

#WeNeedMirrorsAndWindows: Diverse Classroom Libraries for K–6 Students

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Bishop, 1990, p. ix)

Bishop's analogy of mirrors and windows is an important one for educators to think about, no matter the demographics of the schools in which we teach. Books have the potential to entertain, foster a love of reading, and inform while also affirming the multiple aspects of students' identities and exposing them to the values, viewpoints, and historical legacies of others. The mission of the We Need Diverse Books (n.d.) grassroots movement, which began in 2014, is to put "more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children" (para. 2). Although this movement may have recently led to a renewed focus on the importance of diverse books, it should be noted that this issue has been an important one for many years, especially for librarians and educators of color such as Charlemae Rollins, Pura Belpré, Effie Lee Newsome, and Rudine Sims Bishop. They all recognize the importance of children being exposed to diverse reading material.

In this column, I provide suggestions for educators on how to develop diverse classroom libraries. These ideas and suggestions are also applicable for school and public librarians. I focus on diversity using a two-pronged approach, the first of which is cultural diversity with attention to factors such as race, class, and disability. The second focus is diversity in regards to genres and subgenres.

Cultural Diversity

The main types of cultural diversity that I reference are race, class, and disability. Other important cultural markers, such as language, sexual orientation, and religion, are equally important; books related to these additional markers are included in a recommended sample listing (see Table 1).

Racial Diversity

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (<https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison collects statistics about the number of books published annually that are written by and about people of color. Although the numbers are bleak, when one goes back several years looking for notable books written by and about people of color, there are enough available and in print for teachers to have an adequate supply of books in their libraries. This is not to say that there is not a need for more children's books written by and about people of color; rather, there are books available for now to begin sharing and using with students.

One way for teachers to be aware of notable books written by and about people of color is to become familiar with race-based awards such as the Coretta Scott King Book Award (www.ala.org/emiert/ckbook awards), the Pura Belpré Award (www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpremedal), the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature (www.apala.org/awards/literature-awards), and the American Indian Youth Literature Award (ailanet.org/activities/american-indian-youth-literature-award). It should be noted that these race-based awards were created because, for many years, authors and illustrators of color have not received the most prestigious awards, such as the Newbery and Caldecott medals and honors awarded by the American Library Association (ALA). For example, the Newbery Medal has been given

Table 1
A Sampling of Recommended Diverse Literature, Alphabetized by Author

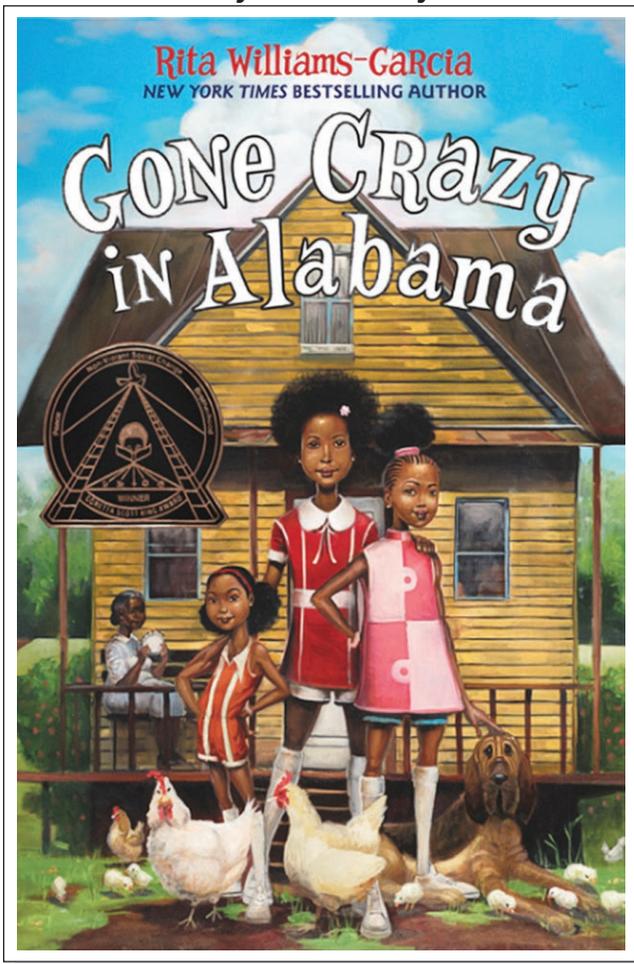
The books listed here include recently published titles as well as older titles and a few classics—with an emphasis on culturally diverse literature—that I believe belong in K–6 classroom libraries. There are other titles (e.g., *Pink Is for Blobfish*) included that are not necessarily culturally diverse but that I believe children will enjoy reading. In short, this sampling of books is a microcosm of what I would consider to be an exemplary classroom library that is inclusive in regards to cultural identity markers (e.g., race, class, gender), as well as genres and subgenres.

