

REFLECTING REALITIES

Survey of Ethnic Representation within
UK Children's Literature 2017–2021

Published 2022



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Foreword:

Reflecting Realities – Five Years of Data

We publish this report in 2022, the fiftieth year of CLPE's existence. Since 1972 we at the Centre for Literacy have been working to ensure that all children have access to a range of quality texts in order that they can become happy, enthusiastic readers and writers with all of the benefits this brings. This means that in their schools, their homes, their libraries and their bookshops, children need to meet characters that look like them – and those that don't look like them, characters that inhabit similar – and different – worlds; stories that both reflect their lives and show them the lives of others.

It was this belief in the need for inclusive and diverse reading materials for all children that led us to publish the first Reflecting Realities survey in 2018. As the first statistics in that report showed there was a stark and immediate need for action. Children from racialised minorities in our country were facing bookshelves where they saw little or nothing that looked like them, they were not visible in our literary world. The first publication led us into difficult conversations and hard exchanges. Not everyone was pleased about the findings of the report, not everyone believed it was true, not everyone thought it was necessary. However, the acknowledgement of the need to change, to reflect on what had gone before, to make real and visible efforts to make the output look different was also obvious.

Over the last five years we at CLPE have worked with our partners and alongside so many others to support a real and visible change across the literacy landscape. We detailed many of these efforts in our report published in 2021 and we can see, in the figures published in this report, the impact of that work. There has been a rapid increase in the volume of titles featuring children from minority ethnic backgrounds and we welcome this increase. We also welcome the increased visibility of authors, illustrators and poets of colour. We welcome it because it improves the choice for young readers, it makes everyone visible in the world of books and it makes everyone's reading diet better.

A rapid rise in output could lead some to believe that the work is complete. We do not believe this is the case.

We are delighted to see the upward trend in numbers but we also know that volume of publications does not necessarily guarantee quality in representation. In the submissions this year we are seeing positive, well-rounded characters across a range of genres but we are also seeing poorly represented characters and books that are submitted with what we view as difficult or damaging portrayals. A rise in the percentages of characters from racialised minorities could lead some people to draw the conclusion the issues identified in our first report are now resolved. It is important to remember that the majority of the books submitted are not solely about racialised minority characters, these books still contain white characters. In 2017 very few books published included racially minoritised characters. In 2021, we have observed a shift towards the inclusion of more representative casts of characters in books published. This development will go some way toward diversifying book corners and the books on offer in the children's section of libraries and shops, making them more reflective of the world in which our reading children are living.

We are determined that this more reflective landscape won't be a 'trend' that disappears or that dips. We will continue to do this work because we believe in the power of children's literature to change lives and we believe meaningfully inclusive representative casts of characters in children's literature make books better.



Louise Johns-Shepherd
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Introduction:

Five years on, what have we learnt?

This is the fifth publication in our Reflecting Realities annual survey series. When we published our first survey, our key focus was to determine the **extent and quality** of the presence of racially minoritised demographic groups in UK children's literature. And this has continued to be the fundamental focus of enquiry with every survey since.

The data collated from the books reviewed for that first report indicated that the extent of presence was very low and the quality was significantly lacking. It provided a benchmark against which to measure progress, progress that we were hopeful could be achieved with a collective investment of time, money and focus. That first report was published at a point in time when the public discourse regarding the need for better inclusion was prompting much introspection across industries. We could not have anticipated just how responsive the publishing industry would be. There is no doubt that the continuous upward trend we have observed with each survey has transformed the volume of representative and inclusive literature available to young readers in the UK during this short time. We have learnt that when intentions are set, investments are made and time is dedicated to an end, remarkable feats can be achieved, as borne out by the trajectory of the summary data contained within this report. However, greater volume alone does not necessarily equate to better representation. It is crucial as is always outlined in these reports, that the quality of the content of this growing presence is carefully considered to ensure that the portrayals of racially minoritised characters do justice to their subject.

This survey should not be read in isolation, it should be read within this wider context and in conjunction with the previous four publications. For readers familiar with this annual survey, you will know that this work involves CLPE undertaking an annual call out to UK publishers both large and small, inviting them to submit any titles they believe satisfy the eligibility criteria for our team to read and review. The process for collecting, reviewing, analysing and reporting the data involves a long step by step methodology that was designed in the first year

of this work to enable us to provide a meaningful snapshot of the UK children's literature landscape. This process and the approach and methodology we use to collect and scrutinise the data that goes into this report is outlined in more detail on [our website](#).

A considerable effort and commitment has been made to improving the volume and quality of representative and inclusive literature by producers and consumers of children's books in recent times. This is evident from the output of steadfast independent publishers who have been committed to inclusion for decades, emerging new publishers for whom better representation has been the core driving force of their work and longstanding houses who have made efforts to recalibrate their focus to ensure that they are responsive to the needs and interests of their readership. These efforts have revitalised bookstores and broadened the choices for children, parents, carers, librarians and teachers.

Our hope for the next five years is that these annual surveys continue to support ongoing dialogue within the industry. We also hope that the volume of inclusive and representative output continues to grow, the nuance in representations becomes more varied and the quality of portrayals becomes more refined, ultimately leading to improved quality inclusive literature that reflects the realities of all readers.



