old tape recorded by her father, she incessantly repeats to the camera “and now, what should I do?”. She has a Bachelor’s in Physics and an interrupted Masters’s in Mathematics.

In 2019, she earned a postgraduate degree in Illustration. In the following years, Inês was recognised by the Bologna Children’s Book Fair and has been exhibited all over the world, from Portugal to Japan.

She still questions everything, but now she occasionally stops to draw, moving between words and images.

Other Information

- **Title:** 'The Duel'
- **Author:** Inês Viegas Oliveira
- **Illustrations:** Inês Viegas Oliveira
- **Print length:** 56 pages
- **Age:** 6+
- **Publisher:** Planeta Tangerina
- **Translation rights:**
Carin Bacho (carin.bacho@kojaagency.com)
Catharina Lantz (catharina.lantz@kojaagency.com)

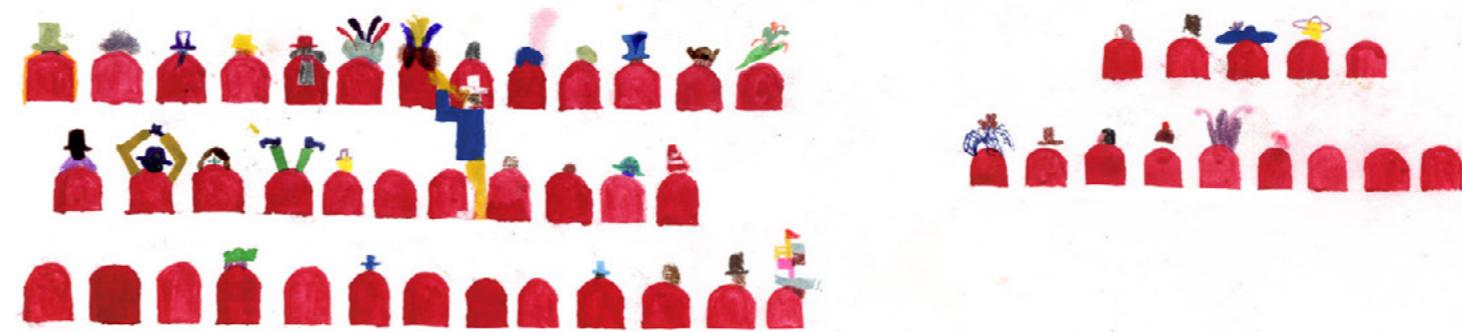


Watch the book trailer.



Theater

Dear Sir, Have you ever tried someone else's shoes on, only to find out they were too big or too small?





To follow

Or maybe you think I got lost,
but where could I go if the only thing I did was to
carry on?



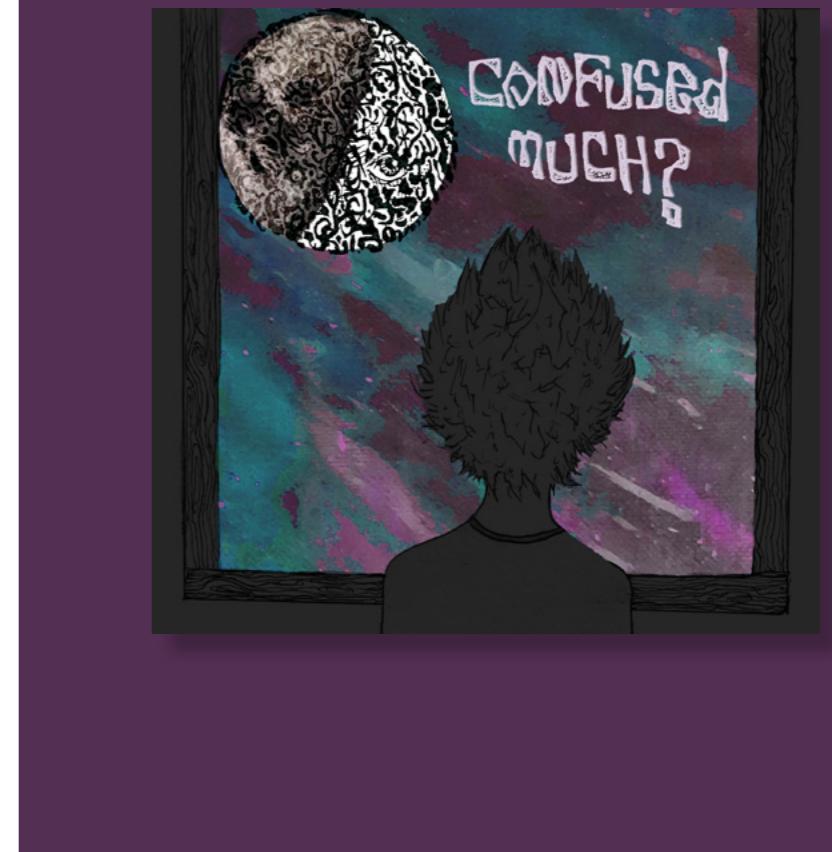
‘Confused Much?’

by Manaf Alattar

Synopsis

‘Confused Much?’ is the story of Corey, a fearless kid full of energy and blessed with love and support around him who is trying to understand what’s going on in his mind.

Corey teleports from one world to another in his dreams. During his mind trip he crosses paths with many creatures trying to help him understand himself and to find out how to get home. But what if he never left home? What is real and what is not?



“I am very impressed by the diverse forms of expression Manaf uses. I like his unconventional approach. And I hope I have been able to support him and can continue to do so.”

Heike Herold, Manaf’s mentor



About the author

Manaf Alattar is a Syrian artist based in Berlin. He started drawing at a young age, inspired by music and by life around him. Back in Syria, Manaf studied Graphic Design. He then moved to Istanbul where he started his career, before ending up in Berlin, his current main residence.

Initially, Manaf focused on doing his own kind of art-dark doodles, tribal art and illustrations were among the mixed techniques he developed over the years.

During his first few years in Berlin, he collaborated with different art collectives, performed live drawing, and exhibited his art at Germany's biggest music festivals such as Fusion, Lollapalooza, Bucht der Träumer and some underground techno raves. He also co-founded the art and music collective Schabernack together with some of his friends.

Manaf is currently working as a freelance designer. He designs and demonstrates his artwork through embroidery on clothes for *nopo1n. by Vaptized*, and is a graphic designer as part of the *nopo1n.* team.

Other Information

- **Title:** 'Confused Much?'
- **Author:** Manaf Alattar
- **Illustrations:** Manaf Alattar
- **Print length:** 40 pages
- **Age:** 11-14



Watch the book trailer.



It's a quiet night. Silence has taken over the sounds of the day. Everything is quiet. The only sound is of the wind blowing through the calm streets. All is peaceful and quiet with exception of this one thing that is disturbing the peace of a kid's room. Corey is sound asleep and dreaming. Something is different about this night. His bed is shaking and his pillows and sheets are on the floor. He's drowning in his own night sweats. He wakes up confused and out of breath and almost falls out of his bed. He stays in bed and tries to go back asleep.

It's not the first time this has happened to Corey. He's used to having strange nights. His nightmares are so vivid, It's as if his subconscious is in complete control of his brain. Every time he closes his eyes, it's as if he travels to other places. Sometimes his dreams are really dark and they confuse him so much he stays awake all night. After a couple of hours his body gives in, his eyes start closing and he falls asleep again, only to tumble into another dream. The one he finds himself in now is stranger than usual. It's not as dark as in his nightmares and he feels as if he's been here before. A dimension so realistic it somehow makes sense.



‘Lana’s School’

by Mirna Brođanac



Synopsis

Lana is a shy, intelligent and curious little girl who really wants to fit in and be like the other children in her class. On the first day of school, Lana and her classmates, with the help of a patient and dedicated teacher, learn that differences don't have to be an obstacle to true friendship.

‘Lana’s School’ is a story about the importance of family support and the need for love and self-realization that is present in all of us from an early age. It teaches us that wonderful things await us on the other side of fear.

“‘Lana’s School’ is one of those books that changes readers and their view of the world: they make the reader a little better and their world much bigger. It would be wonderful to have it read by every child, parent and teacher.”

Olja Savičević Ivančević, Mirna’s mentor



About the author

Mirna Brođanac was born in 1992 in Slavonski Brod, in the east of Croatia. She graduated from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb with a Master's in Comparative Literature and Croatian Language and Literature.

In July 2019, Mirna participated in a creative writing workshop led by Canadian-Croatian writer Josip Novaković. Her stories were published in the electronic journal of the Croatian writer Miljenko Jergović 'The Eiffel Bridge' and in the printed journal of the Istrian branch of the Croatian Writers' Association 'New Istria'.

Other Information

- **Title:** 'Lana's School'
- **Author:** Mirna Brođanac
- **Illustrations:** Ivana Guljašević
- **Print lenght:** 36 pages
- **Age:** 8-11
- **Edition:** Hardcover
- **Publication date:** May 2022.
- **Publisher:** Ljevak publishing
- **Translation rights:** Naklada Ljevak
naklada-ljevak@naklada-ljevak.hr



Watch the book trailer.

Lana wonders the same as she watches the huge school building through her round glasses. Although she's afraid and excited at the same time, she smiles at her dad to encourage him. At the entrance, she is kindly welcomed by her future teacher. The teacher greets her first. 'Welcome, dear Lana! I am your teacher Iskra', she says calmly while squatting to face Lana. She looks into her eyes. The teacher's gaze is lively and her handshake completely natural. There is not an ounce of the timidity people usually show when approaching children like Lana, children with disabilities. Lana likes it so much, she immediately wants to become a teacher when she grows up. Just like Iskra. One of those teachers that wear long dresses and smell like flowers and find it really easy to bend down and hug their pupils. She also hopes her teacher never finds out she can't read, because it makes her feel ashamed.

'My name is Lana Lulić, nice to meet you', she replies earnestly to her teacher, trying to extend her right arm as far as she can. The right arm is OK. She can use it just like other children use their arms, but the left arm is weird. It just hangs down and won't move. This morning, during breakfast, Nina put a bracelet with a shiny butterfly on her left wrist to make it pretty. The teacher compliments the bracelet, the dress and Lana. She greets her dad and takes control of the wheelchair. She has never pushed a wheelchair, but she does it purposefully and neatly. Dad fades in the background and the squeaky, grey door closes behind Lana and the teacher.

Lana is afraid of the new children and imagines their surprised looks. She thinks there isn't a chance that any of them will notice the dress she's wearing rather than the wheelchair; her bracelet and not her curled-up arm; her eyes, and not the Edna Mode glasses. She's so afraid that she doesn't see the plants decorating the school lobby. Nor does she see the polished benches in front of every classroom, the colourful little coats on the hangers above the benches, or the boards with the pupils' drawings of the autumn.

Between the main entrance and the classroom, the teacher has taken forty steps exactly. Lana knows this, since she's counted them. Because of Lana's disability, the school will install a new lift, but not until several years later. She uses every moment before she enters the classroom to think of a way to cover up the fact that she's ill prepared. Dad has taught her to count to one hundred and mum is trying to teach her to read. Mum wants her to be able to count and read. The teacher understands how Lana feels all right away. Before she opens the classroom door, she puts her hand on the shoulder of her preoccupied pupil and says, 'Everything is going to be fine. Everyone's excited to meet



‘My Neighbour Is a Ninja’

by Najiba Abdellaoui



Synopsis

On a hot summer night, Alif spots a mysterious figure prowling around in the dark. On closer inspection she recognizes her neighbour khalti Mina's special sneakers. Could her neighbour be a ... ninja?

Together with her friends Dahir and Taruh, Alif decides to follow her neighbour. But not before they take a course on how to be a ninja. What follows is a journey through the night in which they encounter not only all sorts of night creatures but also their own fears and strengths. As they discover their neighbour's secret, the children learn that not everything is what it seems.

“It was an immense pleasure to see the mystery around the ninja neighbour develop and to witness the small miracles that Najiba accomplished with every re-write. A very enjoyable process!”

Edward van de Vendel, Najiba's mentor



About the author

Najiba Abdellaoui is a Moroccan-Dutch poet, writer and communications professional.

It was hip-hop that first inspired her to explore her voice as a writer. This led to many stories, national and international spoken word performances and workshops where she encourages youngsters to unravel the stories they carry within them.

The power of self-expression and what it can do for young people's sense of identity, self-confidence and emancipation continues to amaze and motivate her to explore the world of storytelling further.

Other Information

- **Title:** 'My Neighbour Is a Ninja'
- **Author:** Najiba Abdellaoui
- **Illustrations:** Kris Lauwen
- **Print lenght:** 136 pages
- **Age:** 7+
- **Edition:** Hardcover
- **Publication date:** June 2023.
- **Publisher:** ROSE Stories & BaaB Publishing
- **Translation rights:** uitgeverij@rovestories.nl



Chapter 1 - A shadow in the street

It's so hot that even the moon is sweating. Alif is tossing and turning in her bed. The windows are open, the curtains are drawn back and the duvet is on the floor but she's still not sleepy.

She remembers from the telly that it helps to think of cool things. She closes her eyes and almost immediately she's floating in a pool full of strawberry ice cream, with dolphins made of whipped cream swimming around her. It's fun and delicious, but when she steps out of the pool she is sticky from head to toe. Yuck. She images the droplets of sweat on her forehead to be tears of ice and feels sad that they're slowly melting away. Hmm, it's useless, she needs to come up with something better.

She's about to travel to the North Pole and cuddle with the polar bears when she hears a sound. It's not the crying of her baby sister wanting a fresh nappy or food. It's also not the sound of her mum or dad going to the loo. No, this sound is coming from outside.

Alif walks slowly towards the window and scans the street. She sees an empty road, dark houses and streetlamps. Nothing special. But then she hears the same sound again! It resembles the jingling of keys. She turns towards the sound, but it's too dark to see anything. The moon has disappeared behind the clouds and the street light just isn't bright enough.

She squints and sees a sudden movement a few houses away – a barely visible shadow in the dark, its eyes darting around in the darkness. Alif feels like running away but she can't keep her eyes off the shadow. A jumble of thoughts race through her mind. She feels increasingly hot. Is it a burglar? A thief who has stolen a keyring? Should she call her parents? Is it a spy? A ghost? A lion that's broken out of the zoo?

Then she hears a grinding sound as if a key is being turned. Before she can blink, the shadow moves away past the houses. It's wearing a dark robe that floats in the night. Even though the shadow avoids the streetlamp, just before it turns the corner Alif catches a glimpse of the shoes it's wearing. Black shoes with silver lightning bolts on them. She knows of only one person with a pair like that.



‘The Very Best Invention in the Whole Wide World’

by Shamisa Debroey

Synopsis

Lola is a bright girl with a mass of curls. She is studious and considers herself to be an exceptionally gifted inventor but, despite her talents, she seems to be unable to help her little brother. Lander is sad, and try as she might Lola is unable to cheer him up.

Would an ancient T-rex make him perk up? Or a rhyming robot? Maybe a star from the farthest reaches of the universe?

When the answer turns out to be closer than expected Lola learns that it’s the little things that matter.

‘The Best Invention in the Whole Wide World’ is a lovely picture book about the importance of the little things in life, and the big things.’



“A powerful story with stunning illustrations. The beautiful compositions take you into the colourful world of Shamisa Debroey. Highly recommended!”

Fatinha Ramos, Shamisa’s mentor



About the author

Shamisa Debroey graduated in 2011 from Sint Lukas Brussels with her first graphic novel 'Verdwaald', which was published by Oog&Blik/De Bezige Bij. The novel was well-received by Focus Knack, De Morgen and De Standaard. Since then, she has won the African Artist Award and the Up-and-coming-talent Award from deAuteurs. She is currently working as a freelance artist, curator and art organizer for clients including Apple, NRC Handelsblad, Vooruit and many more.

Shamisa developed both the story and illustrations for her first inclusive story, 'The Very Best Invention in the Whole Wide World', which was published in 2021.

Other Information

- **Title:** 'The Very Best Invention in the Whole Wide World'
- **Author:** Shamisa Debroey
- **Illustrations:** Shamisa Debroey
- **Print lenght:** 40 pages
- **Age:** 3-5
- **Edition:** Hardcover
- **Publication date:** September 2022.
- **Publisher:** Horizon (Belgium)
- **Translation rights:** Daan van Straten
daan.vanstraten@overamstel.com



Watch the book trailer.



Read an excerpt



I can see it in his eyes,
in his upside-down smile and his droopy shoulders.
He doesn't jump on the bed anymore, he just sleeps in it.

Lander, do you want to see my latest invention? I ask.
He always says no.



But I have an idea.
I am going to invent something that will make
him smile again.
The best invention in the whole wide world.

You'll see, Lander will be jumping on
his bed again in no time.



‘Sentinels’

by Staša Guček



Synopsis

‘Sentinels’ describes the life cycle of an endangered Apollo mountain butterfly. It is set in the Slovenian mountain meadows.

Amid a group of Apollos, one emerges with damaged wings. As the frightening night closes in, she is surrounded by peculiar creatures. However, these creatures are not there to hurt her: moths encircle her and project beautiful patterns in the night sky as the firefly light reflects on their wings and the flower spider sews the butterfly’s damaged wings with silky threads. The next day the butterfly flies into the day without any concerns, but unfortunately the summer weather in the mountains is very unpredictable. Apollo protects the eggs from a storm with her new wings. The life cycle continues.

“Staša is working on a silent book. In spectacular progress, individual illustrations have become an artistic and interesting story. When you have such illustrations, no words are needed.”

Pavle Učakar, Staša’s mentor



About the author

Staša Guček creates connections between different fields of art, technology and sound. She floats between scientific and imaginary illustration, analogue electronics, bioacoustics and field recordings, and develops affinity and care for the world of insects and fragile ecosystems.

She is currently developing custom stand-alone analogue electronic instruments and mentoring DIY soldering workshops. Staša is a member of an experimental musical collective called Kikimore, which creates ambient noise soundscapes.

Other Information

- **Title:** 'Sentinels'
- **Author:** Staša Guček
- **Illustrations:** Staša Guček
- **Print lenght:** 32 pages
- **Age:** 2+



Watch the book trailer.



Appendix 2

46 good practices regarding diversity and inclusion in the book industry

In this appendix you will find more than 40 good practices that were published on the Every Effort Matters platform between September 2021 and January 2023.

Our goal was to inspire book professionals regarding diversity and inclusion in the book industry. The subjects ranged from practical 'how to' articles over interviews with book professionals to good practices from other creative industries.

Many of the articles contain URLs for further reading. As the articles are now several years old, we cannot guarantee that all links still work. However, we felt it would be a shame to omit information that is still up to date. For this reason, we have not altered the original texts but have reproduced them as they were originally published.



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- Time to Act
- Lit in Colour
- Pro Helvetica
- DRIN
- Cargo Confetti

Partner profiles

- Acesso Cultura
- BlueDar
- Mediart International
- ROSE Stories

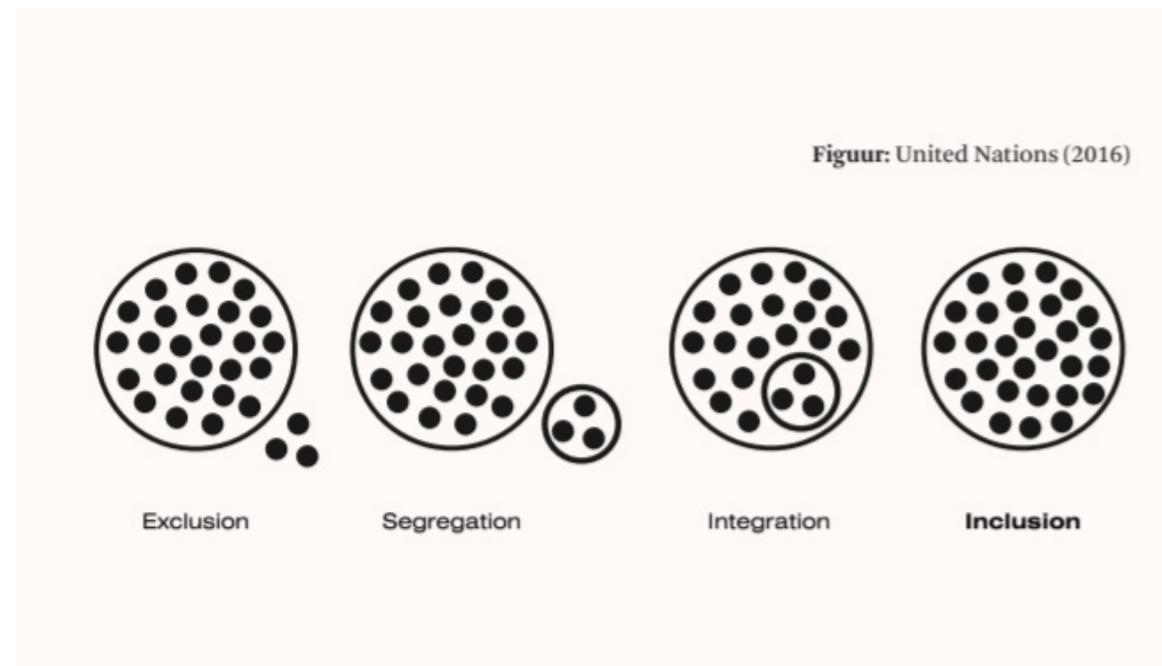
Additional resources

- European Accessibility Act: a rule changer treaty
- Accessibility of European book fairs: conclusions and recommendations
- Marrakesh Treaty: accessible books for persons who are blind, visually impaired, or otherwise print disabled
- Everything you need to know about sign language
- 9 tips for eternal learning



Introduction

Pocket dictionary



Figuur: United Nations (2016)

It's impossible to generalize about concepts like 'diversity' and 'inclusion'. They acquire different content depending on the context or sector. We're happy to help you along the way with a concise pocket dictionary that presents appealing or useful quotes for each concept.

Diversity

'Make space for a variety of ideas, artforms, cultural products, and contributions by people who themselves bring variety because they have diverse backgrounds. In an ideal world this would go without saying.' (Source: [Begrippenkader voor een inclusieve samenleving](#))

Inclusion

'The idea that both the majority and the minority belong can be summed up in the word INCLUSION. Inclusion seems easier than it is, because no matter how inclusive a society aims to be, exclusion will always exist. Enclosure always involves exclusion. Moreover, we might wonder whether the question of who belongs is a static, settled concept or continually changing.' (Source: [Begrippenkader voor een inclusieve samenleving](#))

Equity versus equality

'While the terms equity and equality may sound similar, the implementation of one rather than the other can lead to dramatically different outcomes for marginalized people. Equality



means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognizes that each person's circumstances are different and allocates precisely the resources and opportunities needed to reach an equitable outcome.' (Source: [Online Public Health](#))

Intersectionality

'This is the idea that people in society experience a multiplicity of factors that mean diversity as described above cannot simply be assumed to exist. Intersectionality shows 1) that discrimination exists based on those factors, 2) that equality of opportunity cannot be taken for granted because of those factors and 3) that the complexity of interaction between different factors shows that even gender differences do not always work to the advantage of men.' (Source: [Begrippenkader voor een inclusieve samenleving](#))

Unconscious bias and privilege

'Unconscious bias (or implicit bias) is often defined as prejudice or unsupported judgments in favour of or against one thing, person, or group as compared to another, in a way that is usually considered unfair. Many researchers suggest that unconscious bias occurs automatically as the brain makes quick judgments based on past experiences and background. As a result of unconscious biases, certain people benefit and other people are penalized.' (Source: [Vanderbilt University](#))

You can take implicit bias tests on the websites of many universities, including Harvard: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>. LinkedIn offers an online course called

'Unconscious Bias' to its premium members (<https://www.linkedin.com/learning/unconscious-bias>).

