



CENTRE FOR LITERACY
IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

REFLECTING REALITIES

Survey of Ethnic Representation within
UK Children's Literature 2022

Published 2023

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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



**INCLUSIVE
BOOKS FOR
CHILDREN**

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Foreword

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This is the sixth publication in the Reflecting Realities annual survey series. These surveys provide insights into the extent and quality of ethnic representation in children's literature published in the UK. For over six years now, we have collated, reviewed, and reported on the books that publishers have diligently submitted to enable this work. This survey should not be read in isolation, it should be read within this wider context and in conjunction with the previous five [publications](#). For readers familiar with this annual survey, you will know that this work involves CLPE undertaking an annual call out to UK publishers both large and small, inviting them to submit any titles they believe satisfy the eligibility criteria for our team to read and review. The process for collecting, reviewing, analysing and reporting the data involves a long step by step methodology that was designed in the first year of this work to enable us to provide a meaningful snapshot of the UK children's literature landscape. This process and the approach and methodology we use to collect and scrutinise the data that goes into this report is outlined in more detail [here](#).

The underpinning motivation of this work is to encourage publishers to produce high quality ethnically representative and inclusive literature to enrich the reading diets of all children. It is an exceptionally surreal time to be alive and an even more surreal time to be a child. It's hard to fathom what the young minds of today are making of the world around them. Undoubtedly, the woes of the adult world have seeped into the consciousness of the young minds of generations before us and weighed heavily on their little shoulders. However, the times in which we currently find ourselves feel particularly overbearing. Children have witnessed firsthand the world they know and everyone in it shut down in response to a pandemic that not only caused the significant tragic loss of many lives but also robbed so many of their innocence and will be the cause of deep and long-lasting trauma for generations to come. The earth is communicating the immense pain of the irrevocable damage we have caused with an ever increasing and terrifying loudness. Screens transmit haunting images of violent, inhumane, horrific scenes of war and devastating suffering. The cost-of-living crisis has conveyed that contrary to the notion that life is priceless, living comes at a price and many have been costed out, forced to live in destitution and despair. And the common toxic and racist discourse of division that compromises efforts to support better understanding and the self-determination of marginalised individuals and communities has continued to intensify.

We cannot scrutinise the story worlds that children are invited to dwell in without regard to the context of the real world in which they are created. Against the backdrop of recent times, books can contribute towards providing hope in what can often feel like hopeless times. Literature can provide much needed affirmation, comfort, guidance, inspiration, and empowerment.



Whilst knowledge is power, hope is the necessary fuel that keeps us going. This is why it is important to concern ourselves with the content, characterisations, and extent of inclusion in the literature young readers consume. And this is why we continue through this work to make the case for inclusive and representative books.

We have distilled the defining features of what makes good quality ethnically inclusive literature, outlined what can constitute problematic portrayals, identified patterns and trends and spotlighted exceptional titles and Creatives. This learning has refined the ways in which we critique and engage with children's literature and how we mediate these titles with the teachers that we work with.

In this year's report as with the previous surveys we will share the findings and learning from the latest set of submissions. For the first time in the short history of this work we will not be reporting increases in representation across all areas. We will draw on the content we have reviewed to unpick this, identifying suggested areas for development, and celebrating the strengths of titles that exemplify the quality of presence we hope to encounter in all representative books.

During this period, the review process has not only deepened our understanding of what makes good quality ethnically inclusive and representative literature, but it has also reinforced our appreciation of the value of community. As we have expressed throughout our time of producing these surveys, better stocked representative bookshelves require a concerted collective effort. We have always aspired to build on the legacy of advocacy in this area and aimed to contribute to the existing ecosystem of dedicated advocates who come in many forms, including writers, illustrators, publishers, parents, teachers, librarians, booksellers, literary award bodies and literary organisations.

As always, we hope that this work supports the pursuit of ensuring that children have the opportunity to engage with a breadth of high-quality literature that meaningfully Reflects the Realities of all readers.



2022 Survey Findings and Insights

Reflecting on Casting



Overall Output

We review fiction, non-fiction and picturebooks aimed at the 3-11 market because this is the output that makes up the core reading diet of Primary school aged children. Through this work, we seek to provide a snapshot of the UK industry output to support publishers in their commitment to producing quality ethnically representative and inclusive literature, as well as support care-givers, teachers and librarians in accessing and curating such literature for the younger readers in their lives.

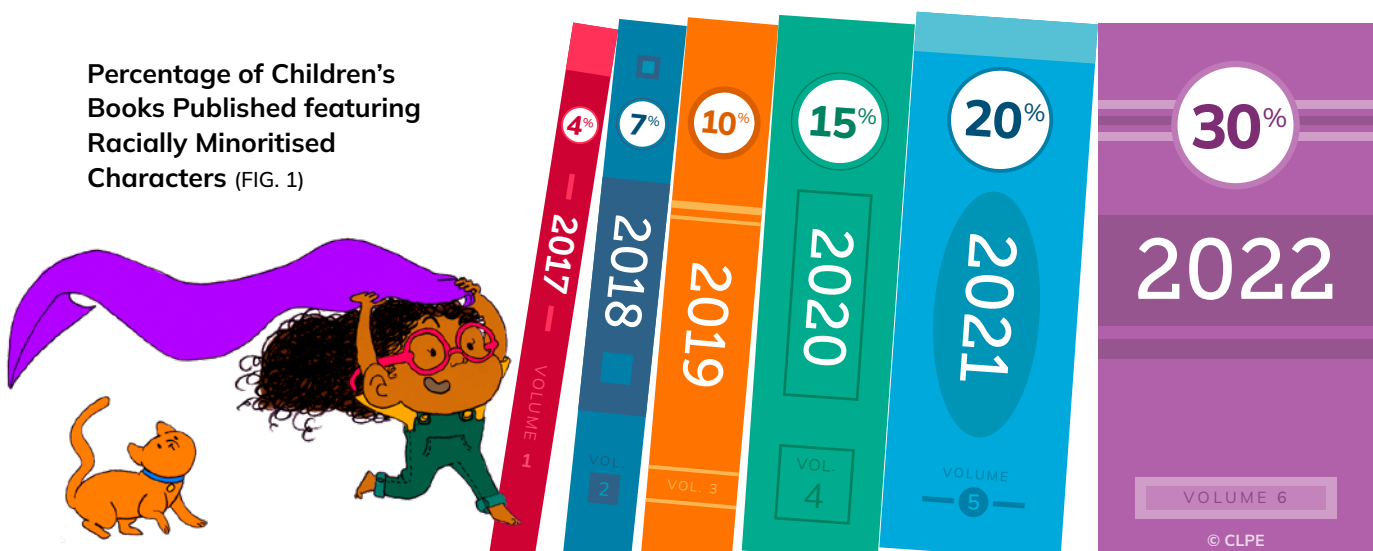
All children deserve to encounter books that provide affirmation by reflecting their realities and broadening their outlook by experiencing realities beyond their own. The term Reflecting Realities was inspired by Dr Rudine Sims Bishop's fundamental body of work and advocacy for inclusive literature. Her analogy of literature serving as '*windows, mirrors and sliding doors*,' perfectly expresses the value of such reading experiences. With every inclusive and representative book that is produced, readers are afforded the opportunity to meet a larger number of racially minoritised characters. Ethnic groups are not a homogenous entity, and every new and additional character from a minoritised background has the potential to convey their multi-faceted individuality, thus widening a reader's body of association and reference. This in turn can help challenge and diminish misconceptions about groups or communities of people.

The term intersectionality was coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late eighties. It is a term that refers to the ways in which the socially and politically constructed facets of identity can combine in various

formations to uniquely work to empower or disempower an individual. We have always expressed through these reports that although we use ethnic labels to code characters to enable us to discuss the extent and quality of presence of racially minoritised characters, this coding does come with limitations. Such labels cannot entirely embody the experience of every individual who identifies with these ethnic markers or who is defined by them. No one demographic group is a monolith and no-one person's identity is one dimensional. In the submissions we have reviewed for this cycle, it has been interesting to observe increased instances of characters not only being portrayed as a racially minoritised individuals but also as individuals of differing religious faiths, sexual orientations, social classes or having various disabilities. In this report we will be sharing the headline figures as well as outlining the range of realities creatively conveyed in the submissions reviewed. In doing so, we hope that readers will see how the principles of the instrumental works of both Bishop and Crenshaw are evident and can manifest in children's literature.

3,195 children's picturebooks, fiction and non-fiction titles eligible for the consideration of this study were published in the UK in 2022. This is a marked reduction in eligible titles compared to the previous report. Of these titles, **954** featured racially minoritised characters. This indicates that **30%** of the children's picturebooks, fiction and non-fiction titles published in 2022 featured racially minoritised characters, compared to 20% in 2021, 15% in 2020, 10% in 2019, 7% in 2018 and 4% in 2017.

Percentage of Children's Books Published featuring Racially Minoritised Characters (FIG. 1)



To enable the publication of the fifth report, we reviewed 1,059 titles published in 2021. For the purposes of this, our sixth report, we have reviewed 954 titles. The 1,059 titles published in 2021 were drawn from a larger output of 5,383. For the purposes of this report, the total number of 954 titles reviewed were drawn from a smaller output of 3,195 in 2022. We filter the Nielsen data to ensure that the total output relates to titles published in the year we are reviewing, which in this case is 2022. We filter the output to enable us to consider titles solely aimed at 3–11-year-olds, and specifically focus on the three text types that feature in Primary classrooms – picturebooks, non-fiction, and fiction. The reduction in output is marked and we believe is likely to correspond with increased production costs within what continues to be a particularly economically challenging period. The 10% increase that we have observed this year therefore suggests that although fewer titles were produced, the proportion of representative titles that made up this output was not compromised.

The sustained upward trend in the volume of inclusive and representative literature over this six-year period is remarkable. The commendable 26 percentage point rise from the first report indicates that there are significantly more representative titles available to young readers now than there were 6 years ago. In previous reports, we have welcomed these gains with cautious optimism. We have expressed our concern that such a fast growth over a concentrated time frame could have the potential to invite complacency, reducing the successes of this period to a trend. To date, these concerns have not been actualised. We are very pleased to once again be reporting an increase in this regard and it is an improvement that we hope will continue to grow over time.

A greater volume of books in principle should equate to the possibility for young readers to encounter a greater breadth of titles that showcase presence across genres, convey different story worlds, explore a variation of themes, and depict wide ranging portrayals. A greater volume of books should create the opportunity for varied and nuanced representations of racially minoritised individuals and communities. It should enable representations that normalise and make mainstream characters that, in the past, have typically either been problematically portrayed, marginalised or were never even brought to life at all within the pages of the books that sit on classroom shelves.

