

Let's Talk About Race in Storytimes

Athena Szeto¹

¹*School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, aszeto1@ualberta.ca*

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Book Information

Jessica Anne Bratt, *Let's Talk About Race in Storytimes*, ALA Editions, 2022, ISBN: 978-0-8389-3789-1, 112 pages, \$49.99 USD.

Libraries are centres of lifelong learning with storytimes serving as a staple in library programming, utilizing songs and books as support for early childhood development with staff facilitators providing tips for parents to set their children up for future success. With growing calls for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives across many fields, libraries are also making changes to better support Black and Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC) patrons and staff to create safe and welcoming community spaces. However, while there have been many conversations and trainings organized around EDI in recent years, little of that has been geared towards young children despite scientific evidence demonstrating that by ages 4-5 children are already able to identify and repeat racial biases that they have learned through exposure (Bratt, 2022).

Jessica Anne Bratt works at the Grand Rapids Public Library as the Director of Community Engagement and Outreach, while also creating and facilitating training sessions for discussing race in storytimes. Her book *Let's Talk about Race in Storytimes* (2022) is a written version of her live training sessions. Featuring stories of Bratt's own childhood, as her parents educated her and her brother on the aspects of

Black history that go unacknowledged in mainstream media and education; along with research on childhood development; and Bratt's own experiences with facilitating discussions on race in her work, this book encourages library staff to consider how implicit biases and dominant cultural norms influence library programming and how to encourage productive and healthy conversations about difficult topics of race and diversity.

Bratt's book encourages the reader, through interactive activities, to consider their own understanding and comfort levels with race and facilitating conversations about it. It addresses common concerns and fears that a facilitator may have on the topic, such as offending a patron or saying the wrong thing. To address such concerns, Bratt emphasizes the need to acknowledge the feelings of the other party and apologize genuinely if necessary, utilizing a transformative justice approach of making amends and learning from mistakes. Bratt also addresses concerns that white library workers may have, emphasizing that addressing EDI is a task shared amongst all workers and should not be a burden carried solely by racialized staff.

EDI work is no easy task, which Bratt acknowledges, but is necessary for libraries to live up to their reputation as community centres of democracy, equality, and access to information. Throughout the book, Bratt does an excellent job of emphasizing the necessity of the work and the importance of self-care during the process. Bratt discusses how becoming comfortable with discussing race is a process, occurring through ongoing reflection, learning, and challenging oneself to step beyond one's comfort zone. She highlights the importance of having a support system and offers many suggestions for facilitators to employ with their coworkers to develop ideas, receive feedback, and even roleplay worst case scenarios that may arise. Additionally, Bratt stresses the necessity of being kind to not only oneself but others as well throughout the process, as everyone is working through different experiences and potentially traumas.

Throughout the book, Bratt's calls to action are backed up with tangible actions that can be undertaken by the reader. For example, Bratt points out that discussions around race and diversity are difficult not only for facilitators but for caregivers as well, who may struggle with having conversations on the topic with their children and expect

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that those conversations will be handled by other individuals, for better or for worse. Bratt provides practical talking points, affirmations, and even example sentences that facilitators can use to model these discussions for caregivers to use, such as talking positively about and normalizing differences between people of different races, nurturing curiosity and appreciation about differences, emphasizing shared commonalities such as love and becoming comfortable with not having all the answers to questions posed by children (Bratt, 2022).

Alongside talking points, Bratt also provides six example storytime templates for different age groups that facilitators can adapt to best suit their styles. The templates suggest activities, phrases, and books that can be used to promote diversity and recognition and acceptance of differences. Additionally, Bratt also lists several books that she recommends for storytimes such as Jabori Asim's *Whose Knees Are These?* (2006), along with her reasoning behind why she chooses certain books over others; for example, do the books show diversity in characters, ideas, cultures, etc.? Do they have appeal factors such as big pictures and interactivity, and do they offer good representation (Bratt, 2022)?

Bratt finishes the book with a series of challenges for the reader to become comfortable with discussing race in storytimes, starting small with featuring books with diverse characters and gradually working towards future challenges, such as asking the facilitators to begin using talking points and modeling healthy discussions around race. The appendix contains an extensive list of resources, such as books, videos, podcasts, and even EDI educators that can help the reader assess both their own and their organization's understanding and readiness for addressing race in storytimes, and where they can reach out for further support.

Recent years have seen libraries grapple with their stance of neutrality and silence on topics of race, transitioning towards a more active approach towards EDI for workers and patrons. Bratt's book, while focusing on having discussions about race in storytimes for children, also provides excellent resources for the reader to become comfortable with discussing race with all age groups. It is, therefore, an excellent resource for libraries to purchase not only for those looking to incorporate EDI into early

learning programming, but also for all libraries that are seeking to encourage conversations around race and diversity both with patrons and staff.

Conflict of Interest Statement

None declared.