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For the Love of Literature: Fantasy/Sci-Fi/Speculative Fiction

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For the Love of Literature: Fantasy/Sci Fi/Speculative Fiction

by Laura Apol,
Michigan State University

Fantasy. Sci Fi. Speculative Fiction. “I hate it!” my students often maintain, until they realize it means *The Magic Tree House*. *Harry Potter*. *The Hunger Games*. *Divergent*. Then it’s a different story.



For a long time, the world of children’s speculative fiction (which includes both fantasy and sci fi) was dominated by talking animals, time travel, and flying school buses. Not so anymore. Contemporary children’s and YA speculative fiction is not only about escape into worlds where stuffed animals come to life through the force of love (it’s okay; I love the *Velveteen Rabbit* and *Winnie the Pooh* as much as anyone), or where history or science are learned through a trip back in time or a journey into the bloodstream. Now this genre pushes complicated boundaries, asking even very young readers to think beyond, raising questions and inviting consideration of topics that are sometimes dystopian, sometimes historic, sometimes futuristic—and often troubling and problematic. It allows readers to inhabit worlds that may provide an escape, but may just as often provide necessary distance to consider and reconsider contemporary situations, dilemmas, and possible solutions from the vantage of the fantastic or the absurd. In spite of (or perhaps because of) its negotiated connection to “reality” as we know it, speculative fiction makes room for serious consideration, critical thinking, and alternative ways of imagining one’s place in the world. Issues of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability... all of these play out in ways that permit students to see their own situations from a different perspective. Global warming. Genetic engineering. Immigration. Ethnic identities. Population control. Medical breakthroughs. Sustainable sources of energy... the list goes on and on.

Placing these issues in a future time, or a made-up place, or solving them with as-yet unimagined powers or technologies gives readers a lot to think and talk about. Are these books political? Most definitely! Are they transformative? Often they are. By allowing race, gender, age, ability, ethnicity, religion and the like to morph into other kinds of power issues (think *Star-bellied Sneetches*), speculative fiction creates space for contemporary issues to play out on a stage that is imaginary, creative, removed—with repercussions occurring in a symbolic or allegorical Other, and lessons coming in from the side.

So speculative fiction can be a tool for engaging with difficult topics, for feeding imagination, and for sharpening critical thinking skills. But it can also be great entertainment, with storylines, characters, and settings that pull readers in and along. There’s an enthusiasm and passion among readers of speculative fiction that is contagious. These books awaken imagination and delight audiences.

Our column this month acknowledges all these forms of engagement with a wide array of speculative fiction, from wordless picture books to YA series. As well, we include resources to help link teachers and readers to the range, depth, and richness of new creations to be explored and of old favorites to be revisited.

Tesser well.



Lisa Domke, Ashley Johnson, Laura Apol, Jeanne Loh, Tracy Weippert,
(Not pictured: Jackie Kerr)

This column is created by Dr. Laura Apol of Michigan State University, in collaboration with a team of faculty and graduate students who teach children's and adolescent literature in the teacher preparation program, who research issues relevant to the area of children's and adolescent literature, and who have been or are themselves teachers in preK-12 settings.

Children's Literature: Beyond the Obvious—Traveling through Science Fiction and Fantasy —Tracy Weippert and Lisa Domke

Spring fever: the warmer months seem to invite travel, whether to places far away or just down the road. Science fiction and fantasy also allow us to escape everyday life and explore the unknown. In the world of children's literature, fantasy seems to be everywhere. However, in thinking about fantasy, we want to move beyond well-known titles like *Harry Potter*, the *Magic Tree House* series, and the *Time Warp Trio* series; we also want to move beyond the proliferation of anthropomorphic fiction, which is at its core realistic fiction, except the main characters are animals that act like humans. When these options are removed, it becomes more difficult to find fantasy books, and locating science fiction for young readers is even more challenging. Yes, we immediately think of *A Wrinkle in Time*

and possibly the *Animorphs* series, but what other options are there for young children? Librarians and the publishing industry have noted this lack. They have noted as well the need for more diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender—both in characters and in authors of science fiction and fantasy (Gilmore, 2015; Obeso, 2014).