Greater volume should mean these things and more, however this is not always the case. It can mean the surplus production of generic representations that lack depth at best or are poorly rendered or problematic portrayals at worst. Through the process of reviewing this year's submissions, the review team reported a seeming tentativeness in a number of the titles they read. Their encounters with racially minoritised characters in the fiction titles submitted in particular were often difficult to decipher. The limited text-based cues exacerbated the challenge of determining presence, which subsequently made it difficult to ascertain firstly if the book could be classified as meaningfully representative and inclusive and secondly whether the portrayal could be classified as quality in line with the standards, discussed below, that this study seeks to ensure. When in doubt we always return to the title of this work – Reflecting Realities. This term embodies the aims of what we hope to find and achieve and always invites the fundamental question – Do the portrayals we encounter in the literature we consume meaningfully and appropriately reflect the realities of all readers?

As we have discussed in previous reports increased volume of representative literature must go hand in hand with increased opportunity to encounter high quality and considered representations of racially minoritised characters and casts, as this is what these surveys seek to encourage.

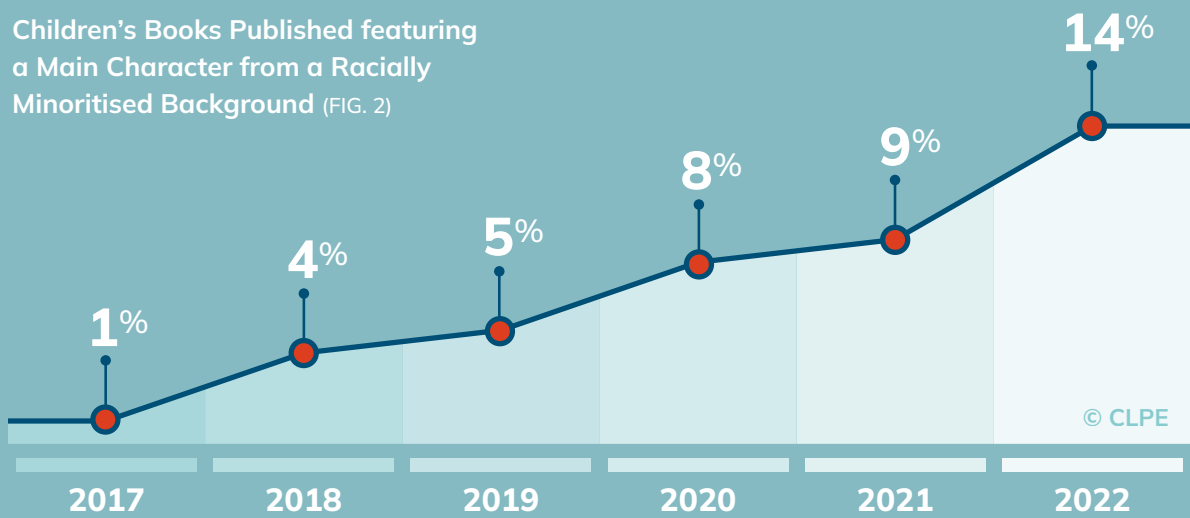


Main Cast of Characters

The increase of representative titles published has also corresponded with an increase in the presence of racially minoritised characters forming part of the main cast. The percentage of childrens books published in the UK in 2022 that featured a main character from a racially minoritised background has increased to 14%, compared to 9% in 2021, 8% in 2020, 5% in 2019, 4% in 2018 and 1% in 2017. This marks a 5% increase compared to the last report and a welcome overall increase of 13% since the first report. Centering fully actualised and sensitively rendered racially minoritised characters at the heart of stories and enabling them to steer and shape the narrative is integral to meaningfully reflecting realities.



Children’s Books Published featuring a Main Character from a Racially Minoritised Background (FIG. 2)



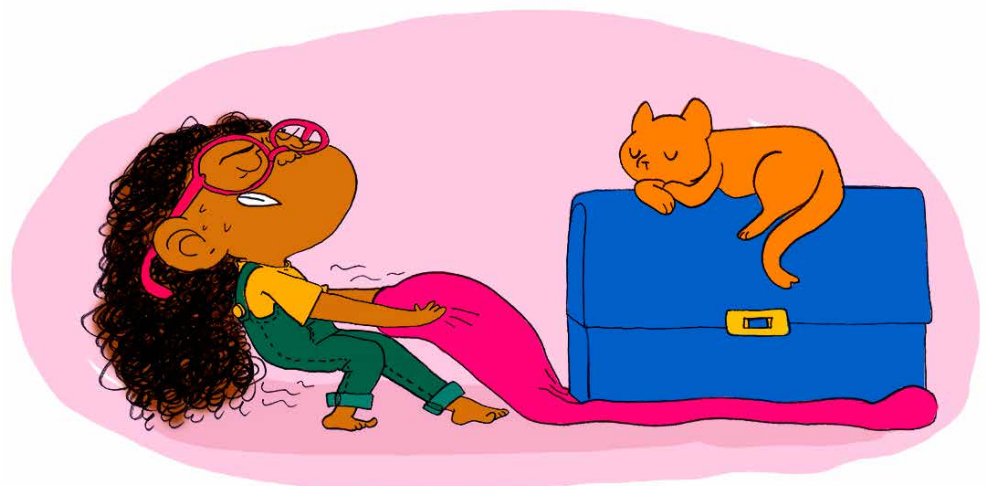
The year-on-year overall growth of presence of racially minoritised characters in children's literature available in the UK market has been encouraging. It has indicated a continued effort to improve the extent of representation in this regard. The nature and quality of this increased presence has however been varied. As we have commented in previous reports, greater volume has not always necessarily indicated that young readers have better choices available to them.

This commitment to encouraging quality representations and portrayals drives the review process. Through this process, we spend a great deal of time identifying and scrutinising the presence of racially minoritised characters. This is often easier to analyse in illustrated titles, as the medium generally makes this immediately apparent through the depiction of skin tone, physical characteristics, props, and visual cues. Whether or not the portrayal is effectively, authentically, and respectfully conveyed within these text types is another matter entirely.

Conversely, the lack of text-based cues to support the identification of racially minoritised characters in the many fiction titles we encountered made the review process challenging. If deciphering presence is so challenging that it compromises the capacity of the reader to identify racially minoritised characters, then it raises questions about whether the portrayal is in keeping with the core aims and principles of this work, i.e., can a book be considered meaningfully representative and inclusive if the portrayal of racially minoritised characters is indecipherable? With that said, how such details are incorporated must be thoughtfully considered. These details must be carefully chosen to add dimensions to characterisations and delicately woven into the narrative. This is necessary to ensure that the integrity of the characterisations and storytelling are not compromised by laboured or clunky writing choices, details, and styles. To avoid such pitfalls,

we would direct readers to the works of creatives who seemingly effortlessly achieve such standards. Award winning creatives that we have highlighted in previous reports, that consistently achieve and set this standard, have included Catherine Johnson and Patrice Lawrence. In this year's report newcomers like Varsha Shah and Sabine Adeyinka have added to this growing canon through their debut contributions. What they all have in common is their ability to draw on their intimate knowledge of the realities, communities and cultures they seek to represent and a real dedication to carefully considered research. They in turn use this knowledge and research to shape well-crafted multi-dimensional characters with subtle details that provide enough insight to develop understanding, invite connection and paint a picture in the reader's mind.

In this reporting cycle, we have observed an increase in presence of racially minoritised characters across ethnic demographic groups within the literature we reviewed. This increase was most notable in terms of characters coded as Black at 6.8%, with characters defined as coming from mixed heritage backgrounds making up the next largest ethnic group at 4.6% represented within the submissions. Although we noted a small increase of presence of characters from South Asian backgrounds at 1.8%, the rate of growth is slow and still far behind the real-world figure reported as 9.3% in the latest UK Census. Whilst we welcome the increases across groups, it is important to remain mindful that, the ethnicity labels assigned can be quite reductive and do not adequately convey the breadth of multi-faceted identities, cultures and communities defined by these markers. By extension, there are nuances and variations within and across ethnic groupings that could be lost through oversimplified or generic portrayals. This is where research and time must be invested in ensuring that character development and story world building are carefully formed.



Reflecting on Character Voice and Agency

The bespoke Analysis Framework we use to guide the review process was developed in the first year of undertaking our Reflecting Realities work in consultation with our esteemed steering group of experts in children's literature, race, social justice and representation, education, and publishing. It was designed to support our team of reviewers each year to identify the ethnicity of each character and determine their position in the narrative. It encourages reviewers to consider the dimensions and underlying substance of characterisations or lack thereof. It supports them to consider the extent of a character's contribution to the plot and assess whether they are afforded the agency to express themselves over the course of the narrative. The Framework also helps us to establish whether their ethnicity is overly determined or incidental to the plot. This in turn enables us to consider the balance of titles that feature casual inclusion compared to those in which the subject or theme directly explores matters that are intrinsically bound in the experience of marginalised peoples.

From our review of the submissions, we deduced that 87% of characters from racially minoritised backgrounds who formed part of a main cast influenced the narrative through their expression of thought, voice or action. This marks a 3% increase compared to the last report, and remains a positive indicator of the agency afforded to racially minoritised characters. This is also a marked improvement when compared with the 38% figure reported in the first year's survey. The increase in this percentage over time would suggest that considered

editorial decisions are being made to ensure that racially minoritised characters are given agency and voice. As expressed in our previous reports, whilst we commend this upward trajectory, it is imperative that publishers remain committed to ensuring that story worlds are populated with nuanced portrayals of thoughtfully crafted racially minoritised characters.

As outlined, our Analysis Framework also provides the scope to determine how many submissions feature the ethnicity of characters as an integral driver of the plot. The review team found that 18% of the titles reviewed featured a main character who spoke about their ethnicity and whose ethnicity formed the basis of a plot point. This indicates a very small increase of 1% compared to the last report. This figure is likely to correspond with the fact that History titles made up the highest proportion of the non-fiction submissions at 17%, closely followed by autobiographies as the second most common genre within this text type. It will not necessarily always be the case; however, it is more likely that the ethnicity of racially minoritised characters will form part of the narrative or corresponding themes of these text types. A good example of this in this cycle was the historical biography *Journey Back to Freedom: The Olaudah Equiano Story* by the tremendously talented Catherine Johnson, a long-standing champion of this literary form, illustrated by Katie Hickey.