- *From the Bellybutton of the Moon and Other Summer Poems/Del Ombligo de la Luna y Otros Poemas de Verano* by Francisco X. Alarcón
- *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander
- *Thunder Boy Jr.* by Sherman Alexie
- *The N°1 Car Spotter* by Atinuke
- *Whoosh! Lonnie Johnson's Super-Soaking Stream of Inventions* by Chris Barton
- *Zora and Me* by Victoria Bond and T.R. Simon
- *Redwoods* by Jason Chin
- *Job Site* by Nathan Clement
- *Everett Anderson's Goodbye* by Lucille Clifton
- *Uptown* by Bryan Collier
- *Bigmama's* by Donald Crews
- *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis
- *Martina the Beautiful Cockroach: A Cuban Folktale* by Carmen Agra Deedy
- *Rrralph* by Lois Ehlert
- *Nikki & Deja* by Karen English
- *Chickadee* by Louise Erdrich
- *Comets, Stars, the Moon, and Mars* by Douglas Florian
- *Maximilian & the Mystery of the Guardian Angel: A Bilingual Lucha Libre Thriller* by Xavier Garza
- *Ice Cream: The Full Scoop* by Gail Gibbons
- *George* by Alex Gino
- *Honey, I Love and Other Love Poems* by Eloise Greenfield
- *Make Way for Dymonde Daniel* by Nikki Grimes
- *Tuck Me In!* by Dean Hacoheh and Sherry Scharschmidt
- *M.C. Higgins, the Great* by Virginia Hamilton
- *Extraordinary People: A Semi-comprehensive Guide to Some of the World's Most Fascinating Individuals* by Michael Hearst
- *Look Book* by Tana Hoban
- *Biggest, Strongest, Fastest* by Steve Jenkins
- *Julius* by Angela Johnson
- *Can I Tell You a Secret?* by Anna Kang
- *Pink Is for Blobfish: Discovering the World's Perfectly Pink Animals* by Jess Keating
- *Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns: A Muslim Book of Colors* by Hena Khan
- *The Grand Plan to Fix Everything* by Uma Krishnaswami
- *Pool* by JiHyeon Lee
- *March: Book One* by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell
- *National Geographic Book of Animal Poetry: 200 Poems With Photographs That Squeak, Soar, and Roar!* edited by J. Patrick Lewis
- *Ling & Ting: Not Exactly the Same!* by Grace Lin
- *Uncle Peter's Amazing Chinese Wedding* by Lenore Look
- *The All-I'll-Ever-Want Christmas Doll* by Patricia C. McKissack
- *Walking on Earth & Touching the Sky: Poetry and Prose by Lakota Youth at Red Cloud Indian School* edited by Timothy P. McLaughlin
- *The Gumazing Gum Girl! Chews Your Destiny* by Rhode Montijo
- *Niño Wrestles the World* by Yuyi Morales
- *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball* by Kadir Nelson
- *Thunder Rose* by Jerdine Nolen
- *Bill Pickett: Rodeo-Ridin' Cowboy* by Andrea D. Pinkney
- *The Adventures of Sparrowboy* by Brian Pinkney
- *Songs From the Loom: A Navajo Girl Learns to Weave* by Monty Roessel
- *Tomorrow's Alphabet* by George Shannon
- *Keeping Corner* by Kashmira Sheth
- *Snapshots From the Wedding* by Gary Soto
- *I Love My Hair!* by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley
- *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor
- *Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin* by Duncan Tonatiuh
- *Polar Bear's Underwear* by Tupera Tupera
- *Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World* by Mildred Pitts Walter
- *Before John Was a Jazz Giant: A Song of John Coltrane* by Carole Boston Weatherford
- *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia
- *Visiting Day* by Jacqueline Woodson
- *The Twins' Blanket* by Hyewon Yum

annually since 1922, but as of the 2016 awards, only four books by African Americans had received it: *M.C. Higgins, the Great* by Virginia Hamilton, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor, *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis, and *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander.