Farrah Serroukh
RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR, CLPE

2021 Survey Findings and Insights:

Reflecting on Casting

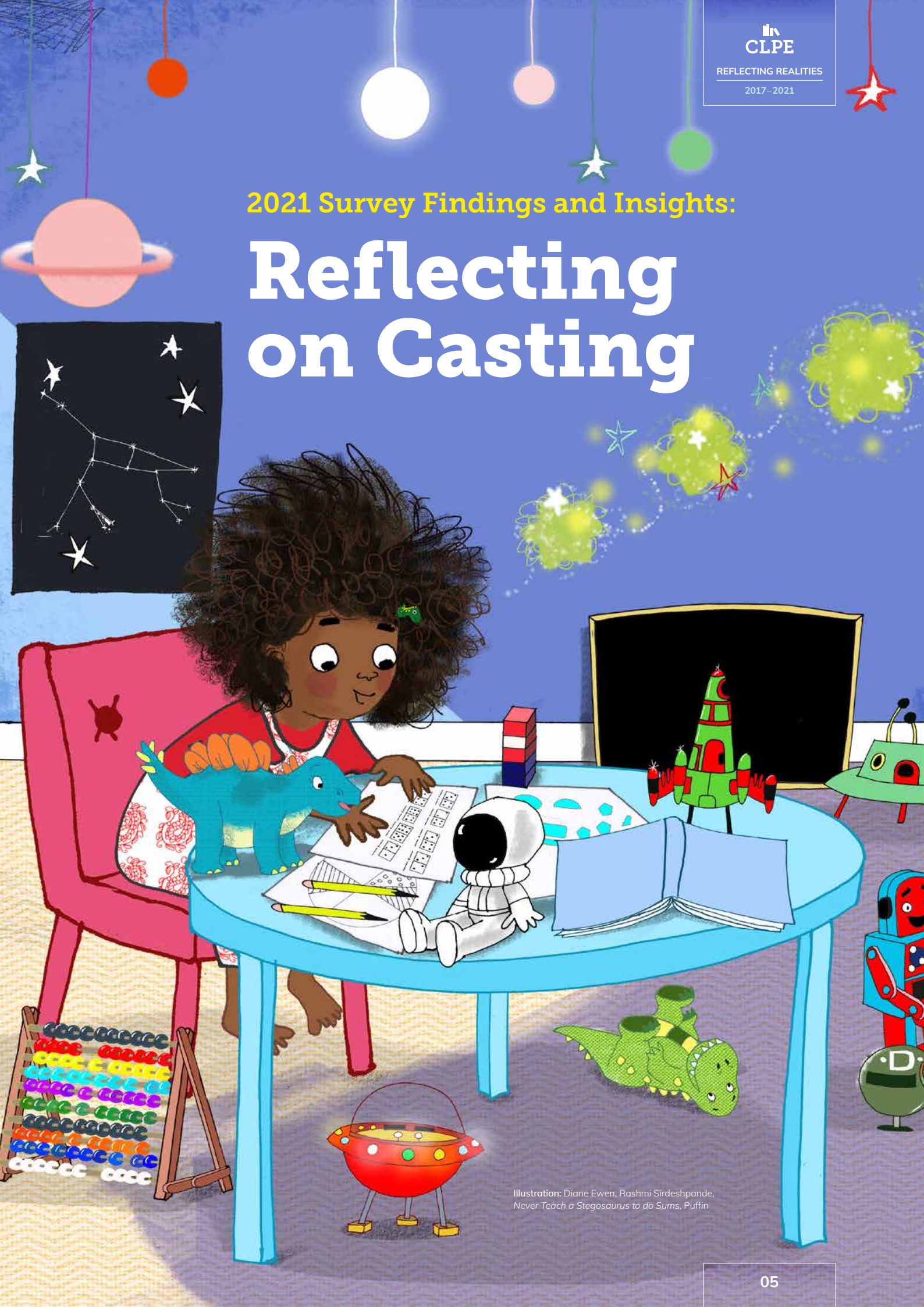


Illustration: Diane Ewen, Rashmi Sirdeshpande,
Never Teach a Stegosaurus to do Sums, Puffin

Overall Output

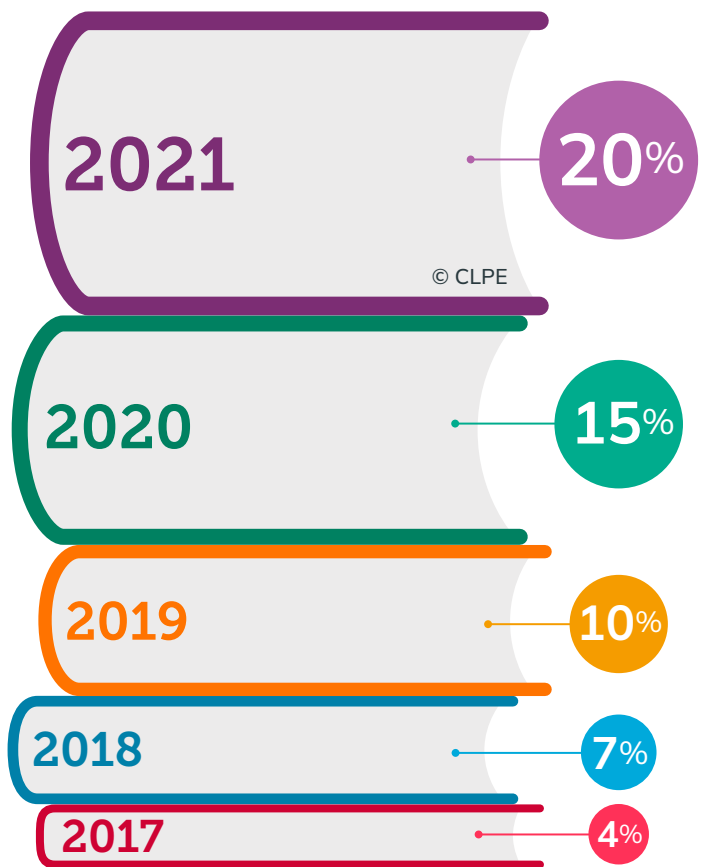
5,383 children’s picturebooks, fiction and non-fiction titles eligible for the consideration of this study were published in the UK in 2021. Of these **1,059** featured characters of colour. This indicates that **20%** of the children’s picturebooks, fiction and non-fiction titles published in 2021 featured characters of colour, compared to 15% in 2020, 10% in 2019, 7% in 2018 and 4% in 2017.

The continued positive trend in the volume of production of inclusive and representative literature shows a sustained commitment to improvement. The commendable 16 percentage point rise from the first report indicates that there are more representative titles available to young readers. This is naturally something we are very pleased to be reporting and it is an improvement that we hope will continue to grow over time.

Increased volume alleviates the burden of one book having to shoulder the responsibility of being everything for everyone. It gives space and licence to the writer to take their chosen direction in terms of casting, characterisation, subject and themes. The weight of knowing that your book won’t be the only title on the shelf featuring a character from a specific demographic group invites the opportunity to shape the character in a way that is unique to the world of their story, because you know that they will be one of many characters from this background that readers will meet. With each new encounter, readers will have the opportunity to either experience affirmation, connection or insights that help form layered impressions over time.

As we have maintained from the outset of this work, the two key components that inform the value of representation are volume and quality.

No one demographic group is a monolith. In reality, every individual is unique and the opportunity for readers to encounter many characters from a range of backgrounds, portrayed in a variety of ways and exploring a breadth of themes allows the contents of the average bookshelf to reflect these realities. This ideal, however, is not necessarily realised solely by an increase in output. More is not always indicative of better, and the value of increased volume can be undermined if the quality of content falls short.



Percentage of Children’s Books Published featuring **Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic** characters (FIG. 1)

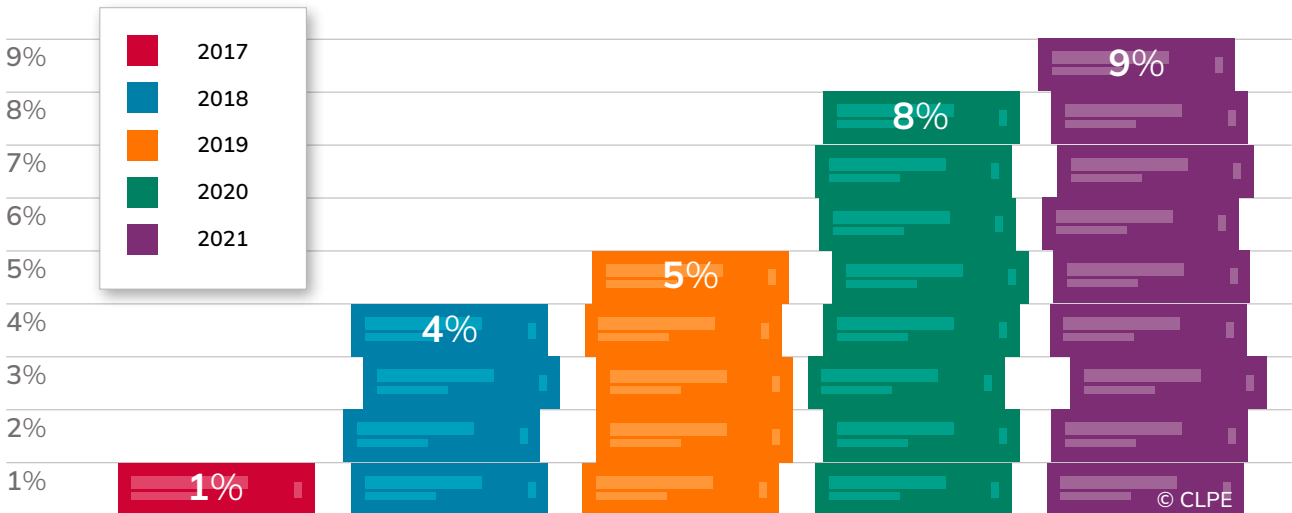
In our analysis of the submissions this year we have found that the quality of portrayals of characters from racially minoritised backgrounds varies across and within publishing houses. As in previous review cycles, we have enjoyed titles in which this quality is exemplary. However, in other instances we encountered titles in which the portrayals required more consideration, deeper development and better refinement. What the titles that do it well suggest is that the knowledge, skill and creative capacity to produce quality representative literature exists. No doubt it always did.

