

This week's work really ties into struggles that I have as an educator and conscious consumer -- specifically the balance between encouraging literacy through engaging, popular books, and challenging norms and stereotypes that are embedded in those texts and that I feel are harmful and insidious.

The two books I am investigating are both parts of larger series: Monster High's "Freaky Fusion" by Perdita Finn, and A Series of Unfortunate Event's "The Bad Beginning: Or, Orphans!" by Lemony Snicket. Both series are best-selling multimedia empires that include toys, books, and movies. Both series should also be read critically to confront the problematic social and interpersonal constructions present in the stories and their illustrations.

Monster High, "Freaky Fusion"

[But really the entire series of webisodes, movies, books, junior novels, and toys.]

Monster High is a series that I was introduced to when my female ESL students requested that we purchase the books for our classroom library. The series focuses on friendship and appreciating differences, but these positive messages are deeply undercut by the reality presented in the descriptions and illustrations included in the books, including those found in "Freaky Fusion."

Monster High seems a perfect platform for multicultural celebrations: the featured school hosts a variety of "monsters" as students -- mythical pseudo-humans from a variety of cultural traditions who learn, love, and live together. Sadly, the diversity featured is extremely superficial, and each character is heavily whitewashed, regardless of the culture that birthed their persona. In reality, this rebellious series is all about conformity and compliance. Essentially, difference is celebrated as long as:

- You are thin (0 overweight or obese characters)
- You conform to Western beauty standards (no long or large noses, no kinky hair, etc.)
- You have money (product placement EVERYWHERE, the poor need not apply?)
- You are straight and gender conforming (0 gay, asexual, transgender, or "other" characters).

In these books there are: no overweight or obese characters, no characters with obvious physical disabilities (even zombies have all their body parts), no characters with traditional African hair textures, no characters with Asian features or names, no gay characters, no transgender characters, no poly-amorous characters, and no asexual characters. While the covers seem to show enormous diversity, it's just window dressing: the actual characters have less diversity than mannequins in a store window.

While many characters have dark skin tones, a search of Monster High coloring pages highlights a disturbing reality: without color, all characters are essentially the same Anglo-looking model: thin, with small button or upturned noses, flat or slightly wavy hair, large, almond eyes, and plump lips.

These books support the continued power of hetero-normative, Western, materialistic, and whitewashed cultural narratives. No characters challenge any of the expectations and stereotypes that would be at home in a 1960s American suburban home. Indeed, the entire series is a throwback to a less inclusive society, masquerading as a rebellion.

A Series of Unfortunate Events, "The Bad Beginning: Or, Orphans!"

[Most power-affirming in the first book, but issues arise in the entire series]

“The Bad Beginning” begins the story of Sunny, Klaus, and Violet, a set of orphans from a wealthy family, who lose everything when a fire destroys their family mansion and kills their parents. They are sent to live with their (geographically) closest living relative: Count Olaf. Here is where the problems begin: both for the children and for us as critical readers.

This series is more subtle in its problems, but:

- Bad characters have features of traditionally marginalized people (Jews, Roma)
- Bad characters are poor and scheme to get money dishonestly
- Good characters are white/European and rich
- Artists are irresponsible and low-class
- The best people are: scientists, judges, lawyers, and bankers.

In this series, the propagation of harmful power-relationships functions more as a shorthand: the author relies on culturally-ingrained stereotypes and archetypes, however these shorthands represent a history of oppression. For example, like Shakespeare before him, Snicket and his illustrator represent Count Olaf as having a hooked nose and hooded eyes: features typically used in Western literature to represent the “shifty Moor” or “usurious Jew,” and these references come through in both the descriptions of Olaf’s personality and his looks. He schemes and he steals and altogether would be entirely at home in “The Merchant of Venice.”

There is also some low-key class warfare present: all the antagonists are bohemian artists who seem allergic to sensibility and class, while every positive character, without exception, is a wealthy, well-educated member of the upper- or middle-class who are engaged in sensible careers, including: banking, law, and science. All problems are solved through the logical application of skills learned through a good education, and we’re left with a nagging feeling that heroes (and villains) are bred, which is troubling given the class-stratification of our society.