





The age of the sensitivity reader

A sensitivity reader is someone with lived experience of marginalisation who is asked to provide feedback on a manuscript prior to publication. You might think of a sensitivity reader as someone who is ethnically diverse, but race and racism is just one facet of diversity. Often forgotten in conversations on the topic in the publishing industry are things such as (but not limited to) disability, sexual orientation, neurodiversity and gender identity.

Traditionally, so-called 'sensitivity reads' have been commissioned towards the end of the publishing process, often at the copy-editing stage, one of the final checks before typesetting and proofreading. A sensitivity reader is asked to review the text, generally to ensure that there is nothing 'offensive' or 'problematic' in it.

And this is where the problems arise.

The book publishing process is long. By the time a book has reached copy-editing stage, everyone involved has read it multiple times and there is a sense that the manuscript is pretty much ready for the printer. If a sensitivity reader is brought in at this juncture, there's an assumption that they won't find much wrong. And if a fundamental issue is discovered it's far too late to do more than tinker with the text to try and make the best of it.

'Many books have problems that require a large rewrite, which isn't possible at the copy-edit stage,' says children's fantasy author and former publisher Louie Stowell. She argues that 'it's vital to get a sensitivity reader involved as early as is practically possible, and ensure there's enough time in the schedule to make substantial changes if that proves necessary'.

Getting a sensitivity reader to check a book once it's almost finalised smacks of tokenism, of a last-minute panic that it might cause offence – and of a dawning awareness that no matter how widely read an author might be, they are writing from a particular worldview.

And yes, when someone is asked for their input at this late stage, any criticism can feel like censorship. This last-minute-ness can have an effect on the sensitivity reader too. Being aware that only minimal changes can be made can affect what they feel comfortable raising – an issue that becomes even more acute if the author is well-known. 'The thing I find most challenging if I've given feedback at short notice is that my response has lacked structure, due to the time limit, and I often worry I've come across as too blunt,' says Elena Koumi, who is one of a network of 'Inclusion Ambassadors' recommended by Inclusive Minds, the company I co-founded alongside Alexandra Strick to support publishers and book creators in making their books authentically inclusive.

Drastic measures

One publisher I worked with felt that the only solution, when faced with inclusion feedback, was to remove a diverse character entirely. 'The only way to resolve this at such a late stage,' they admitted, 'was to change the book more drastically.' They have subsequently changed their approach. 'Since this experience we have looked to involve sensitivity readers much earlier in the editorial process. Indeed, we have just commissioned a sensitivity

Inclusion consultant **Beth Cox** asks whether sensitivity reading is a form of censorship or an essential part of the publishing process



read on a manuscript we haven't even accepted yet.'

Those who criticise sensitivity reading argue that they should be able to write what they want and that publishers are being too 'woke'. (How did a term that refers to being awake to injustice and inequality become an insult?) But I wonder whether these critics have actually tried working with people with experience of the issues they are writing about. If they did, they might be pleasantly surprised. In a *Writers Digest* article, YA author Anna Hecker commented that, 'rather than censoring my book, my sensitivity readers made it objectively better'.

The trouble is, those from a dominant and unmarginalised group might not be fully aware of the need for this kind of input in the first place – or of the very real damage done by any stereotypes and misrepresentation in their books. Yet the effects can be profound. For example, psychologist Michael Inzlicht found that asking people to perform tasks in the context of negative stereotyping significantly undermined their performance and coping skills. The adverse impact was still evident in subsequent situations, causing him to conclude that 'these lingering effects hurt people in a very real way, leaving them at a disadvantage'.

'I sometimes think the author doesn't care about my own lived experience,' says Robert Kingett, an Inclusion Ambassador who is blind and has cerebral palsy. 'Poor representation reminds me that I am not part of the mainstream culture. [There] is the

agenda

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sense that there is a standard default we all should be striving for, rather than taking the time to learn about differences.’ As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says in her TED talk: ‘The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story’.

Unfortunately the very term ‘sensitivity reader’ is problematic, because it suggests an attempt to avoid upsetting people who might be ‘sensitive’ – which suggests the issue is with those who are marginalised, implying they are delicate, and we must avoid offending them at all costs.