The momentum of recent years seems to have encouraged a collective growth of activity. It’s important that this energy continues and that it is directed towards developing understanding of what works and applying this knowledge with consistency within and across departments, making this knowledge central to the creative process.

Main Cast of Characters

The increase of representative titles published also corresponds with an increase in the presence of racially minoritised characters forming part of the main cast. **9%** of the children's books published in the UK in 2021 had a main character from an ethnic

minority background, compared to 8% in 2020, 5% in 2019, 4% in 2018 and 1% in 2017. As the 9% figure indicates, we are continuing to see a slow but positive growth in the number of children's books featuring a main character from a minority ethnic background.



Children's Books Published featuring a Main Character from a Racially Minoritised Background (FIG. 2)

Over the last five years, as the volume of titles we review has increased, so too has the variation of portrayals of characters of colour. As welcome as this increase is, it should be viewed with cautious optimism, firstly because it remains a very low figure and secondly because we cannot risk complacency at this point. Through access to quality representative and inclusive literature, younger readers have the opportunity to experience the world as it is, as well as enjoy the possibilities of how it could be.

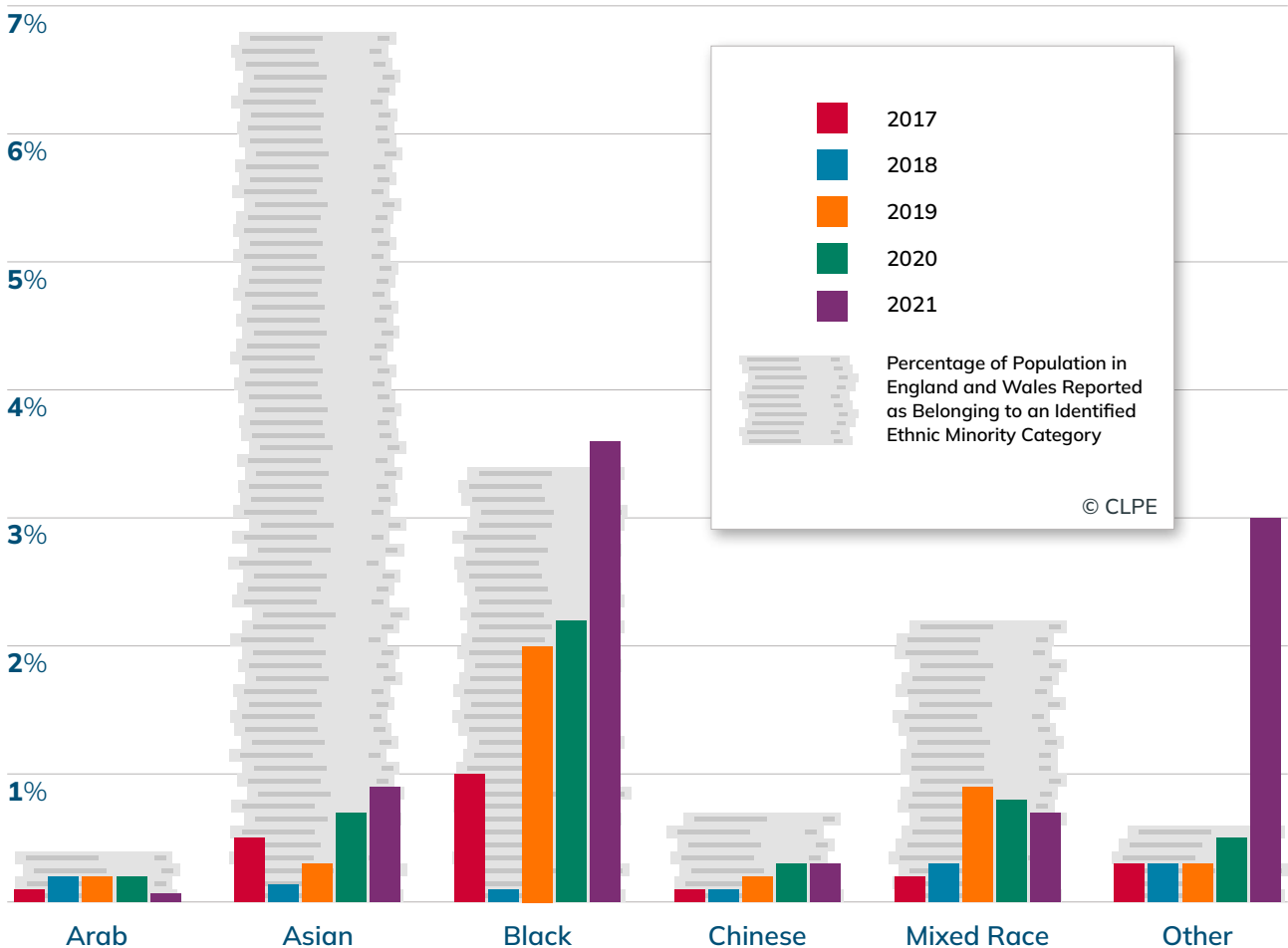
The connections, enthusiasm, curiosity, and awe that characters have the capacity to inspire in young readers mean that careful attention must be paid to the crafting of these characters.

This is why who we cast and how they are cast matters. Throughout the creative process, it is necessary to give due regard to questions like: what position does the character hold, what is the dynamic within the cast, what is the extent of their agency and contribution to the plot and in what ways, how effectively and how authentically are their being and personality conveyed?



Illustration: Diane Ewen, BookTrust Cymru Early Years Practitioner Conference 21/22 – Equality, Diversity and Reading for Pleasure in the Early Years, BookTrust Cymru

Contrast in Demographic Makeup of Real World Populations compared with Story World Populations



Percentage of Total Books Published Featuring a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic Main Character (FIG. 3)

These considerations are particularly important when we consider how much of a disparity there is between the demographic makeup of story worlds compared to that of the English and Welsh population. Figure 3 shows the extent of presence of different demographic groups compared to the census data available to us over the last five years. It is important to note that the census figures and categorisations are over a decade old. We also acknowledge that the language used to describe and discuss minoritised peoples can be limiting and we must emphasise that each of the census terms referenced are representative of vast and heterogeneous communities of people. The new census data is currently being processed and the summary findings are not available at the time of publishing this report. Given changes in population growth in the last decade the disparities are likely to therefore be greater.

The five years of data that we have collected shows us that not only has the gap between representation in literature and actual population been slow to close, but the proportion of representation of different demographic groups has also remained relatively static and very low. This would suggest that the increase in the casting of characters of colour is more likely to equate to an increase in the presence of ethnically ambiguous figures both in the foreground and background of texts as opposed to fully actualised characters from specific demographic groups or identifiable cultural backgrounds.

Reflecting on Character Voice and Agency

The analysis framework we use to guide the review process has been designed to enable us to identify the ethnicity of each character and their position in the narrative. It also supports reviewers to assess whether these characters had the agency to express themselves over the course of the narrative and note whether or not their ethnicity was overly determined or incidental to the plot.

84% of characters of colour who formed part of a main cast featured in the submissions influenced the narrative in their expression of thought, voice or action. Although this is a slight drop by 6% compared to the last report, it remains a positive indicator of the agency afforded to characters of colour. This is particularly the case when compared with the 38% figure reported in the first year’s survey. The increase in this percentage over time would suggest that considered editorial decisions are being made to ensure that characters of colour are given agency and voice. This is heartening as growth in presence is only as meaningful as the quality of the portrayals. What will be key moving forward is to ensure this agency aligns with nuanced portrayals of thoughtfully crafted characters of colour.

