

A Promise Kept: An Open Letter, Personal Reflection & Essay on Justice Focused Parenting—Reading & Writing as Foundations of Justice in the Early Years

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Abstract

This essay/article reflects on the importance of truth and storytelling as foundations for social justice in the early years.

Keywords: *Social Justice, History, Intersectionality, Education, Early Childhood Education, Stories, Literature, Children's Literature, Literacy, Cultural Studies*

R.J. Akraasi-Sarpong: R.J. Akraasi-Sarpong is a mother, writer, artist, birth worker and educator, her work focuses on intersections of race, gender, class; she views these problems through: Black feminist, critical race theory and socialist critique. Since her father gave her THE most bombastic side eye when she suggested pursuing an MFA in creative writing, she is completing an MA in Social Justice Studies with a specialization in Gender & Women Studies instead.

Introduction

How do I teach my son to walk well, to be in good relation with all kinds of humans, plants, and animals? How do I teach him about the injustices of the world, teach him to walk in integrity? First, through stories. We are shaped by the stories we are told (read). We are shaped by the stories we believe. Are the heroes in them, the plight the heroines face, the villains and monsters real? Do we see ourselves reflected in the stories we tell, and how? What is left out of the stories we share in families, communities, publishing, and public education? I believe we teach our children the values we aspire to through the stories we tell, the heroes we highlight publicly and privately, telling the truth about these heroes and not making them above reproach. We also teach them by keeping the promises we make. We must, as Black mothers, raise our children to recognize and name injustice, understanding they risk being trampled by it or perpetuating it themselves. The creation of a better world is at stake.

Shielding kids from hard truths in the name of happiness is a mistake. This is not to say we should present the world as all doom and gloom. Nor should we present the world as all rainbows and lollipops. I believe people fear if we teach accurate history, and expose the flaws of historical figures and heroes, that children's optimism will be crushed. Parents rushing to defend innocence can end up reproducing ignorance. However, telling flat stories—by flat stories I mean stories where we omit the wrongdoing of political or historical figures dismissing them as irrelevant do a disservice to the education system, family systems and society at large. We dismiss our children's ability to understand nuance and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990).

Instead of dismissing children's ability to perceive reality and dream, we should share stories that motivate them to help shape the world as we envision it—starting from a young age with their small hands. They can write, voice their opinions, and their efforts are meaningful.

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When we (as a society) elevate heroes (historical figures and activists) and continue to venerate them despite problematic behaviour that might not be widely known, we tell our kids that greatness does not require accountability, and that is the wrong message, as greatness most certainly requires accountability. Stories foster understanding. Stories shape our vision of the world. The ability to tell stories is under attack with public school book bans on the rise (London, 2025, p. 2). Those of us still committed to truth-telling must hold each other accountable and ensure that we hold our historical and public figures to the same standard.

For example, I want to share a story about a private protest by my then five-year-old, who is now nearly 10, and a promise I made to him. As mentioned above, the stories we teach our children are foundational in how they see the world. Story circles at Public Libraries filled his early years, and books before bed have been a routine since before he could speak. A few I came across a problematic entry in the table of contents in one of these books, of a historical figure known for his anti-Blackness; though possibly not widely, as a publishing institution, when new knowledge is acquired, new action is required. This open letter is meant as a gentle call in to the publisher and to give an example of how we sometimes elevate the wrong people or do not hold historical figures accountable. The concept of holding heroes accountable is not too deep or complex for kids to understand. The topic of accountability is explored in children's movies such as *The Sea Beasts* where the quote "you can be a hero and still be wrong" demonstrates children's ability to understand nuance (Williams, 2022). *Coco* is another film that demonstrates children can understand and handle the truth about beloved historical figures come to light (Unkrich, 2017). Though these films are fictional and use imaginary examples, they ask audiences to consider how we respond when the pedestal supporting historical figures collapses.

The book, *Little People, Big Dreams: Treasury: 50 Stories of Brilliant Dreamers* by Maria Isabel and Sanchez Vegara (2021), is an anthology of historic figures which has since become a household favourite. Our copy possesses—some household editing by my then five-year-old which is in fact an intentional act of protest. After I shared with him the complex and problematic history of one of the figures in the book, he ripped out the page¹. We discussed how we felt about this inclusion, given the information we had. I let him know that annotating, ripping, and editing his own copy of the book as he did was an ok form of protest, but that doing so to a borrowed copy may be unwelcome and come with consequences, as protest sometimes does. I told him also of another historic form of protest and critique—a letter to the editor. I promised I would write and send one. And so inspired by this call to reflect on Black motherhood and writing years later I begin.

The Letter

Dear Editors,

My name is R.J. Akraasi-Sarpong. This is an open letter to you. I am a fervent reader of your Little People Big Dreams Series. I want to write to you about the inclusion of one the entry in your treasury of stories. We own the book at home and read it often. It is in fact a favourite of my son's. However, we came across the entry of Mahatma Gandhi, and I had a conversation with my son about what anti-Blackness means and that even people of colour can spread anti-Black racism or gender inequality. We would really appreciate it if new editions of the book addressed intersectionality and an author's note about problematic figures in history. It is not fair to paint Gandhi as a hero when he was not fair to Black people. It is not fair to paint Gandhi as a hero

¹ After learning that this historical figure did not respect the boundaries of girls and women and that he used anti-Black racism in his anti-colonial fight against the British, my son ripped out Mahatma Gandhi's page (Hazama, 2017).

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when he did not respect women's boundaries. We want to read stories about heroes who wanted liberation for all, not just some.

We really like your book and enjoy reading often still many years later it is still on almost weekly rotation. There are so many great and big dreamers in your book and the series as a whole, there are also other characters whose history and actions also deserve to be possibly stricken or edited with note of harms caused. With the rise of fascist governance and political unrest worldwide telling stories of children who knew their goals from childhood and pursued them are needed inspiration but not at the cost of authenticity and accountability. I write to you as a book lover and as a mother. I write to you also as an English Literature degree holder and graduate student in Social Justice Studies, writer, researcher. Forever learning. This letter sent is a promise kept. I hope future editions of this book can be more inclusive and receptive to feedback and committed to sensitivity writers and historians as part of the publishing team and intersectionality at the center of every review. The stories we tell our children can only be better for it.

Sincerely,

Conclusion

My son has not asked about the letter in a long time at first he would ask if I had sent it yet and well time and nerve got away from me but with this example of a letter and full intentions on sending it to publisher alongside with reflection writing to journal education I hope to leave an impression as a reader and a mother just as authors and publishers might hope to impress their message on the audience. The impression I want to leave here is that the truth of our histories matters, whether they are political or familial histories. The truth of our heroes matters, and they may not be so heroic after all, and our children can handle the truth and still dream.

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