

The Politics of Story

by Neesha Meminger

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I never start out writing a book with a “lesson” in mind for my readers. I have two young children at home and trust me, as soon as I take on my lecturing/lesson-giving voice, they both zone out. The things they learn the most effectively—the “lessons” they really ingest into their marrow are the ones they learn while having fun, while laughing, while chatting about other things. In other words, they learn through living. Not through me standing on some sort of pulpit and talking down to them.

So the idea of writing to impart a message or lesson through my stories has never been very appealing to me. And in the world of young adult/children’s literature there seems to be a widely-held belief among some folks that this is exactly what authors of books for young readers do. Or should do. I completely reject this idea.

At the same time, however, I understand that things become far more complex when we begin to place cultural products that represent a society’s values and social structures—products like books, let’s say—within the context of the larger society in which they are consumed. As a South Asian woman who grew up seeing virtually zero representations of South Asian children and teens in the media and on bookshelves, it is impossible for me to ignore the larger social and cultural context my books are produced in. And it is even more impossible for me to ignore the economic and political conditions my South Asian characters are growing up in and navigating when it comes to writing my own fiction.

Author and poet Suheir Hammad once said, “Writing must always have intention because words have power.” I know, well, the power of words. I know how a single slur can reduce a person to shame and humiliation . . . and fear. Some words—like racial epithets—have long and brutal histories of violence behind them. They carry with them the power to dehumanize and the inherent threat of attack. In an interview with Al-Jazeera English, Hammad stated, “I think it’s a political decision to leave politics out of your work.” Within a cultural, social and economic structure that advantages and privileges some over others, there is no way to make writing the “other” a non-political act. The very fact that there are “others” means that some perspectives are put forward more frequently and more consistently to create a norm, or dominant narrative.

And there absolutely is a dominant narrative. It is in the messages we receive through the media, through art, through attitudes and beliefs passed down from generation to generation. The dominant narrative, the story we’re told over and over, sometimes states that girls are weaker than boys; that girls should be

“feminine” and boys should be “masculine”; that heterosexuality is “normal” and anything else is a deviation from that norm; that Asians are good in math; that women are biologically wired for childcare, etc.

As soon as voices of the marginalized are brought front and center, out of the fringes of the dominant narrative and into the center, our stories are automatically politicized. Because “othering” certain segments of the population is a social, political and cultural act. In the same way that leaving certain voices *out* of a narrative, or certain faces *out* of a film, book cover, magazine, television show, etc. is a political act, bringing those voices into the spotlight and giving them a platform, assigning them equal value and importance and weight, and listening to what they have to say is also a political act, intentional or not.

So I make the conscious choice to give voice to experiences rarely heard in the mainstream: voices like my parents’ who are non-English speakers; voices of young men and women of color; young women of any color; the working class. I do this because (1) I, myself, am hungry for those voices. I want to see my own experience and face reflected in my surroundings. Seeing these reflections validates me, and my experience, reminding me that I exist. And if I feel this way, have felt this way all my life, I know there are young people out there who need and hunger for the same thing—to see themselves written into the narrative; and (2) every society is a thousand million times stronger when the voices of all its citizens are not only heard, but incorporated into its policies and decisions. This is important to me because I have children who will one day navigate the landscape we are laying out for them. But it is also important to me because I love this planet, I love the young people I write for, and I love the people who struggle every day like my parents did, and their parents before them, to make life safe and loving and just.

Why can’t we simply create art? Something simply beautiful, or entertaining? Why should we have to shoulder the burden of speaking for the voiceless? Good questions. Well, for one thing, the very words we use give readers a sense of our location—or at least the location of the story. As the very wise Margaret Atwood says, “Moral judgments are built into language.” We should absolutely be allowed to focus on the craft we love and our characters and their journeys. That is why we do what we do, no? Yes. But the sad truth is that no matter what we write, it will sit (or not sit) on shelves within the context of a larger system. It will be acquired or skipped within the context of a larger system. It will be reviewed (or not) within that system, celebrated (or not) within that system, awarded and applauded (or not) within that same system. And that larger system, as of this writing, still privileges some over others, silences certain voices and exalts others, and reinforces and validates some experiences at the expense of others.

Everything is connected – the political, the creative, the economic, the social, the cultural, the personal. It is an intricately tangled web where each strand is an integral part of the whole. If we futz with one, we affect them all. Political decisions affect our personal lives. I knew this as a child because my parents adored Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, for opening the doors of immigration to

people from South Asia. That decision—at the political level—brought my family to the west. It changed the entire trajectory of my personal life forever. And when gay marriage is illegal, that absolutely affects available options for same-sex couples in their day-to-day lives. When there is no accessible and/or affordable health care, that absolutely affects the health and well-being of millions of people, personally.