Our framework also provides the scope to determine how many submissions feature the ethnicity of a character as an integral driver of the plot. The review team found that 17% of the titles reviewed featured a main character who spoke about their ethnicity and whose ethnicity formed the basis of a plot point.

This figure is relatively static compared to the last report and would seem to correspond to the fact that a good proportion of the titles reviewed focused on themes of activism, celebrating different cultures, conveying experiences of different diasporas and unpicking the ideology of racism. Such titles offer opportunities for young readers to feel affirmed or better understand experiences beyond their own. When done well, they form an important contribution to reading diets. However, it is paramount that these are balanced with titles in which ethnicity is incidental to ensure that the presence of characters of colour on classroom bookshelves do not exclusively centre on narratives of struggle, strife or subjugation. Balance in output and consumption is key to ensuring well rounded reading experiences in which traditionally marginalised characters are given the scope to exist in the mainstream through well fleshed out and varied characterisations, as well as the exploration of a range of themes.

Cast Dynamics

As part of this process, we review the cast dynamics to determine the position that characters of colour are afforded, as well as, the extent of their agency and proximity to the plot. As we have already noted, in this year’s submissions we saw a higher percentage of characters of colour who were designated the role of the main character. An 8 percentage point increase of characters of colour featuring as main characters compared to the first report is a welcome improvement, particularly given how low the baseline was and we hope that this upward trajectory continues and is informed by careful considerations of how best to ensure casts of characters with varied and nuanced relationship dynamics.



Illustration: Diane Ewen, Rashmi Sirdeshpande, Never Show a T-Rex a Book!, Puffin

Multicultural Cast of Characters with Shared Agency

The alternative to the main cast format was often what we have defined as a ‘multicultural cast of characters’ with equal weighting in terms of presence, agency and voice. 32% of books submitted featured a multicultural

cast of characters with shared agency. This shows an increase over time from 10% in 2017 and is fairly stable compared to the 33% figure reported in the 2020 report.

Background Characters Identified as Belonging to a Racially Minoritised Background

40% of the books published in 2021 only featured the presence of characters of colour in the form of background characters which is an increase from the 25% reported in the 2018 report. As was the case in the previous cycle, this increase is likely to once again

correlate to a significant proportion of the submissions being comprised of non-fiction titles, many of which feature background scenes including people as a standard part of the design or aesthetic style.

Animals and Non-Human Casts in Children’s Fiction.

This work is focused on determining the extent and quality of human characters of colour. The core purpose of this work is to provide the intelligence necessary to support an increase in high quality portrayals of characters of colour in an area of publishing where under-representation has been a long established reality.

However, at the request of publishers, following the publication of the first report, we agreed to collate data regarding the proportion of presence of animals featuring as main cast members and worked with publisher colleagues to collect and collate this data. We assume that the hypothesis for those who wish to have data regarding the presence of animal casts is that this would go some way towards qualifying the lack of ethnic minority presence in children’s literature. We touch on the limitations of this position in a recent [blog article](#).

In this cycle, participating publishers reported to us that 18% of the total books they published in 2021 featured animals or non-human characters as main cast characters. This figure has dropped with each reporting cycle but the distinction has remained the same, in that publishers have consistently reported that the casts of their books are predominantly human led as opposed to being led by a cast of animal or non-human characters.

This insight doesn’t necessarily add any value to considerations about how to improve the quality of representative output other than to highlight that a number of ethnic minority demographic groups are significantly underrepresented in contrast to the number of animal or non-human characters who feature in children’s books.



Illustration: Diane Ewen, Katherine Locke, *Being Friends with Dragons*, Running Press

2021 Survey Findings and Insights:

Reflecting on Content

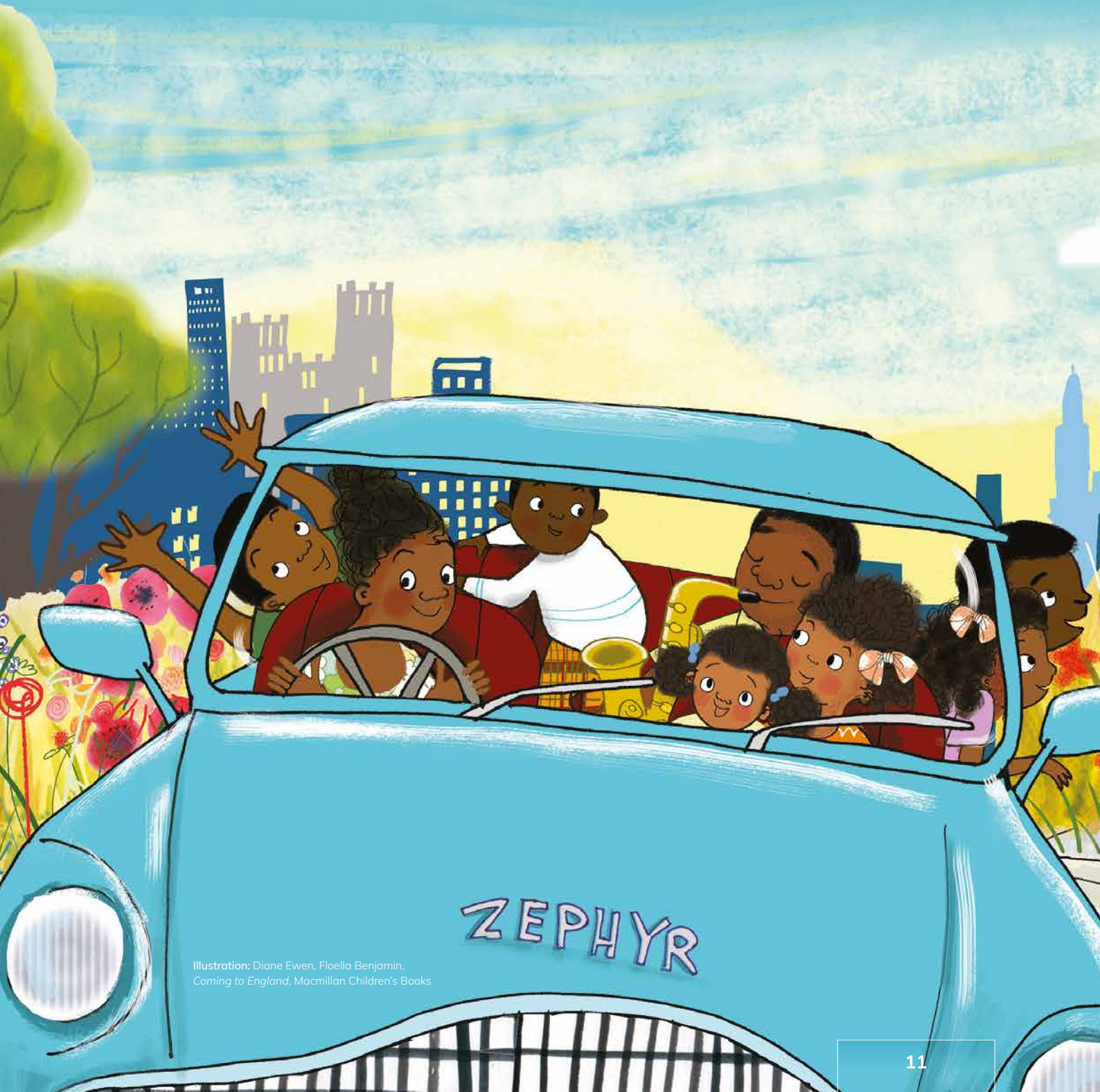


Illustration: Diane Ewen, Floella Benjamin,
Coming to England, Macmillan Children's Books

The year on year increase in the percentage of characters of colour featured in commercial children’s literature between 2017 and 2021 is a very positive indicator of the raised consciousness of the importance of ensuring more inclusivity within the publishing industry.

