
This content analysis study assesses the depiction of multicultural characters in a sample of 22 children’s transitional and middle-grade mystery books published after 1996. Characters of color were evaluated for the prominence of their role in the story and the presence or absence of cultural context and stereotypes among main characters. Most characters were classified as narrators or as non-narrator main characters, and over half of these were written with good cultural context. The one stereotype that appears to persist in this genre is that of impoverished or tragedy-stricken African-American characters; however, an underlying problem is the difficulty of finding enough Asian-Americans, Latino/as, and Native Americans in this genre to conclusively determine whether they, too, are portrayed stereotypically.

Headings:

Detective and mystery stories.

Multiculturalism in literature.

Children’s literature.
DETECTIVES & DIVERSITY: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CHARACTERS OF COLOR IN CHILDREN’S MYSTERY NOVELS

by
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Table of Contents

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 2

Literature Review ................................................................................................................ 4

Methodology ..................................................................................................................... 13

Discussion ......................................................................................................................... 18

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 29

References ......................................................................................................................... 32

Appendix A: Book List ..................................................................................................... 35

Appendix B: Data Table for All Books Studied ............................................................... 37
Introduction

One frequently-cited statistic in fields from education to healthcare states that minority births in the United States were at an all-time high in 2011 – for the first time, fewer white babies were born than babies of color (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). For the public libraries community, this means determining the best way to meet the information needs of an increasingly diverse population. Through working with the youngest members of the population, children’s librarians and school media specialists will face this issue in a very tangible way sooner than other professionals.

Kintsch’s (1988) Construction-Integration model of reading comprehension emphasizes that a reader’s prior knowledge plays a central role in how well text is understood. Described by Duke (2011) as a “virtuous cycle,” the reader’s current knowledge assists in shaping his comprehension of the text. The better-matched the reader’s knowledge is to the context of the material, the easier the text will be to parse…and the easier it will be for the reader to gain new knowledge from it. The knowledge children possess, particularly very young children, is often dependent upon their environment; familiar, everyday experiences are within their knowledge base. It therefore stands to reason that if they are exposed to texts that draw from their everyday experiences, they will get more information out of the text.

For the child growing up in the contemporary United States, those everyday experiences are incredibly varied, yet many of the books available to them are not. The impetus for this project occurred when, in the course of conducting reader’s advisory
with a ten-year-old boy, I tried to think of a famous children’s detective of color. Mystery is a genre I have always enjoyed and one in which I consider myself fairly well-read, yet Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, Nate the Great, Encyclopedia Brown, Cam Jansen, Jigsaw Jones… all the famous names in children’s mystery fiction that came to mind were white. I did not know a single culturally appropriate mystery book I could offer my patron. When Google searches for lists of children’s multicultural mystery books failed to turn up results, I decided it was time to compile one myself – and the task was more difficult than I’d anticipated.

Despite the fact that mystery is a popular fiction genre among middle-grade children, comparatively few titles are available that feature characters of color. Agosto et al. (2003) found that only 13% of middle-grade mysteries reviewed in School Library Journal and Voices of Youth Advocates between 1991 and 2001 featured a protagonist of color. My initial search for mysteries on the Web site of a publisher specializing in multicultural literature turned up a paltry two results. It seems that although these books are indeed seeing publication, they are neither widely publicized nor a common subject of professional projects and literature. In conducting this study, I hope to add to research not only on multicultural children’s genre fiction, but also on children’s mysteries – two topics that could benefit from a closer look due to high demand from the target audience.
Literature Review

Literature about children’s mystery novels is scarce, still more so for literature about multiculturalism in children’s mystery novels. Regardless, through a study of children’s genre preferences and how culturally relevant texts affect reading comprehension, the benefits of increasing representation of children of color in the perennially popular mystery genre becomes more apparent. An overview of literature on traditional elements of the mystery novel for children and how they tie into genre preferences and cultural relevance follows.

Children’s Genre Preferences

Though reading preference studies are popular in the fields of education and literacy, they often (i) focus on preschool children or teenagers (neither of whom are the target audience for the books discussed in this paper), (ii) study differences in general subject matter or topical preferences (such as fiction vs. nonfiction, books with themes of sports or animals with no indication as to whether those books were fiction, nonfiction, picture books, etc.) among genders, socioeconomic classes, and races rather than preferred genres, and/or (iii) are very out of date and do not include genres reflective of today’s offerings. According to the relevant genre studies that have been conducted, however, books with mystery themes appear to be a favorite of middle-grade children regardless of gender. It is less clear, however, how race and socioeconomic class may factor into genre preferences, partially due to the outdated or incomplete nature of available information.
Peter J.L. Fisher (1988) surveyed 207 third- through fifth-grade students in an urban elementary school consisting of black and white students, asking them to rank eleven genres on a four-point Likert scale. He found that although girls and boys tended to prefer different genres overall (boys ranked adventure, sports, and science higher than girls did, while animals, crafts, and fairy tales topped the girls’ lists), mystery scored third out of eleven options on both the girls’ and boys’ list. Looking at overall rankings, mystery was the second-most popular genre among all the children surveyed; when comparing lists by race rather than by gender, mystery was still the second most popular genre. Interest in mystery appeared to be more marked as children grew older, with the gap between it and the first-ranked joke book category narrowing by three-fifths of a point on Fisher’s converted sixteen-point scale. Sturm’s (2003) study of North Carolina children aged two through eighteen found that mystery ranked fifth for girls and fourth for boys on preferred categories for fiction, suggesting that Fisher’s findings for the genre’s popularity remain fairly consistent as children grow older.