We find the lack of diverse science fiction and fantasy for young children troubling because these genres can influence children's creativity and vocabulary in positive and unique ways. Stories that explore futuristic technologies, alternative historical timelines, different realities, or interactions with other lifeforms provide space for children to question or explore who they are, what they believe in, and what they care about. Introducing young readers to books that challenge their perceptions of story and the world and that offer unusual solutions helps them become more creative problem-solvers and seek explanations or resolutions in new and innovative ways.

Such texts, when well-written, also have the potential to introduce children to new and sophisticated vocabulary that they might not otherwise encounter due to the unique characteristics, subject matter, and events of science fiction and fantasy texts. Even small amounts of exposure to complex vocabulary may have a positive influence on young children's literacy skills as they learn and grow (Dashiell & DeBruin-Parecki, 2014; Kindle, 2009). When children are exposed to novel words, as is the case with fantasy or science fiction, these potential increases in vocabulary can contribute to improvements in writing and reading comprehension skills.

Given the genre benefits and challenges in identifying books for young children, we wish to share some ideas of fantasy and science fiction books that will take students on travels to faraway places while stretching creativity and improving literacy skills. We will also share some of the blogs and websites that inspired us so that you can continue your journey.

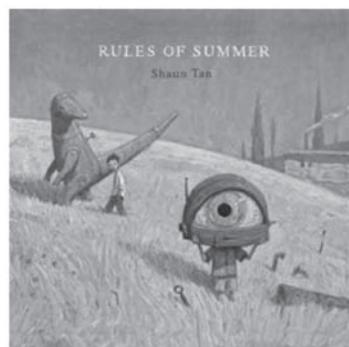
Picturebooks and Early Readers

When we think of fantasy and science fiction picturebooks, the authors **Chris Van Allsburg** and **David Wiesner** immediately come to mind. David Wiesner's books *Sector 7* and *June 29, 1999* fit the science fiction genre, while *Tuesday* and *Flotsam* are more fantasy. Chris Van Allsburg has written and illustrated a multitude of fantasy picturebooks including *The Wreck of the Zephyr*, *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, *The Stranger*, *Jumanji*, and *Zathura*—the last of which moves into the realm of science fiction.



The wordless picturebook *Chalk* by Bill Thomson is reminiscent of Wiesner's *Flotsam* and Van Allsburg's *Jumanji* because children find

objects that make new worlds come to life. In *Chalk*, three children discover a bag of chalk dangling from a t-rex's mouth. Soon, they realize that whatever they draw with the chalk occurs in real life. They must figure out how to deal with unspoken rules in this new world.



The younger brother in the picturebook *Rules of Summer* by Shaun Tan must also deal with unspoken rules. Told in few words, he learns how to successfully play with his older

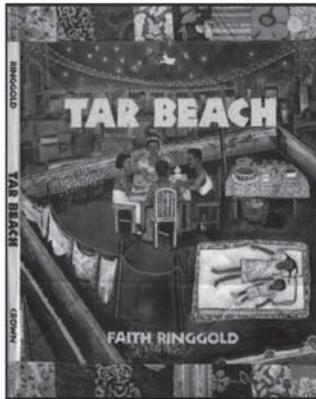
brother and navigate the adult world because after he broke the rule "Never leave the back door open overnight," many fantastical creatures showed up in their living room. Other unexplained occurrences take place when the young boy steps on a snail and unleashes a tornado, or when he leaves a red sock on the clothesline and a giant red rabbit stalks down the alleyway. These strong elements of fantasy portray the two brothers' adventures and show how the older brother still protects the younger in the end.

For younger readers there is *Max the Brave* by Ed Vere, which tells the story of a case of mistaken—or misleading—identity. Max is a brave kitten who is going to chase a mouse...



just as soon as he figures out what a mouse is. Max meets a fly, some birds and an elephant, who all point him in the direction of the mouse. When Max finally does catch up with the mouse, Mouse introduces himself as "Monster" and encourages Max to continue his search. Max eventually finds what he believes to be a mouse (but in reality is a creature reminiscent of the Wild

Things in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*) and is surprised by how big, green, and toothy "mice" are. After the monster swallows Max (and sneezes him out), he realizes that he does not enjoy chasing "mice" and instead decides to chase "monsters."