The 18% figure is also likely to be influenced by the fact that titles focused on celebrating identity and points of individuality and difference made up 30% of the books featuring a social justice theme. Titles that celebrate our uniqueness and commonalities offer



important opportunities to affirm, uplift and educate young readers. These were closely followed by titles that explored themes pertaining to the environment, followed by racism as the third most common social justice theme explored within this year's submissions. Given the socio-political context, in which climate change and anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric feature regularly, the prevalence of these themes is understandable, as such titles can offer important means of helping children to make sense of the world around them. When the subject matter of such titles is well researched, thoughtfully considered and sensitively communicated, they form an important contribution to the reading experiences of young readers. However, as expressed in previous reports, the thematic focus and subject matter of the book's children consume must be balanced. Countering a long legacy of erasure, problematic portrayals and marginalisation requires a concerted effort towards a sustained investment in producing a breadth and range of narratives that normalise and centre racially minoritised characters. This necessitates the publication of titles that convey a spectrum of perspectives and experiences, explore a range of subject matter and themes and portray a breadth of possibilities from the everyday to the fantastical.

Cast Dynamics

It is important to review casting and cast dynamics to better understand the nature of the presence of racially minoritised characters. The review process involves determining their position within the cast, as well as the extent of agency, contribution to the narrative and proximity to the plot.

As highlighted, the percentage of racially minoritised characters who were designated the role of the main character has increased from 9% in the last report to 14%. The review team noted a prominence of main characters from mixed heritage backgrounds in particular. This jump in numbers of main characters from racially minoritised backgrounds from the last report and the increase over time is a crucial marker in determining the gains in this area of work. With that said however, this figure did not necessarily equate to consistently well developed characterisations in this round of submissions. We have shared through our previous reports what we call the [degrees of erasure](#). These comprise a glossary of terms which outline the various ways in which racially minoritised characters can be rendered visibly invisible through the literature

we have reviewed over time. In this reporting cycle we continued to find that at times textual cues were very surface level and vague, for example with ethnicity solely being alluded to through the name of a character or a throwaway reference to a food item. This made it challenging to decipher presence and in other instances the role allocation felt tokenistic or formulaic. Assigning the main character role to a racially minoritised individual signifies an elevation of status and scope for significant contribution to the narrative. In order to build on this increase and for future gains to carry weight moving forward, it will be important as part of the editorial process, to evaluate how effectively each character is fleshed out to make them identifiable in a way that resonates with readers and enriches the narrative.

Multicultural Cast of Characters with Shared Agency

The alternative to the main cast format is what we have previously defined as a 'multicultural cast of characters' with equal weighting given to each ethnicity featured in terms of presence, agency and voice. 27% of books submitted featured a multicultural cast of characters with shared agency. Although this is a drop of 5% compared to the last report, this doesn't necessarily signal a problematic downturn. This is more indicative of the type of output featured in the submissions. Some text types such as picturebooks with patterned narrative structures featuring a rotating ensemble cast of characters lend themselves better to this type of cast composition and there were simply fewer of these in the submissions in this cycle.

Background Characters Identified as Belonging to a Racially Minoritised Group

25% of the books published in 2022 only featured the presence of racially minoritised characters in the form of background characters which is a decrease from 40% in the last report and matches the same percentage outlined in the first report of this series. This shift in part, will be due to the variation in the ratio of types of text reviewed from year to year. Within this reporting cycle, we reviewed fewer non-fiction titles compared to the last report. Non-fiction titles typically feature background scenes populated with generic groups of people as a standard part of the design or aesthetic style. Therefore fewer titles with such casting formulations will inevitably impact on this statistic.

2022 Survey Findings and Insights

Reflecting on Content

We have been very pleased to be able to consistently report a year-on-year increase in the overall percentage of racially minoritised characters featured in commercial children's literature between 2017 and 2022. The continued advocacy and commitment of many has contributed towards raised consciousness within the publishing industry, who have in turn been responsive to calls for action.



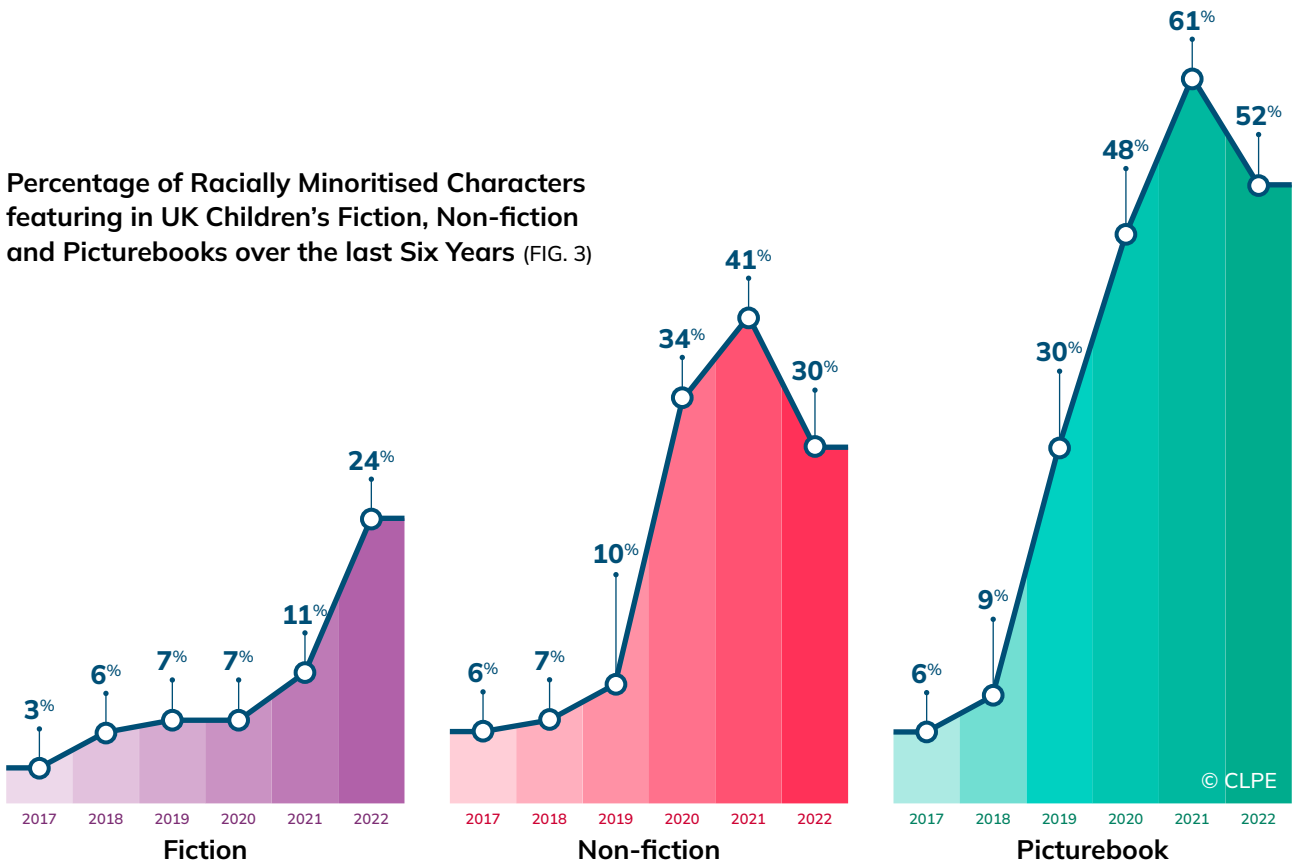
In the last report, we commented that this raised consciousness must be channelled towards ensuring that the continued increases in volume corresponded to meaningful portrayals and high-quality representations. In every cycle we have seen examples of surface level, sometimes poorly developed and other times tokenistic characterisations of racially minoritised individuals. Bringing this to the attention of publishers through ongoing dialogue and reflecting on the nature and quality of the characterisations and broader content has been a key priority of our annual reports. We have asserted throughout that increased volume must go hand in hand with improved quality.

Whilst we have continued to observe instances of either under-developed, light touch or ambiguous presence, we have also seen growth in presence in genres such as fantasy, mystery adventures and comedy in which total absence or under-representation was previously marked. We have additionally noted interesting patterns in terms of types of narratives being explored, in particular a growing number of titles that feature diasporic experiences. These positive shifts will have allowed for more opportunity for young readers to meet varied and more nuanced representations of racially minoritised characters which is the ultimate aim of this work.

Extent of Representation of Racially Minoritised Groups in Books According to Text Type

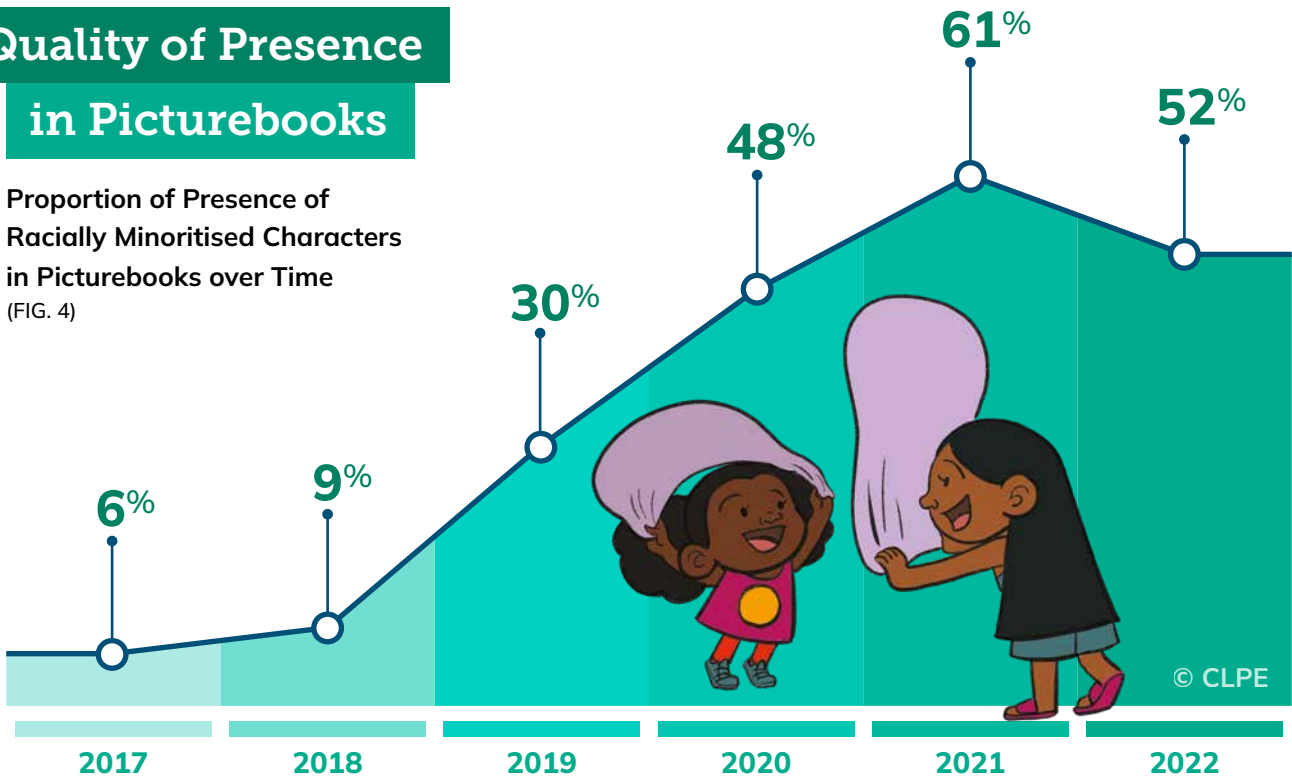
In the first five surveys in this series, we reported a consistent growth in presence across all three text types. This year for the first time, only fiction titles showed an increase in racially minoritised presence, while our analysis showed a decrease in presence for non-fiction and picturebooks. The increase in representative fiction is much needed and very welcome and goes towards closing the marked gap between the text types. We reviewed fewer non-fiction titles in this cycle compared to the last report, suggesting a dip in the output of this text type, which may account to some extent for the decrease in presence. We observed an increase in the picturebooks published in 2022 and reviewed more picturebooks compared to the last cycle. However, the increased number of representative picturebooks did not correspond to the proportionate growth of output of this text type, and in fact we observed a 9% decrease of presence. Whilst we are pleased more representative picturebooks were published, it will be important to continue to carefully monitor the gap between inclusive titles compared to overall output to ensure that the gains made in recent years are not undermined through a regression of presence in these text types.

