Evaluating Authenticity in Literature for Young Adults:
A guidebook for YALSA Award Committees[1]

In consultation with chairs of the following committees[2] (Coretta Scott King, Pura Belpré, Sydney Taylor, Schneider), along with resources from the American Indian Library Association, the Asian/Pacific American Library Association, and the Purdue Online Writing Lab, the following guide has been created to help committee members ensure that full attention is paid to representation of characters and settings in order to avoid awarding narratives containing blatant stereotypes and harmful depictions.

What is Authenticity?

"Cultural authenticity is an analysis of the extent to which a book reflects the worldview of beliefs and values and depicts the accurate details of everyday life and language for a specific cultural group. Given the diversity within any cultural group, however, there is never one image of life within a group, which means that themes and underlying ideologies are often more significant for analysis" (https://wowlit.org/links/evaluating-global-literature/evaluating-literature-for-authenticity/).

The following topics, questions, and appendices can be useful when thinking about the complexity of cultural authenticity and intersectionality when it comes to sensitive and responsible representation.

Additionally, it should be understood that sometimes certain representation in both fiction and nonfiction may seem problematic by today's standards, but their existence in literature could be for a specific purpose of critique, in which case, it is up to your committee to have thoughtful, critical discussions about such portrayals. So be sure to take into account the time period of the text, as well as the representations of gender, sexuality, race, class, (dis)ability, etc.

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[1] **Compiled by the 2019 Awards Oversight Committee:** Robert Bittner (Chair), Betsy Fraser, Laura Giunta, Charlie Gluck, Katie Richert, & Joel Shoemaker.

[2] Consultation with committees and committee chairs did not include discussion of any confidential information from previous deliberations. Oversight Committee members each consulted with a past chair and also looked at the Division or Association's existing guidelines to look for ideas and to gauge current gaps. Consultations with the chairs was used to better understand whether or not conversations about race, class, gender, sexuality, etc., in relation to authenticity were taking place at all and if so, to what extent.

Literary qualities

This refers to the formalistic components of a book, which are already commonly spelled out within YALSA awards criteria. These elements include: Voice, style, setting, theme, and design. Further components that require deeper cultural competency are: Characters and voice.

Characters and voice

Are characters being portrayed realistically, fully, and respectfully? Or are they being included for a specific purpose, as a tool rather than a person? "Disability is used to mark characters as 'unique,' and it is sometimes what prompts a narrative in the first place; however, few works develop complex perspectives about disability (Mitchell and Snyder 10)". Similarly, depictions of Native American characters tend to focus on stereotypes based in colonial history, relying on narratives of white saviors and savages. For the purposes of literary evaluation on your given committee, consider the following questions (see the Appendix for more examples):

- How is disability represented in the literature? How is normalcy reinforced?
- Is disability just a catalyst for the narrative?
- In what ways do disability, gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and class intersect?
- How are disabilities like blindness tied to "Truth" or deafness to communication within a literary work? What symbolism is attached to disability?
- Do non-white characters exhibit a wide range of positive and negative human emotions, behaviors, reactions, and lifestyles?
- Are racial and ethnic minorities portrayed as successful problem solvers rather than dependent on white saviors?
- Are Black, Latinx,[3] Asian, Native American, and other non-white cultures portrayed as diverse or homogeneous? What about LGBTQ+ people?
- Are American Indians in historical texts portrayed as human beings and members of highly defined and complex societies?
- Do LGBTQ+ characters or non-white characters only exist within the narrative to provide learning opportunities for cisgender and/or heterosexual characters?

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[3] While the use of Latinx as a term is relatively new, and while we recognize that it is still being debated by scholars and Spanish speakers as an acceptable replacement, we are using it in order to be inclusive of non-binary people. Using the term, Latinx allows us to avoid the binary that comes from the use of gendered terms Latino or Latina.

- Are sexual/gender minority characters subject to the same expectations of romance and sexuality as their straight/cisgender counterparts?
- Do characters speak in dialect? Does that dialect have a legitimate purpose?
- Is the dialect representative of real-life ways of speaking for certain groups or has it been made up? If it has been made up, does it contain elements of stereotypical or racist depictions from real life?
- Does dialect only come into play with regard to lower class individuals or those with less education?
- How are different languages incorporated into the text?
- If non-English words are used, are they spelled and used correctly?
- Do characters engage in code-switching,[4] and if so, is it done respectfully and effectively?

Accuracy of details and authenticity of values

What are the inaccuracies within the details of the book, if any? Have historical events been changed to suit the narrative? What values are at the heart of the book? How do these values connect to the actual lives of people within the culture? Does this book reflect a specific cultural experience, or could it happen anywhere? As a committee, it is necessary to exercise due diligence and research the people, cultures, and situations being portrayed if there is a lack of existing knowledge in the area.