LGBTQIA+/queer

LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation used mainly as a symbol of the rights movement behind it, but it is also a useful memory aid to check that you haven't left out any people or groups when considering sexual and gender diversity. Here is a brief reminder of what each of the letters or symbols stands for. (Source: [Wel Jong Niet Hetero](#))

Lesbian: woman sexually attracted to women

Gay: man sexually attracted to men

Bisexual: person sexually attracted to both men and women

Trans: person who is transgender or transsexual

Queer / Questioning: queer is an umbrella term for all those who do not feel heterosexual or cisgender, while questioning is applied to people who are not 100% certain of their sexual orientation and/or gender

Intersex: person born with both male and female sexual characteristics, hormones or genes

Asexual: person who feels little or no sexual attraction to others

+: All other sexual orientations, genders and sexes that do not fall under the above letters

Institutional racism

'Institutional racism' is a sociological term that refers to the systematic exclusion of or discrimination against certain groups, based on written and (above all) unwritten rules, traditions,



behaviour and conventions. In short, its range is fairly broad. Institutional racism can be found in the Netherlands in, for example, the housing market, the language, traditional practices, medical guidelines, recruitment procedures and police forces. (Source: [De Correspondent](#))

Cultural appropriation

Cultural appropriation is the unthinking adoption of a custom, tradition, look, symbol, language or other cultural characteristic of a marginalized group. Innumerable people, without any knowledge at all of Palestinian culture, traditions and history, political or otherwise, wear a keffiyeh because 'it looks good with skinny jeans'. Or they may get themselves a Samoan tattoo because 'David Beckham's got one', without even knowing where to find Samoa on the map. Or they may use blackface during carnival or on Sinterklaas. This too is an aspect of institutional racism. (Source: [De Correspondent](#))

Neurodiversity

'Neurodiversity' is a term that expresses acceptance of the idea that people with autism, for example, have brains that are differently 'wired'. This makes them different from other people, but 'different' definitely does not mean 'inferior' or 'sick'. In fact the neurodiversity movement claims that because they are different, people with autism make a valuable contribution to society. This contrasts starkly with what is known as the biomedical model, which assumes that autism is a disorder of the brain and therefore a defect. (Source: [Nederlandse Vereniging voor Autisme](#))

International sign language

People who are born deaf learn to communicate in ways that are very different from those of people who can hear. Sign language is very important to them, and the use of sign language interpreters at press conferences is therefore essential. But even people who do not know sign language can communicate with deaf people. (Source: [Het goede leven](#)) Sign language is not universal; each country has its own. This has to do with the fact that a language develops in a community. Wherever people come together and communicate, a language emerges. Since people who cannot hear speech don't all live in the same place, all over the world there are communities of deaf people that have developed their own sign language. (Source: [Nederlands Gebarencentrum](#)) International sign language is the version used at international conferences.

Want to learn more? The below sources discuss inclusive terms and vocabulary.

- [What do we actually mean? Concepts for an inclusive society](#)
- [Demos/Citylab brochure 'Macht herverdelen'](#)
- [Words matter – An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector](#)



Introduction

5 good reasons for making books more inclusive

The figures are clear: European literature could do far better when it comes to diversity. Whether it's a matter of the range of characters in books or the composition of teams in literary organizations and companies, there's work to be done.

American professor [Sarah Park Dahlen](#) looked into how many different kinds of characters could be found in English-language children's books in 2018. Of all the characters, she discovered that 50% had a white skin colour, and a further 27% were animals or objects. That means that only 23% of children's book characters in the US are non-white humans. Their origins are Native American (1%), Latin American (5%), Asiatic (7%), or African or African American (10%). The figures for the United Kingdom are similar. In a study called [Reflecting Realities](#) the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) shows that only 10% of all children's books published in the UK in 2019 included one or more characters from an ethnic minority. Only 5% had such a person as the protagonist.

Why is diversity so essential? Perhaps you need a bit of prompting to convince you of the importance of seeing more inclusive books published. Here are five good reasons.

1. If you are handed a book as a mirror, you can recognize yourself in it and feel confirmed and valued in your existence. Scientific research has demonstrated that reading stories that feature role models in which you can recognize yourself makes an important contribution to your personal development, and indeed to your reading pleasure,



motivation to read and reading skills. Those are surely things we would want for everyone.

2. Literature also gives you an opportunity to discover the world. Children need books and stories as windows on the world, so they can learn that theirs is not the only perspective. It's an important precondition for the development of empathy, citizenship and social insight. Again, surely these are things that should be available to all.

“Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading then becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.”

Professor Rudine Sims Bishop

3. From a business and economic perspective too, there are benefits to promoting diversity and inclusion. Companies with teams that have a diverse composition as regards gender, origin, skin colour and other aspects perform considerably better than their rivals.

4. Then there's the extra readership you have the potential to reach. Think rising sales figures. An [American report by Adobe](#) shows that no less than 62% of consumers value inclusive marketing by businesses. That expectation is no different for literature.
5. Literature and books increasingly need to compete with other entertainment sectors. There too people are continually looking for new and innovative perspectives and talents. Literature must not get left behind. [Recent research](#) shows that compared to visual media, books have a unique cognitive power to involve readers personally and facilitate identification and empathy. Of course we all know that literature is a powerful medium with huge potential. So let's use it to the full.

[Streaming platform Netflix](#) has a clear and extensive diversity policy. As well as airing a large number of series and films with diversity-related themes and diverse casting, it has put an ambitious plan for inclusiveness into operation behind the scenes.



Introduction

Diversity and children's literature: facts and figures

Anyone walking into a bookshop or a library senses it intuitively: there's still not much diversity to be found on the shelves. Research confirms the impression. Many perspectives are lacking in present-day children's and young adult literature. But what is the extent of this underrepresentation and how big a problem is it?

In the United States, [Professor Sarah Park Dahlen](#) has examined how many different kinds of characters were to be found in English-language children's books in 2018. Of all the characters, she found that 50% had a white skin colour, and a further 27% were animals or objects. That means that only 23% of children's book characters in the US are non-white humans. Their origins are Native American (1%), Latin American (5%), Asiatic (7%), or African or African American (10%).

The figures for the United Kingdom are similar. In a study called [Reflecting Realities](#) the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) showed that only 10% of all children's books published in the UK in 2019 included one or more characters from an ethnic minority. Only 5% had one as the protagonist, despite the fact that more than a third of all British school-age children have a minority ethnic background. This does represent a slight improvement on previous years, in which the percentage of characters with such a background was only 7% (2018) or 4% (2017). Although things seem to be moving in the right direction, many young readers still do not see themselves fully reflected in children's books.



Is this inclusive? Why only 4% of children's book heroes are BAME – video

In the Netherlands, Judi Mesman, Ymke de Bruijn and Rosanneke A. G. Emmen carried out [research](#) into the bestselling, most frequently borrowed and most celebrated children's books between 2009 and 2018. Their results do not suggest any underrepresentation of authors or illustrators of colour (between 8% and 10%) when compared to Dutch population figures. The situation is different in regard to characters, however, since only 16% were non-white, whereas the figure is between 19% and 28% for the Dutch population aged five and under. A large majority of the characters in the study were white (84%). This suggests that children of colour in the Netherlands are less likely to come into contact with characters who resemble them, and this can have an impact on their development and their motivation to read. Female characters are also strikingly underrepresented (39%), and women characters of colour played a less prominent role in the stories studied than in real life.

Nevertheless...

Accessibility concerns not just diversity in books but access to literature. Research carried out by [EDRLab](#) shows that people with a reading disability can read no more than 10% of the books produced annually. EDRLab has set itself the task of getting more accessible e-books onto the market. The good news is that the European Commission recently approved the European Accessibility Act, which obliges publishers to ensure that all e-books coming onto the European market after June 2025 must be made accessible to people with disabilities.



Core concepts and perspectives

Inclusive and diverse books

You want to create and get to know books that are more inclusive. But what do 'diverse' and 'inclusive' actually mean? At Every Story Matters we put it like this:

In an inclusive literature, characters, plot, illustrations and other elements with different socio-economic or cultural origins, sexual orientations or gender expressions, physical or mental disabilities exist side by side. This is the kind of literature that invites, reflects and values all readers, authors, illustrators and others, irrespective of how they differ from each other, whatever those differences may be.

Pigeonholing, you say? We're opposed to that, naturally. Authors and books that are diverse are easily placed in a separate category and reduced to their inclusive character, whereas they are far more than that and deserve to be appreciated for their content and the reading pleasure they bring.

There is a lot still to be done, we all agree about that. Authors with diverse backgrounds or books featuring diverse characters are still not given equal opportunities. Such books are published less often, but that's not because they get pushed into the background and are nowhere to be found. These reading lists celebrate diversity in literature in all its facets. Let the browsing begin. Above all, explore further for yourself. These lists are just the beginning.



Do you have your own book tips? Let us know in the comments, so that everyone can enjoy your recommended books.

1. Diverse Voices (199 books)

This list combines bestsellers like *I Am Malala* (Malala Yousafzai) and *Americanah* (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) with titles you're unlikely to have heard of, whether books about people with disabilities or stories set in non-Western cultures. In the books in this list you'll experience diversity in all its many facets through the eyes of the protagonists.

More extensive lists with the most diverse subjects?

- [Best Multicultural General Fiction \(545 books\)](#)
- [Books About Forgotten History - People and Events That Don't Get Taught in History Class \(186 books\)](#)
- [Non-European/Western Based Fantasy \(26 books\)](#)
- [New books for grownups](#)

2. Non-Caucasian Protagonists in Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Paranormal Romance (2,248 books)

Fan of science fiction, fantasy and anything featuring supernatural powers? Then this is for you. The only precondition for inclusion on this list is that the central character is non-Caucasian. You'll find book tips for all ages here.

These books also have central characters who are people of colour:

- [2020 YA/MG Books With POC Leads \(287 books\)](#)
- [Asian Young Adult and Middle Grade Fiction \(563 books\)](#)
- [Latina Leads in YA and Middle Grade Fiction \(285 books\)](#)
- [Black books: the 2020 essential adult gift guide](#)

3. 2021 Books by Women of Colour (157 books)

Try reading a few books by authors with diverse backgrounds. There's a fair chance you'll get to experience some new points of view. This list features books that were published in 2021 and were written by women of colour.

Want to get to know more authors of colour?

- [2019 Books by Authors of Colour \(340 books\)](#)
- [Non-Fiction/Memoirs by Women of Colour \(269 books\)](#)
- [32 New Novels by Black Authors to Read Now](#)
- [Asian American Children's Literature Creators \(198 books\)](#)
- [10 brilliant books by Black writers](#)
- [Forthcoming Books for 2020 by African Americans \(72 books\)](#)

Authors of colour select their favourite books:

- [Anticipated Literary Reads For Readers of Colour 2020 \(196 books\)](#)
- [Angie Thomas X Round Table Books](#)



- [EJ Koh's Books to Celebrate Asian American Fiction, Non-Fiction, Memoir, Graphic Novel, and Poetry \(28 books\)](#)

4. 42 New Books to Read this Pride Month

It doesn't need to be Pride Month for you to read stories from or about the LGBTQ+ community, but this list is packed with good tips. From poetry to romance and non-fiction: something for everyone.

Looking for children's books about being queer?

- [A taste of the rainbow: LGBTQ+ books for kids](#)

5. Stories About Individuals with Disabilities (527 books)

How many books have you read in which the central character has a disability? Here you'll find more than enough inspiration.

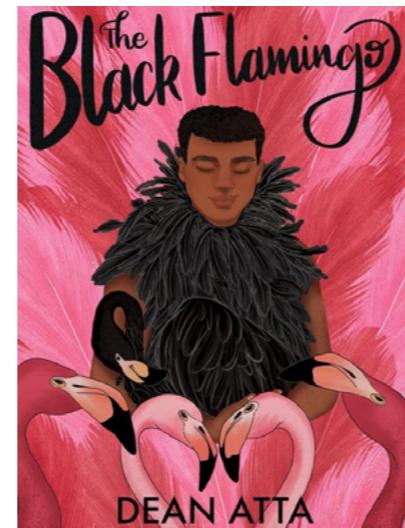
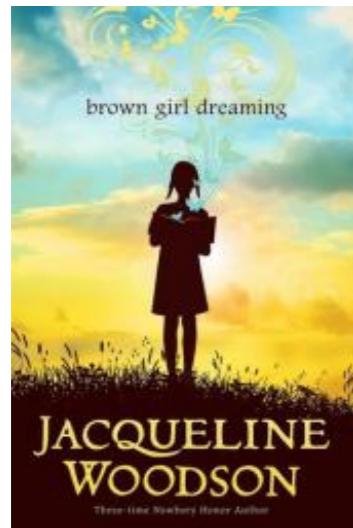
Looking for books for young readers?

- [7 Children's Books About Deafness](#)



Core concepts and perspectives

The power of narratives and representation



Are stories a representation of the world we live in or do the stories we read – and tell – create our reality? Here are some ideas on the power of narrative and the importance of reflecting on what kind of representations stories offer.

We may think there is something natural or essential about who we are and the role we occupy in society. If that is the case, then growing up would mean finding that true essence, hidden deep down inside each one of us, and pursuing the tasks that destiny has laid out for us. But are our personal and collective identities really part of an essence that we all need to discover?

One of the reasons why we find this concept problematic is that it may fix certain social groups in a privileged position and others in a disadvantaged one. Stuart Hall (1932-2014), a Jamaican-born British scholar, edited and contributed to the book *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996), which criticizes this essentialist perspective on identity.

Questions of Cultural Identity

According to Hall, there is no such thing as a natural or essential identity that unfolds with time. Identities are not defined once and for all; they are never-ending processes that are built within discourses. If we accept this argument, then all cultural expressions, including stories, are discourses that are constantly telling us who we are and who we are not. The lack of representation of certain groups in literature, the



over-representation of other groups, and the stereotyped portrayals that many stories present, have a huge impact on the way people perceive themselves and, therefore, the place each individual occupies in society.

As people working to create and distribute narratives, it is important to ask a number of questions. What opportunities of identity formation are we offering our readers? Are these stories setting the same characters in the same positions, and thereby helping to reproduce the same unequal society? Or are we instead offering opportunities to change the social narrative?

In the 1970s quite a few debates arose about the problems of representation in Children's Literature in the UK and the USA. Many scholars criticized books for reflecting a white, male and middle-class gaze. Fortunately, over the last few years we have started to see more and more stories in which different characters are portrayed. We can find narratives where female characters take the lead or where the realities of racialized peoples are represented, while stories that include diverse gender identities are more available than ever. But there is still much to be done.

New Voices, New Perspectives

A more diverse book sector is not just about including 'minority characters'. It also means paying attention to how those characters are portrayed in order to avoid stereotyped representations.

In an inspiring Ted Talk, the novelist Chimamanda Adichie addresses the danger of telling a single story. She talks about her childhood memories of growing up in Nigeria and mentions the impact of reading exclusively books by British and American authors, who portrayed the childhoods of white children from the USA and the UK. She could not imagine a literature that included people like her. She also talks about the importance of avoiding stereotyped representations by offering multiple stories. 'The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not only that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.'

Sometimes stereotyped representations result when published writers who come from a privileged position – mostly white, male, middle-class and Western – try to tell the stories of an oppressed social group. They may sometimes be criticized for culturally appropriating elements of an oppressed culture for their own benefit. In recent years, this has produced some interesting debates. Cultural appropriation is understood as the use of objects or elements of a non-dominant culture in a way that fails to respect their original meaning and give credit to their source, or that reinforces stereotypes. Are you a writer looking to widen the perspectives in your writing? Here you will find some interesting reflections: Cultural Appropriation for the Worried Writer: some practical advice

One of the best ways to include new perspectives and avoid cultural appropriation in the book sector is by publishing work by new authors.



#OwnVoices is a hashtag created by YA author Corinne Duyvis and spread through Twitter as a shorthand book recommendation tool. The intention was to recommend books by authors who openly share an underrepresented identity by using it for a central character. It is important, however, to bear in mind that this initiative had no intention of universalizing a specific representation of a marginalized group. While books identified with this hashtag do justice to the group they represent, they may not make everyone who identifies with that particular group feel included.

A matter of justice

Being critical about the representation that narratives offer, especially of groups that have been oppressed historically and systematically, is not only a matter of recognition but a matter of justice. To conclude, we would like to quote what Adichie has to say about the complexity and importance of what is at stake here:

'How stories are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story.'



Inclusive content

Where can you find inclusive books? You should certainly have a look at the reading lists we've compiled. More and more independent publishing houses are taking on the task of making the books sector more diverse and inclusive from within. You can draw inspiration from these examples of publishers that are publishing, translating and promoting inclusive books and stories.

- Spanish independent publishing house '[Dos Bigotes](#)' specializes in publishing stories and translations at the interface of feminism, gender studies and broader LGBTQIA+ themes. By placing the emphasis on taste and literary quality, it wants to reach as broad and diverse a readership as possible, so that not a single reader feels excluded. 'Nuestro objetivo no es excluir a nadie, sino todo lo contrario: creemos que la buena literatura interesa a todo tipo de lectores, más allá de cuestiones de género o identidad sexual.'
- Independent Australian publisher [Magabala Books](#) is an 'Aboriginal owned and led' house that focuses on the sustainable development of new and emerging indigenous writers. It publishes fifteen books a year in various genres.
- [Éditions blast](#) in France publishes essayistic and other literary creations on themes such as antiracist, feminist, queer and anarchist resistance.



- Both [Editions d'en bas](#) in France and [Invertido](#) in Chile take a subversive approach and challenge canonical works and conventions. They shift the focus to books that were not previously published because of their content.
- For artbooks about (mainly) gender you can turn to the Czech company [By wo-men](#). This independent publishing house also offers workshops and tips for collaboration with a wide range of different authors.

We too are still learning and investigating, so your input is invaluable. Do you have a tip, an interesting case that we can add to this list? Feel free to send it to us at ... or respond below in the comments.



Rethinking diversity



Statistics show that the representation of writers of colour is still lagging behind, despite many efforts to bring about the necessary change. An academic study (2020) in the UK on **diversity in trade fiction and the publishing industry** features 113 in-depth interviews with people who work at each stage of publishing and examines the ways in which writers of colour are published. Here you can find the report's most important conclusions.

The predominance of white audiences

The **core audience** for publishers in the UK is **white and middle-class**. **'BAME'** (Black, Asian, minority ethnic) and **working-class audiences** are **undervalued** by publishers, both economically and culturally. Publishers fear that books by writers of colour are **too niche** and will not appeal to their core audience. Writers and their books are treated by their publishers in two ways in the hope of increasing their appeal to the mainstream readership. Either they are **whitewashed**, with the publisher deliberately erasing or not mentioning aspects of diversity in the storyline, characters and covers, or the authors and their books are **exoticized**, with BAME characters or cultural elements presented as unusual, even romanticized or made to seem glamourous.



Tension between moral and economic imperatives

Publishers do care about diversity. This is especially true of a young generation of publishers, who are looking beyond the traditional places where writers are found in order to discover new talent from underrepresented backgrounds. Throughout their interviews, the researchers found no denial or defensiveness about the inequalities that exist in publishing.

However, publishers also believe their work is 'fundamentally a business, and therefore [we] need to sell books'. **Publishers tend to think there is a tension**, or even a dichotomy, between the **ethical principle** of including the voices of historically marginalized sectors in the books they publish and the **economic imperative** of making a material profit.

Approaches to diversity in publishing are frequently shaped by this tension, and diversity is advocated as a way of preventing reputational damage, rather than as an attempt to solve structural inequalities. At the same time, social diversity is usually poorly represented for fear of disappointing sales figures.

"A lack of faith in new audiences is the biggest reason why the publishing industry still struggles to publish more diversely."

An invitation to rethink diversity

According to the report, the key to a deeper and, at the same time, strategic approach to diversity is to work on reaching new audiences that are now underestimated. If these potential audiences felt that the publishing industry actually cared about them, they would consume more of its content, and more people belonging to minority communities might be inspired to write. This group of researchers therefore invites the publishing industry to **rethink diversity**.

As well as simply increasing the number of people from minority backgrounds in the publishing workforce and among authors, the publishing industry needs to start recognizing structural inequalities that require critical and systematic interventions. This also means rethinking the universal concept of '**quality**', by recognizing publishers' cultural biases about what they consider good or bad. They need therefore to reflect on their perspective and the position from which they are making decisions, and be willing to challenge it.

What can publishers actually do?

→ **Rethinking audiences.** Publishers can invest in audience development and work in partnership with audience engagement organisations to reach and engage diverse audiences. In this regard, the researchers also stress the importance of considering the heterogeneity of potential new audiences, whose interests are just as diverse as those of the white middle-class traditional core audience.

- **Rethinking promotional campaigns.** Publishers can include more imaginative promotional campaigns using new media channels and new types of partnerships, while booksellers can do more to attract new audiences.
- **Rethinking practices.** Publishers can hire more people who belong to marginalised communities. That will benefit publishers strongly by helping them tap into new audiences, although only if they are given the resources and freedom to do so.
- **Rethinking whom to join forces with.** Publishers can work in partnership and support writer development initiatives financially (both non-profit and grassroots organizations) to discover new voices.



The literary canon and diversity: an impossible combination?

If you ask what a literary canon is, you'll sometimes be told it's a list of books that you need to have read. But is that so? For a start, there is not one agreed list. It exists in various versions. Every country or language community can draw up its own canon, and the Dutch-language canon looks very different from the canon of American classics. Yet all these lists have one thing in common: they are Western-oriented and include almost exclusively novels by white, male authors. High time for a bit of diversity!

How did this come about, anyhow? Definitely not because there are no female authors or authors of colour. When we look at who put together the canon and which criteria were used, a great deal immediately becomes clear. Do the authors of books on the list need to be dead? Do all the books reflect the history and culture of a specific country or region? What about books we simply find exceptionally beautiful, and what about all the differences of taste and opinion that exist about them? What is a canon actually for? Is it to inspire readers, to preserve books and authors in perpetuity, or is it primarily intended to be used in schools, to educate children and young people? The reality is that a canon is usually compiled by an elite group, and the history and culture of a specific country or region is imagined as less diverse than it was in reality.