Fisher’s is one of the most detailed genre preference studies available, offering a wide and well-defined array of genres and even distribution of subjects where gender and race are concerned. One limitation of this study, however, is that it is twenty-five years old and not reflective of current demographics or today’s children’s literature offerings. For example, fantasy is not included as a genre – a glaring omission in today’s post-Harry-Potter literary landscape. Also, children were identified in the study as black or white, categories not necessarily reflective of today’s increasingly diverse American population.
More recent genre preference studies specifically for third through sixth graders are few and far between, but in their interview-based study of fifth-grade boys’ reading preferences, Farris et al. (2009) compiled an attribute-based list of books that appealed to the subjects of the study. Books that are part of a series and books with action and suspense elements were cited by the boys as two of the attributes they found most appealing in a book. This reinforces other findings that boys like books that they describe as “scary” or “action-packed” (Davila, 2010). Sixteen of the 22 books reviewed for Farris’ study are part of a series or franchise, and as discussed below, action and suspense elements are important features of mystery books for children. This research suggests that mysteries may be a good fit for boys’ reading preferences.

Few recent reading preference studies have been conducted specifically about children of color; of those, most have focused on the preferences of African-American children. Williams (2008) conducted a study of 293 African-Americans aged 8 to 12 in a disadvantaged area of urban Florida, observing their selection of books at a book fair and interviewing a representative sample about their reasons for choosing their books. Seventy percent of participants mentioned looking for a book that was part of a series (with nearly eighty percent of boys exhibiting this behavior), reinforcing Sturm’s (2003) and Farris’s (2009) findings. Forty-one percent mentioned choosing a book because they thought a family member would enjoy reading it. This is consistent with research suggesting that African-American households emphasize family literacy and are likely to choose books (i) with input from multiple family members, and (ii) that more than one member of the household is likely to enjoy (McNair, 2011).
Why Is Diversity Important in Children’s Literature?

Numerous studies show that people are more likely to enjoy and show good comprehension of books that include familiar language, settings, and experiences that they encounter in their everyday lives; that is, if people are able to use existing knowledge to apply context to reading, they will navigate the text with greater facility. Rhonda Garth-McCullough conducted one of the most recent studies on children’s comprehension of culturally relevant books in 2008. She evaluated the reading skills of 117 African-American eighth graders first using a standard reading-level test, then using six short stories – two each told from the perspective of Caucasian, African-American, and Asian-American protagonists. Before reading the stories, the students completed prior-knowledge assessments that represented different experiences reflected within the stories (for instance, one question was “Have you ever ridden a subway with your friends?”). After reading each story, students were given a reading comprehension quiz.

All the students demonstrated a higher level of comprehension of the African-American texts than of the texts written from a Caucasian point of view. Perhaps most significantly, cultural relevance of the text was a better indicator of how well a student would perform on the comprehension test than general reading level (as assessed by the first test). Students who read below grade level but performed well on the prior-knowledge assessment understood African-American texts much more thoroughly than students who read above grade level and performed poorly on the prior-knowledge assessment. This appears to support Luke et al.’s (2011) theory that adapting comprehension instruction to emphasize connections to the real world and cultural context can help disadvantaged students increase achievement in reading. It is also
possible that students were simply more interested in the texts that reflected their experiences; it is well-documented that reading comprehension is greater when the topic is of interest to the reader (Asher, 1979; Duke, 2011).

In order to successfully perform any study using culturally relevant texts, however, one must begin by identifying those texts – no small matter. Even when they attempt to do so, many multicultural books do not present an accurate or authentic perspective of the culture they represent; in other words, it is not as simple as choosing any book that features a character of color. In Willis-Rivera and Meeker’s (2002) study, picture books that dealt with issues of race and culture were evaluated; many had been included on lists of recommended books on these issues, as compiled by libraries and booksellers. The phrasing of the text often indicated that the author assumed the person reading the book was white; most of them, while including characters of color, took place from the perspective of a white character and therefore were not culturally authentic in the same way as the short stories chosen for Garth-McCullough’s study.

Even when one sets authenticity aside in favor of seeking out any representation at all, finding a protagonist of color can be challenging. Agosto et al. (2003) surveyed all middle-grade genre fiction reviewed in two leading journals between 1999 and 2001 in search of books featuring protagonists or major secondary characters of color. A modest 13 percent of mystery novels fulfilled this criterion – and mystery fared better than most genre fiction, with only Westerns and historical fiction boasting a higher percentage of books with characters of color.
What Makes a Good Mystery for Children?

