

Event Title: Writing to Center and Empower Children Outside the Mainstream

Event Description: Children's authors have the privilege and responsibility to tell stories that matter. These panelists write stories that share the lived experiences of children and teens outside the mainstream, narratives that transcend marginalizations—not by erasing them, but by embracing them. In centering outsiders, these authors honor the craft of story and the art of humanity. This panel highlights the motivations, challenges, craft, and artistry that contribute to the creation and success of their books.

Event Category: Children's and Young Adult

Event Organizer

Katey Howes: Katey Howes is children's author, poet, makerspace enthusiast, and fun mother. Her most recent book, *Rissy No Kissies*, received multiple starred reviews, was included on Kirkus' Best Books of 2021 list, and has been called "an artistic gem for consent discussions, sensory-processing contexts, and anyone who champions children's agency and bodily autonomy." (Kirkus) Katey's previous picture book *Be A Maker* received the ILA's Social Justice Literacy Award and was featured on Reading Rainbow Live. Her debut book *Grandmother Thorn* was named an Anna Dewdney Read Together Honor Book. Katey can be found at www.kateyhowes.com and on Twitter at @kateywrites. You may also find her wandering the woods outside her Bucks County, PA, home with a dog named Samwise. To contact Katey directly, use the contact form on her website.

Event moderator

Alison Green Myers: Alison Green Myers is an avid reader and writer. She's served as a classroom teacher, literacy coach, curriculum writer, and school director. She is the Program Director for the Highlights Foundation, a National Writing Fellow, and an active member of the Society of Children's Books Writers and Illustrators. Her debut middle grade novel *A*

Bird Will Soar is the 2022 winner of the Schneider Family Book Award honoring a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences. Please reach out to Alison at alisongreenmyers.com/contact.

Event participants

Meera Trehan grew up in Virginia, just outside Washington, DC, where she read as much as she could, memorized poems, and ate enough cookies to earn the nickname “Monster” after the Cookie Monster. After attending the University of Virginia and Stanford Law School, she practiced public interest law for over a decade, before turning to creative writing. Her debut novel, *The View From the Very Best House In Town*, came out February 2022 from Walker Books US, an imprint of Candlewick. She lives in Maryland with her family. Meera can be found at meeratrehan.com and on Twitter at @writemeera.

Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow is an award-winning children’s book author and educator who aspires to be a griot. That is, she strives to create community stories with lyrical language, unforgettable voice, and dialogue that begs to be read aloud (or even sung). A curriculum writer and former English teacher, she has educated children and teens in traditional and alternative learning settings. As an inaugural AMAL fellow with the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC), she developed foundational curricular frameworks for youth and adult anti-racist programming. Her picture books and middle grade fiction center young Black Muslim protagonists and include *Mommy’s Khimar*, *Once Upon An Eid* (anthology contributions), soon-to-be-released *Abdul’s Story*, and *Your Name Is A Song*, an Irma Black Award honor book. These works have been recognized as the best in children’s literature by Time Magazine, Read Across America, and NPR. She lives with her family in Philadelphia. She can be found at <https://jamilahthewriter.com>.

Alexandra Villasante’s debut young adult novel, *The Grief Keeper* was a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection and the winner of the 2020

Lambda Literary Award for LGBTQ Children's Literature/Young Adult Fiction. Alex is a member of the Las Musas collective of Latinx children's book creators and a co-founder of the Latinx Kidlit Book Festival. Alex's short stories appear in the upcoming Young Adult anthologies *All Signs Point To Yes* (Inkyard, 2022) and *Our Shadows Have Claws* (Algonquin, 2022). She is the program manager for the non-profit Highlights Foundation, which supports children's book writers and illustrators, and lives in the semi-wilds of Pennsylvania with her family.

OPENING MODERATOR REMARKS AND HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS

Alison Green Myers: Hello and welcome, I am Alison Green Myers, my pronouns are she/her. We are pleased to have you join us for Writing to Center and Empower Children Outside the Mainstream, each of us comes to this topic from our personal experiences, as possibly this theme connects with your life.

Our goal today is to open to conversation about empowering characters whose differences have placed them outside the mainstream, and have very much placed them at the center of our stories. It is about our hope for more stories and characters like them, so that more children are represented thoughtfully and authentically in children's books. Before we move into some introductions, I'd like to mention that we are coming to you today as creatives. The opinions that we share are our own and we'd ask you to consider them with respect. We will be offering supplemental materials through the AWP forum. If you have questions or would like us to approve a quote, please reach out to any of the email addresses on your handout.