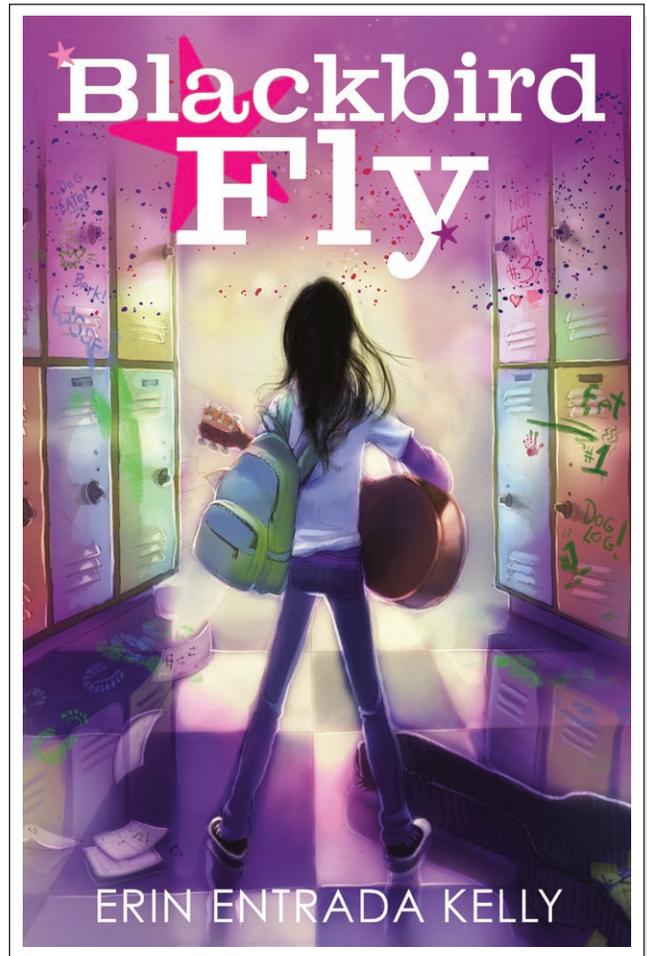
Giving race-based awards brings attention to some titles that might not receive as much attention otherwise. For example, in 2015 and 2016, there were several outstanding books that received a race-based award, including *Gone Crazy in Alabama* by Rita Williams-Garcia (see Figure 1), *I Lived on Butterfly Hill* by Marjorie Agosin, *Blackbird Fly* by Erin Entrada Kelly (see Figure 2), and *In the Footsteps of Crazy Horse* by Joseph Marshall III (see Figure 3). Were it not for race-based awards, these titles would not have received major prizes.

Figure 1
Cover of *Gone Crazy in Alabama* by



Note. From *Gone Crazy in Alabama*, by R. Williams-Garcia, 2015, New York, NY: Amistad. Copyright 2015 by HarperCollins. Reprinted with permission.