The shift in the makeup of casts of characters forms one part of the effort required to improving the quality of representative literature. We are keen that the qualitative insights from this report and all previous reports support publishers in ensuring that the outcomes of their conscious efforts consistently result in meaningful presence. The substance of each character and the integrity with which they are developed within different

text types also requires consideration. The five years of data shows us that there is a raised consciousness throughout the industry and that this is translating into a more conscious practice. However, the industry is not yet at the place in which this conscious practice is consistently translating into the meaningful presence of characters from racially minoritised backgrounds. Instead, what the review team has observed is that the range of presence continues to be varied. At times the presence is problematic and poorly executed and at others it is too insignificant to have any real weight. Ultimately we want this work to support publishers in channelling this conscious practice towards ensuring consistency of meaningful presence.

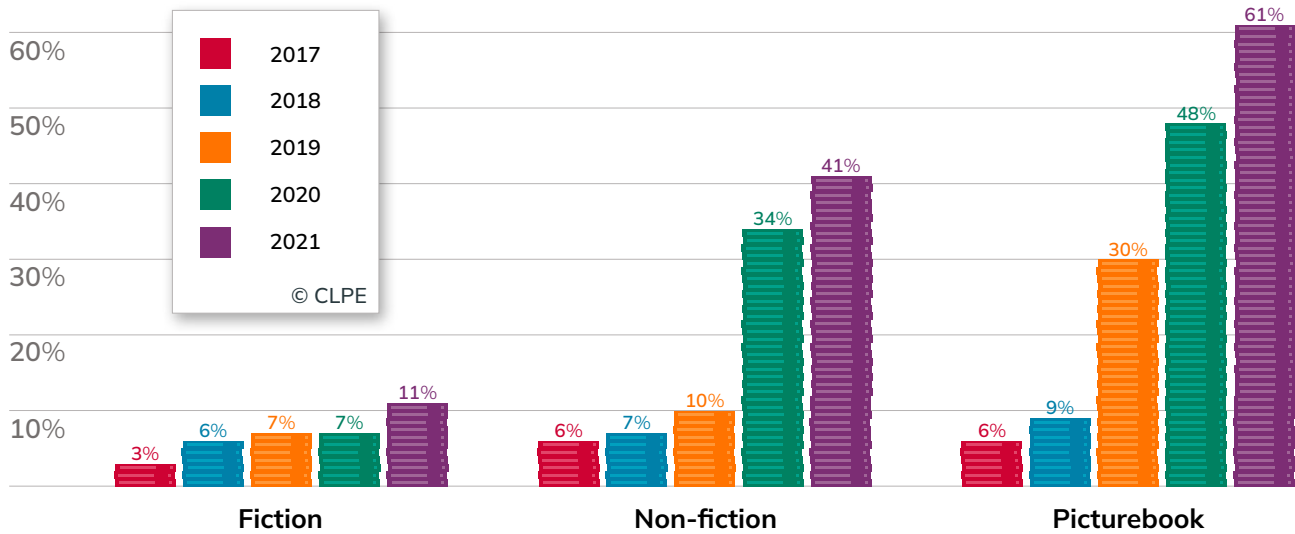


Extent of Representation of Racially Minoritised Groups in Books According to Text Type

In this survey, as with every reporting cycle to date, we have seen a growth in presence across all three text types, fiction, non-fiction and picturebooks. Whilst we welcome this upward trend, we have noted a consistent and widening gap in growth between picturebooks and the former two text types and the relatively slow increase in presence of characters of colour in fiction compared to picturebooks and non-fiction. In the first two reporting cycles the difference between the text types was not very large. However, since the third report we have found the rate of growth in the presence of racially minoritised groups in fiction compared to the other two text types to be markedly slower, with the gap significantly widening over time.

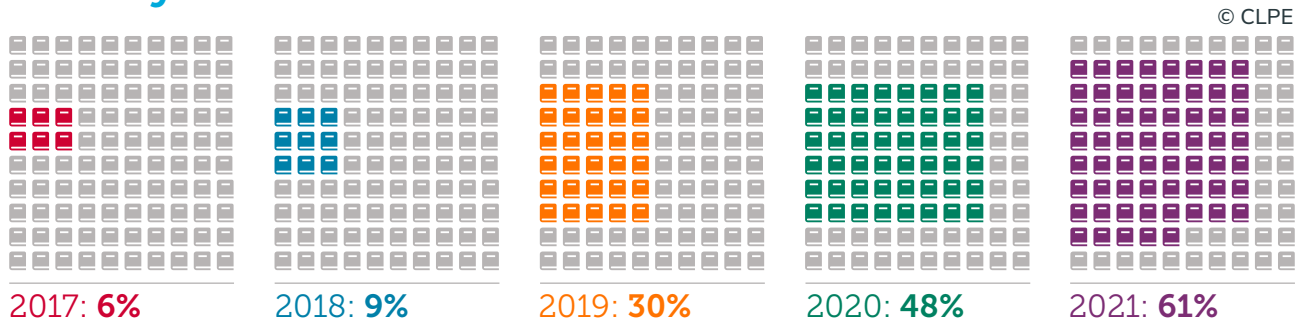


Illustration: Diane Ewen, Katherine Locke, *Being Friends with Dragons*, Running Press



Percentage of Racially Minoritised Characters featuring in UK Children's **Fiction, Non-fiction** and **Picturebooks** over the last Five Years (FIG. 4)

Quality of Presence in Picturebooks



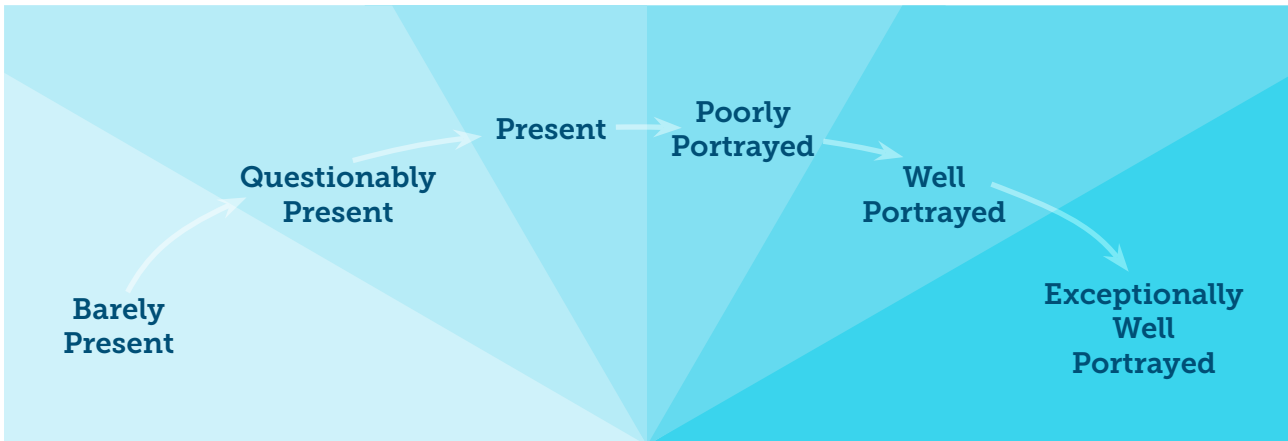
Picturebooks featuring at least One Racially Minoritised Character (FIG. 5)

61% of picturebook titles published in 2021 featured characters from racially minoritised backgrounds within their casts. The volume of representative picturebooks has increased year on year and the increase from 6% in the first year of reporting compared to 61% in this cycle of reporting shows a tremendous improvement in the proportion of presence. There is no doubt that visibility has increased most within this text type. We believe this is in part to do with the fact that this is a format that can be more easily adapted.