To start things off, let's open with some introductions. I'll ask our panelists to tell us a little about themselves, their work, and what brought them to today's topic.

PARTICIPANT OPENING REMARKS, INITIAL THOUGHTS, OR READINGS

Meera Trehan: Hello, I'm Meera Trehan and my pronouns are she/her. I'm so glad to be here today. My novel *The View From the Very Best House in Town* explores the friendship of two autistic characters, Asha and Sam, and what happens when that friendship starts to fray. It's told from the points of view of Asha and Sam, and also a mansion called Donnybrooke that was a vehicle to explore, among other things, conventional values of success. I wrote this novel because I had questions and in trying to answer those questions honestly, it was important to me to reflect our world. That included writing characters who were neurodiverse, of different ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, and family structures, in addition to having different personalities and motivations. I also came to this topic as a reader. When I was young I loved to read but I rarely saw Indian or Indian-American characters in books and when I did, they were often portrayed in ways that didn't at all reflect my reality. I want kids to feel seen through my work and to learn from it, and for me, that requires giving careful thought to how to represent characters authentically.

Katey Howes: Hello. My name is Katey Howes, and my pronouns are she/her. My books tend to contain themes of agency and individuality for young children. My most recent picture book, *Rissy No Kissies*, centers a young lovebird who, unlike all her family and friends, doesn't like kisses. While it may seem like a simple concept, it is carefully crafted to center a character whose comfort with displays of physical affection differs from the norm, and who is made to question their belonging and identity because of those differences.

I had been wanting to write about this topic for many years, for a variety of reasons. To start with, I have pretty serious social anxiety that makes "normal behavior" in social situations very difficult for me. I've always disliked seeing the awkward/shy/withdrawn child in books and other media depicted as the outcast, or shown overcoming their weaknesses to gain

acceptance - instead of being valued and respected for who they are and how they feel.

I also have 3 children whose personal traits have made their experiences of and preferences for physical affection very different. (One autistic, one with sensory processing disorder, one fiercely independent.)

This theme could find a place in many genres of literature. I chose picture book form because I believe this is a message children aren't hearing early enough. No child should feel they are LESS, they are OTHER, that they are unloved or incapable of loving, because they are more comfortable relating to people in a different way. Children should not judge their friends' preferences for social interaction, or to force unwanted touch upon them. They should grow up with a book beside them that says, "your body and your heart are YOURS, and you choose how to share love." And in the end, the books we write for kids? They also carry their message to the parents, teachers, grandparents...all the other caregivers who read aloud, who read along. A picture book can be a powerful friend for a child, but it's also an education for the whole family, the whole community.

The past two years publishing has had a wonderful influx of picture books that normalize and de-sexualize the concepts of consent and autonomy for young children and their caregivers. We need more, at every age level and genre of children's literature. More books that lift up and center characters whose sensory processing, or neurodivergence, or mental health, or personal preferences influence the ways they interact with society. Books that empower readers who relate to those characters and let them feel seen, loved, safe, and respected.

Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow: I am Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow and my pronouns are she/her.

Reading of excerpt from *Abdul's Story*: "During writing period each day, he wrote, then erased his mistakes . . . wrote then erased . . . wrote then erased. His classmates had neat sentences. Abdul had smudges.

Why write his stories anyway? The people and places in his school books never looked or sounded like the people or places he knew.

Some stories are for books, Abdul decided, but not his."

Why I Choose to Write about Characters out of the Mainstream:

- I'm writing my own identity that isn't typically in the mainstream.
- I'm working to undo the kinds of harm that happen to kids who share my identities or have other marginalizations – particularly those who are racialized.
- I think like an educator, my work is creative but elements of love-based pedagogy still inform the work.

Alexandra Villasante

Hola! I'm Alex Villasante, my pronouns are she/her. In my YA book, *The Grief Keeper*, Marisol is an undocumented immigrant to this country, but she's also a queer woman, who speaks English and dearly loves trashy North American teen dramas. She and her sister flee the violence in their homeland of El Salvador, but once in the US, they're detained by ICE and given an unusual choice: be immediately deported, or participate in a cutting edge clinical trial for a device that transfers grief from one person to another.