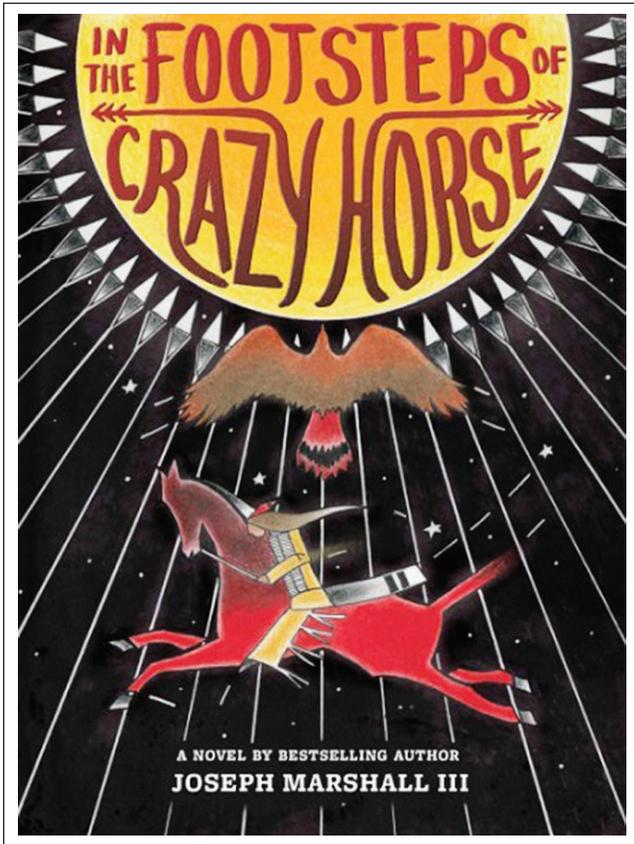
Figure 2
Cover of *Blackbird Fly* by Erin Entrada Kelly



Note. From *Blackbird Fly*, by E.E. Kelly, 2015, New York, NY: Greenwillow. Copyright 2015 by HarperCollins. Reprinted with permission.

The Coretta Scott King Book Award is given to African Americans who write exceptional books about the black experience. The award, which has been in existence since 1970, has created a canon of high-quality books for teachers to choose from. The Pura Belpré Award, named after the first Latina librarian in the New York Public Library, is given to “a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth” (Association for Library Service to Children, n.d., para. 1). The American Indian Youth Literature Award honors exceptional writing by and about American Indians, and the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature honors books about Asian/Pacific Americans. In addition to shining a light on particular award-winning titles each year, the

Figure 3
Cover of *In the Footsteps of Crazy Horse* by Joseph Marshall III



Note. From *In the Footsteps of Crazy Horse*, by J. Marshall III, 2015, New York, NY: Abrams. Copyright 2015 by Abrams. Reprinted with permission.

awards introduce authors and illustrators to the children's book world. Although authors and illustrators are unlikely to win an award each year, learning about them when they do win can lead educators to seek out other titles that the winning authors and illustrators may produce over the course of their careers.

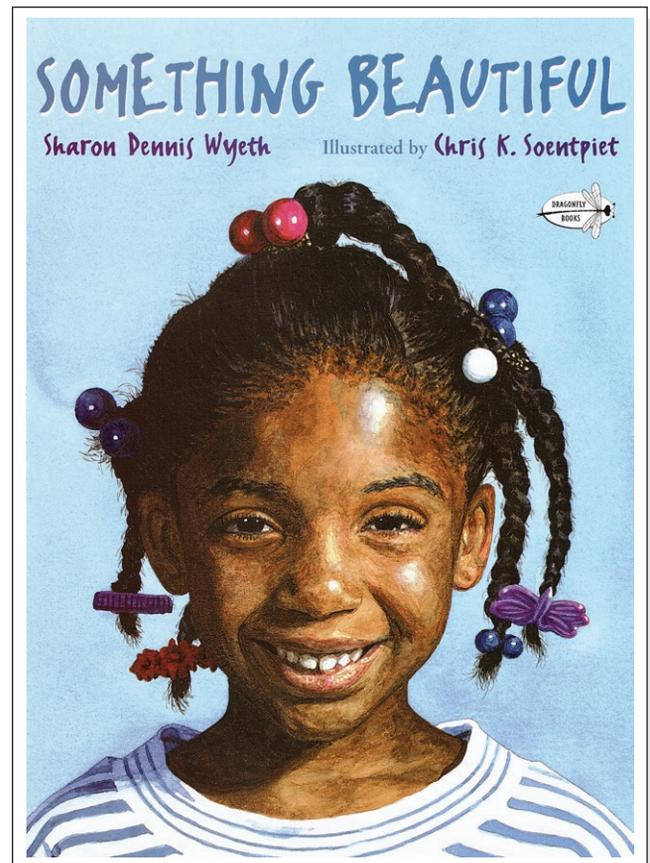
Class

Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later) and other family stories by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard feature middle and upper class African Americans who were teachers and medical doctors in the early 1900s. The depiction of African Americans as professionals is important for children to see and recognize that African Americans can be members of various socioeconomic groups. However, not all children are middle or upper class, and they too should see their experiences reflected in books. Although there are certainly challenges directly related to poverty, there

are books that show poor people in positive and realistic ways as caring about the communities in which they live and members of those communities.