Research abounds on criteria for evaluating a mystery story and criteria for evaluating a middle-grade fiction book, but very little exists for the place where they intersect: children’s mysteries. In *Writing Mysteries for Young People*, Joan Lowery Nixon states that a poorly-imagined mystery can be identified when the detective does almost nothing to solve the problem himself. What he has done is accidental. He merely lets things happen to him, and there is no reason for the reader to cheer him on, to worry along with him, to feel any suspense about what might happen to him or to take pleasure in the solution. There is no real question regarding the mystery and how it might be solved. (p. 21)

Although this might be said for any literature genre, it rings particularly true for mystery fiction, where part of the attraction for a reader might be trying to stay one step ahead of the sleuth character and the anticipation of the next step the detective will take. Billman (1984) agrees, proposing that many children’s mystery books (using Nancy Drew as an example) are more correctly adventure novels wherein the focus is on the protagonists’ activities as the detective work unfolds, rather than on the nuts and bolts of piecing together clues:

Readers match wits with the author, not the characters in the story. When two suspenseful plotlines are introduced in the first chapter, for example, they know (even if Nancy doesn’t) that the distinct plots will eventually intersect. (p. 33)

In this sense, mystery fiction can in fact be predictable and easy for children to follow, despite the moniker. This gives it important common ground with the series, another format popular with children. Many popular children’s mysteries have been serials, from the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys franchises (which have been churning out sequels for more than 80 years) to the contemporary Encyclopedia Brown and Geronimo Stilton.
Another common trope in children’s mystery fiction is that of a child tackling a problem that an adult is not able to solve on his or her own, or that he or she does not believe the child capable of solving. Each of the twenty-two mysteries read for this project included a scene where a parent, teacher, or other authority figure asked the child to stop sleuthing or to let adults handle the situation. Toward the end of the book, an adult occasionally asks the child to take over the situation because they have done well in solving the mystery thus far. Routledge (2001) notes that in the course of their sleuthing, child detectives move between the adult world and the child world – the former being necessary to solve the mystery and the latter being necessary for children to relate to the protagonist. Children are often curious about various aspects of the adult world, and reading a detective book where someone like them solves an adult problem may temporarily make them feel like they are a successful part of it.

**People of Color in Mysteries**

Although they discuss mystery novels for adults, van Fleet’s (2004), McAllister’s (2003) and Ponce’s (1998) articles have the distinction of being three of a very small handful of scholarly articles devoted to people of color in detective fiction. In discussing African-American, Native American, and Latino/a representations in mysteries respectively, the authors touch on the importance of including cultural context in books written for these populations. Ponce (1998) observes that themes of social justice are common among authors of Latino/a mysteries, a natural fit for a literary genre that centers on crime and punishment. Crimes investigated in these books often center on drug smuggling rings and hate crimes against minority groups, and Ponce notes that Latino authors like to set their mysteries in locations steeped in Latino culture, such as
Miami or eastern Los Angeles. Latino detectives and the characters around them often defy stereotype. Ponce cites the eponymous protagonist of Carolina Garcia-Aguilera’s Lupe Solano mystery series, whose independence, loving (but not domineering) family, and dedicated work ethic can be difficult to find in mainstream portrayals of Hispanics.

McAllister (2003) believes that in order to find good Native American mysteries, one must look beyond the mystery genre. Tony Hillerman’s Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn books, centered on a pair of contemporary Navajo sleuths, are cited as good examples of the genre. Unfortunately, McAllister argues, most quality Native American authors are not writing within the mystery genre, and “none of the ‘Indian mystery’ writers, so far at least, has managed to brew the mix of culture, geography, and good story that makes the Chee and Leaphorn books work.” Where there is a good mystery story, there is little cultural authenticity, and vice versa.

van Fleet (2004) observes many of the same attributes in black mysteries that Ponce does in Hispanic mysteries. Many black mysteries focus on uniquely African-American settings and experiences; for example, the protagonist of Gary Phillips’ Ivan Monk series runs his private investigation business from a barber shop, a common gathering space in African-American communities. van Fleet also notes that the black experience is often explored through the mystery cases themselves – color bias (in which light skintones are considered more desirable within the African-American community), interracial relationships, and class conflict are frequent themes. Like Hispanic mysteries, African-American mysteries are usually written by black authors for a black audience.

Although it is a critical point made in all three articles, van Fleet in particular emphasizes the importance of authors who create deliberately black characters that are
steeped in their own culture. In her words, “[In a good black mystery,] being black does not drive the story, but it is impossible to imagine the story from a different point of view, with different characters, in other neighborhoods.” (p. 84) Providing identifiable locations and characters that are integral to the sleuthing – and that can hold the reader’s imagination – can give a mystery atmosphere and immediacy. Ensuring that the audience feels that the setting and characters are believable and relatable helps establish the mystery’s credibility.