As we have stated in previous reports, although this is the text type in which it is often easiest to identify characters of colour, it is also a text type in which presence can fail to be fully actualised. As detailed in the guidance in our [previous reports](#), we are keen for young readers to encounter well developed, multi-dimensional characters of colour across all text types.

We want readers to encounter characters with agency, who are identifiable, relatable, nuanced, varied and are central to the narrative. It is evident when care and attention has been dedicated to ensuring this as the distinction in quality and detail is marked.

Given that the submissions are sent on the basis that they are believed to be representative, the nature and extent of presence of characters of colour have been quite varied in this text type. Based on our observations, the quality of portrayals of characters of colour in picturebooks continues to tend to sit on a spectrum of vague at worst to great at best. On one end of the spectrum, we continued to encounter titles in which there was barely any presence or the presence was too ambiguous to determine and on the opposite end of the spectrum we were delighted to have the opportunity to review carefully crafted, beautiful titles.



Spectrum of Quality of Presence in **Picturebooks** (FIG. 6)

In this review cycle, we were pleased to have encountered a range of titles with well and exceptionally well portrayed characters to highlight as examples of good practice. Each title in its own way serves the function of adding important variations of portrayals and helps to support understanding of the possibilities of what such representations can look like.

Alanna Max publishers continue to be steadfast in their production of high quality, thoughtfully crafted and beautifully produced titles featuring the beloved characters, Lulu and Zeki. Titles which in this cycle of reporting included *Zeki Loves Mummy*, *Zeki Loves Daddy* and *Lulu's Sleepover*, written by Anna McQuinn, with the first two titles illustrated by Ruth Hearson and the third title illustrated by Rosalind Beardshaw.

The Boys written by Lauren Ace, illustrated by Jenny Løvlie and published by Little Tiger, follows four boys as they grow from toddlers into men. It empathetically and eloquently explores variations of positive masculinity. Their ethnicity was incidental and carefully stated through the illustration, and their characterisation was varied and non-stereotypical. This was one of a number of examples in which the submissions conveyed broader representations that incorporated multi-faceted and intersectional portrayals.

Both *The Boys* and Anna McQuinn's *Lulu's Sleepover* convey these intersectional components through subtle but very clear acknowledgement of the sexuality of key cast members. From moments like the beautiful same sex wedding scene in *The Boys* through to Lulu enjoying the company of her lesbian aunts, the depictions in both titles manage to strike a fantastic balance of infusing the pages with love and joy, whilst also making the portrayals feel very every day and matter of fact in

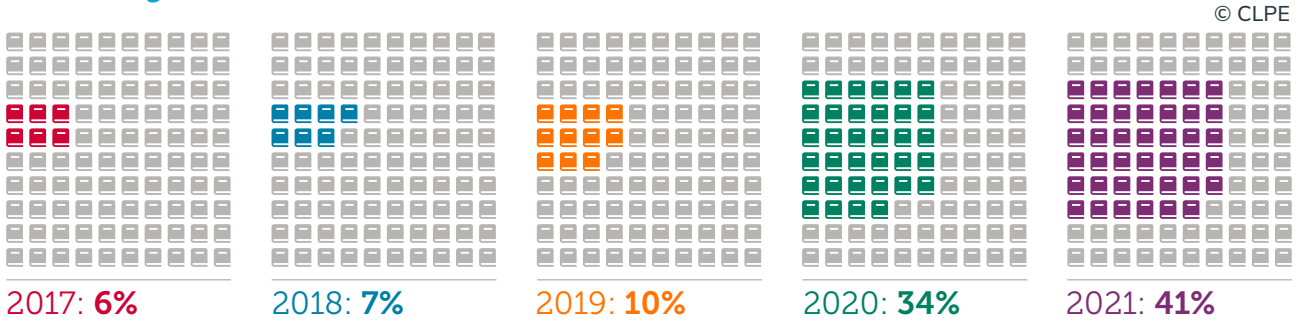
their essence. These details are particularly important given the traditionally marked absence and deliberate erasure of LGBTQ+ characters in this area of publishing.

Challenging traditional representations of girlhood is one of the many achievements of Malorie Blackman's, *We're Going to Find the Monster!*, illustrated by Dapo Adeola and published by Penguin Random House. It is a delightful tale steered by a wonderful young girl, who incidentally happens to have vitiligo, is buoyed by the passion for adventure in her belly. The joy, energy and spirit of adventure pulse through every page of this heart-warming and memorable tale.

Breadth and variation of representation was an underpinning feature of *Hey You!* written by Dapo Adeola and illustrated by some of the best of established and emerging Black British illustrators: Diane Ewen, Onyinye Iwu, Jade Orlando, Bex Glendining, Derick Brooks, Joelle Avelino, Danni Mustapha, Kingsley Nebechi, Chanté Timothy, Nicole Miles, Camilla Sucre, Jobe Aderson, Alyssa Johnson, Charlot Kristensen, Sharee Miller, Reggie Brown, Selom Sunu and Gladys Jose, published by Puffin Books. It is more than just a picturebook; it is an ambitious effort to spotlight the rich range of talent, who through their beautiful, dynamic, creative and thoughtfully crafted contributions offer a touching love letter to Black readers and a gift to all readers young and old. Every life-affirming illustration is infused with love, tenderness and joy.

We hope that over time this continued growth aligns with an ongoing investment in ensuring that the representation featured in each picturebook is as considered, meaningful and multi-dimensional as the exemplary titles referenced, enabling young readers to be spoilt for choice, affirmed, inspired and entertained.

Quality of Presence in Non-fiction



Non-fiction Titles featuring at least One Racially Minoritised Character (FIG. 7)

41% of non-fiction titles published in 2021 featured characters from racially minoritised backgrounds. This marks a 7 percentage point increase compared to the 2020 output. Given that the large majority of non-fiction books aimed at the 3-11 age range are illustrated, we drew similar conclusions about this increase as we did with picturebooks. In an illustrated title it is both easier to ensure and identify presence.

The most prominent non-fiction sub-genres were Biography and History titles. Books that profiled key figures, moments and movements continued to feature strongly in this strand of the submissions. Efforts were made to unpick challenging themes and issues by framing or exploring them in interesting ways to broaden understanding and deepen thinking. **Escape: One Day We Had to Run**, written by Ming & Wah, illustrated by Carmen Vela and published by Lantana, unpicks the idea of escape by using a series of verbs that represent the concept of fleeing. These verbs are used to share the ways in which people in a range of contexts have sought to escape their oppressors and find refuge. **We Have a Dream: Meet 30 Young Indigenous People and People of Colour Protecting the Planet** written by Dr Mya-Rose Craig, illustrated by Sabrena Khadija and published by Magic Cat Publishing takes the opening of Dr King's renowned speech as its title and applies its underpinning spirit to spotlight the dreams that fuel the work and commitment of contemporary activists around the world. David Olusoga's **Black and British: An Illustrated History**, illustrated by Jake Alexander and Melleny Taylor and published by Macmillan is an important complement to the award winning title, **Black and British: A Short, Essential History** published in 2020. To distil such important information and insights of a breadth of historical figures, eras and themes for a young readership is a very challenging undertaking. This follow up illustrated edition, incorporates a range of primary

sources interspersed with lively, vibrant and engaging illustrations, making the content accessible and easy to digest. The thorough research and careful consideration exhibited in these titles show a clear reverence for the subject and reader. Contrary to this, we encountered submissions that were not as attentive to detail or as thoroughly researched. At times this resulted in titles that featured either under-representation of certain demographic groups or worse still mis-representation. This was notably the case in titles featuring representations of figures from Arab backgrounds.

