

JUNE | 2019



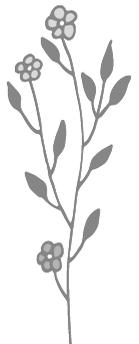
ALL YOUNG STORIES:  
DIVERSE VOICES IN STORYTELLING

*Panel Script*

BOO SUJIWARO

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

HOW & WHY I WRITE	3
WHERE INSPIRATION COMES FROM	4
DON'T GET CONFUSED BY THE SCENERY	5
DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS: THE STATISTICS	6
ACCURATE REPRESENTATION: WHY IT MATTERS	7
ADVOCATING YOUNG STORIES	8
WORKS CITED & OTHER INTERESTING READINGS	10



## I. HOW AND WHY I WRITE

Stories taught me how to live — I learned from books how people interact, how they think, how the things they feel translate into body language.<sup>1</sup> The questions I've had growing up, the answers I've revised repeatedly over the years, the lives I've lived in the pages of books have shaped me into the person I am today.

I write for children because I know how hard growing up can be. When you are young, everything you feel, see, hear is so much more immediate, so much more vibrant, and as exciting as that sound, it can also be equally terrifying. Your life changes every single day when you are young — at every new fact you learn about the world, at every new street corner you discover; a lake is as big as an ocean, and a walk in the park is never just a walk in the park. I write for children because I want to be there for them. Stories were there for me when I had nothing else.

At the core of every good fiction is the human experience. I know this because Asperger's has turned my whole life into one arduous attempt at determining the parameters of the human condition, its limits and its universality. I spent my formative years searching for an answer to one question: *what makes a human a human?* I've read widely to this end; I wanted desperately a manual that would help me navigate and interpret the absurdity of the neurotypical world. I wanted to live safely within its confines in the hopes that one day I'll become as human as everybody else.

This reflects in my fiction which examines the human condition from the perspective of someone on the outside looking in. These days, it is to the conclusion that not only are our differences reconcilable but also that our faculty for reconciling these differences determines the extent to which we *are* human.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, a person who clenches their fists is an angry person, and a person who keeps checking their watch is a person who needs to be somewhere else.

Stories have taught me how to understand people, and writing has taught me how to connect. These days, when I look at the world, I can finally see the people in it, which has made me feel a lot less angry, and a lot less alone.

I am genuinely happy for young people growing up in this time, because there is more awareness now, and there are people fighting for them so that their voices can be heard. I don't think I can ask for a better time to be alive in; since I was born in a less accepting world, I now get to truly appreciate the positive changes that are being made.

Thank you for showing people like me that the world *does* care, and that we don't have to figure it all out all on our own. I have no doubt that because of everybody's kind efforts things are going to keep changing for the better.

## II. WHERE INSPIRATION COMES FROM

Because I always gravitate towards fantasy when I write, it sometimes comes as a surprise to people that I get my inspiration from ordinary everyday experiences.

For instance, in the summer of 2017, an idea found me on the train from Devonshire. I was seated at the table seat with a boy named Connor, his mum and his nan. Connor had ASD.

His nan and I were playing Sudoku when Connor turned on a restaurant game on his iPad. We were in the quiet coach, so the other passengers weren't too happy; a man rustled his newspapers in our general direction, the women across the aisle side-eyed us. So Connor's mum muted the iPad, which made Connor burst into tears.

He cried, "But sound makes people *peopler*."

So a fantasy story about the mysterious and magical people called the Peopler is definitely on my to-write list. Usually my ideas don't have as

definite an origin as this one, but bits of fantasy, breadcrumbs that lead to the extraordinary, can usually be found in the humdrum and the everyday.

### III. GENRE IS JUST A FLAVOURING—DON'T GET CONFUSED BY THE SCENERY<sup>2</sup>

It is possible to treat serious subjects with levity *and* the respect they deserve. I write fantasy as a way to satirise, manage and process real-life dilemmas so that they feel conquerable and so that the solutions to them seem somehow within reach.

As a BAME writer, racist ghosts are easier to deal with, to humourise and to exorcise than actual racist people. That a boy was killed due to his sexual orientation is tragic and cruel. That this same boy was killed and then clawed his way back to this world because he *still* wants to go on living despite how his first life ended is a point for marvel that puts hope back in the reader's heart.

