

# Picture this – exploring diversity in children’s publishing

## 1. Summary of impact

Picture books feature in most Australian’s childhoods. Although there are some individual exceptions, the genre as a whole fails to reflect the range of identities and different ways that people choose live in modern-day Australia, according to analysis of 2018 book titles conducted with funding from a Social Impact Grant.

“Animals appear in Australian picture books at over four times the rate that people from diverse backgrounds do,” says UTS doctoral candidate and project co-lead, Emily Booth.

It’s a disparity that can’t be explained by relatability alone, according to Emily, who – together with volunteer-run, not-for-profit Voices from the Intersection – collected and analysed data on picture books published in 2018 to explore diversity (or its lack) in Australian children’s literature.

“Characters who could not be identified as Indigenous, People of Colour, people with disability, or LGBT occur over three times as often as protagonists from marginalised communities.”

The lack of diversity can be an alienating experience for too many small children, says Emily.

“The underlying message is: you don’t belong on the page.”

The data will be used by Voices from the Intersection to support its ongoing campaign to increase diversity in Australian children's publishing.

## 2. The problem

Voices from the Intersection suspected that there was an imbalance in terms of the number of children's books by and about people from diverse backgrounds – including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, People of Colour, people with disability, and those who are LGBTIQ+.

They were also concerned that marginalised groups were not being represented by authors or illustrators from within these communities.

While they had stats to prove this was the case for young adult fiction – Emily had already undertaken research in this area – they lacked hard data to support their campaign to increase diversity in Australian picture books.

## 3. Beneficiaries

Community not-for-profit Voices from the Intersection gained a dataset to help them in their campaign, but children – whatever their background – are the ultimate beneficiaries of Emily's work.

"Picture books help you learn how to read but also how to understand stories. They are a kind of template on how to be a child, how to exist," she explains. "If they exclude people from diverse communities, then there are also kids potentially sitting there thinking no-one in this book looks like me, no-one in this book speaks like me, no-one has the same sort of life as me."

Authors and illustrators wanting to write about experiences that don't fit into mainstream stories about Australian life, could also be boosted by Voices from the Intersections work, which seeks to open up publishing houses to more diverse content.

#### 4. Approach to impact

For the project, Emily scrutinised bibliographic services, as well as other publicly-available content to determine not only the kind of titles making it to publication but also whether that content was written and/or illustrated by people from diverse backgrounds. She was able to build on work she's undertaken into diversity in young adult fiction. She also worked closely with her community partners, Rebecca Lim and Dr Ambelin Kwaymullina from Voices from the Intersection, to work out parameters for classification.

#### 5. What has changed as a result of this work?

##### 5.1 The outcomes

The project has produced a data set that will be used by Voices from the Intersection to support the need for the Australian publishing industry to incorporate more diversity into its publishing lists.

##### 5.2 Impact

For Emily, the project is ultimately about fairness, not just for children but for society.

"A lack of diversity in children's books is detrimental for all children. If you're from a marginalised community, you almost never see yourself truly represented. At the same time, all children are being deprived of exciting stories that explore other experiences, other ways of understanding our world," she says.

However, one of the project's biggest impacts is perhaps as much about art as social justice.

"Increasing diversity is actually about making art more valuable, about making it more entertaining, more engaging," Emily says.

"If you write a disabled character and you don't have that experience yourself it's less likely to be authentic. We avoid narrative clichés, clichés with metaphor, but we also

need to be aware about clichés of identity – about avoiding stereotypes. Diversity and quality aren't different things.”

## 6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

Emily is a big fan of Rebecca Lim and Dr Ambelin Kwaymullina – the authors of young adult fiction who run Voices from the Intersection on a purely volunteer basis. The opportunity to work with her heroes to get hard data on what picture books were put into print by Australian publishers in 2018 was one that she grabbed with both hands.

“I was drawn to the Social Impact Grant because I strongly believe in research that promotes equity and visible, sustainable change outside the university. I think its value is in its encouragement of these partnerships with local community organisations – this project demonstrates that such partnerships can produce findings that are highly original, practical and beneficial.”

At a practical level, the grant made things possible financially.

“As Voices from the Intersection are volunteer-run, they could not have funded this research themselves. The grant was a rare and invaluable opportunity for everyone involved,” Emily says.

Emily was also able to adapt data analysis methodology for the project that she had previously developed as part of her research into diversity in Australian young adult fiction.

## 7. Challenges

As a full-time PhD student, the time consuming nature of the data collection process was a challenge for Emily. However, the funding she received enabled her to take leave from her casual job, a factor that was vital to the successful completion of the analysis.

**\*Emily Booth is not a spokesperson for Voices from the Intersection. Her comments reflect her personal interpretations of the project findings.**