Percentage of Racially Minoritised Characters featuring in UK Children’s Fiction, Non-fiction and Picturebooks over the last Six Years (FIG. 3)



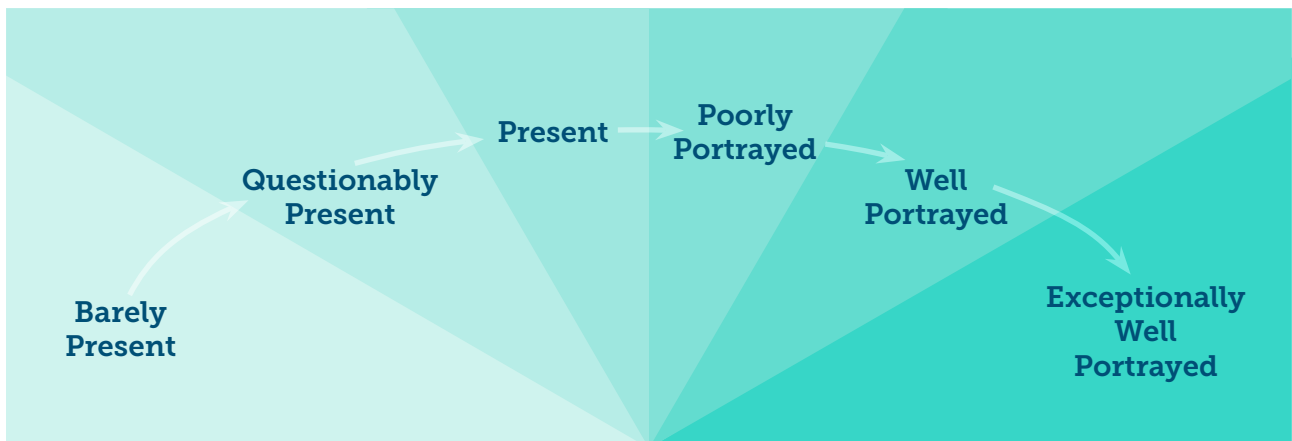
Quality of Presence in Picturebooks

Proportion of Presence of Racially Minoritised Characters in Picturebooks over Time (FIG. 4)



52% of picturebook titles published in 2022 featured characters from racially minoritised backgrounds within their casts. Over the course of the first five years of this work we observed a remarkable increase in the volume of representative picturebooks, growing from 6% in the first year of reporting compared to 61% in the fifth year. It was apparent through our review of previous submissions that of the three text types, picturebooks were the medium in which quick gains could be made in conveying presence. As we have commented previously, this is a format that can be more easily adapted at least on a surface level. We highlighted

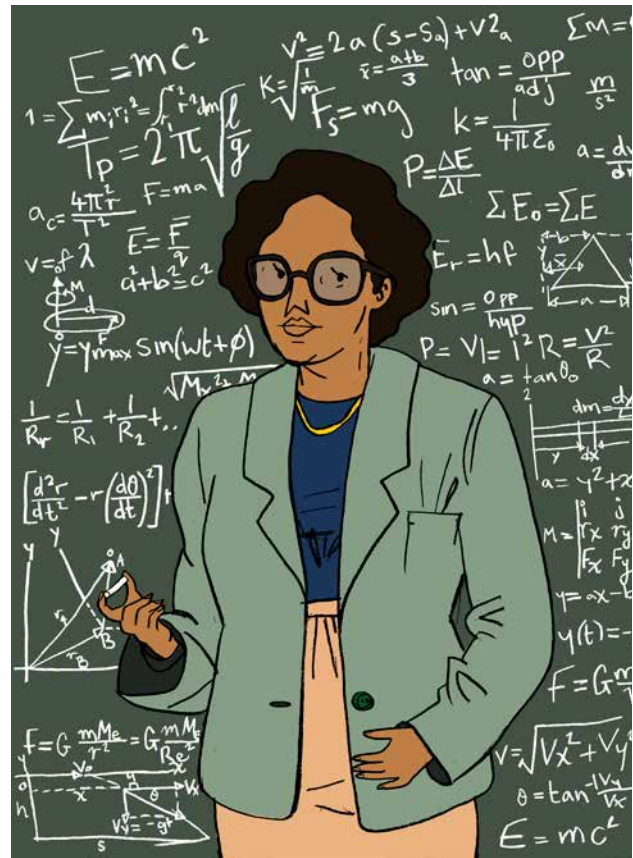
short cuts that compromised the quality of portrayals of racially minoritised characters within this text type and encouraged publishers to give due regard to ensuring that characterisations were carefully conceived and sensitively actualised. In the last report we shared the graphic reproduced here for your reference as a summary of the range of ways in which presence within picturebooks we have reviewed over time has manifested. We are naturally keen to encourage publishers to ensure that the picturebooks they produce sit firmly and consistently on the latter part of this scale.



Spectrum of Quality of Presence in Picturebooks (FIG. 5)

The percentage drop is not something we are immediately concerned about at this stage for reasons already outlined. What we think is more noteworthy is that there were fewer exceptional picturebooks in this review cycle that embodied the aims of this work. The presence was apparent but often felt generic and lacking in substance. Through this research we are keen to add to the wider long-standing body of work in this area by identifying and promoting the defining features of what constitutes quality representation within and across each of the text types we review. Reflecting realities in picturebooks means the cultivation of well-drawn, sensitively rendered multi-dimensional characters with agency, who are identifiable, relatable, nuanced, varied and are central to the narrative.

With that said, in the fewer instances that we did encounter quality titles, they were beautiful embodiments of the principles of this work and wonderfully exemplified what it means to effectively reflect realities within children's literature. In this section and the fiction and non-fiction sections that follow, we will share some of these high-quality examples, as well as outline some of the kinds of realities that we have encountered through this review cycle and contemplate the ways in which this expands the possibilities of what inclusion can and should look like.



Individual Realities

No one book can capture every reality, but a carefully considered ethnically inclusive book featuring well-crafted casts can demonstrate characteristics that encompass both universal and unique qualities and experiences. Some of the excellent examples reviewed highlighted the ways that different aspects of a character's identity, personality, experiences, life, and culture intersect to make their portrayal richer, nuanced and more multi-dimensional.

Holly Sterling's *Ballet Kids* is a sweet example that centres a young boy from a mixed heritage background who loves ballet. We experience firsthand his narrative arc of excitement, nervousness and ultimate elation in being able to perform in the role of the Sugar Plum fairy. This gentle and beautiful celebration of a young boy's love of ballet not only effectively centres a racially minoritised character by offering insights into his passions, hopes and fears but also challenges gender stereotypes through its affirming portrayal.

Children's books often provide a snapshot of the issues of the times in which they are produced supporting children to grapple with existential predicaments and helping them to process and make meaning of the world around them. *In Our Hands* is a timely, heartfelt fable that explores the power of hope. When the world is plagued by isolation and cursed to live without colour, it is up to a group of determined children to grow a seed of hope that will inspire everyone to come together and build a better future. Through the delicately detailed illustrations and gradual unfolding of the story, the reader experiences how small actions, persistence, and the commitment of a multicultural cast of characters working to make things better can manifest in fundamental and big changes. It conveys the importance of working together and the value of community. And it importantly counteracts divisive rhetoric that only serves to exacerbate the challenges we face as a society. It marks Lucy Farfort's debut as both author and illustrator after several successful collaborations and is an important contribution to a growing body of titles helping to empower and inspire children to continue to hope and strive for a better future.

Another powerfully moving and timely debut came in the form of *Through the Forest* by Yijing Li. It is a title with an ethereal quality that centres on a boy of East Asian heritage and charts how he works through his feelings of emptiness and loneliness. Recognising these feelings and allowing the character to sit with, explore and process them not only validates such emotions but offers starting points for exploring these further.

Family Realities

Reflecting the realities of family lives through the lens of babies and toddlers invites scope to represent and normalise the rich variety of family constructs that form the basis of young readers lives. Gaia Cornwall's *The Best Bed for Me* presents the common struggle of putting a young child to bed. The child's imaginative attempts to defer the inevitable are patiently quelled by his mothers, thus normalising this same-sex, mixed heritage couple's family home. Another title touching on the same core theme was Atinuke's *Baby, Sleepy Baby*, illustrated by Angela Brooksbank. It is inspired by a Nigerian lullaby and is a warm hug of a book that portrays a mixed heritage family soothing a baby to sleep. Clare Helen Welsh's *Everything Changes*, illustrated by Asa Gilland, explores the delicate subject matter of how the separation of a mixed heritage couple impacts the family unit. Swapna Haddow's *My Mum is a Lioness*, illustrated by Dapo Adeola, is a delightful, high energy, comical, relatable and uplifting ode to mothers told through the perspective of a mixed heritage family and wider multicultural cast of characters.

