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# Combinations to Reflect All Nations: Economic and Symbolic Capital in Diverse Children's Fiction

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## **Abstract**

As Children's Laureate 2013-2015, Malorie Blackman raised awareness of the lack of racial diversity in children's fiction. Underrepresentation of ethnic minorities within fiction and in the publishing industry's infrastructure is a severe problem in the children's book world, as proved by research on the last 15 years of publishing and current bestseller charts. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of economic and symbolic capital is important when considering how diversity is highlighted in the contemporary literary field, but his polarisation of the different capitals as motivation for creating art is reductive. Storytelling is about combining voices and experiences, and publishers can, and should, combine economic and symbolic motivation when publishing diverse fiction for children. Publishing a book because it will be successful economically and because it is the 'right' thing to do are not mutually exclusive; in publishing diverse children's fiction, both can and should serve as inspiration.

## **Key Words**

Children's Laureate; children's fiction; diversity; symbolic capital; economic capital; paratext

## **Introduction**

'There were always too many people ready to set my limits for me,' said author Malorie Blackman, OBE, of her childhood (Coats 2014, 6). Feeling confined to predetermined paths based on her race, she was told when considering jobs that, simply, 'black people become secretaries' (*The Telegraph*, April 4 2014). Blackman broke through these limits, becoming a bestselling children's author and pushing past further constraints from adults who told her, when starting her career, that white children would not want to read about black

characters. However, Blackman's books exist in a realm of children's fiction where there are still limits regarding the kinds of books that are published and the different types of capital perceived to be invested in them. Storytelling's power comes from pushing limits and moving beyond what we believe to be true or possible, while simultaneously teaching us about ourselves and the world we do live in. This duality between fantasy and fact is especially important in children's fiction, which shapes the way young people see the world and themselves. Blackman's life shows how breaking limits is rewarding; similarly, expanding limits on children's fiction to make it more representative, and developing and combining the kind of capitals invested in diverse children's books, is also morally, economically and symbolically rewarding.

One way Blackman broke free from 'challenges and opposition from some editors, booksellers and librarians' (Coats 2014, 7) reluctant to support her books due to their focus on race, was when she took on 'the most inspiring post in children's literature' (Blake 2019). As Children's Laureate from 2013-2015, Blackman focussed during her tenure on emphasising the importance of diversity. She described as a child "'never once read[ing] a book that featured a black child [despite being a prolific reader]'", which left her feeling "totally invisible" (*The Telegraph*, June 4 2013). To combat this as laureate, Blackman established the annual Young Adult (YA) Literature Convention; edited an inclusive YA anthology of short stories covering disability and LGBTQ+ themes; supported libraries and was consistently vocal about racial representation, to try and increase accessibility to representative fiction for marginalised children.

Laureates are traditionally revered and praised; Children's Laureates are similarly respected in the literary field, deemed 'the perfect ambassadors for children's literature' (Walker Books 2019). However, despite having supposedly perfect ambassadors, who have often tried to improve the diversity situation, British children are still underrepresented in fiction. In July 2018, the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) published a report analysing ethnic representation in children's literature. It statistically confirmed a monoculture in children's publishing, often anecdotally acknowledged by writers including

Blackman ('white adults sometimes think that if a black child's on the [book] cover it is perhaps not for [their children]' [*The Telegraph*, June 4 2013]). The report showed that only 4 percent of children's books published in 2017 included black, Asian or other ethnic minority (BAME) characters, and only 1 percent featured a BAME protagonist, despite 32 percent of pupils of compulsory school age in England at that time having minority ethnic origins (CLPE 2018, 5). Publishers need to take note of voices such as Blackman's and this shocking statistical evidence and ensure that books published today are not limiting and instead value multiplicity: that they tell stories of children from a range of cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Not only would this enable more children to see themselves reflected in literature, which has essential moral value, but from a more cynical perspective, by publishing books which only a limited market can relate to, publishers miss out on vast audiences and therefore revenue. Publishers must combine stories from a global range of cultures in order to break free from a limiting canon of white-centred fiction.