Polyphony

A canon that is not diverse represents a missed opportunity. If the canon is supposed to represent a culture, then it ought to have room for women, or for authors with a background in migration who are able to illuminate the colonial or postcolonial perspective. Just to be clear: books by male, white authors that are now part of the canon do not have to be replaced. We are advocating expanding the list by adding different perspectives. Polyphony is the key word here. The more diverse the books and authors in the canon are, the better it will be as a whole.

You can compile a canon for any number of reasons, but you always need to make choices and selections, and these will never be the same for everyone. So let's opt for a multiplicity of canons that invite us to talk about the books we regard as good, books that mean a lot to us and represent the plurality that's characteristic of society.

What are your thoughts on the literary canon? A great many institutions and organizations have made suggestions for titles that could be added to the canon. Try taking a look:

- [Mackin Community \(English\)](#)
- [Fixdit \(Dutch\)](#)
- [The Mary Sue \(English\)](#)
- [Literary Leadership brief \(English\)](#)



Core concepts and perspectives

Business advantages of including diversity



The inclusion of new voices and perspectives represents an important challenge for the European book industry. We believe in building a more diverse and inclusive book sector together, and that Every Effort Matters. Not only is this the right thing to do, it's actually profitable to invest time, effort and resources in diversity and inclusion. Why? Here are three financial reasons for focussing on diversity and inclusion, and one example of good practice.

1. Diverse teams = financial profit

Various research reports demonstrate that teams that are diverse in terms of gender, origin, skin colour and other aspects perform significantly better. [McKinsey & Company](#) has analysed data about diversity and inclusion from fifteen countries and more than 1,000 large companies. According to its latest report (2020), there is a strong relationship between **diversity on executive teams** and the likelihood they will **outperform others financially**. In other words, it's likely that companies with diverse corporate leadership (in terms of both gender and ethnic or cultural background) will make greater profits than companies with homogenous executive teams.

2. Demand for diverse storytelling

One of the main ways for a business to succeed is by



maintaining a healthy balance between what it offers and the demands of its consumers. Over the last few years, there has been a considerable shift in consumers' expectations.

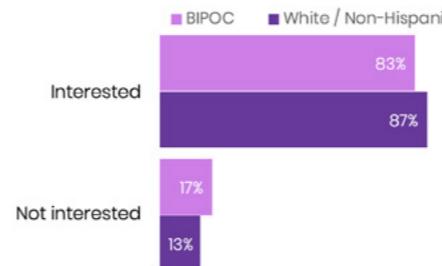
An [American report by Adobe](#) showed that no less than **62% of consumers value inclusive marketing** by companies.

The picture is no different for literature. Changes in the audience's expectations of storytelling are inviting the book sector to include more diverse characters and lifestyles. The book trade, as part of the culture industry, needs to consider changes in its audience. A literature sector that lacks inclusive stories risks missing out on a large group of consumers.

3. Expectations of Gen Z and Millennials

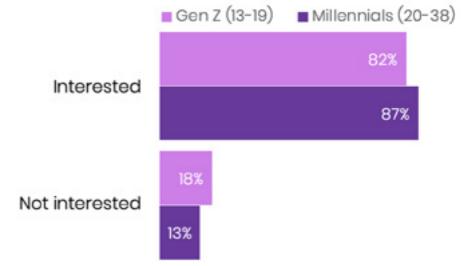
Media consumption in younger generations may give us a clue as to what these audiences are expecting when paying for cultural content. According to YPuls's recent [Representation in Action trend research](#) there is a **strong demand for inclusion among both Gen Z** (ages 13-19) and **Millennials** (ages 20-38). Both generations described being interested in watching a show or movie with a diverse cast, and therefore migrating to the platforms that provide what they are looking for. Moreover, multicultural and minority consumers react most favourably to content in which they can see themselves and their communities represented positively and realistically.

How interested are they in watching a show/movie with a diverse cast?



Source: YPulse Survey Data | April 16, 2021 – April 21, 2021 fielded among 1000 13-39-year-olds

How interested are they in watching a show/movie with a diverse cast?



Source: YPulse Survey Data | April 16, 2021 – April 21, 2021 fielded among 1000 13-39-year-olds

4. Good practice: Netflix Inclusion Strategy

The streaming platform Netflix is an impressive example of good practice. In addition to the creation of a large number of series and films on diverse themes and with diverse casts, an ambitious inclusion strategy is being implemented behind the scenes. The University of Southern California has made a study of all series and films Netflix released in the United States in 2018 and 2019: 52% had a female lead character and 35.7% of all the lead characters had a minority background. Perhaps this explains why Netflix comes top when Gen Z and Millennials are asked which media sources they feel are diverse and inclusive, with more than half (69% of 13-19-year-olds and 60% of 20-38-year-olds) pointing to it specifically.

We highly recommend that you to spend nine minutes watching [this video](#), in which Verna Meyers, VP of Inclusion Strategy, and the rest of the team explain their perspective and how they are encouraged to think about the question 'Who is not here?' as they do their job.



Core concepts and perspectives

In conversation with Vanessa Joosen (University of Antwerp)



We asked Professor Vanessa Joosen about children's and young adult literature and the importance of inclusion within those genres.

Vanessa Joosen is a professor at the University of Antwerp, where she teaches courses on English Literature and Children's Literature. She actively tries to address diversity and inclusion in her teaching and one way she does so is by making her mandatory reading lists diverse. Her research interests include the construction of childhood, adulthood, and old age in literature, postmodern fairy-tale rewritings, the international reception of fairy tales, and genetic criticism of children's books. Professor Joosen has been organizing the [Children's Literature Summer School](#) since 2018. That same year, she was awarded an ERC Starting Grant for the project 'Constructing Age for Young Readers'. She and her research team use methods from genetic criticism, digital humanities and reader-response theory to study the construction of age in children's books.

Why is children's and young adult literature so fascinating to you?

I think it's an exciting literary form that offers interesting stories as well as often beautiful language and illustrations. It's also informative about the knowledge and values that people want to pass on to the next generation.

What evolutions in this genre have you noticed during your career and what do you think characterizes children's and young adult literature of the last five years?



There has been an evolution from an opposition between aesthetic and entertaining books to literature that tries to be both (and sometimes succeeds). We also see genuine attempts to make children's literature (the books, the production and the readership) more diverse and inclusive. Also, concern about the decline of reading among young people is spurring attempts to draw them back in.

Diversity and inclusion are increasingly important themes in the book industry. Is this also the case with children's and young adult literature?

Yes, although children's literature is slow when it comes to diversifying the field itself (many books about diversity are still made by people that belong to dominant groups).

Is there a certain kind of diversity or approach to the theme that you rarely see in children's literature? Is the range of 'diverse stories' itself sufficiently diverse?

Own voices still need to be boosted more. Translations need to be further diversified to include more children's books from non-anglophone countries.

You are a professor at the University of Antwerp where you teach, among other things, the subjects 'Young Adult Literature' and 'Constructing Age in Modern Literature'. Is diversity and inclusion also a theme in those subjects? If so, why do you think it's important?

Yes. I actively address the theme and try to make my reading

lists diverse. That brings students in touch with good literature of the kind that has an important impact on society. It also makes students aware of the limitations of their own perspectives and how these can be broadened to include other experiences and views that are highly relevant to our world. It shows them the wide range of children and adolescents who deserve to be represented in literature and the wealth of voices that have interesting stories to tell.

How do you approach and discuss these topics?

I pay attention to content as well as politics and literary form, and I address topics such as positionality and intersectionality.

Positionality: the notion that personal values, views, and location in time and space influence how we understand the world. In this context, gender, race, class and other aspects of identity are indicators of social and spatial positions rather than being fixed, given qualities.

Intersectionality: Intersectionality is the acknowledgment that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalize people: gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability etc.



Is there an inclusive children's book that you would absolutely recommend to us?

'Cinderella is Dead' by Kalynn Bayron.

This is a feminist version of the classic story that takes place 200 years after Cinderella found her prince. Teenage girls in the kingdom are now required to appear at the Annual Ball, where they can be selected for marriage by the men in the kingdom. Sophia is sixteen years old and would much rather marry her childhood best friend, Erin. At the ball, she meets Constance, the last known descendant of Cinderella. Together they vow to bring down the king. This is not just a fairy-tale retelling, it breaks the story apart and rebuilds it into a wholly original and captivating story in which girls finally get to decide for themselves who lives happily ever after, shattering stereotypes of race, gender and sexuality in the process.



How to select diverse and inclusive books and picture books

The challenge is to make use of children's curiosity in order to expand their ability to read the world from different perspectives and empathize with others. Whether you are a publisher, a teacher, a librarian, a parent or a reviewer, selecting books for children is never a neutral activity. But how do you determine which books can be considered 'diverse'? And how can you use them in your interaction with children?

Here are some analytical tools to help you reflect on how to make a diverse selection. We have based our tips on the article '10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books For Racism and Sexism' (Derman-Sparks and the Anti-Bias Curriculum Task Force, 1989) and 'Addressing Disability as a Part of Diversity' (Nasatyr and Horn, 2003).

Illustrations: What characters are presented in the illustrations? Do they include minority groups? Do these groups look stereotypically alike, or are they represented as individuals with distinctive features? Do they look like privileged groups (e.g. a Black character that looks like a white person, except for being darker skinned)?

Storyline: When a minority group is included in the storyline, does a minority person need to adhere to 'white' or 'male' behavioural standards in order to get ahead? Are people with disabilities, non-white groups or other minorities considered a problem? Does the storyline encourage passive acceptance or active resistance? How is this problem solved? Is there a hero? Who is the hero?



Lifestyles: Are lifestyles other than those of white middle-class people represented through text and image? If so, do they go beyond oversimplification and offer genuine insights into other lifestyles? Is the minority group in question depicted as 'different'? Are negative value judgments implied?

Characters and relationships: Are minorities or marginalized groups included in the story? Are they presented as active rather than passive recipients of what privileged groups do? Are white/middle-class/male/heterosexual characters shown as having all the power, taking the lead and making all the important decisions? In descriptions of romantic relationships, are only heterosexuals depicted? Is a character with disabilities presented in a supportive role?

Loaded words: Look for biased language and adjectives that exclude or ridicule minorities. Examples of loaded adjectives are 'slow', 'retarded' or 'special' for people with disabilities, 'savage' and 'primitive' for non-white groups, and 'lazy' or 'humble' for working-class characters.

Context: Take a look at the time when a book was first published. Many folk tales and classics were written in a different context and present biased elements. It may be inappropriate to evaluate classical literature according to the above guidelines. If we consider it important to present these narratives to children because they are part of our cultural heritage, it is essential to think of possible creative interventions that can promote a critical reading of them, so that these books too can work as an interesting resource to help children understand the unequal world we are living in.

Read [The literary canon and diversity: an impossible combination?](#) for more ideas and examples.

Authorship: An examination of the author's perspective and background may also be an important tool. All authors write from within a cultural as well as personal context. Analyse the biographical material on the jacket flap or at the back of the book. Look for qualities that the author or illustrator may have that would help them understand minorities' perspectives.

Complex reality: Some books that present representations of minority groups tend to be rejected because they broach 'difficult topics'. There is a common belief that we need to protect children from the outside world. Traditional ideas about childhood make us think of children as innocent and incapable of understanding complex realities. Yet it's never too early to arm them with awareness and analytical tools that enable them to look critically at our complex reality. Children ask 'why?' about everything. Many [research projects](#) have shown that children see and interpret differences, for example in skin colour, from a very early age. One of the most famous examples in this respect is the 'Doll test', which was designed in the 1940s and has been repeated on many occasions since:

VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRZPw-9sJtQ>



How to stimulate the joy of reading with young readers

Ah, the joy that comes with the smell of a new book. It's probably related to a strong and special connection with literature that was created while we were growing up. It might be a connection with a character, even to the point of considering them our friend. Or maybe we just can't stop reading a novel because we have the impression the author is talking to us. **The sense of intimacy and pleasure we derive from literature is a very powerful tool.**

Maria Nikolajeva is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. In 2014 she published the book 'Reading for Learning. Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature', a presentation of her research on young readers' cognitive and emotional engagement with fiction. Her findings show that reading fiction is not merely pleasurable, it is essential for our cognitive, social and emotional development. Moreover, pleasure makes the acquisition of knowledge more efficient. In fact books are likely to be more powerful than movies in developing empathy.

Recent comparative research by Marlon Schotel (Tilburg University) on the cognitive responses of readers and viewers of fiction demonstrates that both books and films contain many indicators of possible positive effects on out-group attitudes. But a **book's potential is embedded in a deeper cognitive complexity**. In short, reading has many benefits and enjoying reading is key to acquiring them.



So how can we stimulate the **joy of reading diverse and inclusive literature with young readers?**

- **Diverse reading as a general lens.** Instead of introducing supposedly inclusive reading on special days, or creating a separate table with diverse books, it would be more effective to add a critical lens to our general selection process. Diversity and inclusion should not be a niche, but rather a paradigm for all the decisions we make. This does not necessarily mean eliminating any text that may contain discriminatory elements. It means providing the tools we need if we are to read them critically.
- **Building active reading communities.** Among the most enjoyable and powerful reading experiences are those that take place in reading communities, reading circles or book clubs. When young readers are involved in systematic discussion about the books they read, they acquire a capacity to see the way different readers create meaning out of the same text. Any collective reading practice can then become an inclusive experience in its own right, promoting a deeper understanding of different perspectives.
- **Horizontal dialogues.** Books do not contain an inner meaning. Meanings are built through each reader's connection with what the author has written. A book may allow a young reader to feel represented through the voice of a character for the first time, while simultaneously making another reader feel uncomfortable. In fact many of the books we consider valuable in terms of diversity and inclusion may make certain groups of readers feel awkward. It's important

for adult mediators to be aware of this and allow everyone to express feelings and opinions of their own, while avoiding evaluative and moral judgements. Instead of building dialogues based on closed questions, to check whether a child has understood the storyline and whether they get the message, it's more powerful to let the books open up questions, discussions and new ways of understanding the complexity of human life.



Reading promotion

BookTok: How creators are challenging the publishing industry to promote diversity



Though TikTok is best known for viral dances and sound clips, its impact on the publishing industry has not gone unnoticed. In a niche corner of the app, BookTok – a community of TikTokers who review books and give recommendations – has exploded since the start of the pandemic. While users discover a wide range of new reads, the authors of the books highlighted have seen a massive increase in sales, some even ending up on the *New York Times* bestseller list. As of May 2022, #BookTok has amassed over 56 billion views and shows no sign of losing momentum. It opens up a realm of opportunities for publishers and writers to find new audiences and publicize their works, making it an extremely useful tool for promoting diversity and inclusion.

So how does BookTok work?

To discover how BookTok can help promote diversity and inclusion, we first need to examine the facts and figures. Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* is often mentioned as an example of books that have gained most of their popularity on TikTok. In December 2020 it sold 1,600 copies a week. In November 2021, after weeks of TikTok hyping it up, that number grew to 21,000 copies a week. The same phenomenon can be seen with *The Song of Achilles*, a retelling of the mythical story of Achilles that links him romantically to his companion Patroclus. Almost a decade after it was first



released in 2011, sales went from 1,000 a week in April 2020 to 11,000 a week in April 2021.

Perhaps most interestingly of all, the increase in sales after a book goes viral on TikTok tends to be lasting.

Pauline ([@thebooksiveloved](#)) made four videos on the app in November 2021, raving about *Love and Other Words* by Christina Lauren. Each of them had up to a million views. Sales rose from 600 copies a week to 2,500 in the week after the videos first appeared, and as of May 2022 the book is still selling 1,500 copies a week, more than double the figure for before the TikTok effect.

Shifting the narrative

While BookTok is revitalizing publishing, it is also mirroring the industry in some ways, including one of its biggest problems: a lack of diversity. This corner of TikTok seems to be an echo chamber, where the same sorts of books are recommended time and again – books by writers who happen to be predominantly white, straight and non-disabled.

But creators on the app are starting to shift the narrative. Readers who don't recognize themselves in the books being recommended are taking matters into their own hands and saying, 'Hey, do you feel underrepresented in literature? Here are some books that are going to make you feel represented.'

Azanata Thakur ([@azantareads](#)) is one of them. As a Muslim woman of colour, she makes videos supporting Muslim authors

and recommending lesser-known books not just to the niche of female Muslim readers but to anyone who stumbles across #BookTok. In March 2021 she went even further by founding a virtual book conference called [BookTalk](#). Its mission is to connect with authors, publishers and other creatives in the book industry in order to inspire critical approaches to reading and raise the profile of marginalized voices, thereby highlighting the importance of equitable representation in storytelling.

Diverse books do sell

According to an [academic study](#) from 2020 about diversity in trade fiction and the publishing industry, there is a fear among publishers that diverse reads are too niche and will not appeal to their core audience. (Read our article on the study [here](#).) BookTok, however, has shown that this is not the case. There is an increasingly diverse audience that not only wants more representation but is actively searching for it.

Moreover, BookTok has had a massive impact on sales, which casts doubt on the prevailing notion that diverse books don't sell. The same 2020 study shows that publishers tend to think there is a tension between the ethical principle and the economic imperative. They fear that including the voices of marginalized sectors in the books they publish will not be profitable enough in a financial sense. But clearly many readers are actively looking for books with greater diversity, and their activities on BookTok have shown how much such readers can help increase book sales. It is undeniably profitable to tap into this audience.



The rise of a more diverse community on the app is already having an effect on the publishing industry. Brands and publishers are increasingly partnering with BookTokers, including those who focus on diversity. This creates a great opportunity to promote the works of authors who might not otherwise succeed simply because traditional publishing and promotion have failed to make space for them. When looking for new and innovative ways to promote diversity in literature, TikTok is a tool that can no longer be overlooked.

→ [@Cherishandfavor](#) makes TikTok videos about her life as a mom. She has a series on her account where she recommends '[the dopest kids' books](#)' to help your child understand and embrace diversity.

Creators who help promote diversity and inclusivity

Countless BookTokers are making it their mission to bring diverse reads into the mainstream. Here are a few examples.

- Kaley from [@chronicallybookish](#) is a book lover with a chronic illness. She uses her first-hand experience to read, review and [recommend](#) books that represent people with disabilities.
- With over 123,000 followers, Kendra ([@kendrareads](#)) uses her platform to promote books with people of colour in the central role.
- [@Mychal3ts](#) is a librarian who makes BookTok videos as a hobby. He recommends diverse children's books like ['All bodies are cool!'](#)
- [@readwithsyll](#) 'recommends a lot of unpopular books', as she puts it. Her seven-part BookTok series, for instance, gives her recommendations for the best [books with stories about mental health](#).



Diversity and inclusion in libraries

The smell of new and older books, the joy of browsing row upon row of titles and the excitement of connecting with people who share our literary preferences: whether we're young or old, the library is a place where we come together to lose ourselves in good literature. But how can a library make itself even better for everyone? How can a library become more diverse and inclusive? Let's share three examples of good practice that have already been adopted by some libraries.

Help your visitors find diverse and inclusive books

Nowadays, many libraries offer structured lists of their collections online for everyone to browse. This means people can easily find the book they're looking for, or a book that falls within their range of interest. As for promoting diverse and inclusive literature, it might be interesting to use this approach to cataloguing to provide a digital guide that visitors can use.

The Bibliotheek Midden-Brabant in the Netherlands has already put this into practice by dedicating a [section of its website](#) to diverse and inclusive literature. In this section they offer lists of books about diversity and inclusion, LGBTQIA+ and gender. There are lists for adults, young adults and children, along with other related materials (viewing tips, existing communities, articles). Visitors can easily select a book they find interesting and would otherwise not have come across.



Offer books for people with a reading disability

Reading does not come easily to everyone, but people for whom reading is difficult might well have a strong desire to read. Different types of books are available to cater to those with reading disabilities, and they require different levels of reading skills. [Luisterpunt](#) in Belgium and [Passend Lezen](#) in the Netherlands are libraries for people with reading disabilities that lend out a variety of books. While many libraries already offer audiobooks to their visitors, it might be interesting to look into other types of book, such as:

- DAISY audiobooks: DAISY stands for Digital Accessible Information System. The books are narrated by volunteers or authors and can be browsed just like printed books. Listeners can move from one page to another, listen to sentences again or even insert a bookmark.
- Braille books: blind or visually impaired people can easily follow these books in braille by running their fingers over the text.
- Books in large print: these are printed in A4 format, have a large font size, more space between the lines and a design that is deliberately kept simple. Overall, they are easier to read than regular printed books.
- Karaoke books: these are digital books that are combined with the spoken version. The reader is guided by a karaoke bar that follows the text, timed to coincide with the human voice that is reading the story. The reader can see where they are on the page as the book is read aloud.

Establish relations with communities to help shape your collections and activities

Another way in which libraries can work towards greater diversity and inclusion is by establishing relationships with specific cultural communities and associations. This brings in outside influences, which can result in more extensive collections with more diverse and inclusive content. An example is the Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam, which has established [Het Huis van alle Talen](#), a platform of cooperation in which the library, communities and ambassadors of different cultures work together to make the collections and activities of the library more diverse and inclusive.



Tips for makers

In conversation with Pieter Gaudesaboos (illustrator and writer)



© Bob Van Mol

Pieter Gaudesaboos is a Belgian illustrator and writer of picture books. In his latest book, *A Sea of Love*, Penguin and Bear investigate what love is and what it means. 'You could call me an illustrator,' he says, 'but really I'm someone who tells stories. They come out of me, whether I write them myself or work as an illustrator with other writers.'

'Each picture book is completely different, yet instantly recognizable as a "Gaudesaboos",' you write on your website. What is that, a real Gaudesaboos?

I think it's a combination of absurdist humour, a certain warmth and a particular use of colour. I like to do a lot of different things. It takes me six or seven months to create a book for infants and toddlers, and after that I'll want to do something completely different, for example to make a book for older children and adults. So my books are very diverse, but they do have something in common. What exactly that is, I find hard to say.

***A Sea of Love* tells the story of Penguin, who is in love with Bear. What gave you the idea of writing about love?**

I never thought I'd write a book about love until my daughter asked me what exactly love is. I told her love starts with falling in love, which is something you don't have any control over. It happens to you and then you can decide for yourself what to do with the feeling. Two questions remained with me after that conversation: 'Can you fall in love with someone who is utterly different from you?' and 'Can you fall in love with someone who



is completely the same as you?' The idea immediately struck me of telling a story about two characters who are utterly different but at the same time somehow completely the same, and about how they fall in love.

Why did you find it important to tell this story?

I wanted to show children that love is simple and can't be judged based on sex, skin colour or sexuality. Love is simply about feeling good with someone. You know, I sometimes get annoyed by problem books. They contain inclusive and diverse characters, but they merely describe the problems those characters can face. That often means they're read only by readers who find themselves confronted with similar difficulties. As a reaction, I wanted to tell a beautiful story that's as open as possible and can strike a chord with lots of children.

What inspired you when you were composing the story?