Negative impact

The real issue lies with the dominant groups, those who haven’t suffered trauma or discrimination and who don’t understand the impact of misrepresentation on those who are marginalised. ‘When I found an unfavourable mention of disability in a text I’d been studying, my concerns were dismissed,’ says award-winning disability rights campaigner Heather Lacey, who is Co-Director of Inclusive Minds. ‘As with the ableist comments I’d received over the years, I was told not to make a fuss. This felt like a huge blow. Inauthentic representation has a massively detrimental effect on how we see and relate to the world, and how we see ourselves.’

Consulting people with lived experience shouldn’t be about avoiding offence but ensuring



authenticity. Books *should* offend. Books *should* be problematic. Books *should* make us question what we think and believe. As Ryan Holiday says in his blog about ‘The problem with sensitivity readers’: ‘There is no important or worthwhile book that is not in some way insensitive to somebody, somewhere’.

Instead of asking ‘How can we avoid causing offence’ the question should be, ‘How can I ensure this representation isn’t skewed by my own experience and world view?’

The penalties for not taking these issues seriously can be severe. There have been cases in recent years where issues have been flagged up even later in the process – not by sensitivity readers, but by advanced readers and reviewers, resulting in books being cancelled, rewritten or withdrawn. Prominent cases include Keira Drake’s YA novel *Continent*, which was criticised for perpetuating racist stereotypes and a white saviour narrative.

When faced with these criticisms Drake was initially shocked and in denial, but then realised

that ‘the critics were right’. Her publisher delayed publication and she rewrote the book with the support of four sensitivity readers.

‘There is a material difference between criticism and censorship,’ she commented later. ‘Criticism is the most valuable thing writers can receive.

BOOKS SHOULD OFFEND. BOOKS SHOULD BE PROBLEMATIC. BOOKS SHOULD MAKE US QUESTION WHAT WE THINK AND BELIEVE

When we heed the criticisms that ring true, it challenges and stimulates our minds. It puts us in problem-solving mode. And it makes our work better.’

Employing a sensitivity reader to ‘cancel-proof’ a book ignores two important points. Firstly, there is no guarantee how much, or how wholeheartedly, the feedback will be taken on board by the author or editor – again, this is linked to how late in the process the feedback is sought. Secondly, a single sensitivity reader can only speak from their own experience and ‘check for offense’ from their own perspective. Something that may seem authentic to one person won’t necessarily ring true for another. Portrayals, terms or phrases that one reader might find crass or derogatory might seem neutral – or even friendly, depending on the context – to another.

The more people an author can consult early in the process, the more authentic they can be. As Drake’s reaction to her critics shows, if someone finds some aspect of a plot or character problematic, it could be seen as a learning experience for the author rather than a series of accusations that makes them feel defensive.

On the question of censorship, it has been argued that while sensitivity reading may have a place in YA and children’s books, adults should be left to make up their own minds about whether something is offensive. But again, the focus here is on offense. Surely characters need to be authentic whoever the book is written for?

Reading is how we develop empathy – both as children and as adults. It’s how we understand and relate to those with experiences and perspectives different from our own. But if those perspectives are based on fictional characters that aren’t fully rounded, that are based on stereotypes the author has grown up with, they will perpetuate misconceptions and squander an opportunity to increase empathy. And it’s the people who are already marginalised that bear the brunt of this lost opportunity. Instead of being included, they become even more othered.

Early start

So, what is the answer? The answer begins with your approach as a writer. If you are creating a book with a diverse range of characters, or even just one diverse character, that approach needs to be motivated by the fact that you care about how people are represented – not just to tick a diversity box. Which means involving people with lived experience, and really listening to them, from the



CHALLENGING CHARACTERS

Jo Ross-Barrett on how to create a character without condoning their opinions

When portraying a character with unsavoury attitudes the main thing to do is challenge these subtly within the content itself. To take the example of a guardian hitting a child (e.g. ‘He cuffed me and sent me to bed’): leaving this as description portrays the act neutrally and risks tacitly suggesting it is acceptable.