### **Capitals, and the Importance of Publishers Combining Them**

Stories consist of combinations of voices, characters and experiences; the market of child readers is a combination of children from different backgrounds; and in order for 'reading and reflection [to] multiply [readers'] experience' (Gibbon qtd. in McMaster 2013, 45), publishers must invest a combination of capitals in diverse children's fiction (children who *are* currently well-represented in fiction need to read and learn about underrepresented characters, too). Economic capital (financial value a book can accumulate) and symbolic capital (cultural prestige and reputation) underpin publishing activity; Pierre Bourdieu argues 'the structure of the publishing field is shaped *above all* by the differential distribution' (1996, 9, emphasis mine) of these capitals. He consistently contrasts the two capitals as inspiration for cultural production, arguing art is either produced for economic gain, or (more worthily) simply for art's sake – and that 'it is these forms of capital that are particularly important in determining [a publisher's] competitive position' (1996, 9). The rise of conglomerate publishers has seen companies' competitive positions altered as corporate giants contrast more dramatically with smaller independent houses. While John Thompson

points to trade publishing's polarisation between conglomerates and independent publishers, arguing 'the large corporations become the dominant players' (2010, 187), regarding diversity in children's fiction, smaller houses are beginning to thrive.

The independent publisher Knights Of (KO) was established in October 2017. Founded by Aimee Féloné and David Stevens (who both previously worked at Scholastic, so had experience accruing economic and symbolic capital at a larger publisher), KO is explicit in its focus on publishing commercial and inclusive children's books, featuring children of ethnic minority races or with disabilities. Although small, with significantly less economic capital than their conglomerate competitors, KO's deliberate effort to increase diversity and representation in children's fiction has gained them significant symbolic capital. Stevens and Féloné were named Bookseller Rising Stars 2018, endowing KO with prestige, and Féloné was a featured speaker at London Book Fair 2019's 'How to Get Ahead in Publishing' seminar. KO's increasing symbolic capital is also reflected in their acquisitions: one of their novelists, Jason Reynolds, was previously a National Book Awards finalist, demonstrating that authors (and indeed literary agents) do not always sign with the largest, most economically powerful publishers. Symbolic capital is clearly a key inspiration of KO's activity. However, as a business they are, of course, also striving to increase their economic capital, shown by their successful mission over Christmas 2018 to crowdfund £30,000 to found an inclusive children's bookshop. Establishing a bookshop cannot be contained by either economic or symbolic motivation; KO's ethos as a small independent publisher is to genuinely make a difference regarding diversity in children's fiction, and founding a bookshop will help marginalised children find themselves in fiction – but will also bring in profit for KO. There are indeed 'practices and motivations too varied to be accommodated by a rigid, dualist division between art for the sake of art and art for the sake of money' (Zimmler 2009, 617); KO's activity demonstrates that Bourdieu's strict division is not always illuminating.

A further example of a positive development in diversity of children's fiction, and publishers' ability to combine capitals, is American author Angie Thomas' YA novel *The Hate*

*U Give (THUG)*. Published in Britain by Walker Books in February 2017, *THUG* covers racist police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement. Its culturally powerful content combined with phenomenally successful sales illustrate significant symbolic and economic capital.

Thomas was originally 'far from convinced that she would find a publisher,' due to issues also highlighted by Blackman: agents 'were telling [Thomas] that books with black kids on the cover don't sell' (Noble 2018). However, two years after a 13-way publishers' auction, *THUG* has sold over 850,000 copies and spent over two years on the *New York Times (NYT)* Bestseller list (Kantor 2018) – with a 'black kid' on the cover. As well as economic capital from book sales (and a successful film adaptation), the book's reception demonstrates its accumulated symbolic prestige: it won the 2018 Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals Amnesty Award, and 'many are calling it the defining book of a generation' (Noble 2018). Walker Books can count themselves among 'those who know how to reckon and deal with the 'economic' constraints inscribed in this denied economy...able fully to reap symbolic and even 'economic' profits on their symbolic investments' (Bourdieu 1996, 149). Walker's investment into *THUG*'s symbolic value, with its political and social justice themes, reaps rewards with further prestige bestowed by awards, and successful conversion into economic capital accrued by book sales. Combination of symbolic and economic capital is acknowledged by Bourdieu: 'the accumulation of symbolic capital... [is] a veritable credit, and capable of assuring, under certain conditions and in the long term, 'economic' profits' (1996, 142). However, his qualification that this effect occurs in the long term is not always true: Thomas' second novel, *On The Come Up*, has automatic symbolic capital due to Thomas' now established and influential author brand, and on publication in March 2019 instantly became number one in the *NYT* bestseller chart (The New York Times 2019).

