



# Windows into Worlds

Article Author:

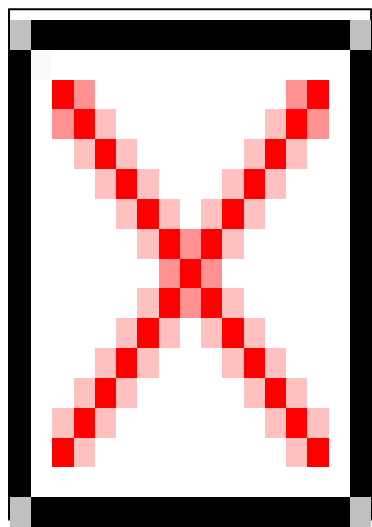
[Jake Hope](#) [1]

[244](#) [2]

Byline:

**Jake Hope** on the importance of visual representation and inclusion

In an extract from his new book [Seeing Sense](#) [3], Jake Hope discusses the importance of visual representation and inclusion, and interviews illustrators **Yu Rong** and **Poonam Mistry**.

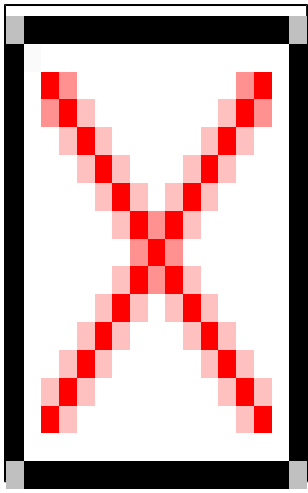


Visual literacy offers readers the opportunity to literally see themselves reflected in the visual texts that they encounter. This can be enormously empowering, showing that reading is inclusive and embraces a wide range of life experiences and backgrounds, affirming many different identities. For professionals working with books, whether in schools, libraries or bookshops, this means attention should be paid to ensure that representation in their book stock is not outmoded or problematic. Just as society shifts and progresses over time, so too does our understanding of what it means to be inclusive and how best to achieve this.

Despite the immediacy that visual representation allows, as part of an overall collection, the inclusivity and authenticity of what is being represented can be easy to overlook.

Encountering a wide range of characters with varying backgrounds and lifestyles can be an effective means for helping to normalise situations and increase exposure to a broad range of experiences from an early age. Illustrations within the books we read are able to convey subtle messages that can enrich and at times challenge societal conventions, taking an active role without this needing to be part of the main narrative of the story and thereby feeling didactic. An example of this might include two characters of the same sex holding hands whilst taking a child to school; the inclusion of children wearing glasses, hearing aids or other support equipment in classroom scenes; or a range of different cultures being represented.

Here I explore different facets of diversity and lived experience and how these can be represented visually in books in ways that are respectful, contemporary and authentic, helping to ensure that books are inclusive and reflect the society they are part of.

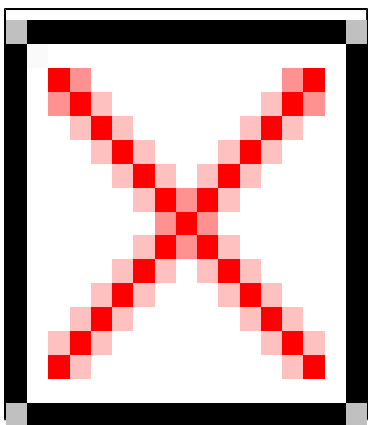


## Cultural diversity

Signifiers of different cultures can be embedded into visual narratives in a variety of ways. Broadly, this may include skin-tone, hair colour and hair type but can also be referenced through subtle details, such as the foods that characters are depicted as eating, the clothes that they wear, or the environment they are located within.

In appraising visual representation in books, it is important to look out for caricatures, where physical attributes are exaggerated in ways that perpetuate stereotypes and to consider when the book was published as books from a certain age are likely to depict a view of people which is influenced by the politics of the day. An example of this is **Tintin in the Congo**, a graphic novel featuring the eponymous boy journalist, and written and illustrated by Herge. The depiction of the people and landscape of the Congo in this graphic novel drew upon limited source material, much of this steeped in colonial viewpoints. This is reflected in the style of illustration which led to criticism of the book's publication in colour in the UK in 2005. Discussion ensued about whether the book should be removed from sale or whether it represented an important part of societal history and progress. There is a danger that wiping out books of this kind leads to making history anodyne, but equally it's important to contextualise these limited and outdated portrayals through raising awareness of the visual representations of culture that counter these stereotypes. If outdated representation constitutes the only opportunity for readers to encounter particular cultures, it risks perpetuating stereotypes.

