

The Legacy of *Children of Blood and Bone*: An Analysis of Racial Diversity in YA Publishing

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) has affected diversity in YA fantasy publishing, specifically in the representation of Black people. It looks at the book's immediate reception within the YA publishing community and beyond, as well as its more lasting impacts on the industry. By studying the cover designs and other paratextual elements of subsequent YA fantasy titles by Black authors and telling Black stories, an analysis is formed as to the increase of racial diversity in the YA market. This is further dissected through the lens of the commonly cited conflict within publishing between culture and commerce, asking how this dichotomy affects the push for greater diversity in book publishing.

Keywords

YA, diversity, race, publishing culture, fantasy books

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Young Adult (YA) fiction market has seen a notable rise in books by and about people of a greater diversity of identities and backgrounds. What has been especially prevalent to me, a reader of YA fiction myself, is the explosion of fantasy books written by Black and African American authors since the publication of Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* in 2018.

This title was the first of its kind to achieve mainstream success, and since then many books have followed in both high fantasy and contemporary fantasy, including, but not limited to, *Legendborn* (2020) by Tracy Deonn, *Witches Steeped in Gold* (2021) by Ciannon Smart, and *The Gilded Ones* (2021) by Namina Forna. Common challenges faced by the protagonists in these books include racial prejudice and discrimination, generational trauma, misogyny, violence, and grief – adversities that reflect those faced by the authors themselves, telling of their experiences of living as a Black person, more specifically as a Black woman, in the West. Their books tell stories of courage, and the reclamation of identity and history.

These stories have only just begun to be told in mainstream YA publishing. The success of *Children of Blood and Bone* is a definitive turning point for representation in fiction. I am going to examine this change through the lens of several print culture theories, namely the theory put forth by Coser (1982) in the epilogue of *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* that publishers act as “gatekeepers of ideas”. What role did the publishing industry play in this transition? How does the dichotomy between culture and commerce affect the push for diversity?

Although I have striven to remain objective in my analysis, it is impossible to guarantee a complete lack of bias. I am a white British person and, as such, my conclusions will be limited in this discussion of diversity and racial prejudice within the YA publishing industry. As publishing itself remains predominantly white, this is all the more important to point out.

Furthermore, nearly all of the texts on cultural theory or publishing theory that I have drawn from were written by European or American white men before the turn of the 21st century (Lewis A. Coser, Gerard Genette, Richard Abel), so they too are limited by their positions. All the same, these theories and opinions are still valuable from the point of view of someone analysing the current state of a sector of the publishing industry. Understanding the opinions, motivations and prejudices that book publishing is based upon will also, hopefully, aid in the push for diversity and broader representation.

***Children of Blood and Bone* – publication and impact**

Children of Blood and Bone was expected to be a huge hit from the start. Publishing rights to Adeyemi's *Legacy of Orisha* trilogy sold in 2017, and the film rights were acquired pre-emptively by Fox 2000 at the same time; *Deadline* called it "one of the biggest YA debut novel publishing deals ever" (Fleming 2017). The fact that *Children of Blood and Bone* centred on non-white characters was considered revolutionary.

A big selling point was the book's relevance to the Black Lives Matter movement, using a fantasy world inspired by Nigerian folklore to portray the experience of growing up as a Black child in the USA. The book was described as a "Black Lives Matter-inspired fantasy" (Fleming 2017; Newkirk 2018). In her author's note, Adeyemi describes her motivation for writing the book: "*Children of Blood and Bone* was written during a time where I kept turning on the news and seeing stories of unarmed black men, women and children being shot by the police [...] I told myself that if just one person could read it and have their hearts or minds changed, then I would've done something meaningful against a problem that often feels so much bigger than myself" (2018, 526).

She goes on to list some real-life examples of black victims of police brutality, encouraging the reader to apply the same sympathy they felt for her fictional characters to the real people suffering racial violence (526-27). From early on it seems that literary agents, publishers and the author herself were aware of the potential cultural impact that publishing *Children of*

Blood and Bone could have. As well as the more publicly known and life-threatening issues highlighted by the novel's analogy of racial violence, the book also shone a light on the issue of representation within YA fiction.

The final page of *Children of Blood and Bone* is 'A letter from TOMI ADEYEMI', a personal note of thanks addressing the reader directly. Adeyemi writes: "I hope you see a glimpse into my Nigerian heritage and the beautiful cultures and people Africa holds [...] I hope if you've never seen yourself as the hero of a story, this book changes that." (533). I think these two wishes perfectly encapsulate the ultimate aims of making publishing a more inclusive industry. Firstly, the goal of introducing white audiences – or perhaps, more accurately, the predominantly white audience which publishers think of as the main consumers of YA books – to the idea that fantasy can branch out into cultures other than European. Specifically, Adeyemi wants to encourage interest in her own Nigerian history and identity, as well as in other African heritages.