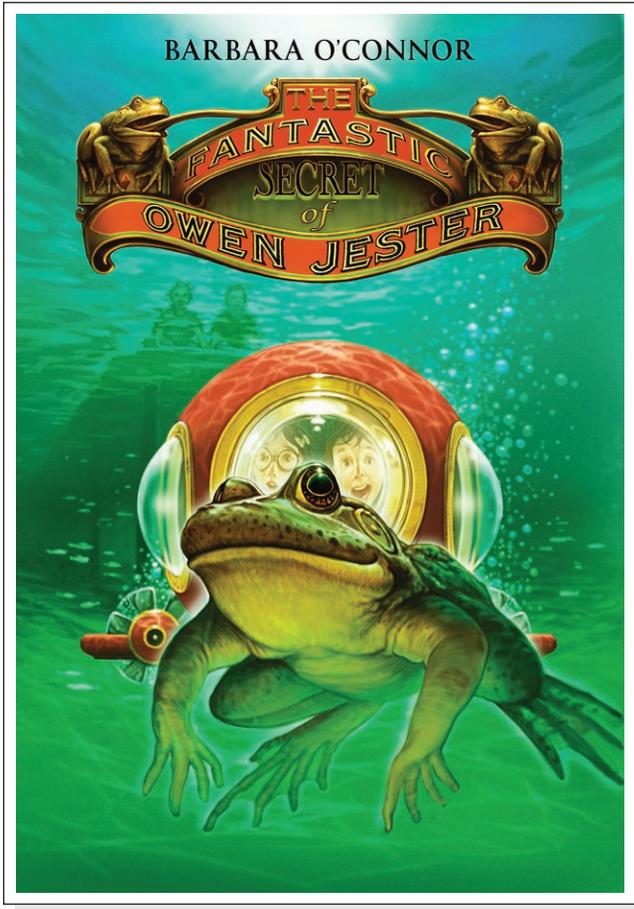
One example of such a book is *Something Beautiful* by Sharon Dennis Wyeth (see Figure 4), about a girl who lives in a neighborhood that has many low-income families. After learning about the word *beautiful* in class, she goes in search of "something beautiful" in her community. At first, she only sees a homeless woman and some graffiti, but with the help of people who live in her community, she soon sees that there is beauty there, too, and that she is also able to make it more beautiful by removing the graffiti, for instance. *DeShawn Days* by Tony Medina is a collection of poems about a boy who lives in the projects, and then there is *My Very Own Room/Mi Propio Cuartito* by Amada Irma Perez, about a girl who lives with a large family in a small, crowded house and dreams of having her own quiet space. Barbara O'Connor has written a number of notable

Figure 4
Cover of *Something Beautiful* by Sharon Dennis Wyeth



Note. From *Something Beautiful*, by S.D. Wyeth, 1998, New York, NY: Dragonfly. Copyright 1998 by Random House. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 5
Cover of *The Fantastic Secret of Owen Jester* by Barbara O'Connor



Note. From *The Fantastic Secret of Owen Jester*, by B. O'Connor, 2010, New York, NY: Square Fish. Copyright 2010 by Macmillan. Reprinted with permission.

middle-grade novels (e.g., *How to Steal a Dog*, *The Fantastic Secret of Owen Jester*; see Figure 5) with characters who are a part of poor or working-class families. Reading widely and paying attention to issues of class as they appear in books is one way for teachers to select and include in their classroom libraries children's books that depict a range of socioeconomic groups.