The way I see it, there is no way our writing can *not* be political. It helps shape the cultural landscape of our society. Art that is packaged and sold as a product is always a cultural statement. It is a statement of the times we are living in—the social, political, and economic forces that have shaped the story, the song, the film, the dance, or the book, allowed it to be packaged and sold, and the powers that have vetted it and placed upon it their stamp of approval.

Writing that reaches young readers is especially dangerous because it shapes the future—the cultural and political future of our nation, society, and world. Why else would there be such strong opinions on what should and should not go into books for young readers? Ask any YA author, librarian, teacher, or bookseller how they feel about sex, drugs, cursing, or violence in books for teens and you are sure to get an impassioned response.

Whether we like it or not, stories do impart messages, regardless of whether those messages are consciously infused into the story. If there are no brown faces on any television shows during primetime, that is a message. And young learners are remarkably absorbent when it comes to information and knowledge—particularly when it is through an entertaining medium like television, music, books, film.

While I vehemently resist the idea of preaching to young people, or writing “message-driven” novels, I can’t help but be aware of the larger world I live in, and that the readers I write for live in. That doesn’t mean I want to read stories designed around a particular agenda. However, simply writing books that feature strong protagonists of color or female characters, or accurately and respectfully portraying LGBTQ youth could be seen as a “message” in itself because there are so few depictions of marginalized experiences. And as writers, our stories either support the narrative or challenge it. Either way, our stories are political—they are messages—even if the only ones that seem to get pegged as such are the ones that challenge the status quo.

This was never clearer to me than when I saw a New York Times book review of a fellow YA author’s book. The reviewer stated that the book, which was about teen dating violence, was driving home a message. I immediately wondered if, had the book been about teen girls and shopping, or teen girls angsty over teen boys, the reviewer would have seen it as putting forth a “message”—which, of course, it still would have been. But because these types of stories support the dominant narrative, they are often not seen as messages at all. It is usually the stories that challenge the dominant narrative that get labeled as “message-driven.”

And when I was struggling to find a publisher for my second novel, *Jazz in Love*, I realized how uncommon it was to find novels about teens of color that were not *about* race and the “otherized” experience. The dominant narrative gives us a very flat, narrow view of the experience of people of color and it is almost always rife with racial violence and suffering to that end. I wanted to tell a story that was about a teen who was in touch with her culture and traditions and didn’t reject her Indian-ness, but struggled with the issues that came up *within* that context—issues of religion and faith, gender and sexuality, beauty ideals, family issues, etc. In other words, she was a normal teenager with normal teen problems who *happened* to be Indian, Punjabi, and Sikh. I did not want to erase that part of her, but I didn’t want it to be the *only* thing about her.

I recently visited a school with a student population that was predominantly East Asian and Latino and just about every one of those teens could relate to having working-class parents like Jazz’s parents in *Jazz In Love*, and to the language issues in the book. These teens understand immigration issues and policies because their lives are intimately affected by those policies. These students understand race and the impact of living in a society that does not adequately or accurately reflect their experiences. They know what it’s like to walk into a bookstore and not see representations of themselves on the shelves. In short, they understand, intimately, the political implications of the stories they are told over and over.

Yes, good stories are universal. But it is our differences that move us to new places. And seeing accurate, respectful depictions of those differences reflected in our world helps us to understand and honor one another, to evolve as a whole. The flat, single depiction, and dominant narrative of our world, is an outdated product of social and economic forces. Most people know this. Most people want to hear diverse voices. Writing them into existence, without ignoring the reasons they’ve been silent or absent, is no more a political act than writing them *out* of the narrative altogether.

In the same way women’s bodies are the battleground for reproductive rights, people of color are automatically politicized because of the glaring absence of our stories from the dominant narrative. Whether we, as authors, are writing a story about politics or “simply” writing a story doesn’t change the fact that what we are actually doing is writing ourselves into existence in a landscape where our stories have historically been marginalized, undervalued, or written from the outside-in.

I refuse to have my stories disregarded as art and/or literature simply because I choose not to ignore the world I’m living in—the world my characters, and the readers who connect with them, live in. And I refuse to be limited in the types of stories I write, whether they are perceived as “message-driven” because they challenge dominant cultural norms, or unmarketable because they are not about racism and the angst of being “other”.

In the current climate of clamoring for massive sales and blockbuster hits, writers are forced to find the big, sensational hook that will sell the most books. Within that

model, all of the real, *lived* stories of day-to-day people slip through the cracks. But those are the stories that are moving the world forward. Those are the stories that will pull us out of many of the messes we're in. Because all of those little stories are art—they are the heart and spirit of everyday people, and they *are* political.