Secondly, and fundamentally, the aim is to represent a greater diversity of peoples and experiences. In an interview with NPR about her second book in the *Legacy of Orisha* series, Adeyemi looks back on her early writing endeavours: "[...] from around 6 to 18, my protagonists that I would write were all white or biracial [...] I had internalized at a really young age that black people can't be in stories" (Donnella 2020). Adeyemi knows the effect it can have on Black children if they only see white heroes in the books they read, hence her wish for her readers who have "never seen [themselves] as the hero of a story", just like herself, to be represented.

Including its great commercial successes, appearing on several online "Top YA books of 2018" list (Brown 2018; Canfield 2018; Penn 2018), *Children of Blood and Bone* seems to have changed the YA publishing market in exactly the way its author hoped it would. A slew of fantasy novels centring on Black characters, written by Black authors, have hit the shelves since 2018. In 2020, *Time* listed Tomi Adeyemi as one of the 100 most influential people of

the year; British-Nigerian actor John Boyega wrote that *Children of Blood and Bone* “spoke to my self-identity and culture as a Nigerian, in its social commentary and in its depiction of both magic and oppression” and emphasised the vital role that the book plays for younger readers: “It’s so important to have representation within books like this [...] When my kids are growing up, they’re going to have these new classic heroes from an environment they know” (Boyega 2020). Adeyemi’s successful debut proved, to publishers, authors and readers, that there was a market for more YA books that told Black stories.

The Legacy of *Children of Blood and Bone*

Following the publication and success of *Children of Blood and Bone* and its sequel *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* (2019) more books by Black authors, featuring Black characters and telling stories of Black experiences have seen mainstream popularity in YA publishing. My methodology for understanding this transition in authorship involved identifying a selection of books that have been published since Adeyemi’s debut novel that are a) by Black authors, b) in the fantasy genre, and c) written for a YA audience.

My analysis of how the design and marketing of these books may have been influenced by the success of *Children of Blood and Bone* is in part influenced by Gerard Genette’s theory of paratext. Genette’s claim that “the ways and means of the paratext change continually, depending on period, culture, genre, author, work and edition” (1997, 3) is relevant here. Back when Genette was writing in the late 90s, YA as a category barely existed (Strickland, 2015) and bore little resemblance to how it is today. Looking at the paratext of today’s YA fantasy novels illustrates the push for diversity that is currently being undertaken by publishers.

Including *Children of Blood and Bone* and its sequel, *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* (Adeyemi 2019), I compared eight YA fantasy novels by Black authors published between 2018 and 2021. In every example, the front cover design features a depiction of the main character(s), making it immediately obvious that the book has a Black protagonist. Broader

concepts are also alluded to in the cover art, for example the focus might be drawn to the protagonist's clothing or jewellery to hint that the novel is based around African history or folklore. The best examples of this are the covers of *The Gilded Ones* (Forna 2021), *A Song of Wraiths and Ruin* (Brown, 2020), and *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* (Adeyemi 2019).

Most examples draw significant attention to the heroine's hair, an important feature to note given the strong associations within Black culture between hair and identity. Both historically and in the present day, different hairstyles can signify a multitude of things, from self-expression to status to oppression (Williams 2017). Several of my example books contain haircare scenes, which often have a therapeutic effect on the protagonist, for example Briseis in *This Poison Heart*: "I took the time to shower [...] and give my hair the attention it so desperately needed. Two hours and one full Beyoncé *Homecoming* routine later, my hair was detangled, conditioned, twisted, and sitting under a plastic cap. I was [...] feeling like a whole new me" (Bayron 2021, 188).

In other books, hair can indicate status or magical ability; the oppressed magi in *Children of Blood and Bone* have white hair, and, for the protagonist, Zélie, her hair becomes more tightly curled as her magic becomes more powerful: "Once smooth as silk, Zélie's white hair is now coarse and thick, framing her beautiful face like a lionaire's mane" (482). This is also reflected in the cover art – book one's cover shows Zélie's hair as long and almost straight, whereas on the sequel she is illustrated with afro hair. In *Witches Steeped in Gold*, hair colour indicates which order of witches a person belongs to: silver for Alumbrar and black for Obeah (Smart, 2021). In *A Song of Wraiths and Ruin* silver hair is a mark of royalty: "[...] no lie would hide the reality of her gleaming silver hair [...] The defining mark of the Alaharis, the royal family of Ziran" (Brown 2020, 26).

Returning to the discussion of paratext, another feature that these books often have in common is their cover quotes. Both *A Song of Wraiths and Ruin* and *The Gilded Ones* are likened to *Children of Blood and Bone* in review snippets, with *The Gilded Ones* also being

compared to the 2018 Marvel superhero film *Black Panther* (directed by Ryan Coogler). *Legendborn* and *Witches Steeped in Gold* both have quotations from Dhonielle Clayton, a Black author of YA fantasy, whose bestselling novel *The Belles* was released in 2018. As *The Belles* was released just before *Children of Blood and Bone*, I have not included the book in this analysis of the latter's impact. However, it is worth noting that the two books were published exactly a month apart in, on 6 February and 6 March 2018.

