

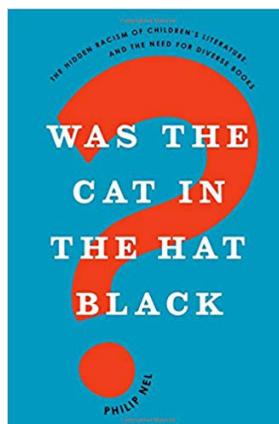
Review/Recension

PHIL NEL

## **WAS THE CAT IN THE HAT BLACK?**

### **The Hidden Racism of Children's Literature, and the Need for Diverse Books**

New York: Oxford University Press, 2017 (278 pp.)



Racism, Philip Nel declares, “is resilient, sneaky, and endlessly adaptable”, and it “endures because racism is structural: it’s embedded in culture, and in institutions. One of the places that racism hides – and one of the best places to oppose it – is books for young people” (1). His very readable volume, *Was the Cat in the Hat Black? The Hidden Racism of Children’s Literature, and the Need for Diverse Books*, begins by exposing the “sneakiness” and “adaptability” that have enabled racism to infiltrate every aspect of writing and publishing for children and adolescents, showing how racism is deeply embedded in book culture and concludes with a very concrete call to arms with a detailed list of the actions needed to end racist attitudes and practices.

The study is firmly planted in an American context: not only are all the books discussed produced by Americans for an American market, Nel also makes frequent references to specific political events, legislation and cultural practices. This is a definite strength as it enables Nel to build his evidence to a crescendo that simply does not allow space for dismissal. And although he is writing for the American market, he models the kinds of approaches that are needed to address problems of racism elsewhere in the world, albeit with some adaptation. The main problem that I find with applying Nel’s study, which focuses on African-Americans, to a Nordic context is his assumption that race is something that can be perceived visually. Freedom of movement within the European Union has led to complex race relations among the Caucasian population as well as between Whites and people of colour. The groups recognised as

“national minorities” – the Sámi, the Tornedalingar, Jews, Romani, Finno-Swedes, Swedo-Finns and Forest Finns – cannot be recognised by visual means unless the individual chooses to mark their membership in the group through their clothing. Racism is just as pronounced in the Nordic countries, but its sneakiness takes different forms.

As Nel repeatedly points out, the prevalence of White characters in children’s books does not reflect the real world. It is estimated that by 2045, Whites will be fewer than half the American population but because racial segregation still functions on all levels of society – most significantly in housing, education and work-places – many Whites do not recognise the racial diversity of their home country. To understand the mismatch between the society depicted in the world of children’s books and the true diversity of America, Nel starts by examining denial. He shows how even very well-intentioned individuals consistently need to be re-awakened to the ways in which racism contributes to their standing in the world. Using his own inculcation into a position of privilege to illustrate his points, Nel enables other White readers – like myself – to recognise our prejudices and the ways in which we have benefitted from structural racism and acted in racist ways.

The first chapter uses the titular character – Seuss’s Cat in the Hat – to unpack both how race is coded to the extent that even individuals like Theodor Seuss Geisel, who actively and openly opposed racism in some contexts, reproduced racist imagery. Nel traces Seuss’s political evolution from reproducing Blackface minstrelsy to confronting racist hiring practices. Importantly, Nel does not allow us to overlook Seuss’s racism, but rather asks us to see it even when it is hidden: the Cat in the Hat, like Disney’s Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse, draws heavily on the caricature, more specifically the minstrel and the conflation of people of colour and animals. By focusing on a beloved author whose works continue to be central to American culture and education, Nel not only shows how pervasive and complex racism is, he also exposes how White fragility functions. White fragility arises from living in a cushioned environment, insulated from race-based stress. Consequently, even a small dose of racial stress – such as the exposure of racist imagery in a beloved childhood book – can trigger disproportionate defensive responses such as anger, fear and stonewalling. The second chapter responds by guiding readers on “How to Read Uncomfortably”.