It does not seem that many articles have been written specifically about children of color in mystery novels; indeed, only one surfaced in the course of researching this paper. Muse (1999) created a book list of black children in mystery novels, providing an overview of the plot of each. Unfortunately, 15 of the 23 books listed were at least ten years old by the time Muse published the article, offering little guidance to today’s librarian in developing a collection of multicultural mysteries reflecting the experiences of twenty-first century children. No critical analysis of the characters was conducted, and no racial groups other than African-Americans were considered.
Methodology

Although mystery novels can provide many ways for children to immerse themselves in a world where they are on equal footing with (or superior to) adults, this is much more likely to happen if they are able to identify with the protagonist. This does not, of course, depend entirely on the character’s race and gender, but sharing experiences with a character is an important element of a reader taking an interest in him or her – and in the story the book is telling. These experiences are often dependent upon setting, family structure, religion, and other cultural elements, making it preferable that a wide variety of experiences be represented in children’s books. It is particularly important that popular (and therefore widely read) genres, such as mystery, be sensitive to this.

For this study, a content analysis of children’s transitional and middle-grade mystery books featuring child characters of color was conducted. All the books in the study were chapter books and had a Lexile reading level of at least 470. The methodology of latent content analysis (also known as semantic analysis) was used to examine the underlying messages each book sends to the reader through the author’s chosen portrayal of the characters of color. Krippendorf’s (2012) definition of content analysis as “an empirically grounded method [of analyzing recorded text], exploratory in process and predictive or inferential in intent” is particularly fitting for this study; its intent is to understand what underlying messages (if any) about people of color are evident in the books studied.
Research Questions

When creating a list of coded characteristics for analyzing the chosen books, the following research questions were used as a guideline to ensure that the content analysis was specifically targeting issues of race and color in the texts.

1. What, if any, stereotypes of people of color exist in their portrayal in each book?

2. Were characters of color primary characters (i.e., given starring roles) or were they relegated to “sidekick” positions?

3. What was the distribution of characters of color across sub-genres?
   (Examples could be comedy, historical fiction, or realistic fiction.)

4. Are authors of color more likely than white authors to portray characters of color in a positive, accurate, non-stereotypical light?

Sampling

As stated in the literature review, mystery is one of the most perenniably popular genres of transitional and middle-grade fiction. Despite this, few resources exist for locating excellent children’s mystery fiction. Similarly, although there are many resources and pathfinders that collect and review children’s books starring people of color, and even some that are specific to the fantasy genre, there were none that addressed mysteries. Therefore, finding transitional and middle-grade books that fit the mystery genre and included characters of color involved combing lists of books that fit one characteristic or the other. This process started by visiting Lee & Low’s website (a prominent publisher of children’s books starring characters of color) and entering the search term “mystery.” This netted two results (Cat Girl’s Day Off and Wolf Mark, the
latter of which was aimed at a significantly older audience than this study discusses), which were then cross-referenced on NoveList K-8. After reviewing the synopses of these books, NoveList’s tag function was utilized in order to find similar titles. Eight books resulted.

Once this route had been exhausted, it was time to focus on popular series by major publishing houses; many popular children’s franchises incorporate spin-off series of mysteries. By looking at the NoveList records for mysteries released by American Girl Publishing and Apple (a division of Scholastic), five more mysteries for children were discovered. In total, 22 titles were reviewed. No book with a publication date earlier than 1997 was selected; although this excluded some characters of color (such as Doug Hoo in Ellen Raskin’s 1979 *The Westing Game*), the goal was to ensure that books were as relatable as possible to contemporary children. Generally speaking, the books chosen for this study were selected if they fit the criteria because there was a very small pool of books that did so in the first place. For similar reasons, it was not possible to ensure that a wide variety of races and genders were represented in the sample, leading to an overrepresentation of African-American children and girls, and an underrepresentation of boys and Latino/a, Asian-American, Native American, and biracial children. A complete list of the books analyzed is included in Appendix A.

**Unit of Analysis**

There were two units of analysis for this study: the books’ text and their cover art or illustrations where applicable. Using the physical descriptions given in the text and the illustrations/cover art (for books that included them), the following characteristics were coded: name, race, and approximate age of the character; whether there is cultural
context for the character (e.g., is the character’s home life portrayed? are cultural
elements of the character’s race, like religion or language, included?); any stereotypical
activities in which the character is depicted taking part; character’s prominence in the
book (rated on a three-point Likert scale, 1 being background character, 2 being main
character, and 3 being main character where the story was told from the character’s point
of view); sub-genre of the book (if applicable – e.g., historical fiction); and name and
race of the author. Books featuring multiple protagonists are included more than once
within this coding schema to accommodate all the characters.