Furthermore, *Black Panther* was released in cinemas on 12 February 2018. This was a time at which popular culture was faced with a turning point, driven in large part by the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement during the 2010s. Publishers (and studio directors) had realised the potential success of telling stories centred on Black people, and so the "gatekeepers of ideas" opened the doors to allow a wider range of stories to be told. At least, that is one way of interpreting it.

Culture vs. Commerce

Applying theories that attempt to define the cultural role of the publisher to this shift within YA publishing produces interesting results, proving such theories true in some ways and false in others. Looking at how the socio-political climate spurred the publication of *Children of Blood and Bone*, and at the wave of similarly themed books in the years since, it could be argued that the publishing industry is "both the guardian and the constant creator of our written culture" (Cosser et al. 1982, 362).

On the surface, the chain of events seems to be: 1), a publisher decides to publish a novel that encapsulates issues faced by today's society, thus ensuring contemporary culture is communicated and preserved in book form; and 2), an entire subgenre of books is born. If you were being particularly idealistic (or naïve) you might even suggest that the decision to publish *Children of Blood and Bone* was a deliberate effort to reshape attitudes towards race and encourage diverse representation within the YA book trade.

Coser et al. would argue that those in the publishing industry act as safeguards of culture through the written word (1982). Richard Abel (1996) claimed that the role of the book publishing community is “the maintenance and care of the world’s now almost universal cultural continuum” and believed that this duty should come before “lining their own pockets”. Both texts depict commerce as the antithesis of culture, decrying mass production and over commercialisation as fundamentally threatening to the publisher’s role as the guardian of intellectual thinking.

A more recent study of the publishing industry, written by Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente (2020), identified the same dichotomy. The report found that while many publishers care deeply about the books they publish and see publishing as an important contribution to society, they also acknowledge that publishing is, fundamentally, a business: “sometimes they spoke of how commercial pressures prevent them from doing some of the work with writers of colour that they would love to do” (Saha and van Lente 2020, 9). Publishing is an industry just like any other, and its primary aim is to make money.

The more truthful story of *Children of Blood and Bone* is that publishers saw an opportunity for profit. Once the book had proved that there was indeed a market in YA for books surrounding issues of race, there became room for more books by Black authors to be published in the mainstream. Publishing companies are not motivated primarily by the aim of preserving culture or increasing diversity; like any business, they need to make money. While individuals in the industry may strive for diversity, they are still limited by this dichotomy between culture and commerce.

Although Coser et al. argue against the idea of an idealistic past in which publishers were concerned with publishing great literature rather than making a profit (1982, 363), they also address concerns that “gimmick books or non-books will overwhelm good literature and serious nonfiction” (373). It is impossible to guess exactly what Coser et al. would consider “gimmick books” nowadays, but I don’t think it would be too much of a stretch to assume

that these scholars writing in 1982 would not consider the trend-driven and profitable YA fantasy genre as “good literature” or “serious”. *Children of Blood and Bone* was a huge hit and resulted in the publication of similar books by Black authors that tell stories of Black experiences – does its popularity make it a “gimmick book”? Perhaps they would regard *Children of Blood and Bone* as “good literature” but everything that came after it as “overcommercialisation” just attempts to follow the trend.

At this point it is vital to take into account the views of publishers regarding their core readership. Saha and van Lente found that publishers tend to believe that their audience is best summarised as white, middle class and female, and that racial and ethnic minorities simply don’t read to the same extent as this segment (2020, 9). Because of these assumptions, the study found that books by writers of colour “are either whitewashed or exoticised” in order to appeal to the perceived audience (1). With this in mind, it is likely that, while many in the YA book trade are striving to provide opportunities for marginalised groups and to highlight diverse representation, some publishers view Blackness in YA literature as a gimmick which could soon go out of fashion with their presumed core readership of young white girls and women.

Saha and van Lente suggest that “It is only when publishers rethink ‘diversity’, which goes beyond the question of workforce composition and instead focuses on catering for the full diversity of the nation that we will see more writers of colour published, and published well” (2020, 10). In short, catering for a diverse audience will result in more opportunities for writers of colour. In the examples I have studied, I have not encountered much of what I would call “whitewashing” or “exoticising”. I admit that it is possible that my own whiteness prevents me from seeing how these titles have been marketed in order to appeal to white readers, but, for the most part, I think the books I have read are genuinely written first and foremost for a young Black audience.

Some of the books I have looked at, such as *This Poison Heart*, feature almost entirely Black casts of characters. Some are based on African or Caribbean history and folklore that are unfamiliar to most white people. Some, like *Legendborn*, examine inherently racist institutions in such a way that they made me uncomfortably aware of my own privilege. But despite the content of these books having the potential to make white audiences feel uncomfortable or even “left out”, they have still been published, and have been consumed by a broad audience. I think this shows that a huge transition is underway in YA book publishing, a transition that is already resulting in increased representation for many marginalised groups – including people of colour.

Publishers choose which books they publish, and these choices can give us an idea of what society was like at a given time, but they never represent all of society, all of culture. But they can, as a side effect of their primary commercial imperative, drive cultural change. YA fantasy is a tiny snapshot of the publishing industry, but the progress that has been made in terms of diversifying authorship and content is substantial and should not be overlooked.

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