Good fantasy doesn't trivialise the tragedy, it simply gives power to the reader by helping them gain a measure of control. This sense of control enables them to process the harsher facts about their world with the understanding that they *can* do something about it — to prevent it from happening to someone else, to call it out for what it is if/when it happens to them.

What the grownups tend to forget is that children *already know* that there are monsters — fantasy simply teaches them that monsters can be beaten.<sup>3</sup> In the case of *Morgue*, the boy who came back from the dead, the tragedy and the fantasy are essentially the same story. The only difference is the writer's decision whether to make the reader's heart bleed or beat. In my experience, good fiction does both. Fantasy simply presents us with a

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<sup>2</sup> Terry Pratchett, *A Slip of the Keyboard* (London: Corgi Books, 2015), p.171. 'In any case, genre is just a flavouring. It's not the whole meal. Don't get confused by the scenery.'

<sup>3</sup> *Slip of the Keyboard*, p.173.

different lens through which to examine and to question the reality in which we live.

#### IV. DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS: THE STATISTICS

The CCBC<sup>4</sup> recently released the statistics on diversity in children's books that were published in the US in 2018. Out of all the children's books published in that year, only 23% were about children of colour. And it turned out that there were actually more books written about *animals* than about BAME<sup>5</sup> people. 1% of children's books were about Native American characters, 5% were about Latinx characters, 7% were about Asian characters, 10% were about African/African-American characters. But 27% of children's books published in the US in 2018 were about animals. 27%. That's more than all of the books about BAME characters *combined*.

Bleaker still are the UK figures. According to the report by the CLPE,<sup>6</sup> only 4% of UK children's literature published in 2017 featured BAME characters, and only 1% had a BAME main character. This means that out of *over* 9,000 books published in 2017, only 90 of them adequately represent young BAME readers. This is an issue because 32% of children in England are of minority ethnic origins, but only 1% of the books aimed at them *actually represent* them.

And I'm sure that the figures are even bleaker for neurodiverse stories that accurately represent people on the spectrum. The lack of representation, and the misrepresentation by the mainstream culture, is a problem because it creates unnecessary stereotypes which does more to alienate people on the spectrum than to advocate any positive awareness.

It is important that neurodivergent people see themselves represented *accurately* in the pages of books and on screen, and not merely as a punchline, not as comic relief, not as a plot device to propel a neurotypical narrative,

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<sup>4</sup> CCBC, 'Publishing Statistics on Children's Books about People of Color' (2019)

<sup>5</sup> BAME stands for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

<sup>6</sup> CLPE, 'Reflecting Realities: Survey in Ethnic Representation in UK Children's Literature 2017' (2018)

but as human beings with equally valid problems, equally dimensional lives, the same as everybody else.

To achieve this we have to stop assuming that neurotypical, straight, white readers lack the capacity to empathise with people who aren't neurotypical, straight, or white. If we can relate to a bunny rabbit, a talking mouse, an orphaned deer, we can relate to our fellow human beings.

## V. ACCURATE REPRESENTATION: WHY IT MATTERS

We want to believe that the creative industry operates within a meritocratic framework because it paints a nice picture of reality. But it also happens to be a lie — a harmful one, because it implies that marginalised members of a given industry are the ones to blame for the lack of opportunities, the double-standards, the misrepresentations, the prejudices they face. That BAME authors aren't getting the recognition and the same opportunities as white authors because they haven't earned it is a dangerous misconception.

Moreover, there is a tendency in fiction to confuse diversity with identity. People who aren't part of a given minority community can, of course, write about marginalised characters all they want, but what we, as an audience, really want is *accurate representation*.

So it is important not only for diverse stories to exist, but also that there are stories told by diverse people. To enable more diverse voices to be present in the creative process, the audience, and the gatekeepers, have to stop holding marginalised members to a different standard — for instance, stop expecting a writer with autism to write only about what it's like to be autistic, or a queer or BAME author to write only serious, depressing pieces about being queer or not-white. We can't expect them to keep doing that for the same reason we don't expect neurotypical, straight, white authors to write only serious, depressing, sociological pieces about what it's like to just *be*.

As authentic as you want our fiction to be, the more you must understand that life isn't just one genre — we can't keep writing a eulogy.