Next, a second coding schema was created to determine a) whether the character’s
race was in any way tied to his or her identity, and b) if not, whether the character
behaved in stereotypical ways. For example, if an Asian-American character is often
depicted eating with chopsticks, this attribute might be included as an example of a
stereotype if his family and home life are not depicted in order to give context for this
preference. In this case, the character might be described as a token minority. On the
other hand, if some aspect of the character’s cultural life is detailed in order to help give
context to this behavior, it might be a positive example of including cultural diversity in
the book. Stereotypes of racial groups were compiled using several sources, including
Devine & Elliot’s (1995) assessment of University of Wisconsin students’ attitudes
toward African-Americans; Wong et al.’s (1998) definition and subsequent evaluation of
the “model minority” stereotype of Asian-Americans; Kao’s (2000) study of high school
students’ perceptions of black, Asian-American, and Latino teenagers; and Fleming’s
The following key was used to assess all characters scoring a 3 on the prominence analysis. In the case of books where no characters scored a 3, all characters in the book scoring a 2 were assessed via this key.

Cultural Context

1 = family members mentioned, but not introduced (or not mentioned at all). No mention of character’s religious, linguistic, or otherwise cultural heritage.

2 = at least one family member introduced, but relationships not explored. Passing mention of cultural heritage (i.e., “I can’t meet on Saturday – it’s my sister’s quinceanera”).

3 = at least one family member introduced, at least one scene exploring the relationship. Discussion of religious, linguistic, or artistic heritage from character’s perspective.

Stereotypes – Blacks

Athletic; rhythmic (i.e., music, dance); unintelligent; lack ambition; poor; lazy; loud; criminal/violent

Stereotypes – Asian Americans

Good school/career performance; good at math, video games, and computers; self-sufficient; hardworking; socially isolated

Stereotypes – Latino

Lazy; likely to be/become manual laborer; illegal immigrant; poor command of English

Stereotypes – Native Americans

Receive “tribal privileges” from the government; in touch with nature; live on reservations; have intuitive knowledge of “Native culture”

Figure 1: Content analysis key for characters of color in mysteries

Each character was assessed in terms of the cultural context given in the book, then analyzed for the presence of stereotypes. Characters were then separated into two categories – author of same race as character and author of different race from character. (No author of color chose to write about a child of a race different from his or her own.) The purpose was to determine whether authors of color (and specifically authors sharing a cultural identity with a character) were more likely to portray children of color within their cultural context and/or in stereotypical lights. Because all biracial characters found in the books studied identified as white and one other race, they were analyzed using the attributes of the minority racial group with which they identified.
Discussion

Overview

In the 22 books studied, 39 children of color were identified; their ages ranged from 7 to 15, with a median age of 11. Half of the books depicted more than one character of color. Five books featured few or no white characters: Dwayne J. Ferguson’s *The Werewolf of PS 40*, Janet Shaw’s *The Silent Stranger*, Sharon M. Draper’s *The Buried Bones Mystery*, Alexander McCall Smith’s *The Great Cake Mystery*, and Laurence Yep’s *The Case of the Goblin Pearls*.

![Figure 2: Number of characters of color per book](image)

Parents and other adult characters were not included in the total count of characters of color, even in cases where they provided sleuthing assistance to the child detective(s). Child characters that were mentioned in passing were not included, either. Taking Christopher Paul Curtis’ *Mr. Chickee’s Funny Money* as an example, Steven Carter and his friend Russell Woods are counted in the total because they are child characters who are depicted throughout the book. Despite his role in solving the mystery,
Steven’s father is not counted because he is an adult. Nor is Steven’s classmate Andre Warrington, because he does not appear after the first chapter.

Nearly two-thirds of all children of color in the sample were black; of the books that only included one character of color, more than half portrayed an African-American child. No author chose to portray a child of Middle Eastern descent. Of the races that were depicted, Native Americans had the poorest representation; only Kaya’aton’my of *The Silent Stranger* fell under this category, although Suzette Choudoir and Gabrielle Broussard of *Trouble at Fort La Pointe* (categorized as biracial) have partial Ojibwe ancestry. Both books are subcategorized as historical fiction (the books take place in 1765 and 1732 respectively), with settings and experiences not reflecting those of modern Native children.

Gender was not evenly distributed, with 23 girls and 16 boys of color portrayed. Apart from two Asian-American characters and one biracial character, all the boys were black. There was more diversity among the girls, although blacks were still the best-represented group. One female character (Mara Lubin, *The Crazy Case of Missing Thunder*) is illustrated in a way that suggests she may be of color, though the text makes no mention of this. Due to this unclear representation, she is categorized as “Biracial/Other” on all charts in this paper.

