

Does My Writing Offend You?

The Need for Sensitivity Readers

“As a push for diversity in fiction reshapes the publishing landscape, the emergence of sensitivity readers seems almost inevitable.” Katy Waldman

The number of books about ethnic characters has risen over the last few years. From ten percent in 2013, to more than a quarter of young adult and children’s books featured characters of color in 2015. There’s a catch, though. Most of the authors are white.

Back in January 2020, the acclaimed publisher, Lee & Low, put out their [Diversity Baseline Survey 2.0](#). It was a follow-up to their often-cited 2015 survey, which really got conversations about representation and inclusion in publishing kicked into high gear. The company shared the 2019 results, explaining why they’d begun this work in the first place:

“Before the Diversity Base Survey, people suspected publishing had a diversity problem, but without hard numbers, the extent of that problem was anyone’s guess. The goal was to survey publishing houses and establish concrete statistics about the diversity of the publishing workforce (which includes authors); and then build on this information by reissuing the survey every four years.”

The sad news is very little has changed with diversity in children’s books since 2016.

America—specifically young America—is currently more diverse than ever. As writers attempt to reflect these realities in their fiction, they often must step outside of their own knowledge. Writers are very aware of the need for diversity, but many authors are concerned for backlash, especially in lure of what has taken place over the last few years. The sensitivity reader

is one step closer to allowing the author to represent a marginalized community with authenticity.

Who are sensitivity readers and what do they do?

A sensitivity reader is someone who assists the author in creating an accurate portrayal of a marginalized community.

Consider the world you live in. Your cultural experiences, likes, dislikes, fears, and even biases are based on your community. As an author writing about another culture, how can you best represent a group of people who are not like you? One way is through help from a sensitivity reader. Without a sensitivity reader, the likelihood of authentic representation significantly dwindles. Why? Because from the outside looking in, it's unlikely an author will understand the complete experience of what it means to be a part of a marginalized community.

Sensitivity readers aren't new, and they aren't necessarily limited to publishing. Scholastic hired readers over the years as well as *Sesame Street*, and Hollywood has used test screeners for decades.

A sensitivity reader's job is to help non-ethnic authors avoid portraying characters in a way that feels inauthentic or uninformed. He or she is someone who specializes in a specific niche (African American, Latinos, Physically Challenged, etc.) and is a part of the specific marginalized community the author is writing about. A reader will offer possible solutions when she believes something may be a problem. Good sensitivity readers help authors recognize their blind spots, not only in their work, but in the way they move through the world.

The goal isn't to edit a manuscript clarity and logic, but to review a manuscript for internalized bias and negatively charged language. Although a sensitivity reader is there to help an author, they are no guarantees the reader will not mistakes.

Most importantly, good sensitivity readers create necessary dialogue between people who are different from one another in any way to recognize their blind spots, not only in their work, but in the way they move through the world. The practice challenges authors and readers to grow.

Who needs a sensitivity reader?

Publishing houses, editors, and anyone who writes or reviews manuscripts outside of their own community whether it concerns ethnicity or physical traits. This should not be optional for writers who choose to write with diversity. Nor for publishing houses who chose to publish manuscripts with diversity.

Where do I find a sensitivity reader?

One way is through is a new service I'm offering called Sensitivity Between the Lines or Sensitivity BTL.

What is Sensitivity Between the Lines? (Sensitivity BTL)

The purpose is to help connect writers with professional sensitivity readers in an environment that brings both together and assists in strengthening writers' understanding and authenticity in their manuscript concerning a marginalized community.

The goal is to connect writers with readers from marginalized communities and allow writers to obtain a more accurate depiction of individuals/communities outside of their own. Sensitivity BTL is designed to give authors the needed assistance to write with genuineness in their manuscripts concerning diversity to honor and respect the marginalized communities.

Here's how the program works:

- Contact the manager Edwina Perkins through email at SensitivityBTL@gmail.com.

- A questionnaire will be sent to the writer along with the cost. When the document is completed and returned, a sensitivity reader can be considered for the manuscript.
- The manager will contact a reader to check for availability. Once a writer and reader are paired, an introductory email will be sent to both individuals. Also, plans for payment will be discussed.
- If a writer has further questions or any issues, please contact the manager. Again, that's Edwina Perkins through email at SensitivityBTL@gmail.com.
- The manager has the right to refuse manuscripts that contain language, sex, homosexual and lesbian content, violence for violence's sake (extreme).

One final thought:

If your story were the only one people read about a marginalized community, what kind of impact would you have on your writing legacy and that community?