However, whilst combinations of symbolic and economic capital are powerful and frequent, it is not true that one type always leads to the other; they are not always caught up in the process of 'intraconversion' that James English acknowledges (2002, 126). James

Daunt, Waterstones' managing director, suggests that while *THUG* was initially sold and marketed as a YA book, 'there is no upper [age] limit to being stunned by beautiful writing of this visceral power' (Eyre 2018). *THUG* is primarily associated with the YA market but supposedly has cultural power and appeal across readerships (*THUG* features on adult fiction display tables in bookshops with a different cover design) – but while the writing may transcend age groups, this is not mirrored by transcendent symbolic or economic capital. *THUG* has not been nominated for any adult prizes (which would give the book symbolic capital in the adult arena) and its position as bestseller has always been within children's/YA charts (demonstrating lack of economic capital in the adult market). Despite Daunt's statement that Thomas' writing has potential to stun readers of varied ages, this is not reflected in the economic or cultural capital gained overall by the book.

### **Peritext Emphasising Symbolic and Economic Values**

Discussing books that could achieve both strong sales and symbolic capital, Thompson suggests 'all too often the criteria diverge' (2010, 10), but *THUG* is, overall, an important counter-example of this. In the children's market it enjoys economic and cultural success, and in addition to a book's content and reception, its peritext (the physical product and its important markers) demonstrate how both economic and cultural motivations were behind many of Walker Books' production decisions. Considering *THUG*'s peritext can also illuminate if and how diversity is prevalent in children's publishing.

Peritextual elements often have dual purposes: achieving publicity strategies (with the goal of accruing economic capital) and emphasising the content's importance (hoping to increase symbolic value). In terms of emphasising predominantly symbolic content, *THUG*'s cover and preface are the most important. Multiple editions have been published, but the [initial English](#) and [American](#) covers, as well as the [film tie-in edition](#), feature a black teenage girl. This is paramount to the book's cultural relevance, as Thomas discussed the rarity of seeing children's books with black characters on the cover – as, of course, did Blackman. Peritexts can convey multiple discourses; a prominent discourse from *THUG*'s cover is that this is a culturally potent novel, centred on characters who are too often marginalised.

Further cultural importance comes from peritext at the beginning of the book in a letter from Thomas to readers. This acts as a preface, which Gerard Genette argues 'has as its chief function *to ensure that the text is read properly*' (1997, 197, emphasis in original). Thomas tells readers, using direct address, about the importance of activism: 'Art is activism. Writing is activism. Find your activism and don't let anyone tell you what that should look like' (Thomas 2017, i). 'Authors often have a fairly specific idea of the kind of reader they want, or the kind they know they can reach' (Genette 197, 212) – it is evident that Thomas wants to reach passionate young people, dedicated to making a difference. Thomas also writes that 'When you make your voice heard, we're gonna be even louder on your behalf. We've got you. I promise we do' (2017, i), showing exactly how the preface can be 'no longer precisely a matter of attracting the reader [as they are already holding the book]...but of hanging onto [them] with a typically rhetorical apparatus of persuasion' (Genette 1997, 198), as Thomas makes the reader feel she truly cares about them. The preface can give an author's 'statement of intent' (Genette 1997, 221), and Thomas' intent through her letter *and THUG's* plot and themes is clearly to inspire readers to stand up for social justice.