![Figure 3: Distribution of male and female characters across races](chart)
Prominence of Characters of Color

On the three-point Likert scale for character prominence described in the methodology section, only two characters scored a 1 (background character). Twenty-two characters scored a 2 (main character, but not narrator), and the remaining 15 scored a 3 (main character and narrator/character from whose point of view the story takes place). Twelve of the characters that scored a 2 appeared in a book featuring a character that had scored a 3. Girls scoring a 3 outnumbered boys four to one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th># (%) Black</th>
<th># (%) Asian American</th>
<th># (%) Native American</th>
<th># (%) Latina American</th>
<th># (%) Mixed/Other</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>13 (59.1%)</td>
<td>4 (18.2%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (9.1%)</td>
<td>3 (13.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10 (66.7%)</td>
<td>2 (13.3%)</td>
<td>1 (6.7%)</td>
<td>1 (6.7%)</td>
<td>1 (6.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Distribution of races across prominence scores

Boys were more frequently depicted alongside other young sleuths of color, especially other boys of color. This did, however, lower the total number of books in which boys of color appeared; the boys were distributed across nine books, while girls appeared in 19 books. Although all sixteen boys solved mysteries with help from other characters of color identified in the study, only ten of the 23 girls did. Similarly, all but three boys worked with other boys of color, while only seven girls sleuthed alongside another girl of color. Four girls (Yasmeen Popp, *Who Stole Halloween?*; Jazz, *The Case of the Stinky Socks*; Tamika Anderson, *Andy Russell, NOT Wanted by the Police*; and Maria Gonzalez, *Scat*) served as sidekicks to white male narrators in buddy mysteries, and an additional three were included in club mysteries narrated by a white character. By comparison, no boys were sidekicks to white narrators, but four appeared in club mysteries narrated by a white character.
Sub-Genres

Most of the books studied did not fall under any sub-genre at all; this was the case for twelve of the titles included in this study. All but two of these general mystery titles were either part of a children’s series or had a sequel. Usually, the series was explicitly a mystery series, but there were exceptions; David A. Adler’s *Andy Russell, NOT Wanted By the Police* is an entry in the otherwise realistic-fiction Andy Russell series.

Of the ten books that could be classified into sub-genres, nine were historical fiction, all but one of which were published under Pleasant Company Publications/American Girl Publishing. This publisher has released two series of mysteries for children. The first, dubbed “History Mysteries,” was in publication from 1999 to 2004. Each book features a different character and a different time period; the mystery ties into an event or cultural phenomenon in the United States at the time. The second series of books are designed to tie in to doll characters, each of which has a pre-existing six-book series about the character’s life. Mysteries are treated as extensions of the character’s story and are marketed in a way that encourages this association, i.e., *The Silent Stranger: A Kaya Mystery*. This suggests that the mysteries released by American Girl Publishing may be targeted to children who enjoy historical fiction and are already familiar with the character through her other books or the matching doll. In other words, children seeking out these books might be looking for “a book about Kaya” or, perhaps even more generally, “an American Girl book” rather than a mystery starring a Native American character.
Cultural Context and Stereotypes

Figure 5: Amount of cultural context given for primary characters of color

A total of 25 primary characters of color were analyzed according to the three-point cultural context key; twelve of them scored a 3 (excellent cultural context given). All of these characters had also earned a 3 on the prominence scale. Although some displayed one or two stereotypical behaviors, the extent of the cultural context sometimes balanced this out. For example, in Kathleen Ernst’s *Secrets in the Hills*, protagonist Josefina Montoya has trouble communicating with English-speaking characters because Spanish is her first language; lack of proficiency in English is a common stereotype of Latino/a people. The book is historical fiction, taking place in 1824 Santa Fe. At that time, the city was part of Mexico and had previously been occupied by Spain since 1692, so Josefina’s language barrier is culturally accurate.

The one problematic stereotype that was fairly consistent among the characters scoring 3s for context was that of impoverished black characters; of the eight black characters that received high marks for cultural context, six were depicted as poor. While this was contextually appropriate for the books, many of which were historical fiction with themes of overcoming racial oppression, it is disappointing to see the already-common perception of black people as historically and currently impoverished reinforced
in these books. Thankfully, among the other two books in this category, there was one effort to advance a more varied perspective of African-American history. Published in 2012, *The Cameo Necklace* features Cecile Rey, a well-to-do African-American girl living in 1850s New Orleans. This mystery, which describes Cecile attending a circus and wearing fancy gowns, might help challenge all children’s understanding of African-American history.

![Figure 6 – Racial distribution of characters scoring a 3 for cultural context](image)

Only three characters scored a 2 (some cultural context given) on the scale. Of these three characters, two (Yasmeen Popp, *Who Stole Halloween?*; and Rebecca Chen, *The Ring of Rocamadour*) were sidekicks to white narrators, but the authors exercised a fair amount of effort to depict their home lives and cultural activities. For example, Rebecca often bemoans the long subway ride from her school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan to her home in Chinatown. Although Yasmeen is never described in the text as African-American and no description of her physical appearance is given, the cover illustration depicts her as black, and there are clues in the text that support her cultural background. Among them is her father, who “has an accent because he grew up on some island [the narrator] can never remember” (48) and alludes to having knowledge of cultural beliefs about ghosts and other spirits. The third character scoring a 2 in cultural
context is Rico Johnson of Sharon M. Draper’s *The Buried Bones Mystery*. The story of four black boys who form a club is told from Rico’s point of view. Although African-American culture and history is woven into nearly every part of the story, Draper takes a “tell, don’t show” approach. The four boys spend much of the book in the clubhouse swapping stories of their cultural heritages, not engaging in activities related to them.