One solution is to demonstrate its negative impact: ‘My head hurt as I retreated to my room – at least he wouldn’t have the satisfaction of seeing me cry’. Alternatively, other characters can provide another perspective: ‘Someone shouted at him to leave me alone’.

When portraying bigotry it’s important to ensure it is framed as unacceptable. In *A Kind of Spark* by Elle McNicoll the R-slur is used against the autistic child protagonist Addie. The narrative examines the negative impact on Addie, building empathy among readers.

When a first-person character has bigoted attitudes it’s even more important that other characters challenge them, because the ‘I’ perspective means the reader is invited to identify with that character.

This can be a difficult when the ‘I’ character is part of a community that shares their bigotry. One solution is to introduce a newcomer to ask questions or prompt a critique. The play *Scarfed for Life* by Martin Travers uses a cross-divide friendship to challenge two Glasgow communities’ religious sectarianism.

Ideally fiction should portray the whole range of virtuous and villainous traits in the whole range of marginalised and non-marginalised characters. However, a problem arises if a villainous character is the only portrayal of a marginalised group, because this may lead to readers equating the marginalised identity with unethical deeds. The solution is to balance your portrayals – be inclusive of a marginalised group within your heroic cast as well as your villainous cast. Then it will become clear that the difference between them is their morality rather than any identity trait.

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PITFALLS TO AVOID

Six Inclusion Ambassadors share the main issues they encounter in their work

'Disability needs to be shown as the norm, by showing the person first and disability second. I'd like to see more representation of wheelchair users out of their wheelchairs – with the wheelchair folded closed near a bed, for example – which would help dispel the misconception that wheelchair users are 'wheelchair-bound'. I'd also like to see disabled characters with complex learning or multiple difficulties.' **Sally-Anne Tapia-Bowles**

'The most common pitfalls I come across are stereotypical portrayals of Black characters: for example, Black women being shown as loud and aggressive; a lack of nuance when it comes to the description of Black characters (we have different skin tones and hair types); and not taking the time to delve into cultural differences between a character who is from Nigeria or Jamaica for instance.' **Rachel Faturoti**

'Some of the issues I've come across are inspiration porn, where the Disabled character makes non-Disabled characters feel good about themselves. Another common mistake I see is visually impaired characters using adaptive technology incorrectly. For example, dictating rather than use a screen reader, never using multi-finger gestures on mobile devices, never interacting with a Braille display. Another common issue is the Super Crip, a Disabled character whose other senses or body attributes are superhuman. For example, Daredevil's Blindness doesn't factor into the story, at all, because he has super hearing and radar vision.' **Robert Kingett**

'One example that deeply frustrates me as an aspec person is the tendency to use asexuality and aromanticism in combination as "evidence" of a villain's innate and unfixable evil through their "inability to love". This is aphobic bigotry, and a horrendous trope with real-world negative impact on all aspec people, but particularly on aro-ace people.' **Jo Ross-Barrett**

'The most common error is not understanding the different textures related to different heritage variants. For example, a character born of one all-white and one all-Black parent will most likely have hair grade variant 3a-4b but never 4c. There is also a lack of familiarity with hair styles, e.g. Afro, dreadlocks, Rasta, etc. Hair care and maintenance is intrinsic to Black people.' **Elena Koumi**

'One of the most common mistakes I have witnessed is selecting a feature of one section of a marginalised community and creating an entire narrative on the assumption that it must apply to other sections of the community too, or that this feature is the only part of that community's identity worth mentioning. This is an especially common mistake in areas pertaining to intersectionality.' **Guntaas Kaur Chugh**

PHOTO: KIGAS / STOCKSY

very start – when the germ of an idea begins to form, as soon as you get an inkling that a character you are developing has a lived experience other than your own.

Why so early? Because once you have developed a character, you will probably have come to know them, and have become attached to them. And aspects of their personality and background will inevitably have become embedded in the plot and in their relationships with other characters. If that character is then identified as less than authentic, changing their personality or backstory can feel like a personal wrench that pulls your whole story out of shape.



