

LIBRARYSPARKS TALKS TO . . .

MIKE JUNG



Author and librarian Mike Jung has become a leader in the We Need Diverse Books movement, a campaign to raise awareness of the need for more diversity in children's and young adult literature. We spoke to him about the campaign and the role of librarians in supporting diversity.

How did the We Need Diverse Books movement begin?

MJ: The movement began in response to BookCon at this year's BookExpo America. I don't want to say that that was the single driving factor, because a lot of people have been doing this for a long time, including Ellen Oh, who is president of We Need Diverse Books™. But that was a flashpoint in a lot of ways for some people. When the guest list was announced for BookCon's young adult panel, it was entirely white men. In fact, BookCon as a whole had scheduled a lot of white people and a cat. There was public dismay about that. So that was one of things that spurred the beginning of the campaign.

I was invited in just after the initial planning started. I'm friends with Karen Sandler, the author of *Tankborn*.

We had just met at a conference a couple of weeks before. She contacted me and invited me to get involved with the campaign. She told me who the other people were on the core team, and when she said that Ellen Oh was one of the people, I knew that it was something that I wanted to be involved with. Ellen and I have been friends for a number of years, and we've been critique partners. She's always been very vocal and very intelligent and very committed to the issue of diversity in children's literature. I knew that getting involved in a movement with her would be significant and meaningful.

What is the goal of We Need Diverse Books?

MJ: The overarching goal is to no longer need to have this conversation about diversity in literature. We would actually like to not have to talk about it anymore. The need is so profound and clear. Lee & Low, a publisher that's been associated with the campaign, published a really enlightening infographic based on data coming from the Children's Cooperative Book

Center about the lack of diversity over the past eighteen years (see <http://tinyurl.com/leelowcb>). Ninety percent of the books that were published for children between 1994 and 2012 did not feature a person of color as a main character or even as an important secondary character. The overarching goal is to see those percentages change so that children's books are representative of the actual society that we live in.

More specifically, the campaign is partnering with First Book, who has committed to some really great initiatives. They are reaching out to publishers and pledging to purchase 10,000 copies of a book by a debut



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author who comes from a diverse background, which is a fantastic thing. It's a concrete step, a concrete piece of action that will actually result in the establishment of an author's career. That's the kind of effort that we really want to get to, because having conversations is an important part of this, but concrete action is the thing that is really going to make the difference.

We're working on launching a diversity festival. The first one will take place in 2016, so we're in the early stages, but there's some intense planning going on behind the scenes. We're also promoting diverse summer reading lists.

It's really all about getting into classrooms and getting into libraries and getting into schools and making sure that there's concrete action being taken in terms of getting a more diverse range of books on the shelf.

It is shocking to see the numbers from the CCBC. Why isn't there greater diversity in literature for children and young adults?

MJ: It's a really big and complex issue. I think that there are a lot of perceptual barriers. There's a perception that diverse books won't sell. That books that are about characters of color are not going to sell. That books by authors of color are not going to sell. I think that is a perception, and there are a lot of ways in which it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. Because the [publishing] industry thinks that these books aren't going to sell. So these books don't get published. And if they do, they don't always get the same level of support that some other books get. And so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy in that the publishers say, "We perceive the books as not being sellers, so we're not going to publish them and

place them." Then the books don't sell because they're not available, and that reinforces the perception that the books don't sell.

Yes, there are authors who are people of color whose books have struggled. But there are authors from every background whose books have struggled. Debut authors tend to struggle. A lot of books struggle in the marketplace. And it's my personal opinion that the struggles of the industry as a whole sometimes get laid at the feet of the issue of diversity. I think that's a bit of a smokescreen.

When we talk about the lack of diversity in books, there is a very real way in which that's one facet of the overall issue of diversity and representation and institutional racism in our society as a whole. It's a vast problem. It puts its tentacles out into every professional arena. It's a deeply rooted problem that

goes back decades and decades through our history.

What can be done? Specifically, what can librarians do to encourage greater diversity in children's literature?