No character scoring a 2 in cultural context displayed behaviors stereotypical of their race; indeed, their authors seem to intentionally give them characteristics that go against those stereotypes. Yasmeen’s parents are middle-class and teach at a local university, and she is frequently described as the most intelligent girl in her grade; Rebecca struggles in school, preferring art class to math class; and Rico is a quiet boy who enjoys drawing and hopes to become an architect.

Eight characters scored a 1 (no cultural context given). None of the characters who scored a 1 in this category were described in the text as being children of color. Two were identified as Latina by their names, and five were depicted in cover art or interior illustrations as characters of color. As discussed earlier, illustrations of the last character, Mara Lubin (*The Crazy Case of Missing Thunder*), seem to indicate that she is intended to be a character of color, but the illustrations are ambiguous and inconsistent. In some, she appears to have a similar skin tone to white characters, and in others, it is the same shade as her black friend Brian’s.

These eight characters presented the most troublesome depictions of people of color in the books studied, although not always in ways that could be coded using the schema outlined in this paper. Some, like Jazz (*The Case of the Stinky Socks*), Marta Gonzalez (*Scat*), and Brian Rooney and Mara Lubin (*The Crazy Case of Missing
Thunder) were not given cultural context for their race, but were not found to conform to any stereotypes, either. However, due to the lack of cultural context and their secondary roles in the story, they fail to meet van Fleet’s (2004) criterion that a good multicultural mystery have characters that one could not imagine altered. All four of these characters could easily be of any race without changing the text, and most suffered from lack of characterization in general.

Tamika Anderson (Andy Russell, NOT Wanted by the Police) is a good example of a potentially offensive character that is difficult to categorize according to the schema outlined in this paper. Although she does not precisely fit into any of the black stereotypes, consider the following passage:

Tamika had lived with [Andy’s neighbors] the Perlmans for a year, while her parents were recovering from a car accident. Then the Perlmans had left to travel in South America for their work and Tamika moved in with the Russells. (p. 4)

While the scenario described is far-fetched regardless of the child’s race, it is problematic to portray the black Tamika as a parentless girl who might also be homeless if it weren’t for the kindness of the Perlmans and Russells, who belong to more privileged cultural groups. By rewriting Tamika’s story so she lives with a family member during her parents’ illness, author David A. Adler could have improved the story in three ways: giving readers a realistic account of what might happen when parents are unable to care for their child; showing a child of color living in a “non-traditional” family structure; and providing Tamika with a potential source of cultural context.

Other characters conformed to stereotypes more conventionally – the three characters of color in Penny Warner’s The Haunted Lighthouse provide three vastly different, but striking examples of the need for cultural context when writing about
characters of color. The book is the second entry in the Code Busters Club series, which is narrated by Dakota “Cody” Jones (the group’s only white character) and revolves around four friends who like to crack codes. Little information is given about M.E. (the group’s Latina member) apart from her eccentric dress sense. The only role she is given in moving the plot forward is communicating with Spanish-speaking maids in a hotel. Although M.E. herself does not embody the stereotype of Latino/as working in low-paying service positions, her role as the interpreter between maids and middle-class children reduces her cultural identity to a language spoken by people performing manual labor.

Quinn Kee, the Asian-American member of the group, is described in the book’s second sentence as “the self-appointed leader of the club and math whiz” (p. 1); he is soon assigned the identities of video game and computer enthusiast as well:

Quinn took [the note] from Luke’s hand. “Hey, I recognize this code. Online gamers and hackers use it when they don’t want just anybody reading their messages. They call it LEET code, or 1337…” (p. 68)

Later, Quinn expresses a desire to use reward money for solving a mystery to buy techie gadgets for the club to use in future cases. Considering that Quinn is one of only two Asian-American boys found in this study, Warner’s choice to assign him so many stereotypical traits (and particularly so many traits associated with the “model minority” myth) is particularly disappointing.

The final character, African-American Luke LaVeau, presents an especially multifaceted problem:

New Orleans was Luke’s hometown, but he’d moved to Berkeley to live with his grand-mère after the big flood. He never talked about his parents, who had died in the flood, and none of the Code Busters asked him about it. (p. 114)
Although Hurricane Katrina was a devastating event with lasting effects on the predominantly black population of New Orleans, here it is briefly appropriated in order to give a black character an “interesting” past. Disasters such as Hurricane Katrina need not be avoided in children’s literature (they may help children who have been through similar natural disasters identify with a character), but the way in which Warner incorporated the event into this book is not done with much thought apart from the types of tragedies black children may have experienced. This makes the inclusion problematic on two levels – the appropriation of a real-life, large-scale tragedy; and choosing that tragedy based (seemingly) solely on Luke’s race.

*Authors of Color and Authentic Portrayals*

Eighteen authors wrote the 22 books studied. Two authors wrote more than one book – Evelyn Coleman wrote four books, and Kathleen Ernst wrote two. The majority of authors represented in this sample were white, with African-American authors in a distant second. No Latino/a or Native American authors were present.