As far as the form is concerned, I drew inspiration from books by Marianne Dubuc, a writer and illustrator who makes substantial children's books in which you can see a clear progression. Most picture books are about 32 pages long, but because I wanted to portray the development of Penguin and Bear, who grow closer as the story goes on, it was important to make a book with more pages. That way you can gradually build up the story and allow the drawings to speak for themselves by omitting words altogether from time to time.

The reader slowly discovers that both Penguin and Bear are boys, even though that's not mentioned explicitly anywhere. A deliberate choice?

For me it was natural to make the two characters boys. I didn't want to conceal the fact, but neither did I want to mention it explicitly. While I was making the book, I played with using lots of image and little text. It was an attempt to show things without naming them, or to allow the drawings to take over the story for a while. Those are the elements I use to make clear that both Penguin and Bear are boys.

***A Sea of Love* is a love story that's atypical of children's books on the subject. Why did you write the story this way?**

I believe there are a lot of soppy books about love, and many beautiful books on the subject too. But I wanted to avoid clichés. So you won't find a heart anywhere in the book, that's almost on principle [laughs]. Only right at the end is there a tiny heart hidden away. When I started the story I had an idea that felt concrete and realistic. I thought it was important to include in the story the difficult transition from friendship to a romantic relationship. I wanted the book to reflect real life.

What other inclusive children's books would you recommend?

Hallo Teckel Tom! by Bette Westera. It's an amusing and unprejudiced book about a dog whose owner has two fathers. That's not explicitly dealt with or problematized anywhere in the book, it's simply how things are.



In conversation with Mylo Freeman (illustrator and writer)



Mylo Freeman is a Dutch-American writer of children's books, which feature mostly characters of colour. Princess Arabella, a princess of colour with a strong will, is one of her most famous. 'Children need both mirrors and windows. Many non-white children see the world only through windows and they need mirrors. Other children see only mirrors and they also have to learn to see the world through windows.' We are eager to share her insightful perspectives on diversity and inclusion with you.

Who are you and what do you do?

My name is Mylo Freeman and I make picture books, which means I write and illustrate my own books. I started writing around twenty-five years ago. It's important to me to be able to tell my stories in my own words.

As well as being a writer, you are also an illustrator. How do you combine the two?

It all starts with a story, without that I can't begin to illustrate, of course. But from the moment I have an idea for a story that isn't completely finished yet, I start illustrating. Usually I begin with the cover, because that gives me a sense of having a grip on the rest of the book. Then I start sketching the other illustrations, meanwhile completing the story. Usually I work on two or three books at the same time, which keeps me focused!



Where do you get your inspiration?

I can be inspired by a story someone tells me or something I read on Facebook. It's all a matter of keeping your antenna up and the things close to your heart will reveal themselves.

Your most famous character is Princess Arabella, inspired by a story about a Surinamese girl. Where did you get your ideas for her personality?

The character of Arabella is partly my own, and in a way a combination of my children when they were young. I guess you could say I have a childish personality (laughing). I think Arabella's willpower and impatience are definitely part of me.

Your books feature mostly characters of colour. Can you tell us something more about that choice?

When drawing Arabella, it was a very conscious choice. Someone told me about a little Surinamese girl who didn't think Black princesses could exist. This was shocking to me. Both that she was convinced they couldn't exist and because I'd never thought of the image of a Black princess. I think it's very important for children of colour to see themselves reflected in books, whether as princesses or as superheroes. A part of building up self-worth is seeing yourself reflected in positive images in society. That's why I hope more writers will consider making their main character a child of a different ethnicity.

What is the project you are most proud of?

I'm very thankful for the Arabella books. They have made me more aware of my 'Black' side, having been raised in an all-white environment as a child. With that series, I'm proud and happy to have contributed to a more colourful world of children's books.

Which book would you love to make in the future?

I want to make a book about a little Black girl living in the time of Rembrandt. I live very near the Rembrandt house in Amsterdam and I've learned that in his day there was a considerable Black community here. I already have the story in my head, but I need time to work it out.

Which inclusive books would you recommend?

- [Julian is a Mermaid](#) by Jessica Love
- [Ada Twist, Scientist](#) by Andrea Beaty and David Roberts
- [Hair Love](#) by Matthew A. Cherry and Vashti Harrison



Sensitivity readers in a nutshell

What are sensitivity readers?

Sensitivity readers are proofreaders who check a book or manuscript for sensitive topics. A reader may specialize in a particular subject, but as an author you can also call upon sensitivity readers to find out whether your work includes contentious subjects or connotations that you may not have noticed. They can also be consulted if you want to write about subjects of which you have little experience.

(Source: [Schrijvenonline](#))

Sensitivity readers are often called upon when authors write about identities or events that fall outside their own lived experience, in other words things they have not been through themselves or seen from the inside. After all, it's important to represent a range of different perspectives or voices, but not everyone necessarily has enough personal involvement to be able to write about every possible subject. Sensitivity readers first came to public attention in 2016, when Keira Drake published a novel called *The Continent*. Critics observed that the book contained insulting stereotypes of Native Americans and Asians. Drake rewrote her book with the help of sensitivity readers. Jodi Picoult made use of a sensitivity reader when she was writing her novel *Small Great Things*, about a black midwife who has to deal with white supremacy.

Why would you engage a sensitivity reader?

Hiring a sensitivity reader can be an enormous help if you think there are aspects of your book that might be taken the wrong way, or if you know you are discussing subjects that fall outside



your comfort zone or your own personal experience. Most of the work of sensitivity readers consists of spotting incomplete or stereotypical representation that an author may perhaps have failed to notice. Authors sometimes regard the use of a sensitivity reader as a way to make their book 'cancel-proof'. But this is about more than warding off every possible criticism. Engaging help and carrying out research contributes to the writing of an accurate and authentic storyline, with credible characters. It means being aware of the images you are creating and adding to the world, and the ways in which those images will circulate worldwide. Will readers be able to recognize themselves in your work? Are you illuminating all aspects of a person's identity, or might you unconsciously be contributing to a stereotype?

The fact that the staffs of publishing houses are far from diverse is nothing new. Not only is the industry predominantly white, the stories it publishes have mainly white characters. Fortunately there are more and more initiatives aimed at structurally anchoring diversity in books and the sector that produces them, making them places where all readers recognize themselves, so that books can be truly inclusive. Nevertheless it is clear that although more books about diversity are being published (whether it's a matter of gender diversity, ethnic diversity or other aspects), the majority are still written by white authors. This means that authors are often groping in the dark when writing about a culture or a perspective that falls outside their own experience. A sensitivity reader can help. It goes without saying that a sensitivity reader will give feedback that may well demand profound changes to the core of the story and to the characters. So don't delay too long in seeking advice.

A real-life example

[Salt & Sage](#) is an example of a consultancy that authors and publishers can call upon if they want to engage a sensitivity reader. Its website features countless profiles of readers with the most diverse forms of expertise: biracial experience, death of a parent, Muslim, dyslexia, you name it.

The British organization [Inclusive Minds](#) is another consultancy for publishers who want to ask advice concerning specific titles or even their entire list.

Want to know more? Try taking a look at these:

- [The rise of the 'sensitivity reader' \(English\)](#)
- [Sensitivity Readers: Who Are They and Should Authors Use Them? \(English\)](#)
- [What Are Sensitivity Readers and Do You Need Them? \(English\)](#)
- [What are sensitivity readers for? \(Dutch\)](#)
- [Sensitivity reader helps with the 'blind spots' \(Dutch\)](#)



Tips for makers

How to write about chronically ill characters in YA

This article presents five tips on ways of creating more authentic and complex stories about people who are chronically ill.

Included under the umbrella of disability, chronic illness is one of the lesser-known and least represented parts of the disability community. Even though there is no single unified definition of chronic illness, it is generally described as a condition lasting for over six months that can significantly affect a person's day-to-day life. Despite the general lack of awareness about chronic illness, statistics show that a large portion of the world population has at least one chronic illness or may develop one later in life. Children and adolescents are no less likely to have a chronic illness than adults. Studies show that 20-30% of adolescents in Western countries have at least one chronic condition.

Yet until quite recently, there was little or no accurate or relatable representation of this part of the disability community in literature and media. The representation of chronic illness in literature and film that did occur was often limited or problematic. Chronically ill characters in YA literature and media mostly ended up magically cured, dead, or exploited for 'inspirational' content.

Here are four tips to create more authentic and complex stories about people who are chronically ill.



1. Avoid romanticizing chronic illness.

Chronic illness in fiction and film is often capitalized on for instant drama in teen love stories, and it creates great tragic moments, for example when someone is hospitalized after being taken away by ambulance. Popular YA novels such as *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Five Feet Apart* depict chronic illness both as a death sentence and as something to be romanticized. Audiences pity Hazel and Augustus, who both have cancer (*The Fault in Our Stars*), and Stella and Will who have cystic fibrosis (*Five Feet Apart*), feeling inspired by their resilience and dedication to love.

However, in real life, chronic illness is complex, diverse, and far from always tragic or dramatic. In fact in the US, 96% of chronic conditions are invisible. People's experiences with and responses to chronic illness are equally varied; not everyone wants to or deserves to be pitied.

Character example: *Cursed* (2019) by Karol Ruth Silverstein. The cover of the book comes with a trigger warning: 'Chronic pain may cause irritability, sarcasm, and bouts of profanity.' The story follows Ricky Bloom, who has recently been diagnosed with juvenile arthritis and is going through her parents' divorce on top of that. Fourteen-year-old Ricky is in pain and justifiably angry, cursing and lashing out. In a world where most chronically ill teens we see are allowed only to be sad and pitiful, this is a refreshing and honest representation of a chronically ill adolescent learning to come to terms with her illness.

2. Write complex characters whose stories aren't necessarily centred around their diagnosis.

If you choose to write about a chronically ill character, remember that chronic illness, although often invisible on the outside, is an intrinsic part of their life that in most cases will always be present and affecting them – but it does not necessarily have to be their entire story. There is more to the character than just their diagnosis. Chronically ill characters in YA literature are often written as simply 'the sick one'. Their diagnosis becomes their main personality trait and the driving force of their story (whether they are the protagonist or a supporting character). More books with chronically ill characters are getting published, but a lot of them still focus on the diagnosis. Although hearing complex and authentic stories centred around illness is undoubtedly important, it is equally important to be exposed to characters in whose stories chronic illness is integral but secondary. Their stories are full of fantasy, adventure, talent, competition, power, and danger.

Book example: YA thriller *The Girls I've Been* (2021) by Tess Sharpe. Most of the novel takes place at the bank where the main protagonist, Nora, and her friends are taken hostage during a robbery. Nora's girlfriend Iris has endometriosis. During the siege, Iris is on her period and is struggling with severe cramps (one of the symptoms of endometriosis). However, instead of fixating on her pain, Iris uses it to negotiate with the robbers and escape. Although endometriosis is not the focus of the book, it starts an open conversation about women's health and introduces the reader to a complex chronically ill character.



3. Characters do not have to be cured for there to be a happy ending

The magical or miraculous cure trope has existed for a long time and still remains fairly common. It involves a disabled character who is miraculously cured or given a magical ability that compensates for or cancels out their disability, so that they become happy and 'whole'. This trope sends a message that you cannot simply exist and be happy with a disability. It erases the representations in the story and negates the character's identity as chronically ill. In reality, people can be both chronically ill and happy.

Character example: Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows* (2015) is a duology that tells the story of criminal prodigy Kaz Brekker. Kaz has chronic pain and relies on a cane when walking and in battle. He is an anti-hero, smart and ruthless, who can get any job done. In the book Kaz's disability is not exploited to demonize him, as often happens with morally grey disabled characters. Kaz refuses a magical cure and is comfortable with his disability; he often uses it against enemies who underestimate him.

4. Finally, it is always a good idea to get a sensitivity reader.

Sensitivity readers review and scan a manuscript for any bias or representation problems before the book gets published. Readers whose identities align with the identities of the characters can provide unique insights and recognize details that don't seem plausible or are unlikely to apply to someone

from their community. Even #OwnVoices authors who write from their own experience often use sensitivity readers.



How to include underrepresented sexual identities in your YA novel

In the end, the girl kisses the boy and both are happy to have found each other. This is how many young adult (YA) novels with female protagonists end. But what about the characters who do not identify as straight? While the lack of books about or featuring the LGBTQ+ community is slowly becoming a thing of the past, with more and more inclusive titles being published, the literary landscape still has a long way to go before it is fully diverse.

YA books that are categorized under the heading of LGBTQ+ predominantly feature portrayals of lesbian and gay characters. As a result, other sexualities are still underrepresented. For reference, the first novel about a bisexual teenager was published in 1997, the first about a transgender teen not until 2004, and the first intersex character in a YA book appeared in 2014.

More recently there has been an increase in YA novels with underrepresented sexual identities. This indicates a positive change; certain titles can even serve as examples for writers and publishers who are aiming for more LGBTQ+ visibility in their books. To aid this process, we have selected three books with queer girl protagonists that we deem interesting examples and curated a list of recommendations that can help you to create similar stories.

The first book is *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* (2021) by Adiba Jaigirdar. It tells the story of two Bengali girls, Hani and



Ishu, who start a fake relationship. Their plan is to encourage Hani's friends to accept her bisexuality and to help Ishu climb the social ladder. What they do not expect is that they will actually develop feelings for each other. All the same, love is messy and not everybody approves of the (fake) couple.

Secondly, we would like to introduce you to *Heartstopper*-author Alice Oseman's novel *Loveless* (2020). Its protagonist Georgia is eighteen and still hasn't had her first kiss. She has never been in love nor even had a crush. On anyone. But she is passionate about everything romantic: weddings, love stories and happily ever afters. Mr Right will eventually come along, won't he? Or Ms Right? Someday... But what if he doesn't? Georgia's first year at university is full of events, new friends, and surprising discoveries. She is eventually introduced to aromanticism and asexuality and realises that having a significant other might not be the key to happiness after all.

The third book is *Miss Meteor* (2020) by Tehlor Kay Mejia and Anna-Marie McLemore. Teenage girls Lita and Chicky participate in the *Miss Meteor* beauty pageant. Both are unlikely candidates, and winning seems an unreachable goal. On top of that, Lita is unsure where she belongs and who she wants to be with, while Chicky struggles with her identity and a fear of coming out as pansexual. As the contest progresses, however, Chicky and Lita learn that fitting in and hiding who they are might not be what *Miss Meteor* is about...

Recommendations:

Show realistic situations that readers can relate to or become aware of

With different sexualities come certain prejudices and stereotypes. Addressing negative connotations with your writing can help to diminish them. For example, in *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating*, Hani's friends question her bisexuality. One of them asks: 'Have you even kissed a girl?' The misconception that people who identify as bisexual have to have romantic or sexual experiences with both boys and girls is not unusual. By including it in her book, Jaigirdar highlights how undermining such thinking is. Hani's inner reaction is communicated through the first-person perspective, so readers see that she is hurt by the comment. This creates a chance for bisexual readers to reflect and may foster understanding in other readers.

Be authentic in your writing

Many queer stereotypes originate from the fact that authors lack essential knowledge of the experiences they write about. It is therefore important that your stories are authentic. This can be achieved by relaying your own experience or talking with others. Alice Oseman, for instance, 'draw[s] on a lot of experiences' in her novel *Loveless*, as she puts it in an [interview with The Guardian](#). Like her protagonist Georgia, the author identifies as asexual and aromantic. One passage describes how Georgia takes an online quiz to figure out where she is located on the Kinsey scale, which ranges from 0 to 6 and indicates a person's sexuality, but her result is an x. This happened to Oseman herself.



If you want to include in your books characters with sexualities that you don't identify as, it's a good idea to engage in conversations with people who do. After finishing your draft, we recommend that sensitivity readers look it over. Their job is to proofread manuscripts with sensitive topics (read more about that in our [article on sensitivity readers](#)). It means you can still be inclusive but avoid falling into the trap of writing about unrealistic experiences.

Avoid tokenism

Tokenism is the practice of including people from minorities in order to appear inclusive. An example would be books that feature one gay supporting character who lacks a personality and an elaborate storyline. To avoid tokenism in your writing, it could be a good idea to incorporate one or more queer characters and give them plenty of space in your story. *Loveless* does this by describing a group of friends around its protagonist, made up of people with different sexualities and gender identities. While Georgia is asexual, her friends are straight, pansexual, lesbian, gay and non-binary. They are all part of the main narrative and portrayed in multidimensional ways. *Miss Meteor* and *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* feature at least one queer protagonist who narrates the story from their personal point of view. The reader therefore gets deep insights into their thinking and feelings, rather than encountering them only on a superficial level.

Create characters who are complex and more than tropes

As the previous recommendation pointed out, it's not enough merely to include queer characters in fiction; sexual orientations

are no substitute for personalities. You risk reproducing limiting tropes. Tropes are 'common or overused themes or devices', as the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* puts it, and could also be described as clichés. One example that often appears in books and movies is the gay best friend of the protagonist who is obsessed with fashion and gossip.

Tehlor Kay Mejia counters this, for instance, when she writes Chicky's side of the story in *Miss Meteor*. The protagonist identifies as pansexual, which is integral to her identity but not her only trait. Chicky sticks up for herself when she's confronted with racist comments that target her Mexican heritage, she feels inferior to her older sisters, likes to dress as a tomboy and finds it difficult to talk about her feelings. Her personality is therefore multilayered and does not coincide with a trope.

Queer characters deserve Happy Endings!

Have you heard of the *Bury Your Gays* trope? It describes a common storyline in books, series and films that ends with the queer characters being killed off. The effect of such narratives is that its audience automatically starts to connect queer people with suffering. It's true that members of the LGBTQ+ community often struggle with their identity or with the way the heteronormative world perceives them, but assigning representative characters predominantly tragic endings reduces them to a single storyline. Luckily, books like *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating*, *Loveless*, and *Miss Meteor* counteract this by featuring positive representations. Spoiler alert: they all have happy endings – and your characters deserve the same.



Inclusive events

What is an inclusive event? An event with an inclusive or diverse programme is of course a good starting point, but it's not the whole story. So here are seven golden tips for making your literary event or programme as inclusive as possible.

1. Start with inclusive content

You've probably come across it elsewhere, but the metaphor of books as mirrors and as windows on the world remains relevant. An inclusive event begins with a diverse and high-quality programme, meaning your audience can recognize itself in the staged event, discussion or festival that you're planning to organize. Are you in search of inspiring titles to make your programme more diverse? Reading lists are often a good place to start.

2. Invite guest curators

Try inviting a guest curator. Their expertise and view of the world is bound to enrich your event. Furthermore, it might be the key to lasting collaboration and to developments that both your organization and your audience will learn from and enjoy. Give the guest curator sufficient freedom and resources to develop a project or event.

3. Pay heed to intersectionality

Identity is made up of several layers. That's what makes intersectionality – the idea that any individual can be privileged



or discriminated against on various grounds – so important when it comes to inclusion and diversity. There are many ways of paying attention to different aspects of inclusion and diversity that are all at play simultaneously. One good example is a British organization called [quipplash](#), which offers workshops and counselling to people who have both a queer identity and a disability. Try to apply this principle in practice when you organize events. For example, if you're planning a reading during Pride Month, look at how you could make the event attractive to LGBTQIA+ people who have a disability or a minority ethnic background.

4. Give equal standing to authors with diverse profiles

It's important to give diversity a central place in your events calendar from time to time, but you might also consider anchoring that broader view in your programming in a lasting and structural way. Don't look at authors with a different background, sexuality, gender expression or ability (or their work) as belonging in a separate or exceptional category. Reward them and others equally, and give them the freedom to write and speak about subjects they choose for themselves. Don't reduce every aspect of their work and artistic personality to their background, and don't expect them to bear all the responsibility for the polyphony and diversification of your event.

5. Don't assume you need only produce books in typical formats

People with a reading disability have access to no more than

10 per cent of annual book production, according to research by [EDRLab](#), which aims to encourage publishers to put more accessible books onto the market. Break the mould and give accessible e-books a place in your organization and publishing programme. When you organize an event connected to a book that's also published in Daisy format or braille, you can make an effort to attract readers who are blind or partially sighted. Then every reader will feel seen and represented.

6. Inclusive also means accessible

As an organizer you want as many booklovers as possible to be able to attend your event. So ensure it's a safe and hospitable space. For more tips and examples surrounding the organization of accessible events you can consult the [Inclusive Events Toolbox](#) created by European Heritage Days. Both your authors and your audience should feel welcome and safe.

Avoid stereotyping when it comes to your external communications and invest in adaptations for people with physical disabilities. If possible, try to provide a sign-language interpreter for your literary event or programme. Make the information known beforehand to your target audience, so that you reach as many lovers of literature as you can. A little effort goes a long way!



Inclusive outreach

Anyone looking at theatre audiences or museum visitors will see little diversity represented in them even today. As is true of culture in general, it's hard for the literary sector to reach new and different target groups. How can you ensure that as an organization or publishing house you get through to groups that have traditionally been remote from you? How can you attune your work to a reader or viewer with a disability, perhaps a visual disability, who grew up speaking a different language or has a different cultural background? How can you ensure that your products and events are open to them both literally and figuratively?

First of all, make sure you are presenting them with a safe and hospitable space where both authors and readers feel welcome and secure. Avoid stereotypical images in your external communications and invest in adaptations for people with disabilities. Some adjustments require only minimal expense, such as employing a sign-language interpreter at a festival or making your website accessible to the blind and partially sighted, but they do make a huge difference. Some adaptations are practical, like providing accessible toilets at your event or sufficient space for a wheelchair between the bookcases of your library. In choosing a location you might want to pay extra attention to whether it's child-friendly and reachable by public transport.

No idea where to start? For many target groups you can contact an organization that will help you on your way. For example,



non-profit Inter ([Inter Vlaanderen](#)), non-profit GRIP ([GELIJKE RECHTEN VOOR IEDERE PERSOON MET EEN HANDICAP - Grip](#)) and OPEN ([Open Belgium](#)) specialize in making products, websites, buildings and festivals accessible. See also <https://www.inclusieambassade.be/>

Don't be afraid to change your organization's image, or to indicate to the public that you are willing to consider improvements and implement changes that contribute to inclusion and diversity. Venture to abandon familiar options and avoid choosing the most obvious solutions every time. To convince people of your commitment, it's best to be honest. Working towards more diversity is a learning process for institutions. That's not to say that you won't have to change anything, but it's impossible to do everything at once and making mistakes along the way is an inevitable part of the process. Acknowledge the resulting vulnerability as a necessary part of change, and as evidence of your integrity and sincerity.



Inclusive job advert

Diversity in the workplace – we're all fans of that. But where do you start?

Finding new employees and colleagues begins with a job advert. By making it accessible and inclusive, you increase the chances of finding diverse candidates. But what expectations do you express and how accessible is the text of your advert? Venture to invest in applicants who will bring different talents with them. Let's get you going with six tips.

1. Be clear

Mention explicitly in your job advert that your company has a diverse workforce and values diversity. To start with, you can add a brief sentence ('we are open to applicants from all backgrounds, nationalities, ...'). Make sure that you make your efforts to increase diversity visible on your website and other channels too, both in text and in images.