My colleague Jo Ross-Barrett of Inclusive Minds points out that when Marcus Sedgwick wrote *She Is Not Invisible*, a YA novel with a visually impaired protagonist, he researched the experiences of students at a school for visually impaired people. The resulting book includes challenges faced, and strategies used, that were inspired directly by their lived experience, material he could never have come up with without their input.

'WHEN WE HEED THE CRITICISMS THAT RING TRUE, IT PUTS US IN PROBLEM-SOLVING MODE. AND IT MAKES OUR WORK BETTER'

'This proactive approach contrasts hugely with the write-it-first-check-it-last approach,' says Ross-Barrett. 'Sensitivity reads and making sure language is "politically correct" are often seen as icing on the cake, rather than essential ingredients. No matter how much icing you put on a cake, if you forgot to give the cake itself a proper flavour then nobody will enjoy it.'

But what about creative freedom? Lionel Shriver rails against the 'unrelenting anguish about hurting other people's feelings [that] inhibits

spontaneity and constipates creativity'. Many writers would say that, actually, the very opposite is true – that writing outside your experience and worrying about getting it wrong generates its own kind of anguish. The more you understand something, the more comfortable you'll feel about what you're writing. Once that burden of responsibility is lifted, a new level of creativity opens up. As author Dave Rudden said of working with Inclusive Minds ambassadors, 'Accuracy is a source of inspiration, not a clamp on it'.

Given that sensitivity reading is, to quote Louis Stowell, such an 'inadequate sticking plaster' on an issue that needs tackling organically at a much

earlier stage, why has it become such a widespread phenomenon in publishing?

Homogenous culture

The quick answer is fear of the so-called 'cancel culture' on social media. But behind this is a growing acknowledgement that a homogenous publishing industry is simply not equipped to make judgments about diversity and inclusion.

Whilst efforts to diversify the publishing workforce have ramped up in the past few years, the Publishers Association's *Diversity Survey 2019* found that the workforce of most publishing houses was still overwhelmingly white and female (and, less visibly, cis-gender, heterosexual, non-disabled and middle-class – in July 2021 the *Bookseller* reported that one third of publishing industry staff felt that their regional, class or ethnic accent was hampering their career).

True, initiatives have been set up to secure paid internships and apprenticeships, and to prioritise books by marginalised writers, but progress is slow. And when those who have been marginalised do manage to get a seat at the table, they may find that it's not a pleasant, or even safe, place to be. In her article 'Where are all the Black editors?' from the 'The Black Issue' of the *Bookseller*, Jasmine Richards references BookCareers data that suggests 'the proportion of staff from minority groups is getting smaller rather than bigger'. In

the same issue, Theophina Gabriel shared how lucky she'd been with her internship, in stark contrast to industry colleagues' 'horror stories of icy line-managers, departments where "edgy" racist humour was thrown around casually over email, and tales where nobody spoke to the intern unless it was for a "race book"'.

Widespread incidents like these are causing talented editors to leave the industry. Richards told me: 'Children's publishing needs to feature books that reflect all parts of our society. For that to happen organically the industry needs to look more like the wider society. Publishers are the curators of

I based the mother character on myself, and was keen to show both Western and traditional culture. So she serves her son chips and has a drawer full of crisps in their kitchen, like us - but later Granny comes in and brings spicy rice and also makes samosas in her home. This was reflective of Muslim homes in the UK today, and also helped me bring culture into my book. And I managed to write it in two days because I didn't have to do any research!

Pigeonholed

Clearly, writing from one's own lived experience brings a level of nuance that is hard to achieve



culture. This is a powerful and important role, and it needs to serve us all and represent us all'.

Some argue that the obvious way to ensure authenticity is for publishers to embrace the arguments of the #OwnVoices movement and commission only authors with relevant lived experience to write about certain topics (i.e. in their 'own voices') - thereby doing away the need for sensitivity readers altogether.

