



Illustration: A Medium For Representing Minorities

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South Africa/Great Britain

A. What is a minority?

The term *minority* should be understood in the broadest sense in order to make it a sensible concept to work with. In essence, one would want to give voice to voiceless, face to faceless and presence to absent people in our book making.

I can list some minorities related to the picture book:

1. People from cultural, ethnic and language minorities could be absent as characters in or as creators of picture books.

2. Illustrators whose work are not adaptable to languages or cultural groups that dominate the international publishing industry, may be neglected or their importance may be disregarded in academic contexts. I think of Wolf Erlbruch whom I consider the most important contemporary illustrator. His strongest works are not available in the English language. I could also mention the Iranian picture book illustrators – eg Morteza Zahedi, Farshid Shaiffee, Marjan Favajan: If their delicate and sophisticated work were printed in hard cover and on good paper, I believe it would have blown the minds of many people in the West, who may not even be aware of the existence of a very strong picture book culture in Iran.

3. The tactile, printed picture book is a minority compared to the electronic and digital means of conveying narratives to children.

4. Consumer societies have very little regard for the creative work of so-called ‘outsiders’. Their brilliance is often not recognised, as it won’t ‘sell’ (e.g. *Playing Cards with Hildegard* by Hermine Cattaneo and a more fortunate outcome: the opportunities Tara publishers in India create for illustrators living on the fringe of the publishing establishment (*Beasts of India* and *I like cats*).

¹ Piet Grobler has published in the most relevant South African and European publishing houses and is the winner of several important international awards as recognition of his illustrations for children’s and young adults’ literature.



5. Picture books of substance, with layered meaning – the so called ‘serious’ picture book – enjoys minority status compared to masses of mainstream commercial books.

6. Since picture books in libraries and shops are categorised according to the surname of the author and not the illustrator, I have to conclude that the illustrator is considered to be of minor importance.

7. The preference given to other forms of literature above picture books is being reflected by much less and much smaller prizes awarded to them and by the limited coverage given in the press.

B. South African examples

The word *minority* suggests a reference to numbers, which could be misleading.

As a white Afrikaans speaking person I am within a certain context a member of a minority group in South Africa, but within the context of children’s literature, it would not be relevant to refer to me as such. People of European decent have been (due to political, historical and perhaps also cultural reasons) dominating the publishing industry in the country for many years.

Mother tongue speakers of indigenous ‘black’ African languages in this context, even though they are members of a linguistic and cultural majority, have often been disenfranchised of an opportunity to make books that represent them and their interests.

Can an illustrator address the inequalities, discrimination or negation in a picture book environment?

The individual Illustrator is probably not in a position to change the world or its perceptions and expectation of children’s literature. One could, however, start by paying attention to the manner in which one portrays minorities. One’s interpretation of the purpose of a picture book, would probably determine the action you decide to take.

I believe picture books should, in the first instance, be seen as narratives to be read for leisure. If you want to learn something, go to school. If you want to hear a message, go to church. If you want to enjoy a good story, you read a picture book.

But, it is also true, that in some cases, in order to rectify imbalances, the author and/or illustrator could also consciously intend to convey a message – or promote a cause with his/her book.



Niki Daly's iconic book, *Not so fast, Songololo*, was created in 1985, nine years before the first democratic elections took place in South Africa. This was the first South African picture book in which all the main characters were black. At that stage – and it is to a large extent still the case – picture books outside of the educational sphere, were only targeted towards the 'white' market. At this time, a 'real life' adventure, presented with realistic illustrations, was necessary in order to address the absence of minorities/disadvantaged people in picture books, and to build the self-esteem of a section of society ignored by the system.

The situation has dramatically changed since then – at least regarding the visibility of minority characters and subject matter in South African picture books. Amongst many examples of contemporary South African picture books consciously rectifying the previous imbalances in representation, there is only time to look at three examples: The corrective is however disguised as humour or fantasy. Thereby, the case of minorities could be promoted without turning the picture book into something patronising or propagandistic, as we see in the following cases: Niki Daly's *Mama, Papa and Baby Joe*; Louis Barnard's *Wie is dit?*; Fiona Moodie and Antjie Krog's: *Fynbos feetjies*.

In terms of delivering picture book illustrators from minority (or previously disadvantaged) groups, the South African industry still has a long way to go. I can only think of one prominent illustrator of colour. I spoke to Dale Blankenaar, a former student of mine at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, to get his views on minority and the picture book environment:

... the industry has treated me with respect and dignity at all times. I have never felt at any sort of disadvantage, and have therefore never felt a member of a minority...
Illustration, whilst it can very often form a focal point, should never sacrifice the integrity of the text to make a point the illustrator feels important. So where there is freedom of expression it should never be abused, and where an opportunity arises to make a social statement it should not be ignored.

Dale Blankenaar displays playful characters that are little parodies of human form rather than actual humans and he does not see boundaries between groups or cultures.



“It is my art to blur the lines, take people away from the issues that face them from day to day, and allow the story to speak”.

C. My viewpoint as projected by my own work

I am in the first instance a storyteller – mostly as illustrator of texts written by other people. If the written text requires a more layered approach (or literary complex or academic – however we’d like to put it) I try to illustrate it with due respect and intentional subtexts. I can refer to *Ballade van de Dood* by Koos Meinderts and Harrie Jekkers, which was not published by the American sister company of Lemniscaat who published it, because the subject matter is not regarded suitable to the market.

If the text presents the opportunity to represent minorities or to promote their cause, I would do so with my illustrations. The integrity of the text should however not be compromised.

I have worked on a couple of books where the intent was to portray families of colour or multi-racial families (*Today is my day!* by Anushka Ravishankar and *Fussy Freya* by Katherine Quarmby). In both cases the racial variety is simply presented as a given without elevating it to the thematic focus of the narrative. I thereby point out that it is a ‘normal’ phenomenon, not something alien or eccentric. The latest book that I have worked on is a selection of Aesop fables titled *An African Aesop*. The author, Beverly Naidoo, suggests that Aesop’s regular choice of African animals as characters and a resemblance of his name to the Greek for Ethiopia could indicate that he was taken to Greece as an African slave. This African interpretation of the author is also being reflected in the illustrations.

I do not claim that these examples are going to change the world. If they can, even just a little bit, contribute to a fair representation of the variety of people on the planet – in an industry often designed as if it aims to entertain only an elite minority or majority – I am a happy illustrator.

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www.aesops-fables.org.uk/

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