Further peritextual elements focus more on driving sales, although they do often increase the book's symbolic capital, too – showing again that these capitals are powerful and effective when combined. Editions of *THUG* with 'Exclusive Collector's Edition' emblazoned on the cover add a special, almost elite feeling to the book, increasing desirability among readers who want to be one of the select few owners. An endorsement from internationally bestselling YA author John Green declares *THUG* 'stunning', increasing the book's reputation as it becomes associated with such a successful author, which can subsequently increase sales. *THUG's* end-pages list accolades the book has won, including number one *NYT* bestseller; *NYT* Editor's Choice and the fact that the book has been sold in over 25 languages. In this case it is true that 'the fringe of the printed text...controls one's whole reading' (Lejeune qtd. in Genette 1997, 1): these endorsements influence readers' perception of *THUG* as worthy, valuable and successful before they even read the first page of the story. The interrelation and interdependency of symbolic and economic capital

invested into and accrued by *THUG* demonstrate how effective publication of diverse children's fiction can be, and illustrate how Bourdieu's 'idealised opposition between the purists and profiteers' (McDonald 1997, 14) misses some of the nuances and overlapping of publishing intentions.

### **Authorial Representation in British YA**

Despite these positively diverse developments in children's fiction, the literary field remains, as Bourdieu (1996) posits, dynamic, with unstable hierarchies. KO and Thomas are exceptions to a rule of underrepresentation. As Children's Laureate, Blackman was vocal about the lack of ethnic diversity among Britain's fictional characters *and* writers; a report by Melanie Ramdarshan Bold (2018) on representation of YA authors of different ethnic backgrounds from 2006-2016 confirmed the lack of inclusion.

From 2006-2016, a mere 8 percent of unique YA titles published in Britain (excluding new republished editions such as film tie-ins) were written by authors of colour (Bold 2018, 397). YA novels, 'especially bestselling YA, typically feature protagonists who are white or ethnically ambiguous [and] cisgender' (Bold 2018, 392), and this is mirrored by the published authors, who are predominantly white, cisgender females. Bold's study also showed 'authors of colour were more likely to publish with conglomerates, and less likely to self-publish and publish with independent publishers, than their white counter-parts' (Bold 2018, 400): KO's establishment shows some positive development since the report's publication, suggesting independent publishers are gaining in confidence and ability to publish diverse authors.

The overwhelming lack of representation extends not just in the wide field of published authors but translates onto bestseller lists, too. Of the top 20 bestselling YA titles published in the UK between 2006-2016, only one was written by an author of colour: *Noughts and Crosses*, by Malorie Blackman (Bold 2018, 401). In the children's/YA bestseller chart for the week ending 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2019, there are only two titles written by non-white authors: *The Boy at the Back of the Class* by Onjali Raúf, which won the Waterstone's



Children's Book Prize on 21<sup>st</sup> March (accruing significant symbolic capital, which will be mirrored by an increase in sales and economic capital) – and *Nought Forever*, a World Book Day title by Malorie Blackman (The Bookseller 2019). The majority of the list consists of white, wealthy authors such as J.K. Rowling and David Walliams, who have multiple titles in the bestseller chart most weeks. The lack of diverse authorial representation mirrors the underrepresentation of fictional characters in children's fiction, showing that inclusivity is a problem in both the fictional and real worlds.

The situation can be seen to be slightly improving from the period of Bold's report: in Britain, 2017's bestselling YA title was *Everything, Everything* by Jamaican-American author Nicola Yoon; *THUG* was the second best-selling YA book of 2018 and in third place was *Children of Blood and Bone* by Nigerian-American author Tomi Adeyemi (Eyre 2019). However, despite these books' symbolic and economic success, there has not been widespread systemic change in the publishing industry to reflect the increase of awareness of diversity enforced by initiatives and conferences. Factors contributing to this include 'structural inequalities, unconscious biases in the publishing industry...and (ironically) the lack of author role models' (Bold 2018, 404). This shows that the symbolism of publishing diversity initiatives (hashtags such as #ReadTheOnePercent and Diversity and Inclusivity Grants organised by the Booksellers Association) have not been, overall, enacted into real economic and symbolic capital invested and/or received by publishers. Bold's report recommends 'the publishing industry needs to engage in more sustainable action, rather than discussions, to help shift the entire publishing culture' (2018, 404) towards being a more reflective industry, bolstering the symbolism of panel discussions and hashtags with concrete investment from publishers into publishing diverse voices and stories. Both the cultural and commercial spheres need to be shifted by these sorts of investments – the phenomenal symbolic and economic success of *THUG* shows that success is possible – and it is vital, and logically necessary, that these spheres combine in action.