![Pie Chart](image)

**Figure 7: Distribution of authors of color**

All authors of color wrote books about children in their racial group, and all but one of the characters written by an author of color scored a 3 in the cultural context schema. By contrast, only five books written by white authors received that score. This supports the hypothesis that authors of color are more likely to write culturally authentic
multicultural fiction. Similarly, all books written by an author of color starred a character of color as the narrator, earning a score of 3 on the prominence schema, but only five books written by white authors could say the same.

It should be noted that no Native American or Latino/a authors were represented in this book sample. Despite this, one book featuring each of these groups (Secrets in the Hills by Kathleen Ernst and The Silent Stranger by Janet Shaw) was able to score a 3 in both prominence and cultural context. Both, however, are subcategorized as historical fiction and likely required research into historical ways of life as well as knowledge (whether acquired through education or life experience) of a particular community. “Authenticity,” then, may be much harder to attain when discussing books that cross over into multiple genres.
Conclusion

This study of children’s multicultural mysteries revealed several gaps in the genre, most notably in representation of different cultural groups. It was very difficult to find multicultural mysteries that featured characters that were Asian-American, Latino/a, biracial, or Native American; even more so to find contemporary multicultural mysteries that met this criterion. In the case of mysteries starring Native American children, it proved impossible.

Given children’s enjoyment of mystery and suspense elements in fiction, I was surprised to learn that sub-genres are not especially common in multicultural mystery books published since 1997. The inclusion of titles by American Girl Publishing admittedly skewed the number of historical fiction offerings available within the mystery genre. Unfortunately, without this publishing company, there would not have been any representation of mysteries featuring Native American children, and the small selection of books starring Latino/a and biracial children would have been weakened further.

The results concerning authors of color were in line with previous research and with what I expected to find. Nevertheless, it is striking, when reading the results and looking at the data table (see Appendix B), to see the importance of authors of color to good multicultural mystery fiction for children; without authors of color, two-thirds of child narrators of color in this study would disappear, as would two-thirds of this study’s books providing a strong cultural framework for those narrators. Continuing to support
authors of color is perhaps the best way to strengthen the landscape of multicultural children’s mysteries.

Although I initially expected to find books rife with outdated stereotypes, I was pleased to find that many fewer existed than I had feared. The only stereotype frequently presented was that of poor African-Americans; although not strictly related, a handful of African-American characters were portrayed as having experienced other hardships and tragic circumstances. While these portrayals can be positive for children who have experienced similar situations, it is vital that all children see representations of characters like themselves in positive situations as well as negative.

On the other hand, some authors went too far in the other direction, so afraid of stereotyping they did not give characters of color a voice in the story at all. Furthermore, due to the lack of racial diversity in my sample, it could be said that my failure to find frequent stereotyping in other groups was simply because there were not enough characters of those races represented to be conclusive. Although it seems that Latino/a and Asian-American children are difficult to find in transitional and middle-grade mysteries, it is encouraging that where they are represented, they are usually shown in a positive light and given dimension beyond commonly-held tropes. It is disappointing that I cannot say the same for Native American characters; while The Silent Stranger was a compelling mystery story, it unfortunately continues the trend of depicting Native Americans in a historical context rather than a contemporary one.

General stereotyping and tokenism I had expected to find. What I had not been as prepared for were the kinds of portrayals that The Haunted Lighthouse and Andy Russell, NOT Wanted by the Police drew. These were characters that the authors ostensibly did
not think were being depicted in a harmful way, but subtly reinforced commonly held
beliefs about people of color – that they need to be “rescued” by white people, or that
their cultural identity can be boiled down to one concrete skill or trait, such as a language
that may be commonly spoken among members of that group.

Despite these findings, however, the results of this study indicate that most
portrayals of children of color in mysteries are not harmful. Many are very positive and
culturally competent. For children who are not part of that racial group, they can provide
assistance in learning about other cultures and considering stereotypes they may have
internalized from other sources. For children who do identify as a member of that group,
they can be a wonderful way to see themselves in a genre they love.
References


Appendix A: Book List

Portraying black/African-American characters


Portraying Latino/a characters


Portraying Native American characters

Portraying Asian-American characters


Portraying mixed-race characters


“Buddy mysteries”/“club mysteries” with multiple main characters, some or all of whom are of color


### Appendix B: Data Table for All Books Studied

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<td>The Minstrel's Melody</td>
<td>American Girl History Mysteries</td>
<td>Tate, Eleanora E.</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Orphelia Bruce</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Poor; rhythmic</td>
<td>Hist. fiction</td>
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<td>Code Busters Club</td>
<td>Warner, Penny</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Quinn Kee</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>AsAm</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Good at math and computers</td>
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<td>Maria Elena &quot;M.E.&quot; Esperanto</td>
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<td>Latina</td>
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<td>Speaks Spanish</td>
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<td>Yep, Laurence</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>Lily Lew</td>
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