Central to conversations around authentic representation of culture and diverse experience is who is telling the story. Discourse around own voices, recognising the way artists record and relay the culture and groups that they are a part of can be a powerful way to communicate representation that is informed and nuanced. It is important to ensure that representation is not at the exclusion of those who come from particular cultures or groups, indeed people with lived experience of what is being represented should be a part of constructing these stories.

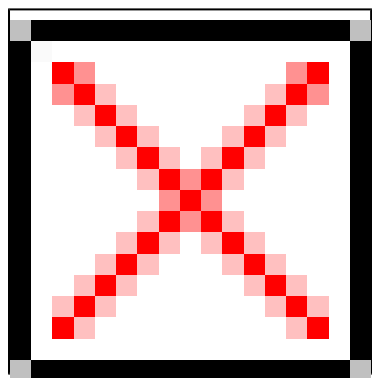


Illustrator, **Yu Rong** (2019), discusses her approach to illustration and the manner in which this is rooted in Chinese traditions, a hybridisation of different cultural approaches: 'I was inspired by Chinese paper cut which was created a long, long time ago. It is in a two-dimensional flat form, mostly in the colour red with topics focused on farming. People use them to decorate windows and doors to celebrate festivals. Studying at the Royal College of Art, I freed my mind of

thinking, thus leading me to explore the possibilities for how to use paper cut to convey my ideas into artwork. Through decades of practice, I have learned how to use the characteristic of paper cut to fully express my creative ideas. It is fun, spontaneous and unique. My journey has turned the use of paper cut technique passively to a more positive free method.?

In selecting titles as part of collections, it is imperative to be aware of the role unconscious bias can play in these decisions. Unconscious bias is the way the brain creates shortcuts and tends to favour that which it is already familiar or comfortable with. This can act as an impediment to achieving a representative collection.

Likewise, when choosing core titles for a collection, it is important consider the effects of colonisation that often impacts upon canonical titles. There has been significant work into decolonisation of the classroom, which has extended to collections in the library. Creating an inclusive collection in the library is key area to ensuring a representative and wide-reaching base for all readers. Thinking around who the primary audience of the collection is perceived to be and considering the types of world view represented by the books is an important starting point in this. Cultural influences can affect an illustrator or artist's artwork and when executed successfully can lend a sense of authenticity to the visuals created, as well as providing access to styles and techniques from other countries and cultures.



Illustrator **Poonam Mistry** (2019) discusses some of the influences behind her work: "My artwork is greatly influenced by Indian folk art and textiles but also other forms of traditional art celebrated around the world. As my style is heavily decorative, it's important that the image itself remains simple and encapsulates what the text is trying to say in its basic form. Each layer of pattern is almost a piece of thread and together they weave and entwine to create a tapestry of different elements and images that feels unified and one. The patterns I draw often curve and adjust to the shape of animals and organic forms to help create movement and fluidity. For me, it is important that my style reflects my heritage and roots. It helps to give the reader an idea of who is behind the pictures.?"

A powerful way to help curate a representative collection ? where selection processes enable this ? is to work with a consultative group of young people trying to ensure that this comprises of individuals with a range of lived experience. As visual narratives are often more immediate, this can be an effective way both of giving voice to young people and visibility to underrepresented groups.

**Jake Hope** is chair of the working party for **Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals**. He is a children's book and reading development consultant.

[Seeing sense: visual literacy as a tool for libraries, learning and reader development](#) [3], by Jake Hope is published by Facet Publishing, 9781783304417, £39.95.

Page Number:

10

---

Source URL (retrieved on Oct '20): <http://imap.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/244/childrens-books/articles/windows-into-worlds>

Links:

[1] <http://imap.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/jake-hope>

[2] <http://imap.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/244>

[3] <http://imap.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/244/childrens-books/reviews/seeing-sense-visual-literacy-as-a-tool-for-libraries-learning-and->