> *The Sydney Taylor committee chair notes, "We definitely rule out books that have actual inaccurate information. Such as a book where they make latkes for Rosh Hashanah. Latkes may be delicious, but within general Jewish observance, no one would be making Latkes for Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year)."*

Additionally, in relation to Science Fiction/Fantasy texts, authors often take a fair amount of liberties with world-building, especially with how hierarchies and cultures are built, and how race, gender, and sexuality, class, etc., play into this—because of this freedom to create worlds that may purport to leave our own culture and history behind, when diversity is present, does it resonate/perpetuate our own cultural norms, and if so why?

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[4] Code-switching, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is "the practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in conversation." An effective example of this is *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017).

Perspectives and power relationships

Whose perspectives and experiences are portrayed? Who is telling the story? Which characters are in roles of power or significance within the book? Who has agency? These questions are important when it comes to portrayals of gender/sexual/racial minority characters and characters with disabilities. Because minorities are sometimes still depicted as unable to exist in their own right, outside of an overarching white/able-bodied/cisgender context, it is useful to be attentive to these dynamics within books under consideration. We do not include these questions in order to prescribe a "correct" way of reading, or to note that there is necessarily a proper way to depict certain characters, but rather to encourage committee members to consider how these depictions may play out in the context of the questions of authenticity noted under *Characters and voice*.

Conclusion:

As with so many other questions or concerns that may come up throughout your committee work, you should always feel welcome to reach out to your Oversight liaison. In addition, you or your committee chair should feel free to find experts in particular fields, to ask general questions—with confidentiality in mind, of course—about things that may not seem authentic or that may seem to fit into a problematic stereotype.

Future re-evaluation:

In order to ensure that the guidelines have a chance to be used and assessed in relation to committee work, and also to ensure that the guidelines are able to be updated as necessary, we suggest a re-evaluation of the guidelines every three years.

Additional Resources:

Curwood, Jen Scott. "Redefining Normal: A Critical Analysis of (Dis)ability in Young Adult Literature." Children's Literature in Education 44.1 (2013).

Bonfiglio, Chontelle. "Code Switching – A sophisticated linguistic tool." Bilingual Kidspot. https://bilingualkidspot.com/2018/04/04/code-switching-sophisticated-linguistic-tool/

"Critical Disability Studies: 1990s to Present." Purdue Online Writing Lab. https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/literary_theory_and_schools_of_criticism/critical_disability_studies.html

APPENDIX:

This list of situational examples should be considered in the context of each committee's deliberations and should not be used as a checklist or as the only areas of consideration. This list of examples for consideration were prepared by the Oversight Committee in consultation with individuals from within YALSA as well as via social media and other collaborative online spaces.

- In a book set in contemporary America, it would be odd to have no people of color present within the narrative in some context, particularly if the book is set in a large urban centre. This is something to consider after numerous discussions around whitewashing in contemporary YA literature over the last decade.

- Books with multilingual content sometimes include non-English language in italics or through a repetition of the phrase in English. While this is sometimes done as a form of education, it can also be seen as "othering" non-English speakers within a given narrative.

- A lack of definitions or translations in the back matter of multilingual texts is not necessarily negative as many young readers are able to assess meaning through context clues, or are able to find relevant information from other sources.

- Code-switching, such as in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, is a context-specific way of speaking that has been read as awkward by those outside of Black communities, but it is a skill that has become necessary in various situations over time and in different locations. Books using code-switching may be best considered through a non-Anglocentric lens.

- In a book featuring a character with a disability, it is beneficial to take notice of disability representation, asking questions like, "Is the disability a part of the character, or simply a vague characteristic?" Or, "Is the disability or person being referred to with outdated or pejorative slang, and is it contextually appropriate (i.e. with relation to time frame and location)?"

- When a book is referencing celebrations, holidays, or traditions from a culture that is unfamiliar, it is sometimes necessary to explore the factual correctness and examine possible instances of cultural appropriate. For example, Cinco de Mayo is often confused for a

celebration of Mexico's Independence Day, which is actually in September. Cultural appropriation can include mentions of pinñatas, sombreros, or sugar skulls which may indicate the confusion of another holiday—in this case Dia de los Muertos—with cinco de Mayo.

- Fantasy fiction featuring settings and people based on real life cultures, places, and peoples, can sometimes end up utilizing stereotypes, particularly when portraying non-European-style cultures as primitive or savage; the same can be true with regard to historical fiction and stereotypes based in cultural biases. It is important to consider these stereotypes and examine them within the context of the novel and through the lens of cultural authenticity.

- LGBTQ characters have historically been relegated to secondary status, and they are often confined to roles such as the "gay best friend," or are included only as a foil for cisgender or heterosexual characters. When assessing novels with LGBTQ characters, it is critical to look at the role of gender and sexul identity and its use within the larger context of the novel (i.e. Does orientation replace personality and depth? Are they being referred to through homophobic or transphobic terminology on a consistent basis?)

- Each religion has its own customs, traditions, celebrations and rules. When reading novels about certain religious traditions, it can be beneficial to compare the representation against contemporary and historical religious traditions in the real world. As noted earlier, in the context of Judaism, it is not uncommon for some traditions to get conflated.