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### Conclusion: A Future of Combinations for All Nations

John Guillory opposes the binary of economic and symbolic capital, pointing out that 'playing the literary game to win in no way cancels the work of making art as an expression "for the love of art"' (1997, 397); working in publishing with the aim of creating a commercially and economically successful book does not negate the fact that you can also simultaneously intend to publish a meaningful, symbolically and culturally potent book. Angie Thomas' *THUG* shows young adults the reality of racism and potency of social justice in America; Walker Books saw this symbolic potential (proven by the fact that they submitted *THUG* for awards which the book went on to win) – but as a larger corporate publisher, they would also have intended for the book to be very successful economically, and reaped financial rewards from award money and subsequent sales. Bourdieu argues that it is 'impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognised by economic theory' (2011, 78); this is true, and the coexisting motivations of accruing capital in multiple forms must also be acknowledged. To fully understand the social world we live in, we must consider and understand different forms of capital including economic and symbolic, and they must all overlap – and this must also happen not merely in the real world, but in fictional writing based on this real world, and production of this fiction by publishers.

Choices and combinations – multiplicity – are crucial, and what we crave in stories: *Pride 'and' Prejudice; The Lion, The Witch 'and' the Wardrobe; Noughts 'and' Crosses*. Stories are combinations of experiences; the readership of children's books are a combination of readers, and different types of capital must be combined to create powerful books for children. By breaking free from singularity and constraining limits, and acknowledging that publishing economically successful art and art for art's sake can be coexisting motivations, the publishing industry can nourish inclusive writers, develop inclusive fictional worlds and publish inclusive books. Ethical, moral and commercial

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motivations can be honoured as publishing a book because it will sell and publishing a book because it is the 'right' thing to do are not mutually exclusive aims.

From a moral perspective, it is obvious that children should be able to see themselves and others reflected in the books they read, in order to learn and grow. CLPE's report on representation stated that 'in the current socio-political and economic climate the risk of marginalisation of minority groups is heightened. If in their formative years, children do not see their realities reflected in the world around them...the impact can be tremendously damaging' (2018, 9) – books are one of the most powerful ways this damage can be limited. From a cynical business perspective, this is imperative too: the wider range of authors and stories a publisher represents, the wider market they have potential to attract. Furthermore, Blackman suggested that the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in children's fiction could discourage marginalised children from reading, and writing books themselves (*Independent* 2014). If this scenario became widespread, the publishing field would suffer a lack of renewal of capital and, devastatingly from an economic and symbolic perspective, perhaps deprive the world of the next generation's Angie Thomas or Aimee Félone.

In children's fiction, it is not just the experiences of white characters that matter. And similarly, it is not just economic *or* symbolic capital that matters. Both types are significant, and are most powerful and effective for publishers when they are combined. Strength comes from combinations – professionals in children's publishing must work together to counter structural inequalities in the industry and create inclusive fiction for children, and invest economic and symbolic capital into these products. Readers *do* want to buy diverse fiction: *THUG*'s success, *KO*'s growing prestige and economic value and the presence of some diverse books on bestseller lists prove this. Books reflect reality but they can also actively influence it. Growth of inclusive fiction where BAME children are the heroes has the potential to lead us closer to a world where no young black girl is told – in a book or in real life – that, simply, 'black people become secretaries' (*The Telegraph*, April 4 2014).

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