

Why are people different?: Multiracial families
in picture books and the dialogue of
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Why Are People Different?: Multiracial Families in Picture Books and the Dialogue of Difference

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The issue of race has often been contentious in children's literature, from controversies over Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, to Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo*, to Keats's *The Snowy Day*, to Herron's *Nappy Hair*. How race is portrayed and who portrays it have been crucial for many critics. Violet J. Harris suggests this preoccupation with cultural authenticity, as she terms it, centers on "individual books and their portrayals of people of color, as well as the representation of specific aspects of their cultures such as values, customs, and family relationships" (40-41). Francis Wardle counters, "presenting the Black race and cultural group as a single, unified, world-wide entity is not only inaccurate, but denies the tremendous richness of economic, cultural, linguistic, national, political, social and religious diversity that exists in the world-wide Black community" ("Mixed-Race Unions" 200). This insistence on cultural authenticity poses even more problems when more than one culture is portrayed within a family, and it is perhaps for this reason that little has been written on the multiracial family as portrayed in literature.

Even when the multiracial family is alluded to in criticism, the reference is rarely followed up. For example, Pat Pinsent comments in her chapter on "Race and Ethnic Identity" that "today there are few communities with any claim to be racially 'pure'; in modern society there has been a considerable amount of intermarriage which has blurred any such distinctions even further" (91). Despite this, however, the balance of her discussion concerns books about children of only one identifiable racial background. Critics either do not recognize or do not know how to discuss the multiracial family. Although Kate Shackford writes about the [End Page 412] invisibility of the multiracial family in literature (qtd. in Gay 129), some books do exist for all ages of child readers. This article will focus particularly on some of the picture books for children that portray multiracial families.

Why Are People Different?

A 1993 beginners' "Starting Point Science" picture book, *Why Are People Different?*, shows a small illustration of a white woman with a black man, holding a brown baby. The text above the picture reads, "Today people from opposite sides of the world marry each other. Their genes get mixed together in their children" (Meredith 9). This is the only picture of a multiracial family in a book filled with pictures of families, and it suggests a curious conclusion: that only people from different parts of the world will form interracial bonds.

¹ Both the text and the pictures emphasize difference. The sixty-word text of the box (subtitled "Living Apart") in which this illustration is located contains the words "apart" (twice), "different," "not" (three times), "other" (twice), and "opposite." The illustrations in the box show a pale-blond woman with a man whose skin is darker than any other black person in the book. Although the man has his arm around the woman, there is space between them, contrasting starkly with a picture from the previous page of an Inuit family group who are sitting so close together it is hard to tell where one person begins and the other ends. Some might argue that *Why Are People Different?* should be praised for including a picture of a multiracial family at all; and indeed, it is a positive step. But, as Kathlyn Gay points out, treatment of the multiracial family as subject in *Why Are People Different?* is typical. She writes, "The subject has, for the most part, been taboo, unless the emphasis happened to be on the 'exotic' or 'erotic' nature of interracial unions" (11). The strong emphasis on difference highlights a far too common problem with picture book texts that portray multiracial families.

Why Are People Different? is not designed as a picture book solely about multiracial families, and so it is perhaps...



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