A M Dassu, children's author and Co-Director of Inclusive Minds says, 'The movement is growing because there have been harmful representations of communities in some books, leading readers to seek authentic representations from Own Voices authors. However many diverse authors, and indeed readers, welcome fiction written by authors without that lived experience, provided it is done sensitively.' But she acknowledges that this is not easy. 'You need to approach the challenge with humility and be ready to put in the work - and be prepared for criticism.'

Dassu goes on to describe the challenges she faced with her acclaimed novel about refugees from Syria. 'Having done it for *Boy, Everywhere*, I don't think I would write about others' lived experience again, or not for a long time. It was only because I was so passionate about challenging stereotypes about refugees that I was able to invest so much time and energy in the book. It would be difficult to replicate that commitment for another story.

'It's a lot easier to write from my own lived experience. With my forthcoming chapter book,

otherwise. But we enter dangerous territory if it's assumed that marginalised authors can or should only write from their lived experience. This leads to

'PUBLISHERS ARE THE CURATORS OF CULTURE. THIS IS A POWERFUL AND IMPORTANT ROLE, AND IT NEEDS TO SERVE AND REPRESENT US ALL'

them being steered towards writing 'issue' books - and struggling to get a publishing deal for anything else.

Novelist and memoirist Pragya Argwal wrote about this pressure in her recent *Bookseller* article, 'But what if I want to write about mangoes?'. 'Writers from minority communities are pigeonholed because they are often used as a token presence,' she

told me. 'This means that when there are only one or two authors from a minority community given a chance to publish, they are expected to mine their trauma, to be the voice of the whole community.'

Commenting on this pressure to stick to certain subject matter, Louie Stowell says, 'A queer writer may just want to write a story with no queer characters, and that should be absolutely up to them. But if their author "brand" is predicated

RESOURCES

► **Conscious Style Guide** An online resource for those who want to employ inclusive language in their work. US-based so may contradict some UK guidance. consciousstyleguide.com

► **Writing With Colour** The WWC website features accessible guidelines and FAQs for writers. 'We are dedicated to writing and resources centred on racial, ethnic and religious diversity'. writingwithcolor.tumblr.com

► **Reflecting Realities: Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature (2019)** The 2019 report has a useful section on good practice and reiterates in detail the 'degrees of erasure' by which ethnically marginalised characters are kept in the background in children's literature (and, by extension, all literature).

► **Are the Kids All Right? Representations of LGBTQ characters in Children's and Young Adult Literature**, by B J Epstein (HammerOn Press, 2013)

► **The Danger of a Single Story** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's inspirational TED Talk [ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en-gb)

► **Inclusive Minds** Advocacy and consultancy organisation, with a network of over 100 Inclusion Ambassadors who offer writers and illustrators advice to help ensure their work is as authentic and inclusive as possible. [inclusiveminds.com](https://www.inclusiveminds.com)

► **Inclusion training** Beth Cox's programmes, the Inclusion Incubator (for publishers) and Foundations for Inclusion (for freelancers, authors and illustrators), combine training, action and consultancy. [bethcox.co.uk](https://www.bethcox.co.uk)

on being queer, they may feel under pressure to perform queerness in their writing.'

The term 'Own Voices' was coined to raise awareness, but the way it is currently used isn't without issue. The We Need Diverse Books organisation in the US announced in June that they are no longer using that wording, arguing that the term 'own voices' tends to treat diverse authors as a homogenous group, an 'other' (potentially suggesting it's the only reason they got published), as opposed to highlighting their individual experiences. From now on WNDB will 'use specific descriptions that authors use for themselves and their characters whenever possible'.

I am of the opinion that authors should be able to write about a range of characters, provided they do thorough research. As Stowell says, even though she shares some lived experience with some of her characters, 'I wouldn't usually apply the term Own Voices to my own writing because, in the end, I'm writing fiction. I'm not my characters and there is no one-for-one correspondence between author and story in most cases.'

Argwal adds, 'The idea that only people who have lived experience can write about something does not always work well. But ignoring the principle is problematic when it comes to a minority community that does not have a platform. This is because who gets the chance to write and publish is linked to power and privilege in many ways.'

