

Promoting Social Justice: Literary Lenses to Look at Children's Books

By Debbie LeeKeenan

Please note: None of these categories stand alone. Consider the intersectionality of social identities and the overlap between these different lenses.

Reader Response Lens: reading a text for personal meaning

1. In what ways is the book familiar to your life? Think of events in the story, the types of characters, or the setting. Can you relate to it on a personal level? Do you see yourself?
2. In what ways is the book different than your life?
3. How did the book affect you?
4. How has the book increased your interest in the subject matter?
5. How has the book changed your worldview?

Racial Lens: reading a text for issues of race, heritage, and ethnicity

1. How is race read through the text? How is race name and noticed?
2. Who are the dominant characters? White or people of color? How is Whiteness normalized? Who are the "others"? How are the "others" portrayed? Think about word choice, actions, illustrations.
3. Are there stereotypes in the images or text? Are there any generalities that hold truth?
4. How does the book deal with conflicts, particularly between majority and minority groups?
5. What is fair or unfair in the storyline? Are there examples of resistance, protest, and activism?

Socio-Economic Lens: reading a text for its socio-economic issues

1. How are different demographics represented in the book?
2. What worldview does the book represent?
3. What does the book say about class structures?
4. How are power, privilege, and wealth portrayed?
5. How is poverty, homelessness, hunger presented?

Historical Lens: reading a text for its contextual significance. This includes information about the author, their historical moment, or the time period of the text.

1. Research the author's life and relate the information to the book. Why did the author write it? What is the author's worldview?
2. If the author is writing on a debatable issue, do they consider all sides of the debate? Does the author seem to have a bias?
3. Research the author's time (political history, intellectual history, economic history, etc.) and relate this information to the work.
4. Upon reading the book, how has your view on the given historical event changed?
5. Do you think that ____ is fair or unfair? Why? What could have been done differently?

Psychological Lens: reading a text for patterns in human behavior. While everyone is different, there are basic recurrent patterns of development for most people.

1. Is the way the characters act believable? Why do certain characters act the way they do?
2. Think of development throughout the lifespan, for children, youth, young adult, middle-aged, or elderly people. Do the characters follow the patterns associated with these groups?
3. Think of the range of human emotions. How do they come to play in the book? (happiness, anger, sadness, pride, depression, indifference, confusion, etc.)
4. What did you think of any moral/ethical choices that the characters made? What would you have done?
5. What are the broader social issues the book attempts to address?

Gender Lens: reading a text for its gender related issues and attitudes towards gender. *Gender identity* is the personal sense of one's own gender. Gender identity can correlate with assigned sex at birth or can differ from it.

Gender expression is the external communication of a person's gender identity to others through such things as clothing, hairstyles, and mannerisms. It also includes how individuals, communities and society perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender.

1. How is gender expressed in the book (i.e. what words, images, colors, symbols portray gender?) How are heterosexual relationships normalized? How are they disrupted? What counter narratives around gender and sexuality are present?
2. What role does gender identity or gender expression play in the book? Are there LGBTQ characters?
3. Observe how gender stereotypes might be reinforced or undermined. How does the book reflect or disrupt the gender roles of society?
4. How is gender non-conforming behavior acknowledged in the book?

Spiritual Lens: reading a text for its spiritual and faith related issues, and religious literacy. Religious literacy involves the ability to analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses.

1. Is religion presented as one aspect of one's social identity? How is religion and spirituality viewed as part of one's everyday life?
2. Look for stereotypes in the images and text.
3. What does the book say about various world religions? Are certain religions presented as superior to others?
4. How are holidays presented in the book? Are they connected to religious beliefs, as secular events?
5. What does the book say about different beliefs and values: faith, grace, love, forgiveness, hope, etc.?

Ability Lens: reading a text for ability and disability issues

1. How are ability differences presented? Are characters with disability normalized? Is the person or disability the focus?
2. Authenticity: Does the book center on a disabled character in their own voice? Are they created by authors and illustrators who are *actually* disabled, or who extensively consult with actually disabled adults? Do they use neutral, non-pathologizing language? Do they back up statements with data-based facts and refute myths and stereotypes?
3. Does the book work for inclusivity? Encourage advocacy?
4. Does the book promote disability acceptance, not just awareness; e.g., does the storyline focus on changing the environment to suit the disability, not the person?

Family Structure Lens: reading a text for an inclusive view of families

1. How are families defined and presented in the illustrations and in the text?
2. Are there a range of different family configurations?
3. How are changes and transitions in family life presented?(i.e., divorce, separation, death, moving, marriage, birth, adoption, job loss, etc.)

Linguistic Lens: reading a text for an inclusive view of languages

1. How are people who speak more than one language presented? Is the dominant language of the characters always English?
2. Are the characters' home languages respected?
3. How is learning a second language viewed in the book?
4. Is the connection between language and culture visible and evident?
5. How are problems and challenges navigated when there is a language barrier or communication misunderstanding?

Resources:

<https://www.embracerace.org/blog/reading-picture-books-with-children-through-a-race-conscious-lens>

<https://diversebookfinder.org/>

<http://booksforlittles.com/>

<https://socialjusticebooks.org/guide-for-selecting-anti-bias-childrens-books/>

Teaching Tolerance <http://www.tolerance.org/>

Anti-Defamation League <http://www.adl.org/>

Teaching for Change <http://www.teachingforchange.org/>

<http://www.antibiasleadersece.com>

Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo. (2015) *Leading Anti-bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change*. Teachers College Press/NAEYC.

LeeKeenan, D. & Nimmo, J. (2016) *Anti-Bias Education in Changing and Challenging Times*. *Child Care Exchange*. Redmond, WA