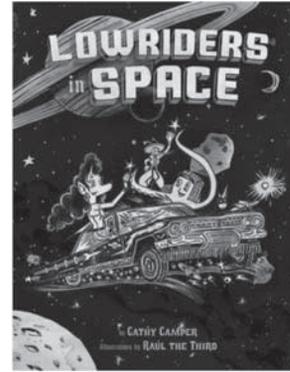
There are no fantasy creatures in Faith Ringgold's classic, *Tar Beach*, but instead, the narrator Cassie Louise Lightfoot has learned how to fly: you just need a destination that can only be reached by flight. Cassie Louise lives in the 1930s, near

the George Washington Bridge in an apartment building with a rooftop patio that she calls "tar beach." On warm nights, she, her family, and their neighbors go up to the rooftop to play cards and spend time together. On an old mattress Cassie Louise and her brother lie on their backs and look up at the stars, imagining all the places they could go and things they could do if only they could fly. She imagines taking ownership of places—changing her life and the lives of her parents—just by flying over them. For example, she flies over the Union Building, which she claims for her father, stating that since they won't allow him to be part of the union due to his race, she claims the building and gives it to him to own. She does the same with the ice cream factory, so that her family can have dessert every night. By flying among the stars, Cassie Louise can imagine a better life for her family.

Finally, for readers beginning chapter books, there is the *Commander Toad* series by Jane Yolen. These books document the adventures of Commander Toad and his crew of the *Star Warts* spaceship. In the installment *Commander Toad and the Space Pirates*, Commander Toad's crew is bored, but all of that changes when Commander Salamander and his band of space pirates take over

the ship and threaten to make Toad's crew Hop the Plank and float into space forever.

Novels and Graphic Novels

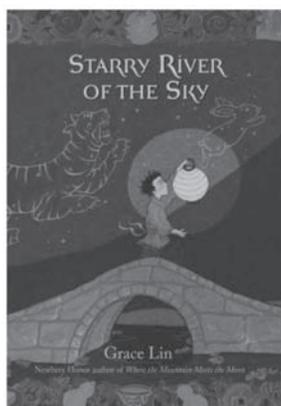


The graphic novel *Lowriders in Space*, written by Cindy Camper and illustrated by Raúl the Third, is excellent for readers in grades 2 and up. It tells the story of Lupe Impala, a talented female mechanic, El Chavo

Flapjack, an industrious octopus car cleaner, and Elirio Malaria, an artistic mosquito who uses his "beak" as his paintbrush when detailing cars. All three long to own their own garage one day, so they enter the Universal Car Competition to win some money. With help from rockets and a trip to space, they turn an old car into an intergalactic lowrider. This book mixes Spanish, Mexican American slang, and English, including humorous comments and situations (such as El Chavo stating, "I don't think we're in the barrio anymore" and the constellation Orion being upset that they used his belt of stars to jazz up their car). Each Spanish word or cultural expression is explained at the bottom of the page and in a glossary at the end. There is also an author's note describing the history and culture of lowriders in California. *Lowriders in Space* is a fast-paced, funny story that leaves readers wanting more, and the epilogue paves the way for the next installment of the trio's adventures—*Lowriders to the Center of the Earth*, slated for publication in July.

Culture is a critical component of the book *Starry River of the Sky* by Grace Lin. This middle-grade novel tells the story of Rendi who is trying to get as far away from home as possible when he is discovered as a stowaway in a merchant's cart and left to work for an innkeeper in a tiny village struggling with a drought. Rendi is tormented by moaning that he hears at night and the fact that

there has not been a moon in the sky for weeks. Readers are kept engaged trying to determine why



Readi left home, to guess the secrets that he harbors, and to explain the mysterious actions of a guest at the inn, Madame Chang, and an elderly village resident, Mr. Shan. While Lin weaves several Chinese myths into the story, the story itself contains many fantastical elements. Beautiful line illustrations accompany each chapter's beginning, in addition to full color plates throughout.

Resources to Visit for More Science Fiction and Fantasy Adventures

We hope these books have sparked a virtual wanderlust. To aid in a search for more science fiction and fantasy titles, we have also compiled an overview of some of our favorite blogs and websites that feature science fiction and fantasy texts and resources.

“Views from the Tesseract: Exploring Children’s Science Fiction and Fantasy” (<https://shanshad1.wordpress.com/>) by Stephanie Whelan, New York Public Library children’s librarian, is a great resource for those interested in the artwork associated with science fiction and fantasy texts. Whelan has a section of her blog dedicated to images associated with cover art of popular texts in these genres and spends time discussing the features of each. She also has some thorough lists that categorize science fiction and fantasy title for those looking for a quick reference.

