

Johanna Lestelä
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My Journey in Writing a Diverse Children's Book

I am very thankful for the opportunity to give this short presentation of my journey in writing a diverse children's book and getting it published.

I would like to start with a short story:

It's about a small girl who lived in Finland some 30 years ago. She liked dolls and books and dancing amongst other things. She lived happily with her mother. And then one day, she had a new doll. And this was not like any other doll she had had before, because the doll had brown skin and dark brown eyes just like hers. She had never met another child who would resemble her in that way, and couldn't have dreamt of a doll that would look like her. This time naming a new doll would be easy. There was only one option in her mind. Because they were both one of a kind in this world she knew, and luckily they had found each other. So the doll would be named after her.

I still have the doll and it's still called Johanna, after me. Finland has long been a fairly homogenous country, but even here today this story sounds surreal. Nowadays I work as an elementary teacher in the capital area. The pupils in my school speak at least 30 different languages as their mother tongue. The school picture of my class looks very different from the ones from my childhood. In school, subjects like mother tongue, nationality and skin colour come up in surprising situations and surprisingly often in everyday conversations with the kids. Because of my own background and experiences I have been eager to catch these openings and discuss the themes with the kids.

Still in many situations I find myself lacking the vocabulary to address the difficult themes brought up. A theme that comes up often is identity. Whether the kids identify themselves as Finnish or something else. Quite many do not seem to identify themselves as Finnish at all when we have discussed the issue. Of course there might be many reasons for this. First, the homes naturally emphasize their own cultural background, whether if it is Finnish or something else. Secondly, the outside society might sometimes give the feedback that you do not originally belong here or that you are not even welcome to be here. So I have always tried to offer them the idea, that they are indeed allowed to see themselves as Finnish too.

Sometimes they say they are half this and half that. That is what I used to say as a kid. Nowadays I try to suggest them the idea of being something AND something. Because maybe it is not so nice to be only half of something. Language matters. And also representation matters. In my view the Finnish children's books still today do not reflect today's Finnish society in its variety. It has been fairly difficult to find diverse children's books for my class, for I want everyone to feel included. When I have found books with dark skinned characters for example, they are often portrayed as somehow different from the norm. I want to challenge the norm.

My picture book series is my attempt to add diversity in representation in Finnish children's books. For me it was very important that the book is not about skin colour, it's not about race or tolerance. It is a children's picture book about everyday life. The story is about a girl, Tuikku, who is worried. She has done something wrong, but she doesn't want to tell anyone. In the end she learns that worries can be solved with the help from others. I wanted to write a book in which any child could identify themselves with. With that I wanted to underline the fact, that Finnish childhood can look like this too and it is just normal.

In my experience the publishers acknowledge the need for these kinds of books. I had no background in illustration or publishing before I started the project. But I had the idea and the passion and the pedagogical knowledge. For a while I waited and kept the idea in a drawer. There were many coincidences that made me think I really need to do this now. The pressure grew until I felt we just must get a book like this in Finland and the sooner the better. So I mustered up and sent the script with a few sketches to the publishers.

Many have welcomed Tuikku with open arms and told me it was about time we had a book like this in Finland. Nevertheless I have also been very thankful for those reviews in the mainstream media that have highlighted the story and the narrative about emotions, because it emphasizes the fact that this book is for everyone.

The second story about Tuikku will be published next week and I hope to write many more books about Tuikku. But Tuikku's story is just one story and what matters is the variety of different stories and the variety of representation. I want to see the next generation in Finland and everywhere to

grow up in an environment of inclusion, possibilities and hope. Literature can lay a future like that right in front of our eyes. I want to encourage everyone to share their ideas and to send the first letters to the publishers. Because we are eagerly waiting.