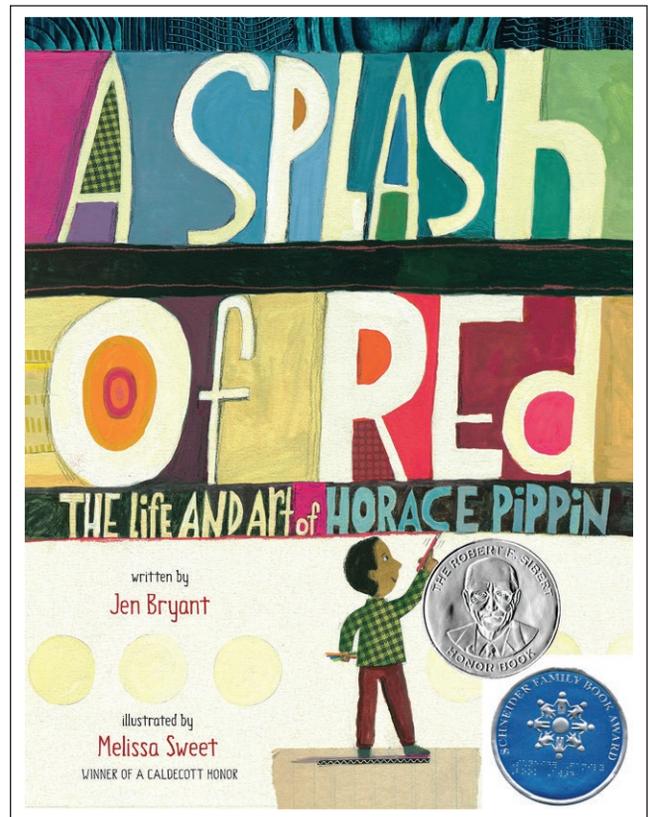
Disability

The Schneider Family Book Awards (www.ala.org/awardsgrants/schneider-family-book-award), given annually by the ALA (n.d.), "honor an author or illustrator for a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences" (para. 1). The award is given to books in three categories: picture books, middle-grade novels, and young adult novels. One picture

book exemplar is *A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin* by Jen Bryant (see Figure 6), documenting the artist's ability and determination to continue painting after he was shot in one arm during World War I.

As there are multiple aspects to our identities, there are also a number of ways in which we can see ourselves reflected. For instance, a Latina/o child and an African American child could both be autistic. Reading a book like *Rain Reign* by Ann M. Martin, about a fifth grader with autism, could be a mirror in regards to disability but not necessarily race because the main character seems to be white. This is one example of why it is no easy task to fill classroom libraries with books that will function as both mirrors and windows for as many students as possible. Schneider Family Book Award winners over the years have featured characters with a range of disabilities, including autism, dyslexia, blindness, an inability to speak, and clubfeet.

Figure 6
Cover of *A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin* by Jen Bryant



Note. From *A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin*, by J. Bryant, 2013, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf. Copyright 2013 by Random House. Reprinted with permission.

as others, such as the Schneider Family Book Award, that are not. Numerous professional organizations, such as the International Literacy Association, NCTE, and ALA, give awards. Consider tuning in to watch the ALA's annual Youth Media Awards announcement. It's an exhilarating experience for those of us with a passion for children's literature. Thousands of librarians attend the ALA midwinter conference and are able to be present at the press conference while others across the country watch a live webcast of the proceedings. The press conference usually lasts about an hour, with the Newbery and Caldecott medals—considered the organization's oldest and most prestigious—saved for last to build excitement. Learning about the various awards presented and each year's winners serves as one important way in which we can make sure that our collections of books—whether we are educators, teacher educators, or librarians—are diverse in a number of ways.

Finally, to stay informed about notable titles being published, consider subscribing to reputable magazines that review books, such as *The Horn Book Magazine* (www.hbook.com) and *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (bccb.ischool.illinois.edu). Reading reviews will allow for consideration of race, class, disability, religion, genre, and other factors.

Conclusion

Although it may be challenging to take on this task, the benefits are worthwhile. It is also important to remember that simply putting these books in our libraries is not enough. Reading them and sharing our enthusiasm with students is essential so they will seek out these books in the libraries. Having a diverse collection can support all students in finding

titles that they can read and connect with on some level while affirming their own cultural identities and hopefully developing important positive insights about others. We all need mirrors and windows in the books that we read.

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The department editor welcomes reader comments.



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