2. Describe the capacities you're after as concretely as possible

Take a look at the demands you're making. Are they inclusive? You might for example describe the job requirements in terms of behaviour rather than in terms of characteristics. So instead of 'you are results-oriented' you could write 'you're capable of achieving results'.



3. Make achievable demands

Make clear what qualities and responsibilities you're after. Potential applicants should not need to guess whether or not they're suitable for the job. Don't make demands that in retrospect are unnecessarily high and will deter even the most motivated of potential applicants. Don't for example say that a particular diploma is required if you could find those same qualities by a different route.

4. Be flexible

Ask your applicants whether they need adaptations, logistical or otherwise, to enable them to participate in a job interview. For example, give people the option of applying for the job in various ways, perhaps by means of video or audio files rather than the classic formula of CV plus motivation letter.

5. Use inclusive language

Make sure you are using inclusive language in your job advert. Use neutral pronouns, for example, and avoid difficult foreign words or jargon that the applicant might just as well learn in the workplace. You're most likely to reach the group you're after if you adjust your language to suit your target audience.

6. Use the right channels

Various groups can be reached most effectively via their own networks. Not everyone is on LinkedIn. Try for example platforms for people with sensory disabilities or autism.

Like to know more?

There are various national diversity charters with a focus on diversifying your workforce. You can find them on the EU Platform of Diversity Charters: [EU Platform of Diversity Charters](#) | [European Commission](#) Also try taking a look at the *link to the article headed '12 tips for more inclusive recruitment'.



12 tips for more inclusive recruitment

A staffing policy that is both more inclusive and more diverse needs to start at the beginning, with recruitment. But what should an organization's approach be? What steps do you need to take to arrive at a more diverse staffing policy and a more inclusive recruitment process? Take inspiration from these twelve practical tips.

1. Find out how much diversity already exists in your workforce

Think broadly, all the way from cultural or socio-economic background to educational level and gender expression. Research, including work by [McKinsey & Co](#), shows that more diversity on the work floor leads to better problem-solving. Meetings between individuals with different backgrounds contribute to mutual understanding and break through compartmentalization.

2. Look specifically for different profiles

Do most of your employees have a similar view of the world and a comparable range of experience? If so, try to find out to what extent your recruitment procedure focuses on applicants who share that same profile. Then you can look specifically for different profiles and work towards creating a team with a more diverse composition.



3. Make clear in all your job adverts what qualities and responsibilities you are after

Potential candidates must feel immediately that your advert is addressed to them, rather than having to guess whether or not they are suitable for the job.

4. Don't set the bar unnecessarily high

Think carefully about the capacities you need a future employee to have. Don't make demands that in retrospect will seem superfluous. For example, don't specify that a candidate must have a certain diploma if you could find someone with the necessary qualities by a different route.

5. Be open to change

Take a critical look at your expectations and the accessibility of your job advert, and venture to invest in candidates who will bring other talents with them.

6. Put together a diverse jury

Give some thought to the composition of the team that conducts your job interviews. Take a critical look at your usual procedures and habits. If it proves difficult to do this yourself, you can always call in the help of specialized HR organizations or experts who focus on an inclusive recruitment strategy.

7. Be aware of prejudices in your team

Preconceived notions are often passed on unconsciously. [Unconscious bias training](#) is one of the tools that can make your recruiters or members of the human resources team in your organization more aware of their prejudices.

8. Think outside the box

Ask candidates whether they need logistical or other adaptations to enable them to take part in interviews. For example, offer candidates the option of applying in various different ways, perhaps by using video or audio files instead of the classic 'CV plus motivation letter'.

9. Make allowance for candidates with disabilities

Dealing with your first ever application from a candidate with a disability? The [Disability-Confident Toolkit](#) offers a wide range of tips for making interviews more accessible.

10. Use the right channels to advertise a vacancy

Various groups of people can be reached most effectively through their own networks. Hunt out channels that will enable you to reach a more diverse range of candidates. You might for example try platforms catering to those with a sensory disability or autism.



11. Make your new colleague familiar with your organization

Is the recruitment round complete and have you found a new member of the team? Congratulations! But that's just the start. Ensure a warm welcome for your new colleague and familiarize them with your organization's personnel policy. Inspiration can be found for example in the [Aga Khan Foundation](#), which offers a digital crash course in making new staff familiar with an organization's safeguarding policies.

12. Make your workplace a safe space

Include respect for one another and for each staff member's unique identity as part of your organization's rules and regulations, and appoint a confidential advisor, preferably an external one. That way you will turn your workplace into a safe space where all employees can be completely themselves. Want to start straight away and need inspiration? Take a look at how British company [Three](#) addresses the issue.



Gender-inclusive language

When trying to persuade readers to buy your book or attend your event, you want to optimize the way you address them. Your choice of words is of great importance, especially when you are attempting to appeal to a diverse readership. You'll be keen to use the best gender-neutral or inclusive terms in your promotional material. No idea how to tackle that? You can find out here.

In our everyday communication, we continually refer to each other using pronouns. Based on what someone looks like, we make assumptions about how they experience their gender and use the corresponding pronoun. We intuitively refer to a person who wears feminine clothing as 'she' and someone who looks masculine as 'he'.

The reality is more complex, however. How we experience our gender should be seen as an evolving point on a spectrum of possibilities. Far from everybody, in other words, identifies as 100% male or female, and as a result not everybody feels comfortable seeing themselves referred to by the pronouns 'he' or 'she'.

Various linguistic constructions present alternative solutions for integrating gender-neutral language. In [this article](#) from 'The Washington Post' you can read how different languages deal with the ongoing transformation.



In 2019, English adopted the neutral 'they' as a way of referring to a person who identifies as non-binary, or in situations where you cannot be certain which pronouns a person prefers. Critics sometimes say that using this pronoun in combination with a verb in the singular creates confusion. It's therefore interesting to note that until the nineteenth century, 'they' and 'their' were standard in English and only after that did grammarians recommend the use of 'he'.

In late 2021, the French neutral pronoun *iel* was added to the popular French dictionary 'Le Petit Robert', for use alongside the masculine *il* and the feminine *elle*.

Spanish and French, languages in which gender is often indicated by the word itself, have opted for different endings to non-neutral words. Alongside 'Latino' and 'Latina', Spanish has adopted the gender-neutral 'Latinx'. In French a dot or asterisk is used to indicate masculine and feminine endings, as in the word *éditeur*rice*.

The Swedish Academy, which as well as choosing the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature is the highest authority on the Swedish language, decided in 2014 to introduce a neutral *hen* alongside the personal pronouns *han* ('he') and *hon* ('she'). *Hen* has since been included in the Academy's official word list. Nowadays the Swedish media use it in around half of all cases in which reference is made to a person.

One rule of thumb is to use gender-neutral pronouns whenever you cannot be certain who will hear or read your content. When talking about groups of people, you can use inclusive language.

Consider for example saying 'dear visitors' or 'hello everybody' rather than 'ladies and gentlemen'.

Gender-inclusive language immediately makes your speech, brochure or website a good deal more accessible, but be aware that it sometimes conflicts with user-friendly interfaces. The use of x or * in words can make them hard to read aloud when making websites accessible to people with a visual impairment. An alternative solution is often available. Some terms are neutral in themselves and will help you to avoid complicated constructions. Make sure in any case that your website is always easily readable and up to date.

Uncertain which pronouns a person prefers? Don't hesitate to ask. Then try to respect that choice as far as possible when talking with them or emailing them. If you make a mistake, don't panic. New pronouns can take some getting used to. Don't pretend nothing has happened but apologize and correct yourself. Your efforts will undoubtedly be appreciated.

Do you or your organization want to express solidarity with people who opt for different pronouns? Then include your own pronouns in your email signature, even if you think it's perfectly clear which you would prefer. If all your staff do this, they will be lowering the bar for others and helping to normalize the ability to choose our own pronouns. Furthermore, you will be showing that you take account of other people's preferences in this respect and that you are open to diversity.



Want to know more?

Ways of dealing with diversity differ from one language to the next. If you have specific questions, you can always look up whether language-specific guides have been written within your network or context. In Flanders, for instance, the non-profit Wel Jong Niet Hetero provides [advice for using gender-neutral pronouns](#) correctly in Dutch.

The UN also puts out a [guide](#) for its own staff and others that indicates the best ways of using gender-inclusive language. It has been written for all the official languages of the UN: [English](#), [French](#), [Arabic](#), [Russian](#), [Chinese](#) and [Spanish](#).



How to make your website accessible

Although websites are mainly a visual tool, everyone could and should be able to access their content, regardless of any (dis)abilities or impairments. If you have something to show or say on your website, why not share it with EVERYONE? As promoters of diversity and inclusion, we should always give some thought to those who will make use of our content in a way for which it was not primarily intended.

[W3C Web Accessibility Initiative \(WAI\)](#) offers a free online course called Digital Accessibility Foundations. People with either a technical or a non-technical background can take part, and the focus is on different aspects of accessibility, such as coding, designing, writing and advocating.

If you use website builders like [Wordpress](#) and [WIX](#) you can check for plug-ins or wizards to help you start improving the accessibility of your website. Some features can easily be made accessible. But if it all starts to sound too foreign to you, you can always check with your website developer.

1. Make your website functional even without a mouse

Assistive software makes use of a keyboard to navigate through pages. So it's important to ensure all the features of your website work without the help of a mouse. You can test your own website, by trying to navigate on it using only the tab key on your keyboard.



You can find a [guide for keyboard accessibility design](#) online. WebAIM offers a more technical approach to the matter. If you have questions, you can consult your web developer, or look at the guides if you operate with website builders like [WIX](#) or [Wordpress](#).

2. Structure the hierarchy of your website

[Structuring the hierarchy](#) means using headers correctly. There are different types of headers as well as plain text. Use an H1 header for the main title of your pages, H2 and H3 for other smaller titles, and plain text for the content. That way you optimize the structure of your website, making it easier for users of other software to understand and prioritize content to read.

3. Add 'alt text' to all your website pictures

Websites make use of powerful media to increase their attractiveness. Pictures certainly help to make things more appealing, but not everyone has access to them. People with visual impairments or a lack of sight face difficulties when consuming these kinds of media through their screen reader software. That's where the 'alt text' comes in. [Alt texts](#) (or alt-tags, or even alt-descriptions) are able to tell users what is in the pictures.

4. Use subtitling, 'Alt text', or audio description for your videos

When it comes to video, there are several things to consider. If the video consists of moving images and text or animations, the best solution is to provide an 'alt text' to describe what is happening. Although maybe [audio description](#) would work even better. For people who can see but not hear, subtitling your video is the way to go.

5. Pay attention to colour contrast

When designing your website, you want to make everything look attractive and appealing. In doing so it's important to take account of [colour contrast](#), to ensure that people with visual impairments will not miss out on anything you have to say.



Expert conversations

In conversation with D'Avellonne Van Dijk (publisher)



We asked D'Avellonne van Dijk to share her experience and ideas about diversity and Inclusion in the publishing sector.

Together with Loulou Drinkwaard, Van Dijk looked for children's books that featured characters who resembled them and discovered they were hard to find. So she founded Wilde Haren, a Dutch publishing company with its main focus on visibility and the representation of people (and children) of colour. At Wilde Haren, inclusivity, visibility and diversity are the norm.

“If we continue to publish stories from only one perspective, we will lose compassion for the other and the ability to learn from another person’s experience.”

When did you start up this publishing company?

We started after the Black Lives Matter protests, in order to provide a platform and visibility for our community.

Why did you want to publish children's books specifically?

We noticed we had missed 'seeing ourselves' as we grew up, and it was important for us to provide a new vision for the next generation.

What ages are your books aimed at?



Three to thirteen, although the age will go up with the newer releases in 2022.

Do you think the current story landscape is inclusive enough?

Absolutely not. There's a lack of accountability at bigger publishing companies, which need an active mindset to work on this internally and acknowledgement that it is important for future generations. In response, Wilde Haren offers personalized advice and targets to publishing companies that are keen to improve in this respect. Another key is making space on the work floor for a more diverse crew, so that marginalized groups can provide input and expand the circle of what you already know.

Who is your target audience?

People of colour (with children of colour). But also white children and children in general. Reading our books normalizes the featuring of children of colour as central characters, as scientists, or knights.

What stories are you looking for?

All stories are welcome, written from the perspective of 'own voices'. It's important to note that we focus on stories that are not about cultural differences, but about things that every child can experience or relate to.

Why do you think inclusivity in literature is important?

If we continue to publish stories from only one perspective, we will lose compassion for the other and the ability to learn from another person's experience. The beautiful thing about reading is how it allows you to immerse yourself in another world. It would be extremely sad to exclude worlds we haven't seen yet, just because we don't know of their existence or are unwilling to make space for them. To thrive is to learn and then use that knowledge to create something even better.

What difficulties or limitations do you still face in your business?

The difficulty lies mostly in convincing long-standing businesses that, even though our ways might be unorthodox, this is the right path to take to ensure publishing keeps up with supply and demand in the future.

What is your biggest dream for your publishing company? And for the book industry?

Our hope is that the rest of the book industry will understand the importance of using their own voices and making ALL steps in the book-making process more inclusive. Our dream is to become renowned for inclusivity in books and showing what support for communities that deserve a podium can accomplish – because the possibilities, creativity and stories are endless.

What is the kind of book you most enjoy publishing?

A children's book or graphic novel. The combination of a good story with exciting illustrations makes my heart fill with joy.



How do you think other publishers could pay more attention to diversity?

Take a critical look around. Do the people you work with and their backgrounds represent the percentage of diversity (in every sense of the word) found in your country? And if not, why not?

Of which project are you most proud?

I am very proud of our collaboration with the Dutch National Opera on the book 'Hoe Anansi de verhalen van de wereld bevrijdde'. The graphic design and illustrations are truly unique.

What are some inclusive books you can recommend?

I would highly recommend the choices made by the Educulture Store in Amsterdam. Their range of inclusive books is impeccable. And of course our titles 'Allemaal Anders', 'Liever Niet' and 'Hoe Anansi de verhalen van de wereld bevrijdde'.



Expert conversations

In conversation with Laura Cerrolaza and Susana Gallego (Abriendo Fronteras)

Abriendo Fronteras is a Spanish organization that aims to make the integration of immigrants and refugees into Spanish society easier. Its method involves reading together. The organization has started an easy-to-read club for immigrants, refugees and people with intellectual disabilities, in collaboration with Cirvite, an association devoted to the wellbeing of people with learning difficulties. We were able to ask two of those who thought up the project, Laura Cerrolaza (Abriendo Fronteras) and Susana Gallego (Cirvite), a few questions.

Who are you and what do you do?

Susana: One of the things we do at Cirvite is to look at how existing texts can be adjusted to make them easy to read and understand. I also work on projects that make other accessible material available, including radio and television programmes for people with intellectual disabilities. Along with Laura, I organize the easy-to-read club.

Laura: At Abriendo Fronteras I work mainly as a teacher of Spanish to immigrants and refugees. Our organization tries to help people in vulnerable situations in various respects: language, work, training and free time. The easy-to-read club falls into that last category.



What is an easy-to-read club?

Susana: An easy-to-read club is a club where people come together to read accessible books and talk about them. Our members are people with intellectual disabilities or people who don't yet have a full command of Spanish. We think it's important to offer them reading materials that they can thoroughly enjoy.

How did you arrive at the idea of starting an easy-to-read club?

Susana: At Cirvite we noticed that many people were interested in the books in our library. You can't simply assume that people in our target group will be able to read and understand written texts. So we saw people without any experience of reading demonstrating their fascination for books by picking them up and leafing through them, without paying any attention to the text. People who did have some ability to read refused to be content with that. They wanted to read, but they came up against the obstacle of simply being unable to understand the books. So we went in search of texts that are easy to read. When we started the club, people said that only those who could read would be able to come, but we refused to accept that. Even those who have difficulty reading can listen to someone reading aloud and afterwards contribute just as much to the discussion as anyone else. For many people who are struggling, the club is a kind of homecoming. They can escape reality for a bit, and that's important for us too.

How did you start off the easy-to-read club?

Laura: Because we saw that our participants were so fascinated by books, we thought it would be a good idea to contact a library and tell the people there about our idea. The library responded with great enthusiasm and made a room available to us for our weekly sessions.

As soon as the location had been arranged, we wanted to reach even more possible participants to give them a chance to read with us and join in the conversation. We used the website and also made personal contact with various collectives. That personal aspect is very important in the whole project, since we don't want there to be any barriers between us and the club members.

Then we had to decide what we were going to read and we wanted to involve the participants in that. Each time we tell them what titles we can offer and then we all make a choice together as to which book it will be. At the moment we're reading 'Robinson Crusoe', one of the most difficult books we have. We started six months ago and we're still at it [laughs].

Do you sometimes deliberately choose titles in which your participants are represented?

Susana: No, not really. We mainly read classics, and you don't find much diversity in those. There are subjects that speak specifically to our club members, though. With 'Robinson Crusoe', for example, there was a lot of interest in the theme of religion. So we got talking with our Muslim members about their



faith. Debating is almost more important than reading. During our sessions, many subjects present themselves, and we discuss them with the help of the divergent experiences of our members. Everyone has something to learn from that.

Why do you find it important to engage in conversation after reading?

Laura: By discussing subjects like religion, culture, ethnicity and so on, people with intellectual disabilities learn about diversity in all its many different forms. We find it important to deal with subjects in a natural way, so that stereotypes fall away and we can broaden members' view of the world, and our own.

Did you encounter obstacles along the way?

Susana: Obstacles are there to be overcome. Years ago, when I was walking through the centre of Madrid with a group of people with learning disabilities, we sometimes encountered surprised looks from those not used to seeing people who are different from the norm. We overcame that obstacle by going outside more, so that we became more visible.

Laura: As a teacher I find it frustrating that it's so difficult to put together regular groups of students. Nowadays immigrants have to achieve an advanced level of Spanish, which requires many hours of teaching. But it's difficult to find people who don't work or have other things on the agenda that mean they can't always come to lessons. As a result there's more work for me, because I'm always having to look for new people and put new groups together. But it's also hard for the participants to form a

close-knit group, and they're often in difficult situations, so they really do need this kind of support.

What is your dream as a club?

Susana: We have a lot of dreams, but one of them is that diversity in society will become completely normalized. We want society to be fully inclusive, so that we come upon different people wherever we look.

What tips would you give similar clubs?

Susana: Be audacious! Don't be afraid of possible obstacles, because you can always overcome them. If we don't try to change things, we'll never find out that they really can change.

Another tip: listen to the experiences of others and learn from them. Look at what they've done to achieve success and try it yourself.



Expert conversations

In conversation with Dos Bigotes (publishing house)



Literature as a cure for ignorance: that is the vision of Alberto Rodríguez and Gonzalo Izquierdo. Together they founded the Spanish publishing house Dos Bigotes in 2014, based on their love of literature and their commitment to the LGBTQIA+ community. Dos Bigotes specializes in literature that relates to LGBTQIA+, gender issues and feminism. We asked them to share their views on diversity and inclusivity in the book industry.

“Literature against silence: that’s our mission. Our books encourage curiosity. No prescription required, but the treatment does have side effects.”

Why did you decide to start a publishing company specializing in LGBTQIA+, feminism and gender issues?

We believe that every reader is interested in good literature, and therefore that it’s important to publish good books related to those themes. They enable more readers to get acquainted with this type of literature and its characters, which in turn will help to break down prejudices and make different realities visible.



What are some of the important factors you take into consideration when deciding which books to publish? How would you describe a quintessential 'Dos Bigotes' publication?

We would have to say that the most important factor is whether we are moved by the story. Right from the start, we've been looking for writers who focus on telling the diverse and complex stories of LGBTQIA+ people and their lives. Aside from that, we love stories written from a non-traditional viewpoint and books that shine a new light on reality.

Dos Bigotes also publishes translated literature and essays. Why do you think that's important? Have you noticed differences in the way certain topics are discussed in different countries or languages?

Absolutely! Ever since we published our first title in April 2014 — an anthology of contemporary Russian writers called *El armario de acero* (*The Iron Closet*) — the translation of foreign authors has been one of the fundamental pillars of our catalogue. We've now published translated literary works by authors from the United States, Britain, Canada, France, Slovenia, Romania, Poland and several African countries.

We strongly believe that translated literature enables readers to learn more about the realities of different countries. It's important to know that the personal and social experience of being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community is very different in the Netherlands, for example, from how it is in Russia. And indeed different in Nigeria from how it is in Uganda.

***La geometría del trigo*, written by Alberto Conejero, won the Premio Nacional de Literatura Dramática in 2019. How does it feel to see the books you've published appreciated in mainstream and non-LGBTQIA+ contexts, including awards?**

It was amazing! We always say that we specialize in LGBTQIA+ themes but not LGBTQIA+ readers, because good books are written for all kinds of people, beyond questions of gender or sexual identity. *La geometría del trigo* is a stunning play written by Alberto Conejero, one of the best contemporary writers in Spain.

Apart from the stories you publish, are there any other ways Dos Bigotes invests in diversity and inclusion?

Yes. We believe that publishing books is a form of cultural activism and for that reason we have a constant relationship with various LGBTQIA+ associations. We also participate in various events (such as national and international book fairs, conferences or talks) because we think it's important to spread awareness of the diversity of LGBTQIA+ culture in all areas of life.

What tips would you give other publishing companies that want to feature more diversity and be more inclusive?

First of all, believe in the books that you publish. Publishing books brings responsibility with it, and as publishers we need to contribute to making the world a more diverse and inclusive place. We're convinced that books save lives, so our job is to present references and stories we can all identify with.



Which inclusive books would you recommend?

There are many books we'd recommend, including:

- Las malas by Camila Sosa Villada
- Tengo miedo torero by Pedro Lemebel
- The Line of Beauty by Alan Hollinghurst.

If asked to pick some books that we've published at Dos Bigotes, we'd recommend:

- Cómo entender tu género by Alex Iantaffi and Meg-John Barker
- El hombre de hojalata by Sarah Winman
- Cómo luchamos por nuestras vidas by Saeed Jones
- -La herencia by Matthew López



Expert conversations

In conversation with Mark Jennett

Mark Jennett is a British trainer, consultant and writer specializing in equality and diversity.

He has worked with the Sex Education Forum on the subject of training, funded by the Department for Education, to support primary and secondary schools in addressing homophobic, bi-phobic and transphobic bullying, provided equality and diversity trainings to non-profits and libraries across England and is the author of the National Union of Teachers' "[Getting EVERYONE Reading for Pleasure](#)"-resource, which helps schools to use literature to combat social exclusion and raise educational standards.

What does a reading promoter do?

I work with schools, and think with them about how to use books as a means of talking about feelings, encouraging empathy and affirming all identities. I also encourage everyone to read for pleasure. I share books that include a range of identities, that challenge stereotypes and promote inclusion. I talk about how stereotypes concerning gender and race can influence attitudes and how we can counter this.