Uncomfortable readings involve acknowledging that the material gives rise to negative affects: guilt, shame, anger and self-doubt. The place of affect in interpreting texts – reading with feelings as a criti-

cal tool – has become a developed field within gender studies, with critics such as Lynne Pearce, Rita Felski and Elina Valovirta making significant roads into the area. Nel's application of this idea to the reading of children's literature is more modest. Rather than focus on the place of affect in critical evaluation, he draws our attention to an extremist practice: revising classics to remove the racist terminology in an endeavour to reduce the ugly feelings inspired by such texts. His discussion focuses on four classics including Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and revisions such as replacing the word "nigger" with "slave". Nel makes two key points: the first is that this does not solve the problem of racist content. On the contrary, it exacerbates the problem. The n-word is used precisely because it is intended to wound and because it shows a lack of respect. Replacing the word with a job description such as "slave" is often nonsensical, not least because *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is set over a decade after emancipation. Instead, Nel suggests, teachers of classic texts containing overt racism should teach the novel in ways that help White students learn how to read uncomfortably, and use these overtly racist materials as a springboard to reading texts where the racism has been submerged (such as *The Cat in the Hat*). The "How to" of the title signals that Nel is writing to White readers and educators, calling on us to educate ourselves and our White students on our ingrained racism. The chapter also incorporates stories of African American authors coping with depressive feelings, turning away from books precisely because they were all too used to reading uncomfortably. For such readers, Nel reminds us that anger is a healthier, more appropriate response, and encourages educators to make space for such reactions to texts in the classroom.

Nel's second key point in his chapter on reading uncomfortably is to refute the argument that racism in classic works is acceptable because "that was how people thought back then". Nel notes that this argument assumes that "people" refers only to White people: people of colour are far less likely to think (and have thought) that they are less than human. He cites Robin Bernstein who points out that although the proportions of people holding white supremacist or radically egalitarian beliefs may shift over time, "the full set of racial beliefs has remained relatively stable" (78).

The following three chapters explore the idea that "race is present especially when it seems to be absent" (4). This presents a research challenge: how to identify and analyse texts and characters that do not exist. Nel's approach is to combine case studies of specific topics with a wealth of statistics from the publishing industry. Chapter

three is a case study of literature about Hurricane Katrina and its devastating impact on the inhabitants of New Orleans. Even if we set aside the impact of industrialisation and global warming on the strength of Katrina, and treat it as a natural phenomenon, this human tragedy exposed a racist infrastructure; from the failure to care for neighbourhoods that were predominantly home to African Americans to evacuation plans that were reliant on car ownership. The number of African Americans who died as a result of the storm was more than double the number of White victims. And yet, the most celebrated children's film, book app and picture book to come from this event – William Joyce's *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* (2011, 2012) – contains only White characters.

Chapter four continues the theme of erasure by examining the practice of whitewashing: placing White or ambiguously raced characters who can be read as White on the covers of those few books that do have protagonists of colour. Other alternatives include using silhouettes or angles that disguise the characters' racial features. Nel makes a series of insightful arguments about this practice and its impact as it hails, in the Althusserian sense, White readers to the exclusion of all others. He also makes another point which I fear is even more insidious because it is harder to address: the tendency for White readers to imagine characters as White, even when the text contains cues signalling that the character is not. His main example is the character Rue in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008–2010), and reactions to the film where she was played by African American Amandla Stenberg, which he contrasts with the lack of reaction to "olive skinned" Katniss being played by a White actress. This links to the final chapter which focuses on genre. Here Nel uses publishing statistics to show that genres such as fantasy are so strongly the realm of Whites that African American authors, like Zetta Elliott, who do write within this genre are forced to self-publish. Nel's eye-opening statistics expose a form of genre apartheid: African American literature for children is confined to history, realism, non-fiction, biography and poetry. Genres such as mystery, adventure stories and fantasy are almost exclusively the realm of White characters and authors.

Nel concludes with a 19 point list of actions that need to be taken in order to produce anti-racist children's literature, of which one third are addressed to Whites who, as "beneficiaries of White supremacy ... have the strongest moral obligation to end it", and also the power to bring about change (202). Nel's manifesto is both morally just and intensely practical. He states his case clearly, coming at the same

issues from different directions to enable readers, especially White readers, to see how they have adopted default racist thinking. For a White reader, Nel's arguments evoke shame and guilt, but Nel does not allow one to wallow in such feelings. Instead, he directs us on how to transform these feelings and the knowledge he has provided into concrete actions. I have begun.

*Lydia Kokkola*  
*Professor of English and Education*  
*Luleå University of Technology*