

Tearing Down Walls: The Integrated World of Swedish Picture Books

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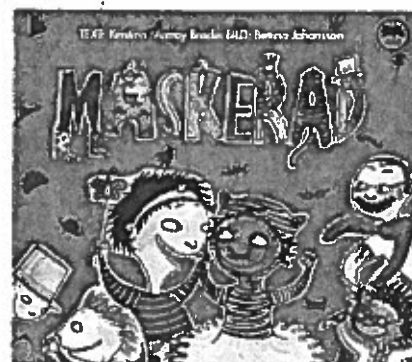
The daughter of an anthropologist, Laura Reiko Simeon's passion for diversity-related topics stems from her childhood spent living all over the US and the world. She fell in love with Sweden thanks to the Swedish roommate she met in Wales while attending one of the United World Colleges, international high schools dedicated to promoting cross-cultural understanding. Laura has an MA in History from the University of British Columbia, and a Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Washington. She lives near Seattle.



As the Librarian and Diversity Coordinator at a school with a global population, my guiding vision is that the books I offer must be both mirrors that reflect children's lives and windows that open up new worlds. This is a challenge when the small percentage of children's books in English showing people of color is largely restricted to stories of oppression far removed from my students' daily lives of homework, soccer, and wishing for a puppy. Of course it's important to be aware of injustice, but it sends a powerful message if we *only* show racial diversity in settings of suffering and conflict.



While "diversity" is not generally the first word that comes to mind when Americans think of Sweden, today fully 20% of Swedes are either immigrants or children of immigrants, many from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Combine this with Swedes' commitment to children's rights and a vibrant literary and artistic community, and you have the perfect setting for stimulating debates and boundary-pushing creativity.



A grant from the Swedish Institute allowed me to visit Stockholm last year to interview librarians, authors, illustrators, publishers, and teachers about how recent picture books reflect their multicultural society. During my visit I learned about a fundamental distinction between their approach to diversity and our own. There is a concerted effort to publish works of artistic and literary merit, free from heavy moralizing, that express a child's perspective and tear down the walls that segregate people of color into a few categories: civil rights hero, the downtrodden, and token exotic friend.

There is a firm belief in Sweden that the problem in stories *must be about something other than differences.* Marie Tomacic, of the Swedish multicultural publisher OLIKA, explained that when the problem in the story is the fact that a boy is playing with a doll, that sends a very different message from a book where the boy's choice of a doll is unremarkable and the conflict "emerges from the play itself," such as arguing about what scenario to act out.

This is why recent Swedish picture books that show ethnic diversity involve conflicts about ordinary, universal topics such as sharing. Several authors who are passionate about diversity proudly told me that if you were to read the text alone, you would never know that the illustrations in their books showed characters of many races. Often it's even hard to tell exactly what ethnicity characters are meant to be. The Swedish Institute for Children's Books monitors and publishes detailed data about gender – but not race – largely because of this ambiguity.



from *Bridget and the Gray Wolves* by Pija Lindenbaum

Gunna Gråhs, a prolific author and illustrator, writes about a multicultural

Swedish suburb where immigrants from several continents pursue ordinary daily activities such as buying lottery tickets or helping a neighbor who forgot to feed his cat. For decades Siv Widerberg has written stories in which multiethnic groups of children build sandcastles at daycare, collect sticks in the woods, and more. Anna Bengtsson shows characters with different ethnic backgrounds going to the hairdresser or playing in a pile of snow. Similarly, Eva Lindström, Lena Anderson, Eva Susso, Pija Lindenbaum, and many other **Swedish writers are revolutionizing children's literature simply by bringing people of color out of the margins and into the mainstream of daily life.**

This is not to say that Swedes have arrived at a place of perfect enlightenment. Many of them admire our willingness to publish children's books that explicitly talk about prejudice, since history and culture have made this topic uncomfortable in their own country.

Controversy erupted in Sweden 2012 over Little Heart, a character intended to reclaim and empower the pickaninny stereotype. There was also heated debate about whether hip hop artist and children's culture advocate Behrang Miri was justified in moving *Tintin in the Congo* to the adult section of a library. In response to these painful incidents, Professor of Illustration Joanna Rubin Dranger has been working on improving Swedes' visual literacy around racial stereotypes through her fascinating School of Images.

Yet recent research supports a significant benefit of the Swedish approach: **when children read books featuring racially integrated groups of peers doing fun things together, it has a lasting positive impact on their play with members of other races.** (This was not the case when they read diverse books showing members of just one race.) The bad news? There are so few of these types of books that likely "most American children have rarely or never seen a cross-race friendship depicted in a picture book."

What can we do without access to most of these wonderful Swedish books? We can bring greater intentionality to how we choose diverse books. We can search for and purchase books that show diversity as a natural and positive aspect of daily life. We can discuss the implicit and explicit messages in diverse books with young readers, helping them learn to read with awareness. Children deserve more from their diverse books: let's start tearing down those walls.

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