Why do you think promoting inclusive books specifically is important?

Children need to see themselves and their families in the stories they read. Books help us to learn about identities that are different from ours and to see how much we all have in common. It's so important that all children see different

You can read more content from Mark Jennett on
<https://www.promotingequality.com/writing-resources>.



sexualities, ethnicities, abilities and other identities in books, and these characters should be presented in ways that challenge stereotypes and encourage empathy.

How do you promote inclusive books to an audience?

In any possible way I can! I give presentations, I work with groups of teachers and I've written many resources on books for younger children. Even when I'm talking about broader equality issues, I always try to include references to stories because they are such an effective means of promoting inclusion.

How do you select inclusive books to work with?

The first question is whether or not it's a good story that will engage children or young people. The question of whether it can be inclusive content or not comes after that.

I try to avoid tokenistic representation. It is not unusual to find a picture book with disabled characters or same sex parents hovering in the background of a couple of illustrations, while all the 'main' characters are white, not apparently disabled and explicitly or presumed to be straight! That's why I like to use a combination of books that put minorities front and centre. I call these 'explicitly' inclusive. This is all part of making diverse identities seem the norm, rather than unusual or surprising.

I also look for books that challenge stereotypes. These could include books with characters that challenge conventional gender norms, that include intersectional representations, or that are 'about' something other than the protagonists' identity.

Finally, there are still many books that tend to view their protagonists' 'minority' identities through the eyes of others. If you're going to write a book about refugees, write it from their point of view, not that of an observer. We need to see the world through their eyes – not our own.

And where do you find these books?

'Barefoot Books' and 'Child's Play' are two publishers who have a really proactive approach to inclusion in children's books. In the UK, there is '[Letterbox Library](#)' as a great source!

Have you come across bad examples?

I'm afraid so! In particular there are still many books that are sold as 'for girls' or 'for boys'. This affirms gender stereotypes and prevents children from exploring different identities or activities – not to mention affirming a binary view of gender. However, I don't believe in burning books! I do sometimes wish we could bury them all, if it weren't for all the environmental problems that would cause! A more constructive approach is to critique them and encourage children to do the same. We can ask: "Is it really only boys who like science? Or only girls who like dancing?" No it isn't – so let's find a better book.

How do you think regular librarians and teachers could promote inclusive books better?

Some already do a great job. But we still have a long way to go in helping people to recognize the stereotypes or the lack of inclusion in a lot of children's books. It's important to find a



balance between drawing attention to diverse titles and implying that they are primarily for a particular audience. Highlighting a book as being mainly of interest because of its gay or black characters can be as unhelpful as labelling books as being 'for boys' or 'for girls'. It confirms the idea that some books might be of interest only to readers who share those identities. While we all need more stories that affirm us, we can all read about everything!

What would it take for inclusive books to reach a broader audience?

It would help if all publishers and booksellers marketed inclusive books to a broad audience. At the same time, I think we need to encourage more debate about how much better the world could be if we could accept other people's differences - and how stories are crucial in this.

We often try to 'protect' children from things like discrimination and prejudice by ignoring it or glossing over it – in fact I think we need to do the opposite and point out how destructive it is for all of us, not just the minorities it particularly targets.

What resources can be used to create a set of good diverse books?

There are many resources out there, including mine! Start looking at certain publishers and sellers who understand inclusivity. For example, you can look for 'specialist' sellers (London's 'Gays The Word' or 'Housmans' bookshop, for example.), who focus on 'minority' or 'radical' titles, as they will

often have a good selection and can make recommendations.

What do you think needs to be done to stimulate inclusivity in the literary sector? What is still missing?

There are still many titles that feel as if they have been produced to fill a gap in the market rather than engage readers with great stories. We need to convince publishers and sellers that there is indeed a wide market for these books amongst children. We need to educate schools and parents about the value of books that don't affirm the status quo. Everyone needs to explore a range of books and we need to model diverse reading tastes while talking about different kinds of books.

What are some inclusive books you can recommend?

Hard to pick favourites but I will try!

- Jessica Love's books, *Julian Is A Mermaid* and *Julian At The Wedding*, are joyous depictions of a child who is not bound by so-called gender norms.
- *Harriet Gets Carried Away* by Jessie Sima, *Spacegirl Pukes* by Katy Wilson and Vanda Carter and *Sleeping Beauty* by David Roberts and Lynn Roberts-Maloney are three great books in which LGBTQIA+ characters feature prominently but their identity is not the primary focus of the story.
- *Planet Omar Accidental Trouble Magnet* by Zanib Mian. A very funny story about a boy who joyfully embraces his Muslim identity.
- *Running On Empty* by S. E. Durrant is a glimpse into the world of a child who cares for his disabled parents.



Expert conversations

In conversation with Michiel Kolman (Elsevier publishing)



We asked Michiel Kolman to share his experience and ideas about diversity and inclusion in the publishing sector.

Kolman is Senior Vice President at the Dutch publishing house Elsevier and former President of the International Publishers Association (IPA), where he continues to serve as chair of the Inclusive Publishing and Literacy committee. He was also Presidential Envoy of Diversity and Inclusion in 2019 and 2020. We are eager to share his insightful perspectives with you.

How have you been working on diversity and inclusion? What motivates your efforts at the IPA?

When I was president of the IPA, I put diversity and inclusion (D&I) onto the agenda. When my term was up, my successor, Hugo Setzer, appointed me as the IPA's presidential envoy for D&I in the publishing industry. Fortunately, we were not starting from scratch. Many publishing houses had already established themselves in the D&I arena and several IPA members, most notably the UK Publishers Association (the PA) had made great inroads in this respect.

I'm very happy that the IPA leadership has been more diverse than ever of late, with an Asian president, an out-and-proud president who is part of the LGBTQI+ community, a female president from the Middle East and a future female president from Latin America. At the IPA we strive for gender and geographic balance in all positions and committees.



Which were the most important lines for the IPA to take in order to contribute to a more inclusive publishing sector?

First and most important has been simply to have the conversation. The IPA started a blog on D&I and put D&I on the agenda at its meetings, while Bodour Al Qasimi launched [PublisHER, a platform](#) dedicated to female leadership in our industry.

Individual IPA members have been very active in this area. The Publishers Association in the UK launched a five-year programme that covered annual monitoring of progress, clear diversity goals in the workplace, awards, learning and training, etc. The IPA focused on sharing best practice. We also sent out a questionnaire to the members and followed up with short interviews. Key take-aways were that every IPA member had a D&I story to tell (even if they didn't realize it), there was a wide variety of views on how important D&I is and how it is 'competing' with other priorities, and there is more of a focus on D&I in the workforce than on D&I in what we publish. Gender was the most prominent diversity lens, but race and ethnicity, age and LGBTQI+ were also on the radar.

As you mention in your articles, the publishing industry needs to pay attention to diversity and inclusion on different levels: within the workforce, with regard to the content that is offered and regarding authorship. What can publishers do to bring new and more representative voices into the field?

If we want to publish diverse books we need diverse authors, and in order to attract diverse authors, we need diversity in our publishing houses and publishing organizations. What we

publish and who publishes it are closely connected. You can't expect a publisher working with a majority of straight white women to be able to publish books that will resonate with a Black audience and with LGBTQI+ readers. (I'm exaggerating a bit to get the point across.)

If you want to address D&I, the first step is to create an inclusive organization where everyone can be themselves and achieve their full potential. At Elsevier we have rolled out Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Safety programmes which were highly effective. Once the working culture is more inclusive, you can put diverse talent hiring and retention on the agenda. Publishing houses that are inclusive and diverse will attract more talent, especially if their efforts are recognized through external benchmarks or independent evaluations. Prospective hires look at organizations like Comparably and Glassdoor to evaluate how companies align on their values and purpose.

In parallel, I am a great supporter of raising awareness of what we publish, for example by celebrating diverse voices through awards, dedicated programmes and financial support.

You write on your blog that both the British and the American publishing industries are making progress in the D&I of their workforce. How do you think they have achieved this progress?

First, the UK and the US stand out because for those countries we have a great deal of data going back several years on diversity in our industry. I would love to have similar data for other countries and be able to build a truly international



perspective on diversity in publishing at a global level, but that is not possible as yet. Of course I'm aware of the fact that in gathering data, you have to balance privacy with the importance of data registration across all types of diversity.

Second, I recall a conversation I had with a leading British publisher who said, 'We cannot afford not to have a strong and active D&I programme, otherwise we will not succeed in hiring and retaining the talent we need.'

I have seen publishing houses putting D&I on the agenda in a systematic way. They hired dedicated D&I staff, formulated a strategy and executed it. They communicated internally and externally about the strategic importance of this approach. They empowered Employee Resource Groups linked to the different D&I lenses, and gave them a budget. Finally, they had strong, outspoken support from the top. To be successful at D&I, you have to fire on all cylinders at the same time and do so in a sustained way over many years.

Is there one specific D&I lens (gender, race, sexual identity, disability, etc) that is likely to present the greatest challenges for the publishing industry?

The UK PA now has data on diversity in the UK publishing industry going back many years and it tells an interesting story: the workforce is more female than male, the leadership has reached gender parity, and the LGBTQI+ community is well represented (even though they are more likely to come out to their immediate colleagues than to their managers). But the race lens on diversity is clearly where most challenges are. This has

been known for years, but dedicated programmes have not really rectified the situation. Even if Black talent is hired, through internship programmes for example, Black interns are less likely to stay in their publishing house than other staff. I think it is fair to say that the inclusive working environment doesn't extend to Black employees.

How will the IPA keep working towards a more diverse and inclusive publishing industry?

D&I now has an official home at the IPA in the Inclusive Publishing and Literacy committee, which I chair. In parallel, the PublisHER initiative is going from strength to strength, and we keep D&I on the agenda through our blogs, as we will at the upcoming IPA Congress in Jakarta next year. Our members are increasingly embracing D&I, and the UK PA and the American Association of Publishers are really in the vanguard here. At the IPA we are playing our part in exchanging best practice and helping all our members become and remain active in this area.



Expert conversations

In conversation with Aimée Felone and Meera Ghanshamdas (Round Table Books)

A children's bookshop that sells only inclusive books? Yes, please! Round Table Books is exactly that and more. An independent store, it opened its doors in Brixton, South London, in 2019 and has been an integral part of the local community ever since. Two important people behind it are Aimée Felone and Meera Ghanshamdas.

Aimée Felone is a co-founder of the UK-based children's publishing house Knights Of, which focuses on diversity within its own ranks and in its commissioned writers and illustrators. Since 2019 she has also been a co-owner of *Round Table Books*. In 2021 Meera Ghanshamdas joined the bookshop's team as its new director. She previously worked in the bookstores *Nomad Books* and *Moon Lane Books*. Both women are advocates for more diverse representation in books as well as in the people who create them.

We talked to Aimée and Meera about inclusive bookshops, Round Table Books' connection to the local community and the changes that need to happen in the book industry.

Can you tell us a little about the origins of Round Table Books?

Aimée: In 2018, the first *Reflecting Realities Report* by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education was published. It showed that only 1% of UK children's books back in 2017 featured a Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic protagonist. Even though that was far from enough, we decided to celebrate and draw attention to the books that made up that 1% by initiating #ReadTheOnePercent



on Twitter. This coincided with Knights Of's first birthday, so we asked ourselves: Why don't we just take all of these books that we're telling people to read and put them in a space where they can come and buy them? We decided to launch a five-day pop-up and sold over 500 books. During that time, customers expressed their need for a permanent bookshop. It got us thinking. If that was what the community was telling us, then that was what we'd do. We set up a crowdfunding campaign with a target of £30,000 and managed to raise nearly £50,000.

Do you feel connected to the local community?

Meera: Definitely. We really wanted to be present in an underserved community, and there were no independent bookshops in Southwest London at the time. On top of selling books, we put on a lot of events. Because the shop is quite small, it feels like an intimate gathering in somebody's living room. In addition, we've built partnerships with Brixton Library and the local Hospital Trust. We hold author readings in the library or sell books at their events and we've done multiple book pop-ups for different occasions together with the Hospital Trust. Next year we want to continue with that and to organize some pop-ups for Pride Month as well. The idea of putting books in a space where they're not expected is important to us, because it's not always realistic to expect people to come to you. Accommodating the community is a fundamental trait of a community bookshop.

But being close to the community also means reacting to what its members need. For example, about a year ago we decided to include adult titles in the store because many 25- to 35-year-olds

find their way there. Anyhow, parents who come in to buy books for their children also need titles that resonate with their own experiences. It's important that they're reading diverse stories, so that they can communicate related topics to their children.

How do you handle the themes of diversity and inclusion at Round Table Books?

Meera: For us it's about quality and about being genuinely able to get behind every book. We try to read all the books we're selling and to discuss them with colleagues, because we want to make sure that they feature great representation. We curate a list of titles that include three of the protected characteristics in UK law, and the intersections in between: race and ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, and ability and neurodivergence. In general, we aim to normalize all experiences. For instance, many children's books are set in the English countryside. While that is the experience of some children, billions of other children around the world live in urban settings. Those should be reflected in books too.

This deep understanding of diversity is what we're looking for in our staff members. Up to now we have only employed people from diverse backgrounds who resonate with this notion and are open to challenges and debates.

Aimée: Conversations are very important. The name of the bookshop reflects that as well. The name Round Table comes from the old legend about King Arthur and his knights who sit at a round table together, so none of them has a superior position. At Round Table Books everyone is equal.



Good practices from within and outside the book industry

Seek out the unknown

Do you want to work to create more inclusion in your organization, or set up an inclusive literary event? Our tip is to step out of your comfort zone and collaborate with organizations beyond your usual network.

To build a bridge to new online and offline target groups, you can engage intermediaries or ambassadors whose practices or ideas may inspire you. For example, open yourself up to other ways of finding new talent and take an active role in them. Need a further impetus? These organizations have blazed a trail.

“Life begins at the end of your comfort zone.”

Neale Donald Walsch

Black History Month: libraries work towards decolonization

Library Sophia in Schaerbeek is working with five guest curators of colour to screen and decolonize its collection under the heading of Black History Month. They cast a critical eye over the whole of the current collection and make proposals for adjustment. They also ask questions about the role a library plays in spreading knowledge and look at how this particular library can adopt a more inclusive policy in future. A library called Muntpunkt in Brussels has joined forces with a team of external experts that is examining the current collection in the light of decolonization, at the same time as looking at what could be added to it in the future. The curators come from a



range of different fields that currently find themselves at the centre of public discourse. They are aware of what's going on in the world and support any number of organizations with their valuable additional expertise.

Guest curators take up their pens

British trade magazine The Bookseller is a weekly that covers the business side of the literature industry. Every year it comes up with a Top 50, and it continually previews the most important books that will be published over the coming three months. In other words, The Bookseller is an important reference for all different levels of the book trade. The magazine recently put one of its issues entirely in the hands of the Black Agents and Editors' Group. The columns written by the guest editors enabled the reading public to look at various parts of the book trade from a new perspective. The [special edition of the magazine](#) could be read in its entirety online.

Call in the help of an external expert

The employees of a company or organization must be allowed to be entirely themselves and to express their diversity fully, in complete safety. To make its workplace a safe space, the Kaaitheatre in Brussels asked Olave Nduwanje to carry out internal research. Olave conducted in-depth interviews with organizers of what claim to be safe(r) spaces, both in Brussels and beyond. His work led to a series of [podcast episodes](#) that offer an insight into the expertise, ambitions, experiences and vulnerabilities of the safe(r) spaces organizers.



Good practices from within and outside the book industry

Time to act



In this regular feature we look further than our own boundaries for inspiration. What can we learn from the performing arts about accessibility?

Getting around in the physical world is something many of us take for granted. We walk upstairs, squeeze through narrow passageways, step over thresholds, read signs and hear loudspeaker announcements without a second thought. For people with a disability, accessibility is still a problem in every sector, because their needs haven't been considered at the design stage. How can the literary sector better accommodate audiences and artists with disabilities? And what can we learn from the performing arts sector?

TIME TO ACT: Understanding and breaking barriers in the performing arts

Time to Act (TTO) is a research report commissioned by the British Council and authored by On The Move, a network active in Europe and worldwide that provides information about cultural mobility opportunities with a focus on social and environmental responsibility. Time to Act focuses on dance, drama, theatre and music. It is the first ever transnational study extensively showing that a lack of knowledge in the mainstream cultural sector is a key barrier preventing artists and arts professionals with a disability from participating on equal terms in European culture. The study is part of the large-scale cooperative project Europe Beyond Access, an initiative aimed at supporting artists with disabilities in their efforts to break the glass ceilings of the contemporary theatre and dance sectors.



Where do things go wrong and what can be done?

The key findings in the TTO report have been grouped into three major areas: Knowledge, Experience and Solutions. We will discuss these further in the following sections and see how the report can inspire the literary sector.

Knowledge

Respondents often complained about difficulties in finding information that would help them navigate accessibility issues. They also reported a lack of information on work by disabled artists. Substantial literature on the performing arts and disability is not readily available in most European countries, since the available information is often limited to certain countries or languages.

Experience

The study found that most arts organizations give priority to ensuring access for disabled audiences, with the needs of disabled artists coming second. This may be connected to the prevailing notion that people with disabilities are 'passive' recipients of culture, rather than 'active' participants. A lack of funding and of inclusive guidelines with an official status is also seen as a major obstacle. Furthermore, perceptions of the improvements made are often more confident than is warranted and contrast with the evidence about actual practices.

Solutions

The Time to Act report makes some suggestions on how the performing arts sector can improve its accessibility.

→ **Policy frameworks and support are necessary as key enabling factors.**

Cultural policies addressing disability and access, and providing a dedicated budget, have been instrumental in enabling progress at the sector level.

→ **Disabled people need to be more involved**

Organizations that involve people with disabilities in their decision-making and have a dedicated staff or budgets for accessibility are generally better placed to make progress in this field.

→ **The normative production methods need to be adapted**

Tight deadlines, small practice spaces and long days don't work for disabled performers, as they have adverse effects on their wellbeing, often making it impossible for them to accept a performance offer. Active measures need to be taken if they are to thrive in this environment.

→ **Making knowledge and practical guidance more easily accessible is critical.**

This can be done by translating the existing literature into different languages, making it globally accessible, and establishing partnerships with specialized organizations.

→ **Other changes that make organizations more accessible and inclusive.**

These include ensuring physical accessibility, integrating accessibility into the design and presentation of productions (e.g. audio descriptions, touch tours, or tactile model boxes), and ensuring that open calls are published and disseminated in accessible formats.



What can we, in the literary sector, learn from this report?

The findings in the TTO report about the performing arts also apply to the literary field. The idea that disabled people are 'passive' recipients of culture, rather than 'active' participants seems to be a sector-wide prejudice. Articles about the representation of disabilities in literature are broadly available, but information about disabled authors is hard to find. [Venue accessibility at book fairs and literary events](#) is discussed more often, but what measures are taken behind the scenes?

We have to ask ourselves whether we are actively making room for people with disabilities in the literary sector. Are publishers searching for works by disabled people to diversify their output? Is the industry a safe space for writers with disabilities and do the prevailing production methods allow them to showcase their talents to the full? There seems to be a general consensus that this should be the case, but concrete measures are lacking. A lack of extra support, financial or otherwise, within organizations is preventing writers with disabilities from thriving in this environment.

However, there are organizations actively supporting disabled writers that we can look to for inspiration.

[Open Minnesota Arts](#) initiates artistic activities (such as Poetry Gatherings) for people with disabilities to help them discover their unique creative gifts, develop and practice skills, and share their creations in a supportive environment.

[Disabled Writers](#) is a resource specifically designed to help editors connect with disabled people working in journalism, or trying to break into the field.

You can find more examples of good practice [here](#).

It's worth noting that most of these organizations are located in the USA and Australia, while European equivalents are still very rare. Although Europe Beyond Access aims to help disabled artists in Europe, it focuses mostly on the performing arts. We can use these American and Australian initiatives as good examples of how to support disabled writers everywhere.



Good practices from within and outside the book industry

Lit in Colour (UK)



Lit in Colour is a Penguin Publishing Group campaign run in partnership with The Runnymede Trust, the UK's leading race equality think tank, and various educational institutions. It's been created to explore how schools can be helped to make English Literature classes more inclusive for authors of colour. It has commissioned a research report to shine a light on barriers preventing more books by Black, Asian and minority ethnic writers from being taught in the classroom. What were the conclusions of this research and what are the recommendations for increasing students' access to books by writers of colour?

1. What's causing a lack of representation?

In the first phase of the Lit in Colour campaign, a team of academic experts carried out research to gain a better understanding of the barriers that are preventing more diverse texts from being taught in schools. Hundreds of teachers and school librarians in primary and secondary schools across the country were consulted as well as hundreds of young people. Data from exam boards was collected to determine which specific texts young people were selecting in their GCSE and A-Level exams.



Here we summarize the findings of the research.

Confidence in talking about race in the classroom

Both students and teachers reported that they expect the teacher to be an expert on racism and diversity, and to have had training. However, only 12% of secondary and 13% of primary school teachers reported having had any training on how to talk about race in the classroom as part of their teacher training course. A number of teachers said they weren't confident talking about racism in classes where their pupils might have had personal experiences, for fear of overstepping boundaries or causing offence. Many said they didn't know where to find books that are appropriate for lessons and lacked knowledge about how to use them in the classroom.

Lack of time, budget and teaching resources

Even after exam boards have introduced more options in order to include diverse texts, this doesn't necessarily translate into change in the classroom. Schools choose texts that other schools choose, so that they can be sure of plentiful shared resources. Ready-made school resources, which staff often rely on, rarely focus on diverse texts. Furthermore, tight budgets can prevent many schools from buying a range of diverse books for their library or new texts for a year group to study.

English teachers are overwhelmingly white

85.7% of teachers in England were white British in 2019, with a further 3.8% white other, while 92.7% of head teachers were white British. 46% of schools have no Black, Asian or minority ethnic teachers. This is in stark contrast to the 34.4% of students in England that are Black, Asian or minority ethnic.

Finding representative books

Primary school teachers in particular reported struggling to find 'everyday' narratives featuring characters of colour. Books tended either to be about exceptional people or to have experiences of racism or 'struggle' as their core narrative.

2. What needs to change, and who needs to change it?

The second phase of the Lit in Colour campaign involves finding practical solutions and recommendations in relation to these complex issues. Below you can find suggestions for students, teachers, parents and supporters.

For students

Students are urged to read a book by a writer of colour, or to start a book club with their friends that focuses on books by Black, Asian or minority ethnic writers. To help them, Lit in Colour provides a practical guide:

- [How to start a book club: read a book by a writer of colour this summer.](#)

Starting a conversation with teachers and librarians is also a great way to help. Pointers are provided on the online platform:

- [Tips on starting a conversation with your English teacher](#)
- [Tips on starting a conversation with your school librarian](#)



Lit in Colour also tries to connect with young students via social media. It has a [TikTok account](#) run by three women of colour who share book recommendations and other resources in a playful and engaging way.