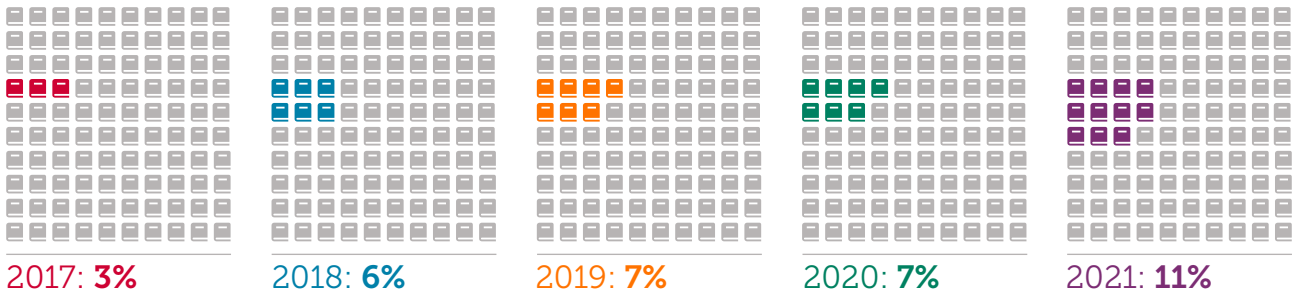
In our last report, we commented on the fact that, we saw a significant increase in the number of books that sought to engage with current affairs and the increased discourse on the legacies of imperialism, anti-racist advocacy and identity politics which were prevalent in titles reviewed for that report. The subjects of such titles were more likely to be individuals of colour. We reflected that there was real scope and potential to build on this by working towards content that focused on groups, movements and social history as opposed to limiting content solely to the exploration of exceptional individuals. Alice and Emily Haworth-Booth's title, **Protest!: How people have come together to change the world**, published by Pavilion Children's does just that by exploring examples of protest throughout history. The innovative approaches conveyed in these titles and the coverage of themes illustrate the importance of creative engagement in the production of information so that it is in the first instance informative but fundamentally easy to digest, engaging and thought provoking.



Illustration: Diane Ewen, Floella Benjamin, *Coming to England*, Macmillan Children's Books

Quality of Presence in Fiction

© CLPE



Fiction Titles featuring at least One Racially Minoritised Character (FIG. 8)

11% of fiction titles published in 2021 featured characters from racially minoritised backgrounds. This figure is up by 4 percentage points compared to the output of 2020. Of the three text types reviewed, fiction is the one that has seen the slowest and smallest incremental year on year change.

Based on the varied nature of the substance and quality of presence depicted in the fiction submissions, it is worth considering what kinds of stories are being commissioned and how the casts of characters who populate these story worlds are developed. We encourage publishers as always to contemplate what it means to reflect realities well. In terms of character development, this means ensuring that the cast is made up of thoughtfully crafted, well developed, multi-dimensional individuals.

As with previous cycles of this work, we continued to encounter fiction titles in which the presence was either too insignificant to be recognised as a meaningful reflection of realities or that the portrayal was insufficiently or poorly developed. The review team encountered many instances in which the only references to ethnicity in fiction titles were the incorporation of surface or limited signifiers to the extent that a reader might easily miss the reference. The opposite of this was also true in other titles in which signifiers of ethnicity were laboured to such an extent that they had the potential to compromise either the

quality of the writing or the overall narrative. In other instances, the review team read titles that featured portrayals that at times felt like the ethnicity had been added as an afterthought, leaving the characterisation under-developed and not particularly well fleshed out thus failing to be meaningful.

Genres of fiction that continued to be proportionately under-represented in the submissions were horror based titles and science fiction. Both genres can add new dimensions and texture to a child's reading experiences, broadening their appreciation of how books might thrill, delight, shock or intrigue us. Having characters of colour inhabit these genres is necessary in making them a meaningful part of the literary mainstream.

Reviewers were however also treated to a sample of fiction titles that were rich in quality and exemplary in the ways in which they reflected realities. The breadth and range of story worlds and themes featured in the fiction submissions gave the review team much to ponder. In terms of genre, both adventure and fantasy were relatively prominent. The growing presence in the realm of fantasy is an important ongoing development. As in previous reporting cycles, we would encourage careful consideration of the quality of this presence. As the presence grows in this space, we hope to see more nuanced, sophisticated and meaningful characterisations. An example of such sophistication was observed in *The Last Gate of The Emperor* published by Scholastic and written by Kwame Mbalia and Prince Joel David Makonnen. A fantasy title located in Ethiopia, that draws on the richness of the way of life, culture and heritage, offering an example of a more layered fantasy based title and a variation of representation of a part of a continent that is often generically portrayed in Western literary markets.



Illustration: Diane Ewen, Rashmi Sirdeshpande, *Never Teach a Stegosaurus to do Sums*, Puffin

The review team were pleased to have the opportunity to read fiction located in a range of genres. An example of this was the anthology of short stories *Happy Here* published by Knights Of, featuring contributions from a range of great emerging and long established Black British authors and illustrators. It is a collection that centres multi-dimensional, well developed Black characters and characters of colour in varied story worlds from science fiction, to murder mystery and everything in between. We share more about how this title came to be and our involvement in this in our fourth report in this research series.

As well as range in genre, we also observed a breadth of themes in the titles we reviewed. Members of the review team were struck by how certain titles managed to unpick challenging themes with real sensitivity. One example was the middle grade title, *Huda and Me*, written by H. Hayek and published by Allen and Unwin. This is a book that explores themes of racism and Islamophobia. Hayek manages to strike a careful balance between incorporating these themes without allowing them to exclusively define or overwhelm the narrative. The author effectively threads these themes into a fast paced, story full of warmth and humour.

Illustration: Diane Ewen,
Rashmi Sirdeshpande,
*Never Show a T-Rex
a Book!*, Puffin



Explorations of diasporic realities is a theme that Hayek's title shares with a number of other books including Yasmin Abdel-Magied's *Listen, Layla*, a title that explores amongst many things the beauty and tensions that can come from existing within and across cultures. Layla is a strong, passionate, intelligent, endearing, sensitive and worldly protagonist. *Tiger Daughter*, written by Rebecca Lim and published by Allen and Unwin, is a sensitive portrayal of the challenges experienced by a second generation character of Chinese heritage and her parents in Australia underpinned by the universal themes of hope, female empowerment and pride. *Front Desk* by Kelly Yang published by Knights Of, is another example of an authentic tale of immigration, this time set in the US during the 90s, full of heart, the book exhibits real attention to detail and genuine care for characterisation through its portrayal of complex family and wider cast dynamics. Yang manages to explore a range of important social justice issues whilst weaving a compelling, relatable story for young readers.

Using our Analysis Framework, we determine and note the ethnicity of the main cast of characters in each title to establish the breadth of presence within and across demographic groups. In earlier reporting cycles, we noted the total absence in some instances and significant under-representation in others of characters from a range of East and South Asian backgrounds.

We are pleased to be observing a slow but steady year on year increase in this regard. As well as

Tiger Daughter and *Front Desk*, the review team had the pleasure of reading *Tomoko Takes the Lead* written by Kit Rosewater, illustrated by Sophie Escabasse and published by Amulet Books and *Just Be Cool, Jenna Sakai* and *Keep It Together, Keiko Carter*, both written by Debbie Michiko Florence and published by Scholastic, all of which depicted multi-cultural casts of characters and in particular

offered insightful and nuanced impressions of Japanese American culture. Readers might notice that these titles are set in Australia in the case of *Tiger Daughter* and America with regards to the other titles cited. They each offer important glimpses into the lives and worlds of the casts of characters featured.

Variety is key to fulfilling a core aim of this work, with variety should hopefully come nuance, which ideally leads to greater scope for affirmation and more opportunities for better understanding.