We were pleased to also receive new instalments from Alanna Max in the form of *Zeki Rise and Shine* and *Zeki Sleep Tight*, both written by Anna McQuinn and illustrated by Ruth Hearson. The tenderness and love of the parent child bond are beautifully captured in both titles. The touching dynamic between Zeki and his father in particular serves to counteract the traditional erasure of Black father figures in fiction and challenge instances of problematic portrayals. Zeki's playful, curious, and joyful energy will resonate with all readers, offering affirming value for young Black readers and a universal charm for all readers. We cannot overstate the value of titles like these, books that are conceived and crafted with such care and thoughtful consideration.

Intergenerational Realities

Within this round of submissions, we encountered a number of picturebook titles that channelled the dynamic of intergenerational relationships as a means of expressing facets of the identity, personality, interests, motivations, dilemmas and culture of each character. The review team enjoyed two new additions to the JoJo and Gran Gran series in the form of *JoJo & Gran Gran Find a Dinosaur* and *JoJo & Gran Gran Go to the Hairdresser*, written by Laura Henry-Allain and published by Pat-a-Cake. Both are fantastic examples of countering past erasure and marginalisation by centering a young Black girl and her grandmother

enjoying one another's company and spending time together in a range of everyday contexts. The simplicity of this format, subject matter and relationship dynamic actually fulfils an important and quite sophisticated function. Through the gentle, playful interactions between Jojo and her grandmother, we have an intimate insight into an important bond, one that sustains and celebrates both characters. In the latter title, facets of identity are honoured using the subtle nods to culture through props and visual signifiers like for example the batik print in the soft furnishings, range of hair products and posters of different hairstyles. A guided tour of Gran Gran's hair salon experience helps counteract the historical absence of this everyday reality in children's literature. Joining the two characters on a visit to the hair salon, in particular normalises, celebrates and elevates Black hair and beauty in a way that has traditionally very rarely occurred in UK children's literature in this way. Subject matter that fundamentally serves to reflect the realities of many young Black readers and should be an average encounter in this instance still remains ground-breaking within the UK context.

The Missing Piece, written by Jordan Stephens and illustrated by Beth Suzanna, is a charming exploration of belonging expressed through the intergenerational relationship between Sunny and her grandmother. It makes feelings that can be challenging to articulate accessible to younger readers. We have the opportunity to meet a multicultural cast of characters who are meaningfully interconnected through their relationships and don't just function as hollow window dressing. Additionally, the props and subtle textual cues

incorporated offer insights into the individuality and cultures that make up this community of people. Every page exudes warmth through the carefully considered palette choices and details, making the book feel like a comforting hug.

Diasporic Realities

Increasing breadth provides capacity to capture important nuances in the lived experiences of racially minoritised communities. Titles like Anoosha Syed's *That's Not My Name!* and Annemarie Anang's *I Am Nefertiti*, illustrated by Natelle Quek, each uniquely and powerfully convey the distinctive challenges of navigating micro-aggressions. Through her skilful storytelling Anang conveys Nefertiti's strength and the importance of the support of her peers. Quek's illustrations powerfully capture the overbearing weight and power that a micro-aggression can have in diminishing a person's sense of self. The picturebook medium offers an accessible means to contemplate these important themes.

Hope Lim's *Mummy's Hometown*, illustrated by Jaime Kim, offers poignant and moving reflections on a typical experience for so many immigrants. It explores the ways in which life and the home that we leave behind inevitably moves on without us, even when our associations and ideas of what we once called home remain fixed in our minds. With evocative and contrasting images of rural and urban, as well as past and contemporary Korean life, the book invites readers on a nostalgic trip down memory lane from the perspective of the mother and an exciting journey of discovery through the eyes of her son.



Socio-economic Realities

We observed a small selection of titles that sought to feature positive representations of characters from social classes that young readers have not typically encountered in children's literature. Manjeet Mann's *Small's Big Dream*, illustrated by Amanda Quartey, is a beautiful aspirational title that instils hope in readers through the resilient and ambitious lead who never loses sight of her dreams. Additionally, social housing features as a natural part of the backdrop in one of the spreads, normalising the presence of the lived reality of so many young readers. Joseph Coelho's *Our Tower*, illustrated by Richard Johnson, is another such title that marries its lyrical prose with captivating illustrations to convey the power of imagination and childhood adventure of a group of friends. It captures the wonderful sense of community of the multicultural cast of tower block residents and draws on Coelho's own experience of growing up in a tower block, celebrating the magic and beauty of the city setting.



Historical Realities

Historical fiction and non-fiction shared through the medium of picturebooks help bring to life and reflect the realities of important figures, moments and movements from our past that have helped shape our present. Sharing these stories in this format make them accessible and engaging for all readers. Patrice Lawrence's *Our Story Starts in Africa*, illustrated by Jeanetta Gonzales, is a great example of this. Through conversations between the main character Paloma and her Tante Janet readers are invited to hear the stories that make up the rich and complex history of Paloma's family and how they came to Trinidad. In doing so, they learn more broadly about the history of the Caribbean. It is testament to Lawrence's exceptional writing skills that she is able to unpick such complexity and convey it in such a digestible and engaging way. The illustrations also beautifully complement and enhance the storytelling.

In this cycle of submissions, we also encountered a number of picturebook titles that shed light on different aspects of the lives and experiences of everyday people and famous figures from the Windrush generation. Benjamin Zephaniah's *We Sang Across the Sea: The Empire Windrush and Me*, illustrated by Onyinye Iwu, offers a real-life account of the life of Trinidadian singer and actress Mona Baptiste, celebrating her important contribution to the music and culture of

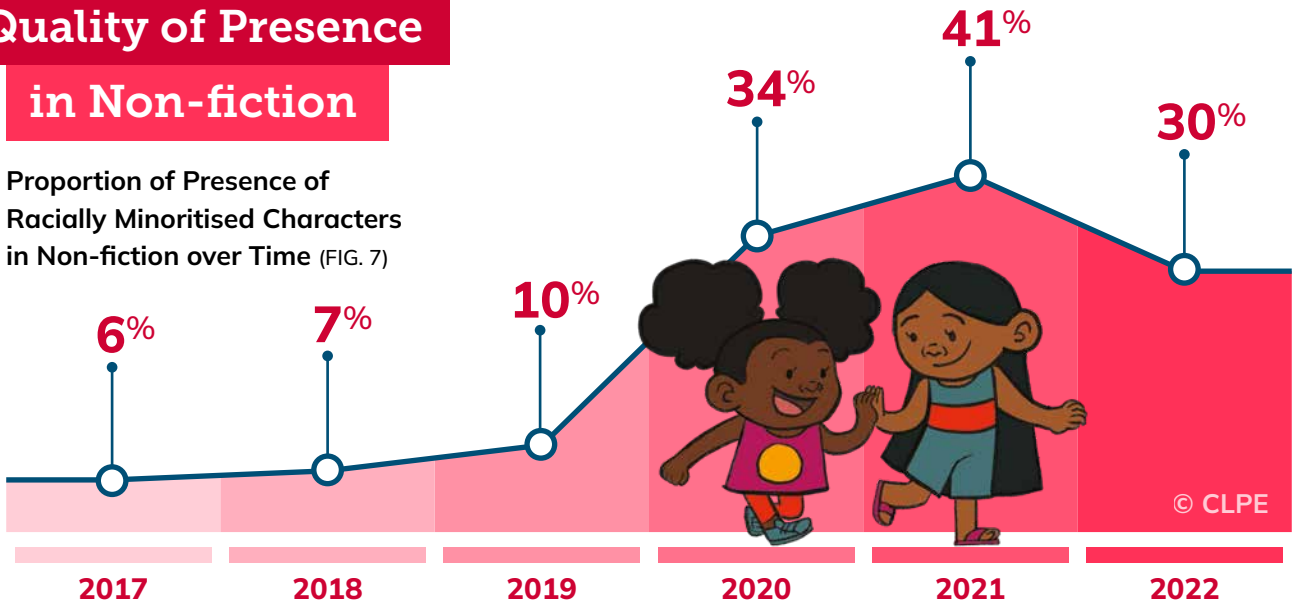
the time. Patrice Lawrence's *Granny Came Here on the Empire Windrush*, illustrated by Camilla Sucre, celebrates more of an everyday icon in the form of a young girl's grandmother. Through sharing insights into her experience, it doesn't shy away from the racism and sense of loneliness and isolation experienced by many during this period and does so in an accessible way for young readers. In doing so, it conveys the realities of this generation with integrity and a commitment to honouring the truth of people's lived experiences. These principles have become the hallmark of Lawrence's work. It is an important book that recognises the value of celebrating the unsung heroes that form the backbone of our families. John Agard's *Windrush Child*, illustrated by Sophie Bass, also offers a window into the journey of everyday people from the Caribbean during this time, honouring their resilience whilst celebrating the beauty and richness of the cultures of this part of the world.

The take away message from this report in this area of output should be that it is evident that inclusive, good quality, multi-dimensional, engaging characterisations and storytelling are absolutely achievable and we have a fantastic range of new and long-established talented authors and illustrators producing entertaining, moving, memorable, unique, powerful and striking work.

We hope that publishers continue to invest in these creatives, throughout the creative process and after publication to ensure that the representation featured in all picturebooks is as considered, meaningful and multi-dimensional, as the exemplary titles referenced in this report, enabling young readers to be spoilt for choice, affirmed, inspired and entertained.