Principles of inclusion

Inclusion – I prefer this term to the word 'diversity' – can't happen at just one stage of book creation, even if that is at the very beginning. Working with

people with lived experience (and paying them appropriately) is only one part of the puzzle and does not abdicate responsibility from the wider system to implement the basic principles of inclusion.

Authors and illustrators need to explore and challenge their biases. Editors need to understand the basic principles of inclusion, so that sensitivity readers can focus on nuance and detail rather than repeatedly addressing easily avoidable pitfalls. Sales and marketing teams need to ensure that they use appropriate language and tone when promoting books. Most important of all, the workforce in publishing, and the writers being published, needs to be much more diverse.

When Inclusive Minds was founded in 2013 our focus was on convincing publishers of the importance of inclusion in the first place. Things have changed since then and the organisation's role nowadays is about supporting publishers who want to get it right – which is why we've now handed over the reins to three new directors, who were formerly Inclusion Ambassadors.

As publishers and authors are increasingly seeking to work with those with lived experience earlier in the process, I wonder whether the label 'sensitivity reader' is still appropriate? I recently saw the term 'authenticity reader' being used. This seems a more accurate description of the role and avoids some of the associations around censorship, offense and political correctness.

Perhaps 'consultant' is an even better term, not only to describe the quality of input provided, but also to ensure fair payment. Hopefully the role of the sensitivity reader, as we have come to know it, will evolve as inclusion becomes more embedded in the book creation and publishing process. ■



BETH COX has worked in publishing since 2003 and has been helping make books inclusive since 2005, long before it became 'popular'. She was on the steering group for Scope's In The Picture Project (2005-8), promoting disability inclusion in children's books, and in 2013 founded Inclusive Minds with Alexandra Strick. As an advocate for inclusion in children's books, she has taught and spoken at numerous courses and events. bethcox.co.uk

HOW I DID IT

Co-Director of Inclusive Minds A M Dassu explains the challenges of writing her novel about Syrian refugees

A M Dassu's debut middle-grade novel chronicles the harrowing journey taken by Sami and his family: from privilege to poverty, across countries and continents, from a comfortable life in Damascus, via a smuggler's den in Turkey, to a prison in Manchester. It was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize 2021

'I think you should treat writing fiction about a community outside of your lived experience with as much care and respect as if you were writing about your own family. It should be checked, rechecked, and then checked again.

'My characters' experiences in *Boy, Everywhere* were drawn from the accounts of refugees and observations from my own life. While I was born in the UK, my family story is also one of cross-cultural relocation and immigration. As a result much of my identity is marginalised – my race, class, gender, physical appearance, religion – and these experiences helped give me insight into the fictional characters in the novel.

'My grandfather's first wife and daughter drowned on a boat journey

to Tanzania. My mother was highly educated but had to sew garments in a factory when she arrived in the UK. My grandparents left behind a life that included nannies, drivers and businesses in two cities, to live in a small terraced house with no heating in the UK.

'It is impossible to write fiction from outside of your lived experience without doing research. But research is not enough to ensure authenticity. The community you're writing about should be consulted too, and you must become aware of issues that affect them. It is not enough to have a token cast of characters with typical names or depictions. There are nuances only a person from that community would be aware of, so it's important to spend time with them.

'My key reason for writing *Boy, Everywhere* was to challenge stereotypes about refugees and migration. I was desperate to make a difference with the book, but I also didn't want to send it out until I was sure it represented Syrians and refugees the way they deserve to be portrayed. So I asked questions,

listened, and tried to understand what felt unfair to Syrian refugees about the way they were represented in the media.

'I knew I was taking on a huge responsibility, and I was constantly aware that this story was about people who had suffered great challenges, so I wanted to do justice to everything my informants had asked me to share. I promised I would do my best to convey their dignified lives, depicting them not simply as victims of war or reduced to a "refugee" label. In the end the novel took five years to get to publication. Up until the very last minute I was still checking things and making changes to the vocabulary people used.

'My favourite part of the research process was learning more about Damascus, meeting more Syrians and passionately discussing their lives and their country with them. The bonus of this process was making life-long friends.'