For parents and supporters

Parents are advised to take a look at their own child's bookshelves to see how many books they have by Black, Asian or minority ethnic writers. For younger children it's important to look at how many of their books feature a main character who is non-white.

Parents can find an inclusive [reading list](#) in the Penguin webshop.

For teachers

Lit in Colour has developed two (as yet incomplete) booklists for teachers who don't know where to find the right books: a reading list for [key stage 2](#) (8-11 years) and one for key stage 3-5 (12-18 years). The reading lists include multimedia for the books that are listed. Videos, PowerPoints and accompanying activity sheets, as well as excerpts from the book read by the author, are intended to help students read and learn in a more engaging way.

Lit in Colour's involvement doesn't end with recommendations and online tools. A core part of the campaign is a commitment to a long-term programme of practical support for teachers and school librarians. This includes:

- Donating books to schools across the country.
- Working in partnership with the Pearson exam board, the campaign is using the '[Lit in Colour Pioneers](#)' programme to encourage schools to opt to use a book by a writer of colour in their lessons.
- Joining forces with publisher [Bloomsbury](#) to [introduce new plays and teacher support](#) that will create more representative and inclusive drama experiences within the English curriculum.

While much of the debate has focused on changes to the history curriculum, it is important to consider English literature as well. Lit in Colour is committed to maintaining its support for schools as they make these changes.

Want to learn more about the report? You can read the summary [here](#), or download the full report at the end of the page.



Pro Helvetia (Switzerland)



Although cultural organizations are increasingly aware of the importance of diversity and inclusion, they often lack the right resources and methods. As a result, the potential that diversity presents goes untapped. How can cultural organizations change their structures more actively in the long term to reflect today's diverse society?

[Pro Helvetia](#), a government-funded Swiss Arts Council, has launched a dossier called *Diversity and Equality in the Cultural Sector*. It lists a number of concrete [targets for 2021-2024](#), one of which is to collect and disseminate data and facts on diversity and equality in the sector and promote the transfer of the resulting knowledge. The project also aims to reduce barriers to cultural practitioners from marginalized population groups in the Swiss cultural sector. Another goal is to support cultural institutions and provide them with active guidance in the development of diversity-oriented processes in 2021-2024. Here we examine these targets in more depth.

Collecting and disseminating data

One of the topics about which Pro Helvetia tries to collect data is [gender relations in the cultural sector](#). We asked Lisa Pedicino, project manager of the *Diversity and Equality in the Cultural Sector* dossier why this was the first subject they chose to examine. 'The reason for the focus on gender, and in particular on equal opportunities between women and men, is that it has been defined as a clear objective of federal policy over the coming years. The role of women in the arts and culture had



not been investigated before, so preliminary research into the different disciplines was urgently needed.'

The quantitative data in the preliminary study led to three findings:

- Women are under-represented in leadership positions.
- Female artists and their work have lower visibility and receive awards less often.
- Women earn less than men.

The lack of visibility for women in the cultural sector means that Switzerland is wasting significant potential in skills and abilities, in both artistic and management areas. Following on from this preliminary study, there is an urgent need to collect and examine data about gender relations in the Swiss cultural sector more comprehensively.

Pro Helvetia is not planning to limit its data collection to the subject of gender relations. 'It is clear to us that diversity includes many other dimensions and that intersectionality is fundamental to understanding the data about diversity. For this reason, we aim to broaden our investigation in the future. We already work with a broader concept of diversity in our programmes, taking into account the different experiences of discrimination,' says Pedicino.

Reducing barriers for cultural practitioners

What existing barriers are preventing cultural practitioners from marginalized population groups from participating in the

Swiss cultural sector? According to Lisa Pedicino, non-inclusive personnel selection processes and strongly hierarchical working environments form invisible barriers. In addition, it is easier to access an artistic network if you have a standard educational background, grew up in Switzerland, or come from a wealthy environment. Having a different background or origin makes it much more difficult. Another barrier is childcare, especially for female artists. Professions that require evening appearances, weekend work or long tours often force parents to put their careers on hold.

Until a few years ago, the subject of diversity in cultural institutions was only rarely addressed from a more structural perspective. Important questions remained unasked. Who works in the organization? Who makes the decisions, and how? Which aesthetics are 'allowed'? And so on. According to Pedicino, many cultural institutions have started to address these barriers, but often without the necessary expertise or real awareness of the complexity of the processes of change required.

Supporting cultural institutions

So Pro Helvetia now offers active guidance to publicly supported cultural institutions and organizations in the form of a [two-day workshop](#). It provides the participants with an opportunity to assess their structures. They are provided with personalized advice on how to develop a sustainable diversity strategy with the experts of their choice.

'Each organization has a different path,' says Pedicino. 'A big theatre with multiple departments is not comparable to the

structure of a festival. This is what makes the one-on-one approach so beneficial. We try to provide the participants with a general understanding of diversity and the kind of change that is required at all levels of the organization. At the same time, we give practice-oriented input and examples of good practice by other organizations.'

After the initial workshop, the participants have an opportunity to apply for support for their diversity strategy. Based on the recommendations of a specialist jury, a number of institutions are awarded a grant for two or three years. This should allow them to dive deeper into what they learned from the workshop and to develop approaches for enhancing diversity within their organization.

Although it's too early to tell what the impact of this programme has been, we do have the results from the pilot phase in 2019, and according to Pedicino they are cause for optimism about the future. Some participating organizations are on their way to increasing skills within the team or at the management level, while others are working on inclusive communication systems or personnel selection processes, and others again have focused on community building and the expansion of artistic networks.



Good practices from within and outside the book industry

DRIN (Finland)



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How can non-stereotypical representations be introduced into the book market? What good examples of diversity and inclusion can we share? How can those active in the book sector learn from each other in this respect? And how can they contribute to a more diverse and inclusive children's literature?

These are the questions the Goethe-Institut Finland and co-creators Warda Ahmed, EL BOUM and Chantal-Fleur Sandjon asked themselves when developing the DRIN project. So what exactly does it entail?

'DRIN – visions for children's books' was launched in 2018 by the Goethe-Institut Finland and stands for Diversity, Representation, Inclusion, Norm Critique. By means of an online publication (*In Our Own Words: BIPOC Perspectives in Children's Literature*), as well as numerous events and articles, DRIN is striving to raise awareness about diversity in children's picture books and the industry behind them. To give you a taste of what you can learn from the project, we will share three of its tips and conclusions about diversity and inclusion in the book sector.

From problems to solutions: what can be done?

All year round, DRIN organizes international events, including seminars, webinars, book clubs and workshops, in which hosts and participants come together to share ideas and thoughts on how the book sector could become more inclusive and diverse. Because the book industry encompasses many different



activities – writing, illustrating, publishing, marketing, etc. – the events discuss many different topics ranging from diversity and inclusion in libraries to writing about your own experiences as a BIPOC author. On the project's website, many materials such as videos and presentations of the events are made available for everyone.

For instance, you'll find a presentation on the site about diversity from a [librarian's perspective](#), listing the problems faced by libraries that can also occur in other areas of the book industry. They include stereotyping, tokenism and cultural appropriation in books that supposedly take account of diversity, unequal implementation of policy across institutions, and staffing that fails to reflect the composition of the community. Once it knows what the pitfalls are, the book sector can step in and try to eradicate such problems by ensuring more qualitative diversity in books, working towards uniform application of norm-critical thinking across all institutions, and hiring more diverse staff.

Calling out to diverse authors: a diverse literary world cannot exist without you

In 2021 the Goethe-Institut Finland published [*In Our Own Words: BIPOC Perspectives in Children's Literature*](#), an interesting and highly readable publication that gives an insight into all stages of a book's life and includes examples of good practice, questions to reflect on, lists of recommended children's books, interviews, insightful observations on diversity within the book industry and affirmations. Here is one example:

'There is a child out there for whom my art is their first mirror. I create for this child today.' Even now, too few children's books are written by People of Colour, so it's important to encourage them to make more. We are therefore including affirmations to remind such authors that a diverse literary world cannot exist without them.

Diverse families as a way to reflect reality

The DRIN website publishes articles about inclusion and diversity in the book sector. They range from critical observations on diversity in German and Finnish children's books to examinations of the diversity gap in children's literature. The articles are written by experts in the field, so they are both insightful and well informed.

[One of the articles](#) highlights the need for more diverse family structures in children's books. These might include bicultural families, single-parent families, same-sex families, families with divorced parents, or children who are being brought up by their grandparents. While other types of family do appear in children's and young adult novels, the vast majority of books still describe nuclear families, which means that many young children are not able to read about their own reality.

In short, the DRIN project aims to achieve a permanent transformation that will make the literary sector more diverse and inclusive. If you would like to find out more about its content, be sure to visit the website: <https://www.goethe.de/ins/fi/en/kul/sup/drin.html>



Cargo Confetti (Belgium)

If you look at the books on offer you'll notice immediately that diversity is still very limited. Of all the children's books published in Britain in 2019, only 5% have a protagonist from a minority ethnic group. You see the same in the play corner: dolls, colouring pencils and other toys do not always reflect society as it actually is. The small percentage of inclusive toys is moreover rather hard to find and often costs a fortune in postal charges.

Fortunately this is gradually changing, and more and more shops are popping up, online or otherwise, that offer inclusive books and toys, such as the Belgian web store Cargo Confetti. But why is inclusion so important in the play corner? Aren't children too young to understand the concept?

You're never too young to learn

Children look at books, pictures, television and toys as a reflection of reality. Play is after all often a matter of mimicry. If stereotypes are presented every day in the play corner, ideas creep unnoticed into the rest of life too. If children read books in which they see only white people working in senior roles, for example, they will think there's no place in that world for people of colour. According to Dr Njoroge, a professor at the Perelman School of Medicine (University of Pennsylvania), this makes inclusive toys and children's books ideal tools for introducing diversity to children. Integrating them into the process of playing and learning helps to break down those



stereotypes from a young age and give children an accurate picture of society.

Inclusive toys are not important just for those children who still rarely see themselves reflected in what is available. It's essential for all children to learn to see the world through the eyes of others. Parents, especially those who have the privilege of not being confronted with discrimination themselves, tend to avoid talking to their children about diversity, because they fear the subject is too difficult or highly charged, or because they haven't developed a vocabulary for dealing with it. An [American study from 2021](#) on the subject of diversity shows how important it is to talk about it with your children from an early age. They aren't blind to the differences between people, nor to the discrimination that all too often results. If you avoid having those conversations with your children, they will continue to see the differences and conflicts and perpetuate them.

It's not easy to find the right way to explain discrimination to a toddler, but that is precisely where inclusive children's books and toys can be of help. Good examples are essential if we are to teach children that everyone has an equal place in the world irrespective of skin colour, family composition, body type or religion.

[Now read more tips on how to talk to children about diversity.](#)

Cargo Confetti: A good example of inclusive toys

Cargo Confetti is a Belgian online shop that sells inclusive toys. It was set up by Zarissa Windzak, who grew up in Surinam but fell in love and followed her partner to Belgium. After she had two children, she found herself continually searching for inclusive toys. They were so hard to find that she created a meeting place for anyone looking for information and materials that would contribute to an inclusive play experience for children.

'At first I thought the web store would appeal mainly to people of colour,' she says. 'But a large proportion of my customers are white, and they not only see the point of representation in literature but want to know how they can help to create an inclusive society.'

In making a selection of toys and books to offer on Cargo Confetti, Zarissa does the quality control herself. 'For children's books I use a checklist: Do the central characters belong to an under-represented group? What is the division of roles? What kind of power relations are described? Is it an "own voices" book? Is the story free of stereotypes? Will it help to give a child a positive self-image? So I try to read the books before putting them on the website, although given the number of inclusive books that are now being published, it's getting harder and harder to read everything in time. If I'm in doubt I talk to people who share a lived experience with the characters or subjects. That enables me to make sure I'm not selling any products that my target group will find insulting or shocking.'



As well as having an online shop, Cargo Confetti presents useful links to articles and information about anti-discrimination, and interviews with authors. 'I recognize that it can be a challenging subject and that many parents aren't sure how to tackle it.

What's even more important is that they may not know what steps to take to bring up their children in such a way that they'll fight racism. I want to help them with that too. Not just because it contributes to an inclusive society, but because it reassures me that I can send my own children of colour out into the world without fear of racism or exclusion,' Zarissa says.

The web store is a receptacle filled with inclusive materials: books for young and old, dolls, coloured pencils, puzzles and heaps of other goodies.

Along with her own picture book 'Liever niet' (Rather Not), Zarissa has another favourite item to sell, her Family Memory Game. 'The characters on the cards are diverse not just in their ethnicity but in their religious convictions, body type, sexual orientation or physical abilities. In one of the pictures you see a child that's being brought up by grandparents or older foster parents. Well, that's exactly what I find so wonderful about it, showing that families can be of a different composition from the traditional image most people have in mind.'



Partner profile

Acesso Cultura (Portugal)



In this article we take a closer look at how our partner [Acesso Cultura Portugal](#) approaches diversity and inclusion within its organisation and its partnership with Every Story Matters.

Acesso Cultura has a clear vision: an inquisitive and inclusive society, in which everyone can dream, have opportunities to participate and be the best we can. The cultural association aims to increase physical, social and intellectual access to cultural participation. This is completely in line with the mission of ESM, making it a perfect match. Acesso Cultura organises training courses, public debates, seminars and an annual conference. They also carry out audits and consultation in various areas related to access.

Putting words into action

Social justice and influence are two of Acesso Cultura's core values, which is why they offer a wide variety of initiatives to promote diversity. One of these is [The Network of Theatres with Accessible Programming](#). With this pilot project they regularly present a number of performances with audiodescription and with interpretation in Portuguese Sign Language. The goal is to improve access to theatres for people with visual impairments and for deaf audiences, not only in Lisbon and Porto, but also in cultural centres across the country.



Library workshops

As part of its partnership with ESM, Acesso Cultura organises workshops for librarians and teachers in various libraries in Portugal, focusing on bibliodiversity.

Andreia Brites has been a reading mediator since 2003 and she guides these workshops. We asked her for more insight into the workshops.

How do you define bibliodiversity and what are the biggest obstacles?

Andreia: "Bibliodiversity implies that all readers recognise themselves in a set of universally accessible books. This means that, ideally, every library and bookstore in the world offers at least one book that is a mirror of every reader - assuming that all people in the world are potential readers. Ideally, it also means that each book has two relationships with its readers: for some it's a reflection of their identity and for others a discovery, a window to see the other. This only happens with true artistic and literary creation."

So, the biggest obstacles to bibliodiversity are the geographical and social asymmetries at the level of creation, publishing and distribution of books, which, in Europe or North America, do not allow for access to translations of books published in African, Central or South American and Asian countries. There is a

hegemony of the great publishing groups, all of them English-speaking, that dominate the world and limit the circulation of stories and books that was already unbalanced from the start.

Another major obstacle is that the voices of writers are not diverse and representative enough, since there are many people who do not access education under the same conditions as others and who have fewer tools to write or illustrate. At the same time, publishers are not always willing to support works that don't promise great sales.

Finally, it's important to promote the critical reading of different books, otherwise, even if they might exist, they risk being read without major changes in perspective."

Why do you say that libraries are one of the last bastions of democracy?

"Libraries are public spaces for culture, thought, contemplation, dialogue, action and silence. They are for everyone who enters, they are free of charge. There are few places like this that have so many benefits and that promote the development of all humans. Also, they actively promote citizenship, by providing information and promoting reading the word and the world. Finally, libraries have a mission to discover and to get to know their audience. When they do it well, they break down access barriers because they develop programmes thinking about those who feel that they don't belong in that place."



Was there a high demand for these workshops?

"Absolutely. Before the pandemic hit Portugal in March 2020 the workshops were sold out in several libraries, like Funchal, Almada, Torres Vedras, Pombal, Ílhavo and Rio Maior. After the pandemic it varied depending on the moment, but, even outside the scope of the project, we decided to keep this workshop in the training offer of Acesso Cultura, as there was interest from other libraries.

How do you go about structuring a workshop? How do you choose which topics are most important to talk about, since bibliodiversity is such a broad term?

"As it was an introductory workshop of only three hours we had two goals: on the one hand, we wanted to disseminate bibliodiverse picture books, adding some critical sense, so that reading mediators could later identify them independently; on the other hand, we wanted to raise awareness regarding the plurality of readings and to our condition of being "the other" in the eyes of those whom we consider "other"."

To which target groups did the participants belong? Why exactly was it important to involve and train these profiles on diversity?

"The groups were formed by reading mediators or cultural mediators. Among these were teachers, librarians and adult caregivers. For us, it was important to stimulate mediators to question reading in this perspective so that they would make access and reading itself more bibliodiverse for their own

audiences. In Portugal, illustrated books already show some bibliodiversity, although we still find many gaps. However, if we know we have the books, it makes sense to share tools that stimulate readers to change."

Did you notice much or little knowledge about this topic among the participants?

"In most cases, less than I expected. In some workshops, I was faced with many prejudices about minority communities, single-parent or same-gender parenthood and even colonialist discourses. This happened when bibliodiverse books were analysed by small groups. In addition to these more flagrant situations, weak critical and symbolic reading skills were notorious."

One source of inspiration used in the workshops is the [TedTalk](#) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Why did you choose this talk in particular?

"In her TedTalk Chimamanda exemplifies what it means to be the "other", by assuming both roles. The argumentative structure of her speech creates empathy, at first, with her condition of being discriminated against. Then, when we feel comfortably solidaric, she pulls the rug from under our feet, demonstrating that one can always hold two places, unless one frees themselves from both, through a deep process of becoming more conscious. Our intention was to provoke this discomfort and the consequent questioning in the groups."



Did you learn anything from the workshops yourself?

"Yes, of course! First of all, we always have hints of structural prejudices that manifest themselves without us being aware of them. I was surprised by interpretations that were very different from those that had made me choose the titles. From a certain point onwards, I started to use these diverse interpretations in moments of sharing, in order to demonstrate the validity and necessity of listening to different voices in order to think and grow."

Are you planning on continuing these workshops in the future? What do you think would be a good next step in promoting biodiversity?

"After evaluating the first fifteen workshops, Acesso Cultura decided to propose two new workshops, aiming to continue discussing the subject. One of them promotes a comparative reading of two picture books in order to question biodiversity themes and rehearse critical sharing with the audiences with whom the mediators work. The other follows the logic of dissemination, now with juvenile books, analysing themes, narrative styles and their relationship with formatted and crystallised contexts of social, racial, gender or religious discrimination, illness, conflict, etc."



Partner profile

BlueDar Digital Art (Germany)



In this article we take a closer look at how our German partner [BlueDar](#) approaches diversity and inclusion within its organization, and at its partnership with Every Story Matters.

BlueDar is a digital art production company that implements animation, new media, and technology in art and education. With the motto 'Education through entertainment', they transcend political borders and collaborate with diverse artists worldwide to target children and young adults in the MENA region (the Middle East and North Africa) as well as Arabic-speaking communities worldwide. The aim is to make education more creative and fun.

What They Do

BlueDar focuses on animation production, providing everything from the idea to the final product, as well as multimedia production. It offers a wide range of products such as augmented reality, virtual reality, smartphone apps, social-media art and games. BlueDar also offers creative workshops that bring together children and young adults from different cultural backgrounds. It's an innovative way of approaching global education and psychosocial support.

Digital Storytelling with Augmented Reality

Technology is an important part of children's and young adults' lives, and it's crucial for them to acquire the multimedia skills



they need to express themselves in digital storytelling.

As part of the partnership with ESM, BlueDar organized five workshops in Berlin, attended by around fifty children and young adults. The workshops combined technology with traditional narrative methods. Each student created a short story on a sheet of A4 paper, combining drawing, collage, writing and multimedia content using the augmented reality technique, and enjoyed the results through their smartphones. The workshop gave the students a basic understanding of digital narratives, storytelling and the importance of inclusion.

The Memory Box

Another project led by BlueDar is the Memory Box. These animation workshops aim to give psychosocial support to Syrian children and young adults who were forced to leave their homes because of the war. The workshops bring together children who have similar experiences and memories of war and destruction. The children in the Memory Box workshops produced various creative products, one being a comic book containing their stories and drawings. They also made a short animated movie, which consisted of the stories of children of distinct age groups. The children each chose a story from their own memory box, wrote about it, drew the characters, recorded the sound and brought it to life by turning it into an animation.

Sulafa Hejazi of BlueDar is happy to share more about BlueDar's creative approach to education, diversity and inclusion, and their experience as an ESM partner.

Why do you think creativity is such an important aspect of education and children's development?

I grew up in Syria where the education system involved a lot of propaganda. It lacked fun and creativity for children (we wore military uniforms in school), and that made me passionate about working in the field of edutainment.

Classical educational methods worldwide are often limited in how they inspire children's imaginations. Combining the educational process with creativity opens up new spaces for children, stimulates their imaginations, enhances their sense of initiative and develops their thinking skills. Learned information itself is not as important as sparking a child's cognitive curiosity. So new, modern, entertaining curricula aim at developing children's encyclopaedia of knowledge, making it not only theoretical but applicable to their lives, and increasing their social skills.

Your main focus is children from the MENA region and other warzones. Why is there a need for creative projects in these places?

Creative projects are important all over the world, especially since technological developments and the contemporary pace of life are not accompanied by simultaneous development



in schools' curricula. There is always a need to search for creative projects that are in line with modern children and their development.

But there is no doubt that children in conflict zones need special support. Psychosocial support through creative projects has a significant impact on their mental health and helps them overcome the trauma of war.

These are children born and raised in war, and their knowledge of life is limited to that perspective. It's important to help them imagine and build a peaceful world where they can live in safety in the future.

Educational facilities were severely damaged during the war and many children were prevented from going to school, which created an urgent need to find alternative creative educational methods to help these children learn.

Do you notice any recurring themes in the stories from the workshops?

The workshop focused on diversity by bringing children from different backgrounds together and helping them share their stories with each other. Many children's stories addressed diversity through the characters, culture, language and so on.

It's nice that the stories were diverse and similar at the same time. They stimulated the imaginations of children who live in the same city and belong to the same age group. But each child has their own unique characteristics that are reflected in their

story. The results ranged from stories about fictional characters or children talking about their dreams to children exploring their relationship with technology and the city they live in.

Did you notice a positive impact on the children? What is their general feedback about the workshops?

We got a lot of positive feedback from the children, and some of them would love to participate again. What caught the children's attention most was the variety of things they worked on, with technology, drawing, collage, colouring, and the use of video and audio. The workshop involves a lot of play and fun but at the same time takes the children's work and ideas seriously.



Partner profile

Mediart International (Croatia)



In this article we take a closer look at how Mediart International approaches diversity and inclusion within its organisation and its partnership with Every Story Matters.

Mediart International Association is actively involved in the field of culture, art, international cooperation, science and education. Since its foundation in 2014, it has successfully organised several international literary events; eight editions of Zagreb Book Festival and nine editions of Europea in the Backyard. Apart from this, Mediart has been organizing Little Letters. The main objective of this project is creating positive experiences with literature for children, creating readers of tomorrow and members of a more progressive society.