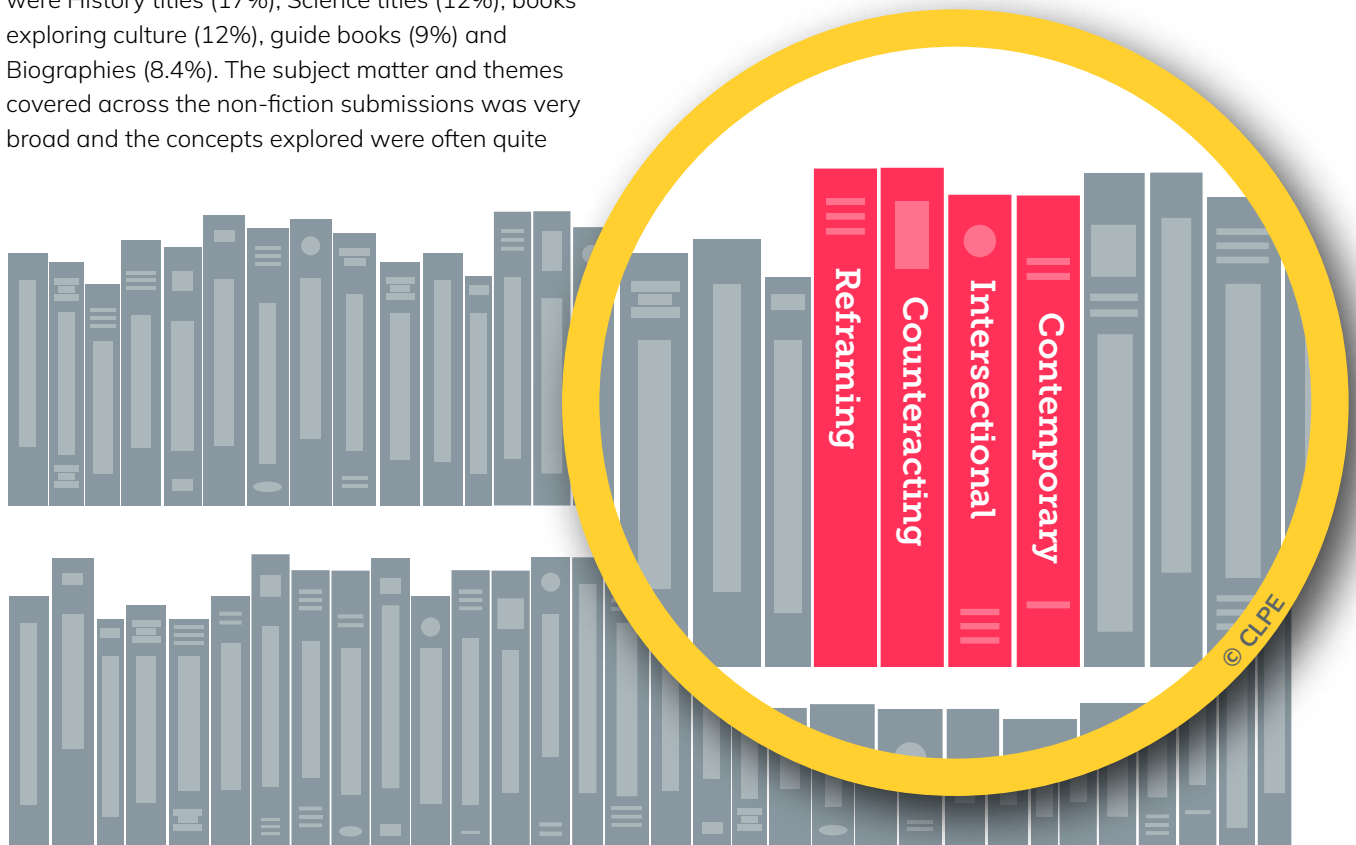
Quality of Presence in Non-fiction

Proportion of Presence of Racially Minoritised Characters in Non-fiction over Time (FIG. 7)



30% of non-fiction titles published in 2022 featured characters from racially minoritised backgrounds. This marks an 11-percentage point decrease compared to the 2021 output. The percentage drop corresponded to a comparative dip in output in that we reviewed far fewer non-fiction titles for this report compared to the previous year. The most prominent non-fiction sub-genres that featured in this round of submissions were History titles (17%), Science titles (12%), books exploring culture (12%), guide books (9%) and Biographies (8.4%). The subject matter and themes covered across the non-fiction submissions was very broad and the concepts explored were often quite

sophisticated. Whilst the review team did encounter titles that barely featured presence in some instances and others in which the presence felt generic, there were some interesting developments in terms of the ways in which subject matter was explored. As with our experience of the picturebooks, this enabled us to draw out common threads in determining the types of realities that were being expressed through this text type.



Reframing Realities

There has been an interesting and important effort in recent times within the Arts sector to re-evaluate the choices of Artists, subject matter and viewpoint that adorn the walls of our art galleries. They encourage people to consider, whose stories does the art communicate and from whose perspective are we invited to view the works? This work of re-evaluation and reframing to account for the erasure, marginalisation or problematic depictions in art was mirrored in a number of non-fiction titles submitted for review. The team encountered thoughtful and carefully researched titles that explicitly sought to counteract and reclaim past misrepresentations of communities, cultures and histories of racially minoritised subjects. These include titles like, Marchella Ward's *Gods of the Ancient World* which outlines in the opening the ways in which the power dynamic of colonial exploits influenced and shaped the ways in which the cultures of colonised peoples were misrepresented. Ingrid Swenson & Mary Auld's *Masterpieces in Pieces* is another such title. The authors acknowledge the disproportionate platform afforded White Artists depicting White subjects and make an effort to counteract the diminishing of the works of racially minoritised Artists by profiling examples of a range of Artists and their works with accompanying commentary.

Counteracting Realities

Although there is some overlap between the ways in which books can reframe realities and how they counteract realities, there is a slight distinction in these functions. When books reframe realities, they do the work of acknowledging the wider context of the subject matter, recognising omissions, distortions and disregard for the experiences of racially minoritised individuals and communities. When a book counteracts realities, it makes a concerted effort to address the prejudice, discrimination and injustices experienced by racially minoritised individuals and communities and in doing so seeks to redress this by honouring the truths of their lived experiences. We reviewed a number of submissions in this cycle that did the work of counteracting realities. *Action Replay* by Adam Skinner, illustrated by Mai Ly Deanna, profiles 25 key moments in sports history, spotlighting important figures who not only excelled in their field but who fought against discrimination through the platform that sport provided. K. N. Chimbiri's *The Story of Britain's Black Airmen*, illustrated by Elizabeth Lander, sheds important light on the contributions of Black men during the first and second world wars and in doing so counteracts the historical erasure of their lives and work. It is an informative and well-illustrated book that does a good job of showing the diversity of the British Army and the distinctive lived experiences of these men.

We received three submissions from *The Black Curriculum* non-fiction series each recognising the invaluable contributions of Black British figures from a range of backgrounds. *The Black Curriculum Legacies: Black British Pioneers*, written by Lania Narjee's and illustrated by Chanté Timothy, counteracts historical erasure by profiling the work and accomplishments of individuals across a range of disciplines and sectors.

The Black Curriculum Migration: Journeys Through Black British History, written by Millie Mensah and illustrated by Camilla Ru, documents histories of movement from the Roman era through the 20th century, whilst sensitively addressing the distinctions between migration and enforced movement. The content works to counteract ill-informed misconceptions about the history of movement and how it has come to shape Britain and Britishness in contemporary times. *The Black Curriculum Places: Important Sites in Black British History*, written by Melody Triumph and illustrated by Amanda Quartey, offers a key addition to this series as it details significant historical moments and movements



by anchoring them to the places in which they occurred. This counteracts the erasure of these important histories and supports a more informed and better understanding of the past.

Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock's *Am I Made of Stardust?*, illustrated by Chelen Ecija, is another important addition to this type of text. Traditionally, if science titles feature an expert as the narrator, they will typically be a White, middle-aged male. Choosing to have the expert Dr Aderin-Pocock guide readers on an exploration of our solar system in an engaging and well-illustrated title is a powerful means of counteracting such erasure.

Contemporary Realities

Historically, portrayals of life in countries outside of the UK within children's literature have been either overly simplistic, regressive, problematic or inaccurate. In being so, they can help to compound misconceptions and prejudices. Having access to books that feature balanced contemporary representations of communities, countries and societies from around the world is crucial in challenging this. We reviewed a number of titles across

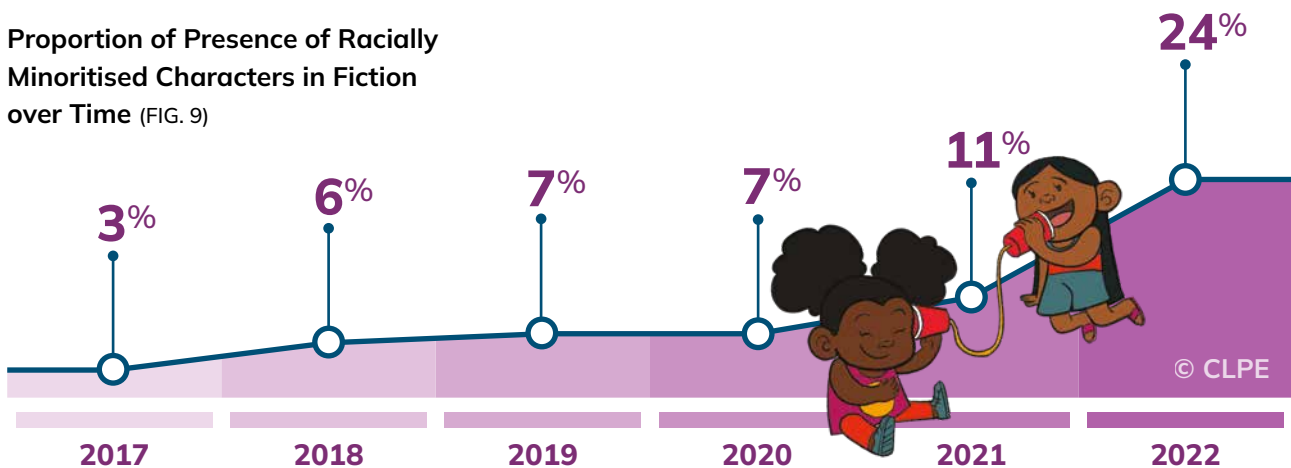
the three text types that supported this aim. In terms of the non-fiction titles, *India, Incredible India* written by Jasbinder Bilan and illustrated by Nina Chakrabarti, is a good example of this. It is an eye catching, colourful title that celebrates the history and diverse religious and cultural aspects of India. It attempts to cover the breadth of the country, sharing insights into the wealth of diversity of languages, religions, ethnicities, and social classes. The vibrant illustrations bring joy and movement to the book as the reader jumps to different cities, objects, and histories learning about the ways in which the past and present intertwine.

These titles each contribute to diversifying and broadening the reading experiences of children, offering important opportunities for affirmation, growth of knowledge, sparking curiosity, challenges to thinking and a passion for learning about themselves and the world around them.



Quality of Presence in Fiction

Proportion of Presence of Racially Minoritised Characters in Fiction over Time (FIG. 9)



24% of fiction titles published in 2022 featured characters from racially minoritised backgrounds. This figure is up by 13 percentage points compared to the output of 2021. Of the three text types reviewed, fiction had the slowest and smallest incremental year on year change in the first five reports. This is the first time since we began producing these reports that the amount of representative fiction has increased by this amount and the first time that we are reporting growth within one text type and not the other two. Whilst the production of representative fiction is still lower than that of the other two text types, this increase is an important and very positive development and goes some way towards closing the gap.