For those looking for description of children’s and young adult science fiction or fantasy, Cynthia Leitich Smith (children’s author) has two links that may be of interest: she discusses science fiction texts at http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com/lit_resources/favorites/by_genre/science_fic.html

and fantasy at http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com/lit_resources/favorites/by_genre/fantasy.html. These links include cover art as well as descriptions of books and related materials such as reading guides and author quotes.

One of the great features of the Logan Library website (Logan, Utah, <http://library.loganutah.org/books/children/>) is that the librarians have created links for readers and fans of favorite series of science fiction and fantasy. For example, a link labeled “If you like *Harry Potter*...” leads readers to discoveries such as Roald Dahl’s *The Witches* and Edward Eager’s *Half Magic*. Since many readers are familiar with and enjoy *Harry Potter*, having a list such as this one may encourage young readers to expand the kinds of books they read and introduce them to new favorites.

The County of Los Angeles Public Library also provides links to lists of science fiction and fantasy texts at <http://www.colapublib.org/reading/lists.php#children>.

Happy Travels!

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YA Diverse Speculative Fiction: Pursuing the Art of the Possible

—Ashley Johnson, Jacqueline Kerr,
and Dr. Jeanne Loh

Speculative fiction is a world that writers create, where anything can happen. It is a place beyond reality, a place that could have been, or might have been, if only the rules of the universe were altered just a bit. (Bowlin as cited in Lilly, 2002)

The idea of worlds just beyond their imaginings draws middle and high school readers toward speculative fiction. It not only introduces readers to new worlds, but also encourages them to reflect carefully on their own.

We, as English teachers, might often think of speculative fiction (including science fiction and fantasy) as something our students read for pleasure or perhaps for independent classroom reading. Yet, in this column, we consider the possibilities speculative fiction offers us to engage with students

in conversations about contemporary issues and the potential for transformation of the world. If we can do this with the kinds of books students are already reading for fun and adventure, think of the opportunities!

Students might be captivated by the *Twilight* series or devoted fans of the *Harry Potter* books. They may have loved *Ender's Game*, the *Legend* series, or the *Maze Runner* trilogy. Perhaps they discovered classic titles by Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, H. G. Wells, C.S. Lewis, Ursula K. Le Guin, or Madeline L'Engle. Regardless of the titles young adult readers choose, it is their curiosity and concern about the world beyond their own communities that motivates and inspires them to turn to speculative fiction. In the words of Isaac Asimov, "the core of science fiction, its essence, has become crucial to our salvation if we are to be saved at all." (1979). And Marion Zimmer Bradley claims, "Science fiction encourages us to explore ... all the futures, good and bad, that the human mind can envision." (1979). Obviously, students who seek out this genre are onto something that we can and should be mobilizing in the English curriculum.

Ray Bradbury postulates that science fiction is any idea that occurs in the head and doesn't exist yet, but soon will, and will change everything for everybody, and nothing will ever be the same again. As soon as you have an idea that changes some small part of the world, you are writing science fiction. *It is always the art of the possible, never the impossible.* (2010)

In the previous five issues of this column, we have talked about a number of important issues and ideas that matter and resonate for ELA teachers and the young readers with whom they work—thinking of books as mirrors and windows, acknowledging the appeal of dystopian fiction, using summer break to explore uncharted reading territory, reading film versions of books, and exposing students to quality nonfiction—and all

Must Read Texts - For the Love of Literature

of these elements coalesce in this issue's focus on diverse speculative fiction. So we would like to propose venturing into this unique genre in order to "speculate on" the art of the possible.

A quote from Mae Jemison helps connect our ideas about science fiction with the broader genre of speculative fiction: "I think science fiction helps us to think about possibilities, to speculate – it helps us look at our society from a different perspective. It lets us look at our mores, using science as a backdrop, as the game changer." (2001). Consider the following big questions and the speculative fiction books that provide possible answers:

- What would the world be like if climate change were an immediate danger that affected people's daily lives, and what if cryogenics really worked? *Read When We Wake* by Karen Healey.
- What if the government controlled our access to knowledge by sanctioning the burning of books? Check out *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury.
- What if lives are marginally touched by magical, unexplainable disturbances that so haunt the protagonists that they search for clues and fall into rabbit holes? Pick up any novel by Haruki Murakami.