Whilst there may be some commonalities shared across East Asian diasporas around the world, the country specific socio-cultural and political context of each country will inevitably influence the identities, experiences, cultures and communities within each context. This means that whilst portrayals of East Asian characters set in Australia or the USA make for interesting and valuable additions to the book shelf, such variety needs to include and extend to portrayals of British characters of East Asian heritage. This is why there is significant value in having award winning titles like *Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths*, written by Maisie Chan, illustrated by Anh Cao, published by Piccadilly Press. This is a book that exudes personality, warmth and humour and through its exploration of intergenerational, cross-cultural family and community dynamics, readers are gifted a glimpse into the world of an everyday young British boy of Chinese heritage growing up in his home city of Birmingham whilst figuring out the world beyond his doorstep.

We have also observed a welcome increased presence of South Asian protagonists. In 2017 and 2018 there were zero characters of Bangladeshi heritage in the submissions. In 2021 we were pleased to see titles such as Burhana Islam’s *Mayhem Mission*, illustrated by Farah Khandaker and published by Knights Of and a new addition to Konnie Huq’s Cookie series published by Piccadilly Press. Humour is a core component of both titles, as are the sense of relatability, familial love, zest for life and culture that pulse throughout these two story worlds.

Anisha Accidental Detective, written by Serena Patel, illustrated by Emma McCann and published by Usborne, marks the sixth instalment of this series. Anisha’s Indian heritage and culture are threaded through the narrative in a way that provides nuance and texture to her characterisation. This flows in conjunction with the fast paced plot peppered with laughter, intrigue and suspense.

Having three titles in the Huq series, six in the Patel and five Planet Omar titles in Zanib Mian’s series, would suggest that there is a real investment and commitment to these characters, authors and story worlds and that most importantly, there is a market for these books.

In their attempt to portray characters of colour with authenticity, what each title referenced manages to do is carefully consider the development of each character, the cast, the community of the story, the wider world of the story and the pieces that make up the narrative. The fact that of the text types reviewed for this study fiction is the area of publication that has been slowest to grow indicates that there is still much to be done. However, the richness in variety, tone, style, genres and themes in the small sample of titles referenced here illustrate the scope of what can be achieved when careful thought and consideration have been invested. We hope that as the volume increases, this level of quality will over time extend across all fiction titles produced.



Illustration: Diane Ewen, Rashmi Sirdeshpande.
Never Let a Diplodocus Draw, Puffin

Moving Forward: Our hopes for the next five years

The Reflecting Realities reports can only serve as a catalyst for change if they are used to inform action with tangible outcomes. Collating, reporting and sharing these findings each year with publishers, teachers and wider stakeholders is only the first part of a much wider chain of actions necessary to effect change in this space.

To ensure change requires engagement, reflection and response. The continued upward trend in data suggests a definite engagement with concerns raised in the surveys to date and an attempt to address these by improving the volume of output featuring characters of colour. It is evident in the examples of titles detailed in this report that there have been some exemplary titles within this cycle of reporting. With that said the quality of presence and portrayals has varied quite significantly within and across publishing houses. Therefore, striving for quality, balance and consistency is key.

It is our intention to continue to publish this survey, at least for the next five years. Our colleagues across the literary landscape in libraries, bookshops, schools, publishing houses and agencies tell us that it is a useful and helpful benchmarking tool. We will continue to work with our partners in other charities and organisations working for improvements in representation across children's literature. This survey provides one measure in a range of initiatives and supports us all with benchmark data in one part of this complex and nuanced work.



Illustration: Diane Ewen,
Rashmi Sirdeshpande,
*Never Teach a Stegosaurus
to do Sums*, Puffin

Guidance for Publishers, Bookshops, Libraries, Schools and Book Buyers

We are keen to channel the positive momentum in order to ensure that the last five years don't signify an exceptional short-term trend. To support sustained improvement, better consistency, and refinement of output we have set out our recommendations in the form of a series of prompts that we hope will encourage critical reflection throughout the creative process, supporting teams across publishing houses to be more considered. These prompts are also designed to support consumers when they are reviewing their stock in bookshops, libraries and schools.

We hope that this guidance in conjunction **with the recommendations outlined in our first report, the lexicon we developed in the second report regarding the degrees of erasure, the toolkit to guide understanding of what constitutes exemplary features of inclusive literature as featured in the third report**, as well as, insights from this year's report will support publishers in their ongoing efforts to produce high quality representative literature.

Quantitative markers can be quite confronting but do offer a tangible measure against which to evaluate progress. Qualitative improvements tend to be harder to gauge. The former therefore has the potential to steer the focus sometimes at the expense of the latter.

We hope that publishers are galvanised by the gains made to date and apply the critical reflection encouraged in this and every report to every stage of the creative process from commissioning through to publication. This focus and commitment we hope will over time lead to output that embodies the defining principles of what it means to truly reflect realities.



Illustration: Diane Ewen, Rashmi Sirdeshpande,
Never Teach a Stegosaurus to do Sums, Puffin

Questions to Guide Considerations

Determining Meaningful Presence

- Do the characters of colour featured in the books we publish/stock reflect the UK population and the world at large, not as a tick box exercise but as a meaningful and accurate representation of the interconnected, diverse society within which our children are growing up?
- Are characters of colour central to a broad range of narratives?
- Do characters of colour exist across a range of genres and within both fiction and non-fiction?
- Are there a variation and balance of themes explored in the titles in which characters of colour feature?
- Have you been attentive to the position that a character of colour holds in the narrative? What position does the character hold? What is the dynamic within the cast? What is the extent of their agency and contribution to the plot?
- Have careful research and consideration been exercised to ensure respectful, nuanced and layered portrayals of characters of colour?
- Are characters of colour well developed and authentically portrayed? How effectively are their being and personality conveyed?

Ensuring Breadth and Balance

- Are readers able to encounter varied portrayals of characters of colour, depicted with a range of personalities and represented as experiencing a full spectrum of emotions in the books you produce/ stock?
- Is the content of our titles balanced, allowing for cultural specificity without reducing characterisations to derogatory stereotypes or one-dimensional shorthand?
- Have we assessed the balance of our output/ stock to ensure that characters of colour are not predominantly defined by their struggle, suffering, exceptionalism or 'otherness'?

Valuing the Creatives

- Is there a sustained investment in both established and new authors from a range of backgrounds who are able to paint characters and worlds with the integrity that the subject matter deserves? Does your output/ stock reflect this diversity of talent?



Illustration: Diane Ewen, Katherine Locke, *Being Friends with Dragons*, Running Press

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The goodwill and continued participation of the UK Children's Publishing industry demonstrates a genuine commitment to better representation in children's literature. Thank you for your engagement with this initiative and we look forward to continuing to work in partnership with you on this collective enterprise.



Underground

TELEPHONE

TELEPHONE

New Arrivals to Britain

Illustration: Diane Ewen, Floella Benjamin, *Coming to England*, Macmillan Children's Books

“Reflecting Realities has been a significant driver of change within children’s and educational publishing; that change is an ongoing process, and we at Bloomsbury hugely value the commitment and work CLPE put into this report.”

Rebecca McNally
Publishing Director, Bloomsbury Children’s Books

“The work that CLPE does and the publication of the Reflecting Realities Report has become such an important benchmark in the publishing calendar providing crucial insight into our industry...”

Denise Johnstone-Burt
Publishing Director, Walker Books

“Without the critical work of CLPE, the industry may well fall back into “old habits”, its research and championing of quality literature is invaluable.”

Aimée Felone
Managing Director, Knights Of

“Long may CLPE’s meticulous work hold publishers to account as we move towards a more equal book landscape for every reader.”

Alice Curry
Founder and CEO, Lantana Publishing




If you have any questions about this report please contact CLPE:

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