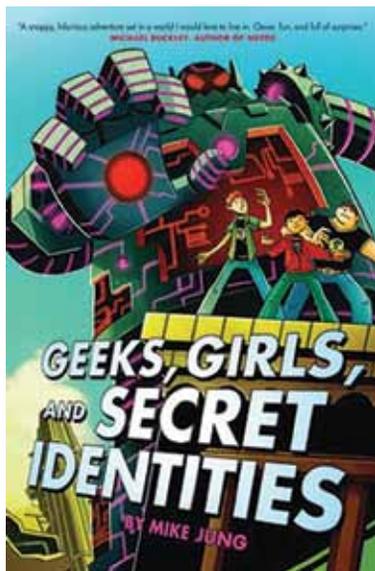
MJ: I'm of the opinion that it's on all of us. There are things that all of us can do. Librarians can invest collection dollars in acquiring a diverse range of books. Really pay attention to some of the specific issues that arise. Look at the covers. Look at the authors. You need to look at the covers, because whitewashing of covers has been an issue as well. It's another way that representation gets diluted. Give a lot of thought to questions such as How can I find these books? How can I present them in the library in a way that our readers are actually going to find them and read them and see that there are books that represent their experience?

Probably the reaction from a lot of librarians will be, Great! We want diverse books. But how do we find them?

MJ: It's an enormous challenge. Librarians are as busy as everyone else, and seeking out books that aren't available or aren't getting represented or aren't getting marketed well is difficult. It takes time and energy, and that's definitely one of the biggest barriers. Librarians already have to do all the day-to-day work—circulation, cataloging, public outreach, and collection development as a whole. When they have to search for books that are harder to find, they don't have that time and energy.

It's a challenge. It's a definite challenge. There's a way in which you could say it's an unfair burden on librarians and also on readers and consumers and booksellers. It's an unfair situation. It's really difficult to say how it can be done. But it has to

be done, right? It means that we just have to keep making the effort, even though it's exhausting, and it's time and energy demanding. But we have to keep trying.



Your book, *Geeks, Girls, and Secret Identities*, features Asian American main characters. What kind of response have you gotten from your readers?

MJ: I haven't heard a whole lot of response from my readers specifically about my characters' racial and ethnic identity. I've had some parents say that it's great to have a book that features a Korean American kid and that he's on the cover. That's a great thing. I'm lucky that the response from both critics and the readers has been overwhelmingly positive. A lot of the response has been that the book is really fun.

When I was writing the book, I was really trying to represent the reality that I live in right now. I live in Oakland, California. My kids have lived here and go to school here. It's a very diverse place—racially, ethnically, and in every other way. I really wanted to make sure that I was honoring

that diversity, because that was the setting that I wanted to use. If I were to create a book with a non-diverse setting, I really would have to have a compelling reason to do that. I didn't with this book. It's been gratifying that people have said, "There's a really diverse range of people in this." But, to me, it's really just a book that's representing reality.

How would you complete the sentence: We need diverse books because . . . ?

MJ: We need diverse books because we live in a diverse world. It's almost reductive to say that, but it's true. We need diverse books because our readers bring all kinds of life experiences to the table. To really serve their needs, we need to have diverse books that represent all of their experiences.

On an individual level, I know that it was a challenge not having books that reflected my specific life experience. And it was just one part of the endless message I got: You are not white, therefore you are an Other. You are an alien in this world. That's an incredibly destructive thing. Books are one way that we can really make a difference for readers who are looking for their experiences and not finding them.



Mike Jung is a library professional, active blogger, parent, and SCBWI member. *Geeks, Girls, and Secret Identities* (Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic, 2012) is his first novel. He's contributed essays to the anthologies *Dear Teen Me* (Zest, 2012) and *Break These Rules* (Chicago Review Press, 2013).

For more about the We Need Diverse Books campaign, visit <http://weneeddiversebooks.tumblr.com>.

For more about Mike Jung, visit <http://captainstupidous.wordpress.com>.