Like its popular branch of dystopian fiction, speculative fiction allows readers to critique the state of society. Yet, it moves *beyond* critique to inspire readers to speculate on potential solutions to contemporary social problems and then prompts readers to consider their complexities and consequences.

Diverse speculative fiction takes the critical reading one step further, asking readers to engage with contemporary social issues from different perspectives; the books in this genre reveal visions of worlds that can be windows into different social norms and cultures *and* often involve characters/protagonists who provide the important mirrors

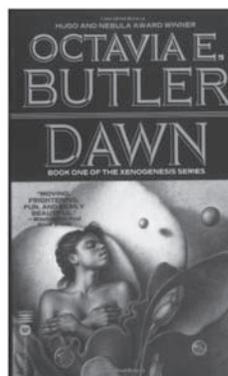
that help readers connect and identify with books. The book reviews that follow offer ideas for summer reading and for possibilities for next year's book and author choices; we hope they will inspire students to read, question, and ultimately transform their world ...

In addition to the book reviews below, here are a few resources that will help in a search for diverse speculative fiction:

- Tu Books (imprint of publishing company Lee & Low focusing on diverse fantasy books): <https://www.leeandlow.com/imprints/3>
- All Our Worlds: Diverse Fantastic Fiction (a database and site with resource lists on diverse fantasy): <http://doublediamond.net/aow/home.php>

***Dawn* (Book One of the Xenogenesis Series) by Octavia Butler**

She believed him. Humanity in its attempt to destroy itself had made the world unlivable. She had been certain she would die even though she had survived the bombing without a scratch. She had considered her survival a misfortune – a promise of a more lingering death. And now ...? (Butler, 1987, p. 13)



Octavia Butler once said, "I was attracted to science fiction because it was so wide open. I was able to do anything and there were no walls to hem you in and there was no human condition that you were stopped from examining." (2006)). Writing from her unique perspective and experience, Butler definitely pushed the genre of science fiction, thinking outside of the box to defy convention and forge her own definition of what diverse speculative fiction can be and do. As

a black woman writing in a genre typically dominated by white men, she was blazing several significant trails that attracted an audience comprised of science fiction fans, black readers, and feminists. Her work consistently interrogates social issues that matter to these diverse audiences.

Butler made a conscious choice to write herself into her work, creating black female protagonists whose marginalized status actually gives them a perspective with potential to envision possibilities beyond their own realities in order to effect the critical change necessary to persevere and survive. Lilith Iyapo, the protagonist of *Dawn*, is one such black woman. The book's cover depicts her emerging naked from the living plant pod that has nurtured her as she slept for centuries within its protective cocoon. The cover's sepia tones and dark-skinned female figure pique readers' curiosity, inviting them to open the book and read on to discover what comprises the first installment of the xenogenesis series.

Xenogenesis refers to the idea of producing an organism unlike the parents. Although this idea is a recurring theme in many of Butler's works, *Dawn* is the first of a trilogy of books that examines a speculative world in which aliens rescue and care for humans with the express intent of xenogenesis. Much as the rescued humans in *Dawn* emerge from their plant protection, the idea of xenogenesis is so slowly and subtly broached and unveiled over the 248 pages of the first book that by the time we understand what it is, it no longer shocks or repels us. Through Butler's masterful storytelling and creation of an alternate world, we have become a part of Lilith's journey, so we have come to know and trust the Oankali. We believe Nikanj when it tells Lilith,

Our children will be better than either of us. ... We will moderate your hierarchical problems and you will lessen our physical limitations. Our children won't destroy themselves in a war, and if they need to

regrow a limb or to change themselves in some other way, they'll be able to do it. And there will be other benefits. ... The child inside you matters (p. 247)

But many things happen prior to that culminating and climactic moment. For the first few chapters, Lilith is the only character whose perspective we see as she is becoming aware of herself and her surroundings within an alien "ship" that is actually an organic, living thing. This perspective sets the tone for the rest of the narrative: it is Lilith's story, and we are *with* Lilith, rooting for her and evolving with her. In those opening chapters she is also slowly realizing that she has survived the nuclear war that destroyed the earth, only to wake up to a new nightmare: she is a prisoner of the Oankali, powerful but grotesque alien beings that perplex and terrify her—at first. As we vicariously meet the Oankali by watching Lilith interact with the different manifestations of this alien race, we learn about them, their world, their ways—and their agendas. It becomes a story of Lilith's relationships with and to the other characters in the book, both alien and human. The story unfolds with Lilith at its center, and as we are drawn in, we cannot help but speculate about what *might* happen even as our rational minds question the realistic possibility of such futuristic events.