We had commented in previous reports that the growing disparity in the volume of output between fiction and the other two text types suggested that publishers could make faster gains in remedying the imbalance in non-fiction and picturebooks as it was easier to incorporate surface level presence, whereas this could not be achieved as easily within fiction. Although we welcomed the increases in presence featured in picturebooks and non-fiction, we did so with optimistic caution. We encouraged publishers to build on these gains by considering how best to refine the focus to ensure that the presence was more meaningful.

Based on our reviews of the fiction submissions over this period, we felt that the slower rate of growth in this text type was indicative of the fact that deeper work was required to redress the imbalance. As discussed in previous reports, there were attempts at incorporating

surface level cues across all text types in the early phases of this work, but this approach only served to plaster over the issue. The labour of language in fiction is heavy. The words must be crafted to create the details, layers, and texture necessary to shape fictional worlds. They must breathe life into casts of characters in a way that makes them feel believable, authentic and relatable. They must pepper the pages with details that evoke the senses to resonate with the reader and will spark thinking to deepen understanding. This is the work of fiction and ensuring that it is representative cannot be an afterthought or a tokenistic nod. And this is why we believe that the growth in output of inclusive fiction has been much slower and why we welcome the fact that it has continued to grow and that we have seen the spike in this round of submissions. As with the other two text types, this volume has enabled us to review titles featuring a range of subject matter, themes and reflected realities. This year, we observed that fantasy at 23% and adventure at 16%, with comedy coming in third at 9% formed the highest proportion of fiction genres. In previous reports, we have discussed the value of ensuring that racially minoritised characters have the opportunity to inhabit a range of literary genres to enable them to become a meaningful part of the literary mainstream. These are welcome gains that we hope will be consolidated and built upon over time.

We also observed some interesting patterns emerging in terms of the types of narrative coming through within the fiction submissions that provided scope to further broaden the realities conveyed through literature.



Everyday Realities

To reflect realities through literature is to provide scope for the normalisation of the meaningful presence of well developed, multi-dimensional racially minoritised characters across all genres and text types. *Joyful Joyful: Stories Celebrating Black Voices*, a collection of short stories and poems from 40 Black writers and illustrators thoughtfully curated by Dapo Adeola, is a powerful example of how realities can be well reflected. Adeola goes to great effort to ensure that the stories are varied in content, theme, style, aesthetic, cultural references and depictions. By centering thoughtfully developed Black characters in this way the collection challenges typically monolithic representations of Black characters in children's literature and offers an uplifting antidote to limiting, skewed or problematic portrayals.

Comedic Realities

We record the genre of each fiction submission to determine the types of narratives in which racially minoritised characters are located. This enables us to ascertain whether there is a disproportionate amount of presence in one type of narrative over another. In the first report of this series, we observed that only one title out of the entire set of submissions reviewed could be classified as a comedy title. It is really heartening to have seen an increase of presence in this genre over time and to be reporting that comedy titles made up 9% of the fiction submissions in this cycle. Having the opportunity to laugh with characters whose lives,

experiences and identities resonate has the capacity to powerfully enrich the reading experience. The investment in this genre has meant we continued to enjoy reviewing new titles in the Burhana Islam series in the form of *The Dastardly Duo*, illustrated by Farah Khandaker, and the highly acclaimed Zanib Mian Planet Omar series, *Planet Omar: Ultimate Rocket Blast*, illustrated by Kyan Cheng.

Diasporic Realities

This is a strand of identity that will be integral to the lived experience of so many readers in the UK. What it means to be part of a diaspora will mean and manifest differently from person to person. It is a distinctive reality shared by so many in different ways and so despite the uniqueness of each person's experience, there will be commonalities within and across diasporic groups. Creating quality narratives that centre characters of a diaspora can provide affirming insights into the realities for young readers and help to expand understanding of what it means to be from more than one space.

The review team had the pleasure of reviewing a number of titles that could be classified in this way, each offering invaluable windows into such lived realities. Serena Patel's *Picture Perfect*, illustrated by Louise Forshaw, embodies an example of this type of reality very well. It captures the multifaceted, intergenerational dynamics of the Gupta family with great heart and authenticity.

We reviewed thoughtfully rendered titles such as Aisha Bushby's moving *Flash of Fireflies*, which explores the challenges of adjusting and fitting into a new culture. We read Kiran Millwood Hargrave's *Leila and the Blue Fox* which sensitively explores a young girl's struggles with immigration, loss of identity, and her relationship with her mother.

We encountered titles that sought to channel comedy as a means of exploring British East Asian experiences. This included titles such as Sue Cheung's light-hearted *Maddy Yip's Guide to Holidays* and Maisie Chan's *Keep Dancing Lizzie Chu*. The latter adeptly manages to weave lighter moments into complex and challenging themes and subject matter.

We also reviewed titles from the prolific author Kelly Yang. *Room to Dream*, *Key Player* and *New from Here* offer important insights into contemporary Chinese American experiences through their moving and sophisticated explorations of identity and belonging against a backdrop of rampant racism and xenophobia.

Books like Yang's and A.M. Dassu's *Fight Back* which boldly tackles themes of extremism, Islamophobia and community activism with heartfelt sensitivity are important in helping young readers navigate the very real pain that stems from ignorance and prejudice.

Each title within this category contributes an important addition to the mosaic of lived realities that combine to reflect the breadth of realities of all readers.

International Realities

Well written stories located in countries outside of the UK offer young readers tickets to new places and cultures. How these spaces are portrayed will shape impressions and sow seeds of associations. Such titles bear the necessary responsibility of ensuring that they avoid compounding problematic portrayals that may exist in other art forms or media output. They must offer nuanced, balanced and honest insights at their heart whilst wrapped in page turning narratives.

A selection of titles in this category excelled in this brief. Atinuke is a key and leading contributor in this regard. Her latest addition to the Too Small Tola series, *Too Small Tola Gets Tough*, illustrated by Onyinye Iwu, skilfully exemplifies how a writer can use their craft to offer young readers broad and varied insights into the lives, cultures and societies of another country. Through this series, readers experience the rich

diversity of characters, religious groups, social classes, neighbourhoods and communities that make up Tola's world in Lagos, Nigeria.

Chitra Soundar is an equally prolific and important figure in this regard. Her important contributions in this cycle come in the form of *Sindhu and Jeet's Missing Star Mystery*, illustrated by Amberin Huq, and *Sona Sharma A Friend Indeed*, illustrated by Jen Khatun. Both titles offer readers fantastic ways into experiencing contemporary India. The first title, a mystery adventure set in Chennai, India is packed with cultural detailing and references in both the text and illustration that add texture to the narrative. The latter title achieves the same standard and, in both instances, Soundar captures the distinct personalities and styles of each of her characters and through her considered attention to detail immerses readers in life in India.

Kereen Getten's title for older readers, *If You Read This*, is set in Jamaica and like Atinuke and Soundar does a fantastic job of channelling her craft to transport readers abroad. Through her writing she brings the beauty and culture of Jamaica to life through her well developed, multifaceted cast of characters whose nuanced relationships are woven together to provide readers with the gift of an engaging story.

What felt like an emerging pattern in some of the books reviewed within this category was titles that were reminiscent of a Blytonesque style. Sabine Adeyinka's *Jummy at the River School* is a mystery adventure set in a prestigious boarding school in Nigeria. This was a brilliantly engaging story, led by a strong relatable protagonist that amongst other things explored the complexities of social class and girls' rights to education.

Varsha Shah's *Ajay and the Mumbai Sun* illustrated by Sonia Albert also shared the same sense of camaraderie and adventurous spirit, but in this instance set in India and told from the perspective of a group of street children. Through this title, the review team were treated to a phenomenal feat of storytelling. Shah not only offers young readers an invaluable insight into the intricacies of social class, complex political dynamics and the global interconnectedness of systemic exploitation but she does so through a cast of layered and complementary characters, all wrapped up in a fast paced, compelling narrative. Both debut authors, Adeyinka and Shah are exciting new contributors to this growing category adding important contributions to the body of work of the talented likes of Atinuke, Soundar and Getten.

Historical Realities

As we have discussed in previous reports, there has been a growing trend in recent years regarding the production of historical fiction that reimagines, reframes and counteracts the traditional erasure or marginalisation of the presence and perspective of racially minoritised figures and communities. The review team gained important insights from Sufiya Ahmed's invaluable contribution to this genre through *Rosie Raja: Churchill's Spy*. Ahmed has been steadfast in her commitment to shining a light on South Asian female figures, both imagined as in the case of Rosie and real life as featured in her title *My Story: Princess Sophia Duleep Singh*.

Adventurous Realities

Going on adventures should form the bedrock of every childhood. It encourages children to indulge their curiosity, take risks, test resolve and build resilience. An increasingly risk averse society can result in manufactured fun taking precedence and sanitising childhood experiences, meaning that opportunities to get lost in an adventure become less available to a lot of children. The adventurous spirit can be further diminished if the casts of characters they encounter in the literature they consume are not representative or inclusive. Adventures with comedic undertones like Lenny Henry's *The Book of Legends: What if all the Stories Were Real?*, illustrated by Keenon Ferrell, Serena Patel's *Anisha, Accidental Detective: Fright Night*, illustrated by Emma McCann; and Mystery Adventures like Sharna Jackson's *Peak Peril* and Sophie Deen's *Agent Asha: Operation Cyber Chop* all centred on racially minoritised characters.

The Lizzie and Belle Mysteries: Drama and Danger, written by J.T. Williams and illustrated by Simone Douglas, is a fast paced, high drama, historical mystery adventure. Its galvanising spirit and considered substance demand the attention of the reader. J.T. Williams is an important and promising new voice whose work adds much richness to the literary space.

All of these titles each invite readers to go on an adventure alongside central characters whose backgrounds are seamlessly woven into the narrative in meaningful and relatable ways.

Fantastical Realities

As with comedy, fantasy was another genre in past review cycles that has particularly suffered from under-representation within its casting. We are pleased to be reporting that in this cycle, fantasy formed almost a quarter of the fiction submissions. This is likely to in part be due to the 'Wakanda Effect' which in fact was preceded by the growing appetite resulting from highly successful titles like the YA title *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi in 2018.

The seemingly trickledown effect of this meant we reviewed a great array of titles within this genre including a new addition to Maisie Chan's Tiger Warrior series, *Tiger Warrior: Rise of the Lion Beast*; and Malorie Blackman's fantasy adventure laced with comedic elements in the form of *My Friend's a Gris-Kwok*.