Zagreb Book Festival

Zagreb Book Festival (ZBF) is an annual literary and cultural event in the capital of Croatia. One of the goals is to empower all stakeholders in the literary field; from the authors themselves, through publishers and translators, to readers. In addition to the literary program, the festival has become known for its well-attended panel discussions related to current social issues and lectures by esteemed domestic and foreign intellectuals, scientists and professors. A significant part of the project is also dedicated to children's literature with the aim of including the youngest members of society in the reading community as soon as possible.



In 2021, the main focus of ZBF was diversity and inclusion. Under the name *I want your story*, ZBF tried to highlight the importance of inclusive literature and offer tools and strategies on how to implement this.

This year's edition was called *Apocalypse today: or about the relationship between nature and society*. With the motto *If not now, when? If not us, who?*, ZBF returned to tackle one of the biggest problems of today: climate change.

Both in 2021 and 2022, Every Story Matters was one of the projects hosted by the festival. The audience had the chance to talk to one of ESM's ambassadors, Moroccan-born, Flemish author Rachida Lambaret. Rachida writes about identity, migration and suffering in a world that is characterised by division. Six young artists, writers and illustrators, also presented their inclusive stories created as a part of ESM's talent development program. ESM was also in charge of a round table discussing and raising awareness about the diversity of each of us, especially through the educational system.

We asked Petra Ljevak, festival director of Zagreb Book Festival, and Valentin Kikić, PR and marketing manager, for more insight into the workings of the organisation and the latest edition of the festival.

Is diversity a hot topic in Croatia?

"Unfortunately not, or at least not as hot as in many other European countries. Croatian society is ethnically and culturally a very homogeneous one, so many aspects of diversity do not seem to enter the frontiers of social interest. Gender equality and sexual orientation are discussed more often, whereas ethnic and cultural diversity tend to be highlighted less. In new Croatian literature, however, diversity is showing up more frequently. This trend has become more dominant in the past couple of years, both in Croatian literature and translations. Again, sexual orientation is a dominant aspect of diversity in these books."

Why did you find it important to make diversity the central theme in 2021?

"Literature exposes stereotypes and helps us identify with others. It creates a space where we don't feel threatened and where we can replace stereotypes with literary heroes. Literature can reshape our understanding of ourselves and the world, thereby changing our social behavior and self-awareness. Literature frames our human experience and historical events and makes us more empathetic and open to new experiences. This view on literature is ingrained in all of our programs. Because of our partnership with Every Story Matters, it felt only natural to make



this premise our central focus in 2021. Zagreb Book Festival 2021 edition was the first literary festival focused specifically on diversity: its meaning, its necessity and its future."

What was it like to organise ZBF and what were the obstacles?

"The biggest challenge when organizing a book festival, especially one that puts literature in the context of current social questions, is finding a balance between arousing the interest of the audience and talking about complex issues. We try to achieve this balance by carefully selecting our participants. We make sure our guests have already earned the audience's trust by their public activity and work. We always pay special attention to the central theme of the festival: its social relevance, importance and appeal to literary audience. Since a lot of aspects of diversity are not reflected in Croatian society, it was at times overwhelming to tackle the theme and create interest for it. But this is also why the final results were even more rewarding."

Which projects of the festival have been most successful?

"Panel discussions have become a unique attribute to our festival and it is what we are mostly known for. It's characterized by a kind of multidisciplinary approach where participants come from different fields, like literature, science and non-fiction."

What have you learned during ZBF from the roundtables of talks?

"Every year, with every round table, we learn something new. One thing we learned and that is a constant is that a deeper

understanding of the world comes from listening to opposing and diverse perspectives."

How has the audience grown or changed since the first edition of ZBF?

"The most drastic change can be attributed to the pandemic. Everyone was forced to move online and it seems that not the entire audience came back to physical events after the measures were cut. Unfortunately, this probably isn't the only reason for the change. The internet drives demand to more obscure niche offerings and we can see the same happening in the book world. The audience for books is there, but it's very divided, with many specific interests and tastes and therefore very difficult to reach in greater numbers. Zagreb Book Festival's audience, though still rather stable, is changing and we will have to change some aspects of the festival accordingly."

What are the plans for future editions?

"We live in challenging times and some aspects of the festival will have to change. We plan to keep the basic concept and focus our program on quality, diversity and actuality."



Partner profile

ROSE stories (the Netherlands)



In this article we take a closer look at how our Dutch partner [ROSE stories](#) approaches diversity and inclusion within its organisation and its partnership with Every Story Matters.

ROSE stories is a Dutch collective of storytellers, producers and talent developers with an eye for talent and a soft spot for innovative stories that have rarely been told. The collective has a clear mission statement: to make the voices and faces in which we are reflected daily even more diverse. This makes the story collective a perfect match for an Every Story Matters partnership. ROSE stories is always on the lookout for storytellers to collaborate with, in order to create stories that enable dialogue in books, on stage, in films and in podcasts.

Helping authors explore their talent: ROSE Academy

ROSE Stories believes that talent is not reserved for the happy few, but the opportunity to do something with that talent often is. To change this they have created several [ROSE Academies](#). One of them is the [Children's Stories Academy](#). The aim of this four-month programme is to create a more inclusive range of children's books. The participants are guided by renowned children's book authors and when they have finished they are given the opportunity to pitch their work to an audience of professionals.

One of the books to come out of the programme is 'Idje Doesn't Want a Haircut'. The story introduces a new superhero. Idje is



seven years old and his lush afro hair comes to life, giving him superpowers and challenging him to use them to do good. The story was so well received that it's being made into a movie by [Lemming Films](#).

Making inclusive children's books mainstream

In partnership with Every Story Matters, ROSE Stories has taken its Children's Stories Academy to a European level. The talent development programme is intended for six emerging authors and illustrators from our partner countries and offers them coaching to help them create their first inclusive children's book. Each participant is paired with a mentor and afterwards the stories will be presented in schools and libraries at the Zagreb Book Festival 2022, as well as to publishers at the Frankfurt Book Fair.

Rozemarijn of ROSE Stories is happy to say more about the ROSE Academies and their experience as partners in the ESM project.

Storytelling is a very broad concept. How do you deal with that?

'An important starting point is that the story should come from the person themselves. We prefer the story to be told by the target group, so not about them but by them. We are continually looking for a kind of individuality and unity between the story and the author, for innovative stories with new outlooks.'

Is inclusion a much-discussed subject in the literary sector in the Netherlands?

'Definitely. In the Dutch literary sector there is more and more talk of inclusion, and you'll also notice that it's increasingly a matter of concern to even the larger publishing houses. An encouraging development.'

There was a great need for inclusive children's books in the Netherlands. Many children didn't recognize themselves in the stories around them as they were growing up. We had hardly any children's books with a person of colour in the leading role.'

What kind of guidance do you give to authors and illustrators? What do you focus on when deciding what to offer?

'Everyone is coached by a person from the book trade and



together they set out to create a unique story, concentrating on the development and the way diversity is woven into it, implicitly or explicitly. Beforehand, participants are given three master-classes, one of which is training on unconscious bias, one a masterclass about the book trade and one about marketing. Marketing is an important aspect of making a book. Ultimately we want our titles to be commercially successful, so that the stories can be distributed as widely as possible.'

Was it the first time that you were able to operate at a European level with your talent development programme? What was that like?

'Working with Every Story Matters was the first time our talent development programme had been organised internationally. It was an enormously enjoyable and instructive experience. Its value lay above all in getting to know talents and coaches from all over Europe, exchanging ideas and learning about inclusion.'

Diversity can be about so many different things and the concept can differ markedly from one country to another. It's hugely important to embrace diversity in every sense of the word.



Additional resources

European Accessibility Act: A Rule Changer Treaty

The European Accessibility Act was approved by the European Parliament in March 2019. It aims to increase the availability of products and services that are accessible to people with disabilities. The full legislative text is available [on this European website](#), but we'll summarize them by asking five questions.

Why is accessibility important for the publishing industry?

Since eBooks are considered a service, those active in **the publishing industry** need to make sure they produce their digital publications in accessible formats. This involves considering the entire supply chain (retailers, e-commerce sites, hardware and software solutions, online platforms etc.). All products and services placed on the European market after June 2025 need to comply with the new accessibility standards. For more details you can visit this article:

- <https://inclusivepublishing.org/blog/what-does-the-european-accessibility-act-mean-for-global-publishing/>

What disabilities does the Act cover?

In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the Act considers as persons with disabilities all those who have 'long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which **in interaction** with various barriers may impede their full and equal participation in society'. So disabilities are not defined purely by each person's



individual conditions but by their interaction with their social environment, which may ease or obstruct active participation in society. The European Accessibility Act aims to encourage book-trade professionals to work together to **reduce such barriers and facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities.**

What are the benefits?

The Act aims to benefit all those who struggle to **access information, products and services** because of their disabilities. Businesses will also benefit because it sets **common rules** on accessibility in the EU, which points to a **cost reduction** (different companies will not need to adapt their materials to each European country's legislation). The Act will also provide more marketing opportunities as it makes **cross-border trading** easier.

What does 'accessible format and services' mean?

Essentially it means that the information, instructions, interface design and any digital communication should be made available via more than one sensory channel, in an understandable way, presented using adequate fonts and font sizes, and with adjustable spacing. For more details you can visit the Appendix of the main text:

→ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32019L0882&from=EN#d1e32-100-1>

Changing perspectives and practices means a long journey

This is a big (and necessary) challenge for any market, and the publishing industry is no exception. Fundazione Lia is an Italian non-profit organization that promotes accessibility in the publishing field and offers various online resources, including an accessibility check, online training and manuals. For example, in this link the foundation provides digital 'tools for born accessible publishing':

→ <https://www.fondazionelia.org/en/resources/tools-for-born-accessible-publishing/>



Additional resources

Accessibility of European book fairs: conclusions and recommendations

The [European Accessibility Act](#) is aimed at increasing the accessibility of products and services for people with disabilities and the elderly. Recently, Fondazione LIA, a non-profit organization that promotes a culture of accessibility in the publishing field, published an article on the [accessibility of European book fairs](#).

It was based on the results of a survey coordinated by the Book Studies Department of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and in collaboration with the Research Department of the Italian Publishers Association. In the survey, seventeen book fairs, among them the Bologna Children's Book Fair, the Vienna International Book Fair and the Madrid Book Fair, were asked about four areas of interest: awareness, physical accessibility, digital communication channels, and initiatives intended to improve accessibility both for the general public and for professionals. But what are conclusions without recommendations? Let's find out what book fairs can do better, according to the results of the survey.

Awareness

Learn more about the accessibility of your own fair

One way in which book fairs can become more aware of how accessible their own events are is by consulting third parties about their successes and shortcomings. According to the survey, most book fairs already have established partnerships with organizations representing people with disabilities. However, only two book fairs have taken the opportunity to ask their visitors, with or without disabilities, about the level of



accessibility. It is therefore recommended that book fairs ask visitors or accessibility experts for feedback on their events. In which areas does the fair already score well? What are some of the things that could be improved?

Implement the Universal Design approach

This approach involves the design of products, environments, programmes and services that can be used by everyone without the need for adaptation. About half of the book fairs that completed the survey make use of it. So there are plenty of fairs that could still benefit from implementing the [Universal Design approach](#).

Physical accessibility

Make someone responsible for everything related to accessibility

The survey shows that all book fairs provide barrier-free entrances, halls, corridors, toilets and ticket booths. A majority of book fairs also offer reserved parking slots for people with disabilities, as well as reduced rates or free tickets. These are just a few of the ways of making a book fair accessible. If you want to make sure that everything runs smoothly, it is advisable to appoint a person who is responsible for all the various aspects.

Provide different kinds of signage

Many book fairs have taken steps to make their events as comfortable as possible for everyone, and this includes how people find their way around. More specifically, most book fairs make use of visual and audio signage, but only one fair provides

tactile signage, so clearly there is room for improvement in this respect.

Offer adequate assistance during events

According to the survey, half of all book fairs have assistance available for people with disabilities. Three offer special guided tours, while only two provide sign language during events. To improve matters, book fairs could offer professional training for their employees and sign-language interpretation services.

Digital communication channels

Inform yourself about digital accessibility

This part of the survey is aimed at understanding how book fairs communicate digitally with their visitors. The results show that many struggle with this aspect because they lack a good understanding of what digital accessibility means with regard to publications, websites, social media, videos etc. In order to optimize digital communication channels, it is therefore recommended that fairs first get a grip on digital accessibility. Here you can find a few [tips on how to make a website more accessible](#).

Provide subtitles and captions for all videos

There is a difference between subtitles and captions. Subtitles are used to help people watch a video in a language they don't understand, whereas captions are designed for people who can't hear the audio. While some fairs already provide these services and others are working on them, it's important that all book fairs offer both subtitles and captions for all videos,



especially bearing in mind the current surge in online events and conferences.

Accessibility as a topic during events

Promote accessibility in all areas of the book market by making it a topic of discussion during your events

The survey showed that only four of the participating book fairs have organized events and online seminars about accessibility for professional audiences. During these events, the main topic discussed was the European Accessibility Act and its implications for the publishing industry. Similarly, only four fairs have organized events about accessibility for the general public. It would be better if more fairs used their events to promote and communicate matters relating to accessibility, thereby contributing to the improvement of accessibility in the book sector as a whole.

In a broad sense, the survey revealed that, while most European book fairs are taking action to make their events as accessible as possible, there is still room for improvement. Fondazione LIA's report sheds light on what still needs to be done to make more book fairs fully accessible.



Additional resources

Marrakesh Treaty: Accessible Books for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled



Photo: WIPO

On June 27, 2013, members of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) signed the **Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled** (MVT). It's intended to create a set of mandatory limitations and exceptions to copyright rules for the benefit of all those affected by disabilities that interfere with the reading of printed material.

The treaty came into force on 30 September 2016. It requires all signatory countries to:

- Permit the reproduction, distribution and making available of published works in formats designed to be accessible to the people the treaty is intended to benefit.
- Allow the exchange of such works across borders by organizations that serve those beneficiaries.

Why is the Marrakesh Treaty important?

- 253 million people worldwide are visually impaired (source: World Health Organization, 2018).
- The World Health Organization estimates that less than 10% of all published materials can be read by blind or visually impaired people.
- The lack of accessible books is a real barrier to education and independent living.



Millions of people around the world have no access to published information, especially in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Books made in accessible formats, usually by libraries and organizations for the visually impaired, couldn't be shared across national borders before the treaty, because national copyright laws didn't allow them to be distributed internationally. Copyright law has historically been a barrier to access to reading material for print-disabled people. **The Marrakesh Treaty is a great achievement by thousands of visually impaired people, librarians and NGOs, who have worked for over a decade to achieve a legally binding international treaty.**

VIDEO: Stevie Wonder talking about the importance of the Marrakesh Treaty. The text of the treaty can be downloaded at https://www.wipo.int/marrakesh_treaty/en/

Putting the Marrakesh Treaty into action: Accessible Books Consortium (ABC)

The Accessible Books Consortium (ABC) is a public-private partnership led by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). It aims to make the Marrakesh VIP Treaty effective at an operational level. The ultimate goal is to increase the number of books produced worldwide in accessible formats – such as braille, audio, e-text or large print – and to make them available to people who are blind, have impaired vision or are otherwise print disabled. The ABC consortium offers a wide range of services:

ABC Global Book Service: provides an online catalogue that allows libraries and organizations for the blind to search and

make requests for accessible digital books free of charge.

Accessible publishing: promotes the production of 'born accessible' works by publishers, meaning books that are usable immediately on publication by both sighted people and those who are print disabled. We provide guidelines on how to produce 'born accessible' works and present an annual award for outstanding achievements in the field of accessible publishing.

Capacity building: ABC provides training and technical assistance in the production and distribution of books in accessible formats. It also provides funding for the production of accessible educational materials in national languages at primary, secondary and university levels.

Want to read more?

Here's a list of additional sources:

- WIPO/Marrakesh Treaty: https://www.wipo.int/marrakesh_treaty/en/
- Summary of the Marrakesh Treaty: https://www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/marrakesh/summary_marrakesh.html
- Main Provisions and Benefits of the Marrakesh Treaty in different languages: <https://www.wipo.int/publications/en/details.jsp?id=4047>
- ABC Accessible Books Consortium: <https://www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org/portal/en/index.html>



- ABC Global book service: <https://www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org/globalbooks/en/>
- ABC's accessible publishing resources: <https://www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org/publishing/en/>
- Online sources of accessible books, organized by country (from both libraries and commercial providers):
<https://www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org/sources/en/>
- World Blind Union's list of useful links to other organizations and services that may be helpful resources for people who are blind or partially sighted: <https://worldblindunion.org/fr-resources-useful-links/useful-links/>
- Euro Blind Q&A about the Marrakesh Treaty, its importance and the discussion process behind it: <http://www.euroblind.org/newsletter/2017/july-september/en/questions-and-answers-marrakesh-treaty>

Here is the list of contracting parties:

Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belize, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Canada, Central African Republic, Chile, Comoros, Cook Islands, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, European Union (EU), Ghana, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Kiribati, Kyrgyzstan, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Mexico, Mongolia, Morocco, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Norway, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, San Marino, Sao Tome and Principe, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United Republic of Tanzania, United States of America, Uruguay, Vanuatu, Venezuela, Zimbabwe



Additional resources

Everything you need to know about sign language (in a nutshell)

You're probably no stranger to sign language. Your first contact with it was no doubt through a screen, when you saw an interpreter in the bottom right-hand corner fervently transposing spoken language into signs. But there's much more to it than that. We are by no means sign-language experts, but like you we're eager to learn. We've therefore listed some facts and figures, as well as learning resources you can access and consult to introduce you to everything you need to know about sign language.

1. Different languages, different signs

Just like spoken language, sign language is highly variable. It exists in many closely related forms – comparable to the differences between American and British English, Peninsular and Latin American Spanish, or Dutch and Flemish – and research has shown that even within a single linguistic region, variation is fairly common. Each country – or linguistic region in countries where there is more than one official language – has a standardized variety of its own. Most national deaf and/or sign language associations are listed on the website of the [European Union of the Deaf](http://www.eud.be).

2. Is there such a thing as a sign 'lingua franca'?

According to the European Union of the Deaf (EUD), attempts to create an international sign language date back to 1924. Over the past few decades, the growth in travel by deaf people



and their inclusion in all kinds of international conferences has further increased the need for a lingua franca. International Signs (IS) serves as an auxiliary sign language where meaning has to be negotiated between signers. They communicate using a set of mixed signs, with elements from their own national sign languages combined with iconic signs that can be understood by a large audience. Want to know more? Then take a look at [this explanatory video](#) put together by the European Union of the Deaf.

3. Deaf readers and booklovers

Readers with listening disabilities can often be overlooked. If possible, try to meet their needs by providing a sign-language interpreter for your literary event or programme. Make that information known in advance to your target audience, so that you reach as many lovers of literature as possible. Looking for information focused on specific language regions or countries? Check out these organizations that can further introduce you to specific sign languages:

Although Belgium is officially trilingual, the German-speaking community does not have its own officially recognized sign language. Within Flanders, Flemish Sign Language is considered the standard. You can consult an [online dictionary](#). French-speaking Belgium has [a different sign language](#), with its own online dictionary and grammar exercises.

- For Dutch sign language, you can visit the [Nederlands Gebarencentrum](#).
- Britain's [Deaf Unity](#) offers information about British Sign Language (BSL), about American Sign Language (ASL) and about International Sign Language.
- Information about German Sign Language can be found on the website of the [German Deaf Association](#).
- You can find more information online about [Slovenian Sign Language](#) and [sign language in Croatian](#).
- Within France, the [Fédération National des Sourdes](#) offers information on sign language and numerous resources.
- Portugal's [Deaf Association \(APSurdos\)](#) provides information about Portuguese sign language and courses.



Additional resources

9 tips for eternal learning

What could be more exciting than eternal reading and eternal learning? Here are nine tips for further training in inclusion and diversity.

1. EU platform of Diversity Charters

There are many national diversity charters that focus on diversifying the workforce. The European Commission has brought them all together on the [EU Platform of Diversity Charters](#), where you can find various examples of good practice in the fields of diversity and inclusivity.

2. Diversity and inclusion in your organization

The Dutch organization [Code Di](#) has developed a [Diversity & Inclusion Code](#). It is aimed at those working in the cultural and creative sector, and it consists of five principles for effectively shaping and promoting diversity and inclusivity in your organization and in your work.

3. Unconscious bias training

Prejudices are often passed on unconsciously. Unconscious bias training aims at making recruiters more aware of their preconceived notions. LinkedIn, for example, offers an [online course](#) (for a fee, but free to Premium members). On the website of Harvard University you can take a free [Implicit Association Test](#).

4. Disability equality training

[Shape Arts](#) is an organization run for and by people with disabilities, aiming to make it easier for them to gain access to culture.



Among other things, it organizes training for cultural institutions, such as its [Disability Equality Training](#), and invites organizations to lend an ear to experts during an [Access Audit](#). By becoming more confident about working and interacting with disabled people, you can ensure they have a better experience of your event or in your organization.

5. Accessible employment guide

Want to learn more about accessibility in the workplace? Then take a look at the [Accessible Employment Guide](#) put out by Attitude is Everything. It focuses on working with the deaf and hard of hearing, but it can be an eye-opener for everyone. The guide asks specific questions and presents concrete answers: Do team members have control over the environment in which they work? Can they be proud of their organization? It combines examples of good practice with testimony from people with disabilities who describe their experiences of working and how their own company or organization addresses their needs. Want to go a step further? Then take a look at the [Disability Confident Employment Toolkit](#).

6. Inclusive language

Using language correctly is one of the easiest ways of ensuring that everyone feels safe and involved. The University of Manchester has written a [guide](#) in which you can find advice (in English) to help you use the right words for talking about functional disabilities, mental health, age, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation. This is an English-language guide, but they exist in many other languages. In Flanders the non-profit

organization Wel Jong Niet Hetero [gives advice on the correct use of gender-neutral pronouns](#) in Dutch. Similar organizations are active in other languages and other countries. Know of one that you can recommend? Please do share it in the comments below.

7. Safe spaces

Do you work in a diverse team? Then it's crucial to create a safe workplace. You can find inspiration in the crash course Safeguarding offered by the [Aga Khan Foundation](#). In short videos (adding up to around fifty-five minutes) you'll discover for example how you can quickly familiarize new colleagues with your company and its values.

8. Accessible websites

How could you make your website more accessible? Leaf through the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#). Want to know more? Then read our five tips on the subject.

9. Inclusive events

The [European Heritage Days Inclusive Events Toolbox](#) gives concrete tips and examples for making your events and activities as accessible as possible, from choosing the perfect location to working with volunteers and drawing up a budget. The toolbox is the result of a research project from 2019-2020 that was supported by the European Council and the European Commission.