Aspects of Butler's approach to the story told in this trilogy are similar to the premise of the novel and popular movie *The Host*, by Stephanie Meyer. Aliens have stepped in to save the remaining inhabitants of Earth from their own self-destructive tendencies. In order to re-populate the planet, the gentle but powerful extraterrestrials have to fix/heal the ravaged physical planet as well as the human survivors. In Meyer's story, human bodies serve as the hosts for the alien souls, but in Butler's story, the aliens need the humans in order to effect xenogenesis – creating a new species that will be a hybrid of Oankali and human via a genetic merger. What happens to those offspring will be told in the next two books of the series, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*.

Although Butler's best-selling novel, *Kindred*, might be the best bet for use in a secondary classroom, any of her novels will make for an engaging reading experience for YA readers. Her writing has definite cinematic potential: There is a visual element to her speculative stories. Her prose style employs figurative language, but not in a poetic sense; her utilitarian use of description creates vivid speculative worlds populated by strange and wonderful creatures that nonetheless seem immediate and real to the reader.

Reading Butler's work is a subversively sensory experience as she pulls readers effortlessly into each story. All of her work is set within the context of unique alternative worlds—places that are compelling, impactful, and memorable. Like all good speculative fiction, her books invite readers to enter and embrace new worlds even as they encourage them to reflect carefully on their own.

***Ash* by Malinda Lo**

A revisionist adaptation of Cinderella, *Ash* is a magic-infused fairytale that includes an enigmatic benefactor, a young girl's longing for home and family, and an evil stepmother and stepsisters who shackle her to misery and hard labor. But *Ash* contains no hapless innocent girl, no abandoned glass shoe, no chivalrous Prince Charming, and no pumpkin carriage.

This novel opens with the young protagonist Ash, who mourns the passing of her mother and distrusts the hasty second marriage of her father. Ash's arrogant and tyrannical stepmother puts Ash to work as a housemaid when her husband's life ends abruptly. As her stepmother and stepsisters regularly travel into the City to seek betrothal to men of wealth and status, Ash keeps house and wanders



through the Wood, where she finds love in two separate realms.

Lo places Ash at the crux of a unique love triangle. Raised on the fairytales of greenwitches, Ash is captivated by the mystical world that lies ensconced within the Wood and soon meets a mysterious otherworldly man named Sidhean, who protects her from the alluring and dangerous fairy world. Ash also befriends Kaisa, the King's Huntress, a generous and adventurous young woman who looks past her rags and introduces her to the royal world. In order to pursue her relationship with the Huntress, Ash trades her life for favors from Sidhean. With his magic, she transforms into an elegantly dressed beauty, so that she can attend a Royal Hunt and grand ball. Ash's contract with Sidhean binds her to him, and though she has promised herself to him, she realizes her growing love for Kaisa.

Lo creatively imagines a story that fleetingly resembles the Cinderella fairytale that we know so well. The prince's search for a wife and his brief encounter with Ash are a just few inconsequential moments in the story, for Ash's love for her fairy godfather and benefactor Sidhean and for the prince's right-hand woman Kaisa serves as the center of the story. Lo upturns the heteronormative structures and gender stereotypes that embody fairytales. In this world, Kaisa is flanked by male hunters as she leads the hunt and slaughters the deer. Heterosexual and homosexual romances coexist without judgment. And the single-minded and independent orphan, Ash, defies her place in society in order to find love. Even when Ash joins the grand ball, she suffers from discomfort in her ball gown and shoes. Unlike Cinderella's experience, Ash's physical transformation feels unnatural and instead involves an ill-fitting facade that even Kaisa notices: "You look beautiful...But the dress does not suit you...It looks like it is suffocating you" (Lo, 2009, p. 217). Lo presents a protagonist who could not be more different from our Disney image of Cinderella, and her gown overpowers her as it takes on a life of its own.

While *Lo* celebrates the strength of women in *Ash*, the problematic relationship between Sidhean and Ash echoes other creative works in which obsessive men are forgiven for their fixations on the women who are the objects of their affection. Thankfully, *Lo* does not play into this oppressive dynamic that disempowers female characters and puts their desires secondary to men's. In understanding Sidhean's inexplicable actions toward her, Ash discovers that his love for her gives her power over him, and eventually she uses this understanding to exercise her will.