Understand that by expecting diverse authors to tell only stories about the experience of being treated *less than*, you aren't actually assuring us that our views are valid. Instead you are putting us in an excruciating position where we have to keep re-hatching painful experiences because that's the only conversation you are willing to have.

No one should be asked to keep validating their existence. Hear us anyway regardless of the stories we tell. Let us show you a funny story, a mystery, a fantasy, an action scene through *our* lenses. You will be surprised with what you find. Old ideas might just ride in on the back of a joke. New ideas might well be given an added edge.<sup>7</sup>

## VI. ADVOCATING YOUNG STORIES

We should listen with the desire to understand, not to dismiss. Oftentimes, young stories are discredited and dismissed because the grownups forget what it's like to be a child — the joy you used to feel from getting a gold star sticker, the sheer terror of witnessing a dismembered hand reaching for the coins in your fist when you were too small to see over the countertop, and too young to know that the hand belonged to a person behind the cash register.

The grownups are the gatekeepers, which means they can be our most powerful advocates or our biggest obstacles. I know I speak as if I'm not actually 24 years old and am therefore technically an adult, but I think that even the real adults also sometimes feel that there are people who are *more* adult than them. Usually, those people are the ones we desire approval from — they are people in positions of authority, people who get to decide whether or not what we do is relevant. They are our gatekeepers.

And, in turn, to the young people whose lives are affected by the decisions we make, we are also their gatekeepers. We can enable diverse voices to be present in creating, sharing and recording stories by showing

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<sup>7</sup> *Slip of the Keyboard*

them that their voices *are* relevant, and that the things they have to say matter. Listen with the desire to understand as the first, and not the last, goal.

Stories, at their best, can help reconcile our differences by showing to us that there's no one right way of looking at the world. Diverse stories put us into the hearts and minds of characters who aren't at all like ourselves, so that we may see that they aren't as unlike us as we were made to believe.<sup>8</sup> After all, the human condition is universal.



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<sup>8</sup> Peter Selgin, *179 Ways to Save a Novel: Matters of Vital Concern to Fiction Writers* (2010)



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- Pratchett, T., *A Slip of the Keyboard: Reflection on Life, Death and Hats* (London: Corgi Books, 2015)
- Selgin, P., *179 Ways to Save a Novel: Matters of Vital Concern to Fiction Writers* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2010)

## OTHER INTERESTING READINGS

Below are some of the more recent readings which have impacted and resonated with me as a writer, and as a person. These authors have eloquently put into words the things I myself struggle to explain. While you most definitely will have read/seen some of these works, I hope that the rest will be useful and interesting to you.

## ON FANTASY LITERATURE AND THE GENRE DEBATE

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## ON CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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- Lewis, C. S., 'On Three Ways of Writing for Children' (1952), in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, W. Hooper (ed.) (San Diego: Harvest Books, [1966] 2002)
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## ON COMMUNICATION ACROSS DIVERSITY AND CULTURE

- Hall, S., 'The Question of Cultural Identity', in *Modernity and Its Futures*, S. Hall, D. Held and T. McGrew (eds) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 274–314
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- Nisbett, R. E., *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently—And Why* (New York: Nicholas Brealey, 2003). Kindle eBook.

## ON NEURODIVERSITY, WRITTEN BY NAOKI HIGASHIDA

- Higashida, N., *To My Colleagues Living on This Planet - この地球にすんでいる僕の仲間たちへ* (Kisarazu, Chiba: Escor, 2005)
- , *The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism*, English translation by Keiko Yoshida and David Mitchell (New York: Penguin Random House, [2007] 2013)
- , *Fall Down 7 Times Get Up 8: A Young Man's Voice from the Silence of Autism*, English translation by Keiko Yoshida and David Mitchell (New York: Random House, [2015] 2017)



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Boo was born in Bangkok, Thailand where she grew up ghost-hunting and learning the English alphabet. She studied Fashion Design at the Accademia Italiana before going on to read English with Creative Writing at Keele.

Having lost half a decade of her life roaming hospital wards as a forced-medicated zombie, Boo has developed a very understandable fear of time running out.

Now as a time racer, she enjoys hoarding books, volunteering at charity events and making people feel uncomfortable with her traumatic childhood stories.