We observed a number of fantasy titles that drew on folklore and mythology from a range of regions, ideologies and religions, from titles influenced by West African mythology such as Jamar J. Perry's *Cameron Battle and the Hidden Kingdoms*, to titles that drew on East African mythology in Shiko Nguru's *Mwikali and the Forbidden Mask*. Patrice Lawrence's exceptional gothic fantasy adventure *The Elemental Detectives*, set in London, draws on a breadth of influences and cultures from West, Central and South Africa that infuse this rip-roaring adventure.





Other titles that drew on religious ideologies and traditions included the Hindu mythology that informed Roshani Chokshi's *Aru Shah and the Nectar of Immortality* and titles like M.T. Khan's *Nura and the Immortal Palace* which was steeped in references to jinns and tricksters of the Islamic world.

SF Said's *Tyger*, illustrated by Dave McKean, has all the elements touched on in this section and more. It is a genre defying title of epic proportions. It is a layered, historical, socio-political, mythical, dystopian, fantasy adventure, addressing complex themes of identity and belonging and grapples with the deep existential challenges of our times. It beautifully pays homage to and draws inspiration from classic literature including William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. And has all the hallmarks of being a contemporary classic in its own right.

By drawing on the range of literary ideologies and traditions across space, time and cultures from around the world through the medium of fantasy, these titles create broader pathways into and out of new stories, providing young readers with richer and more varied and sophisticated reading experiences.

Magical Realities

There is real necessity and value in ensuring the meaningful presence of racially minoritised characters within every genre. This allows historical erasure to be challenged and counteracted through the normalisation of this presence, and in doing so provides templates of possibility for young readers. Lola Morayo's *Aziza's Secret Fairy Door and the Birthday Present Disaster*, illustrated by Cory Reid, is a simple and effective example of this. This being the third title in the series in of itself highlights an important investment that allows young readers who might enjoy Aziza's exploits to keep coming back for more. Aziza is the central character within a multicultural cast of characters. Throughout

the story, she is portrayed as having agency, driving the narrative and taking risks, whilst engaging with others in a variety of ways.

Subverted Realities

Subversion as a feature of children's literature is not new. There are many titles that play with tropes or genres, explore different perspectives and reshape narratives accordingly. Through this review cycle, we encountered a number of stories that centred racially minoritised characters and worked to subvert key aspects of the fairy tale genre. We reviewed Joseph Coelho's spookily delightful *Creeping Beauty*, illustrated by Freya Hartas, which offered a humorous, poetically expressed take on a much-loved classic. Kirsty Applebaum's *Princess Minna: The Enchanted Forest*, illustrated by Sahar Haghoo, is a story led by an assertive, empathetic, adventurous princess who was far from any association with the typical damsel in distress archetype. Similarly, Radiya Hafiza's *Rumaysa Ever After*, illustrated by Rhaida El Touny, offered a fresh take on a familiar fairytale. The central character is a courageous, compassionate, resilient and driven Muslim girl who will stop at nothing to find her parents. The deliberate choice to cast racially minoritised, multi-dimensional characters as protagonists and locate them in genres from which they have been traditionally excluded serves as an additional layer of subversion. This powerfully challenges entrenched norms and expectations and inspires the expansion of imaginations.

Whilst as with past review cycles we continued to encounter fiction titles that were not as considered in their inclusion of racially minoritised characters, we were heartened by the increase of volume combined with the interesting variation of narratives. We enjoyed many more quality titles produced by fantastically talented writers and hope that publishers continue to invest in this talent to sustain these important gains.

Reflections and Recommendations

The first report in this series highlighted the dearth of presence in children's literature and provided simple [recommendations](#) to help address this. The second report identified the ways in which racially minoritised characters were rendered visibly invisible as articulated through the lexicon and glossary of terms we developed, defined as [degrees of erasure](#). The third report outlined the [exemplary features](#) of inclusive literature that we encountered as a means of helping to guide work in this area. The fourth report discussed the growing disparity between the growth in presence

in picturebooks and non-fiction compared to fiction titles. The fifth report reiterated concerns about the distinctions between the text types and encouraged more careful consideration, emphasising the importance of ensuring consistency in the quality of portrayals.

The questions for consideration to that we detailed in the fifth report and have repeated here for your reference remain valid and should continue to be drawn on to inform thinking both in terms of the production and curation of ethnically inclusive children's literature.



Questions to Guide Considerations

Determining Meaningful Presence

- Do the racially minoritised characters featured in the books we publish/stock reflect the UK population and the world at large, not as a tick box exercise but as a meaningful and accurate representation of the interconnected, diverse society within which our children are growing up?
- Are racially minoritised characters central to a broad range of narratives?
- Do racially minoritised characters exist across a range of genres and within both fiction and non-fiction?
- Are there a variation and balance of themes explored in the titles in which racially minoritised characters feature?
- Have you been attentive to the position that a racially minoritised character holds in the narrative? What position does the character hold? What is the dynamic within the cast? What is the extent of their agency and contribution to the plot?
- Have careful research and consideration been exercised to ensure respectful, nuanced and layered portrayals of racially minoritised characters?
- Are racially minoritised characters well developed and authentically portrayed?
- How effectively are their being and personality conveyed?

Ensuring Breadth and Balance

- Are readers able to encounter varied portrayals of racially minoritised characters, depicted with a range of personalities and represented as experiencing a full spectrum of emotions in the books you produce/ stock?
- Is the content of our titles balanced, allowing for cultural specificity without reducing characterisations to derogatory stereotypes or one-dimensional shorthand?
- Have we assessed the balance of our output/ stock to ensure that characters of colour are not predominantly defined by their struggle, suffering, exceptionalism or 'otherness'?

Valuing the Creatives

- Is there a sustained investment in both established and new authors from a range of backgrounds who are able to paint characters and worlds with the integrity that the subject matter deserves? Does your output/ stock reflect this diversity of talent?



The wide array of realities extrapolated across the three text types we reviewed for this year’s report indicate an exciting broadening of representations available to young readers. In many instances the commonly shared themes and genres of these titles mean that the types or categories of realities can have a tendency to overlap. A book focused on historical realities can also have elements of diasporic, adventurous, subverted, and intersectional realities. Over time there will also be many more types of realities that we would hope to encounter. Therefore, these labels are only helpful in so far as the extent to which they encourage producers and consumers of children’s literature to consider whether the books that children have access to feature this breadth of realities. We hope that by defining the breadth of varied representations within each text type, this illustrates the ways in which books can serve as a prism. They do so by offering readers the opportunity to bring the light of themselves to each book and with every encounter deepen their understanding of themselves and the world around them through the spectrum of light created by their interaction with

the range and breadth of sophisticated reflections of realities.

The term Reflecting Realities should be understood as an overarching term that embodies all aspects of our lived realities. In better understanding the breadth and variation of different types and combinations of realities, creators of children’s literature can move on from the common surface level presence we encountered in the early phases of this work towards the more nuanced and varied multi-dimensional characterisations we have enjoyed in a number of titles submitted in this latest cycle. We encourage publishers and creatives to build on the traction of the recent years and continue to strive towards improving the volume and quality of choice available to young readers. Finally, we hope by taking the time to explore the layers of representation we encountered in this cycle, that Reflecting Realities becomes less of a phrase and more of guiding principle for not only publishers but also care givers, teachers and librarians, in the quest for better access to high quality representative and inclusive literature.



Acknowledgements

Steering Committee

This work was led by Farrah Serroukh from CLPE in consultation with a Steering Committee of leading experts in publishing and education who included:

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Their collective wealth of experience, expertise and contributions in informing this process have been invaluable.

We are tremendously grateful to all those involved in this enormous undertaking. This work would not have been possible without the invaluable support and contributions of a range of individuals and organisations.

Thank you, Sarah Crown, Franziska Liebig and the team at [Arts Council England](#) for your continued support of this research and funding this work as part of your ongoing commitment to better representation in the arts and across all sectors. We are grateful for the information and support provided by colleagues at Nielsen. We would like to thank Tom MacAndrew and Liz Scott for their support throughout the process.

We would like to extend special thanks to Marcus and Sarah Satha co-founders of [Inclusive Books for Children](#) (IBC) for their kind donation towards the publication of this report.

Thank you to the review team who meticulously reviewed each and every title, the fantastic staff and students at City University; Bailey Odom, Eva Afework, Fatima Tasneem, Kamila Gutke, Krishna Sawant, Mariya Khan, Misha Rozhan, Nicole Baracho, Paula Aamli, Roann Gutierrez, Sacha Tanna, Sarah Allen Sutter, Shreya Sengupta, Sian Fletcher and Sophia Schloegl. We are tremendously grateful to Fathima Ali for her invaluable support as project manager and research assistant.

Thank you to the wonderful team at CLPE: Anjali Patel, Charlotte Hacking, Darren Matthews, Jamie Wright, Jonathan Rodgers, Louise Johns-Shepherd and Phoebe Demeger. We would also like to express special thanks to Holly Tonks and Patrick Brindle, whose support with recruiting students for the City internship was fundamental to the success of this year's review process. And we'd also like to thank the wider CLPE staff and Trustee team for their unwavering support.

The illustrations used in this report are reproduced with the kind permission of Chanté Timothy. We are truly grateful for her support and generosity.

Thank you to the authors, illustrators, poets, teachers, researchers, booksellers, activists and advocates who have continued to support this work and champion the principles that drive it.

The goodwill and continued participation of the UK Children's Publishing industry demonstrates a genuine commitment to better representation in children's literature. Thank you for your engagement with this initiative and we look forward to continuing to work in partnership with you on this collective enterprise.

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HEY-CHAN-TE

“It is beyond a doubt that the biggest outcome of this thoughtful, sustained, methodical research has been the increase in well drawn, authentic, representations in children’s books. Forty years on, we finally feel we can pick our books from the very best of the best!”

Dr Fen Coles, Co-Director Letterbox Library, est. 1983

“Representation is the core of our operations at Round Table Books CIC and the Reflecting Realities Report provides authoritative evidence to support our work. Inclusive stories alter how we think, revolutionising our perceptions of who can be heroes and have superpowers or adventures. Each consecutive Reflecting Realities Report has perfectly mirrored the conversations we have with our communities. The discourse regarding inclusion and representation is ever-evolving and the report provides necessary observations, statistics and analysis adding nuance to the current landscape.”

Meera Ghanshamdas, Co-Director Round Table Books, est. 2019



If you have any questions about this report please contact CLPE:

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This research has been funded by Arts Council England.