Ash is a thoroughly entertaining and creative twist to the story of Cinderella. *Lo* skillfully leads readers into an intricate world that originates in, but soon leaves behind, a time-tested fairytale. Her approaches to gender, love, and sexuality are refreshing and inspiring; it is our hope that future revisionist versions of fairytales will question existing ideologies rather than reinforcing them.



***Bayou Volume 1* by Jeremy Love**
 “The Bayou is a bad place. Aint’ nuthin’ good ever happened around there” (Love, 2009).

On the cover of this graphic novel, two girls—one White, one Black—clasp hands and laugh. But don’t be fooled by this innocent exchange; up the slope lurks a giant, half hidden behind a tree, and below the girls, a strained hand reaches out toward the White girl. In fact, there is little play and innocence in this powerful literary and artistic work. Even minor exchanges between the girls are fraught with racism and fear.

It is 1933 in the fictitious town of Charon, Mississippi. Lee Wagstaff and her father Calvin live quietly, sharecropping on the land of the Westmorelands, a White family. Lee shares an

uneasy friendship with Lily, the landowner’s daughter, whose rebelliousness and desperation get Lee in trouble. In order to avoid a beating from her mother, Lily accuses Lee of stealing her necklace, but attempts to redeem herself later when she returns to the Bayou to retrieve it. When Lily is swallowed by a White giant who emerges from the swamp, Calvin is accused of kidnapping her. Stoked by anger and hysteria, the White townspeople beat and imprison him. As he languishes awaiting the inevitable lynching, Lee returns to the mysterious bayou in order to find Lily and prove her father’s innocence. From the bottom of the swamp, she enters a parallel world nestled in this murky place. The bayou is a portal through which Lee discovers a provincial world that reflects the inequalities prevalent and palpable in Lee’s time. Lee bravely continues searching for Lily after facing the White giant and encountering a Confederate general with a head of a hound, along with a “murder” of Jim Crows.

Love offers a story remarkably different from the typical fantasy. It is uniquely American, an anthropological study of the South, and he depicts a haunting alternative universe that is grounded in stark inequalities. The creatures in this parallel world take the shape of anthropomorphized animals that symbolize historical markings of the American South: Jim Crow, Confederate soldiers, Brer Rabbit, and the Ku Klux Klan. But, similar to canonized fantasy novels, *Love’s* magical story serves as a graphic and critical social commentary about our relationship with American history. The setting of *Bayou Volume 1* stems from a complex historical narrative that is shaped by racial oppression and violence, but from it emerges a friendship between a little girl with nothing to lose and a peace-loving, blues-singing giant.

***Akata Witch* by Nnedi Okorafor**

At first glance, *Akata Witch* follows a conventional science fiction or fantasy storyline—not unlike the early *Star Wars* films or the *Harry Potter* series; an unsuspecting adolescent who struggles as an

outsider both at home and at school discovers that she possesses talents incomprehensible to the world in which she lives. Facing a seemingly impossible task in the magical world, she conquers her self-doubt and fear in order to face a looming evil.

Okorafor builds an intricate and unique tale from this framework and links a small town in Nigeria to the fate of the world. Sunny Nwazue was born in New York City, and her family returns to Nigeria when she is nine. Although her parents are both Igbo, Sunny feels alienated as a Black American in her community. Sunny receives her calling when she discovers that she is a part of the Leopard people, a group of sorcerers with magical abilities. As a free agent, or one whose parents are not Leopard people, she does not have the luxury of growing up in the Leopard ways, so her learning curve is steep. Alongside three friends of different abilities, Sunny joins a coven to vanquish a powerful villain.

Sunny straddles seemingly conflicting identities. She is both Nigerian and American, Igbo and English speaking, Black and albino, and a Leopard yet raised a Lamb. These contradictions appear to be hindrances at first, but Sunny discovers that they empower her in the Leopard world, and she gains confidence in her identity as she finds her place and duty in the world. Sunny is a modern yet classic protagonist; she is independent, scrappy, and possesses latent talents that exceed everyone's expectations. Her journey is filled with both adolescent and mystical struggles that establish her self-worth and her worth to the world, and readers will find themselves cheering for her all along the way.

Okorafor's world is fantastical yet very much grounded in contemporary social issues. She immerses readers in the old and the new: a modern Nigeria, full of vibrant cultures, languages, and influences from all over the world coexists with delightful yet frightening sorcery and ancient, superstitious tales. *Akata Witch* is refreshing

because Okorafor's imagined world is worlds away from conventional Eurocentric and American fantasy novels. Educative and entertaining, it offers a society and culture very different from our own.

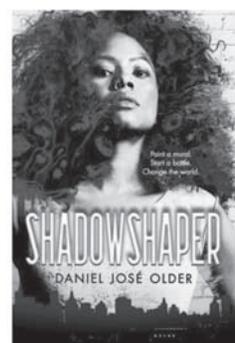
***Shadowshaper* by Daniel José Older**

Maybe the word hasn't been invented yet—that thing beyond diversity. We often define movements by what they're against, but the final goal is greater than the power it dismantles, deeper than any statistic. It's something like equity—a commitment to harvesting a narrative language so broad it has no face, no name (Older, 2014)

It is against this demand for a new language for children's and young adult literature—a language that encompasses the diverse voices of our past, present, and future—that author Daniel José Older introduces his young adult fantasy, *Shadowshaper*.

Set in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, *Shadowshaper* celebrates the vibrant cultures, languages, and identities of its Puerto Rican heroine Sierra Santiago, her family, and her friends. With *Shadowshaper*, Older, who is active in the We Need Diverse Books movement, offers an example of what culturally diverse young adult literature and fantasy can be. In his story, Sierra and her friends unapologetically embrace their heritages, their differences, and their need for each other.

Yet, this is not just a vibrant story of relationships among diverse friends and families. From the first page, Older spins a fantastical story built on Caribbean tales of the shadowshapers. Little does artist Sierra know when she first sees a tear falling from the face painted on a Brooklyn building that she will take on the responsibility for the legacy of the shadowshapers. In a fluid mix of Spanish



and English, her stroke-ridden grandfather Lazaro warns her, “Listen to me, m’ija. They are coming. For us. For the shadowshapers” (p. 22). Unsure of what or who is coming, Sierra follows her grandfather’s instructions, seeks out fellow artist Robbie, and begins to unravel the mysteries of her supernatural heritage while fending off the threats of an unknown power who seeks to destroy not only her, but the other shadowshapers as well. As Sierra and her friends fight zombie-like supernatural creatures and seek to understand powers beyond their imaginations, Older creates a fully empowered heroine who speaks to teenagers today.

Sierra is the best part of this book. When she looks in the mirror and says, “I’m Sierra Maria Santiago. I am what I am. Enough,” (p. 189) readers realize that, at its center, this is a book about a young woman of color who must realize her own power and beauty in a world that constantly tells her she is lacking. As she accepts who she is, we see a truth: A beautiful girl is one who is proud of who she is, where she comes from, and what she looks like. To hear that truth from a funny, confident Puerto Rican girl with natural hair and a curvy body, who also happens to save her community, is a step forward in young adult publishing. At the same time, Sierra represents the modern teenage girl. When she needs information for her supernatural battles, she draws on her best friend Bennie’s web-searching skills, sneaks into the Columbia University anthropology archives, and befriends the young Black librarian who joins her in her fight. Even as the older generations of her family and community question her abilities because of her gender, Sierra challenges them (and us) to realize she is “enough.”

Gender equity is not the only contemporary social issue Older takes on in *Shadowshaper*. Older raises questions about racism, urban gentrification, and the ever-changing landscapes of cities across the United States, while subtly pointing out the assumptions society often holds about who belongs in particular spaces. When Sierra is on the run from zombie-like corpuscles, for example,

she stumbles into a neighborhood of stand-alone houses. Exhausted and barely able to stand, Sierra continues to run through the neighborhood where the residents who notice her dismiss her as “another OD from that damn Dominican club over on Flatbush” (p. 239) and call the police. Yet, these issues do not take over the novel. They are presented as part of Sierra’s life—a part that should be questioned, but not a part that somehow diminishes her story.

Each of these novels answers the call for diverse characters and authors of science fiction and fantasy. Not only do they act as mirrors, allowing our students to see aspects of themselves in the stories, but they also act as windows, pushing us to look at our world in new ways and speculate upon its possibilities. In its many forms and formats, speculative fiction encourages readers to be creative and critical thinkers, empowering us not only as readers, students, and teachers, but also as people.

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