The stories I write are deeply intertwined with my identity as a latinx person, a queer person and a bi-lingual, bi-cultural person. Growing up in a part of New Jersey that was primarily white and American with immigrant parents, I definitely felt outside of the mainstream, not belonging fully to any group of people - even parts of my family, as I was the only American in my family. That honed in me intense powers of observation, and a curiosity of what makes us who we are, how we shed and take on aspects of our identities.

MODERATOR QUESTIONS

- 1) What work is needed? What mistakes have you made/have you seen being made?
- 2) Do modern/recent children's books center and empower outsiders differently than classics? Do they bring something new to the table?

3) What techniques/craft/situations did you use to highlight the sense of being left out? (May include excerpts/examples.)

4) What techniques/craft/situations did you use to show the character's growth into power? (May include excerpts/examples.)

5) What other books do you think create this sense of empowerment well? What do you admire about them?

6) How do you recommend writers begin a book that centers and empowers?

RESPONSES OF EACH PARTICIPANT TO MODERATOR QUESTIONS

A1)

- Meera: Learn about the history of children's literature, listen to marginalized voices specifically about why books have been problematic, and understand the discourse within publishing. One mistake that I made early on was wanting to make marginalized characters perfect, but all characters deserve to be full people, which includes making mistakes.
- Alex: There's work that's needed to portray people outside your experience/identity, but also work needed to portray people who you share identity and experience with. No marginalized people are a monolith, so being really thoughtful about the cultural touchstones you use in your work, and really understanding them is crucial.
- Jamilah: Understanding our own internalized biases against our own in-groups is also important (e.g., internalized racism/homophobia/or ableism). I had to contend with my own internalized anti-Blackness when it came to celebrating Black American names in *Your Name is A Song*. Otherwise, I could have continued sending this same anti-Black messaging to kids in the book.

A2)

- Alex: Even when works within the classical canon, and I'm thinking of books taught in 1990s when I was in high school and still taught today, don't actively cause harm (and many times, they do) their biggest flaw is erasure. I used to think being able to read a book about a white, male, straight spy in the 1950s for example, was a superpower - I could imagine myself to be anyone! But why did I have to work so hard to conform myself into the 'hero'?
- Meera: We have to think of how readers that are "outsiders" from the point of view of the book will receive the work. For example, I know as an Indian-American kid, I read classics with the depiction of Indian and non-white characters that made me embarrassed to be who I was. That's not to say those books had no value. Even problematic classics don't have value, but that value and the good feelings they inspired are separate and apart from the problematic elements. And it's possible to find books that have that same magic that won't further marginalize readers that see themselves as outsiders.

A3)

- Jamilah: As a picture book author, I make choices that are very visual and concrete. I also think it's important to somehow reassure young readers when these things happen.
 - YOUR NAME IS A SONG: Requested a wordless opening spread where the girl is watching a group of kids playing. While I don't have children directly being mean to the girl, I had her report their meanness to her mother who immediately helps to undo what they did.
 - ABDUL'S STORY: The boy literally wishes for an eraser to erase himself from writing class and the artist, Tiffany Rose, created a giant eraser in the spread. An adult comes to reassure him that it's possible for Abdul to write his own story,

that he isn't erased from the writing world because of his challenges.

- I also indulge in what sets my characters apart, what makes them left out. Namely, I use language and references that are specific to their in-groups but might be foreign to the mainstream so the kids and their specific identities are centered.
- Katey - It's important to target your craft to the audience - and in the case of picture books and other books for the youngest readers, not just the audience hearing the story, but the audience that selects, buys, reads/rereads it. To speak to the child, you also have to appeal to the parent, teacher, buyer.
 - Picture books that handle negative emotions or experiences need to do so honestly and authentically, but to balance that relatability with reassurance. In *Rissy No Kissies*, I chose to use an animal character, rather than a human. The MC is rejected by family members, friends, classmates and this could be very upsetting for a small child who identified too strongly with the character.
 - With editor and illustrator: chose to use the cuteness and sweetness of the art and characters to add a sense of safety and distance so kids who already felt the character's pain in their own lives, or empathized with it, would not be overwhelmed, so they would have reasons to come back to the book again and again, to process and internalize the message. Also appeals to buyers.
 - utilized a refrain to get children to eagerly participate in the read-aloud. That gives them a sense of connection and of control, and it also encourages their caregivers to reread with them.
 - thought critically about the use of rhyming language vs prose, and how readers relate to each.
- Meera: How I've done this depends on the character I'm showing the emotion for. So, for example with my character Sam, an autistic boy who is starting his first day at a snobbish private school, I wrote that

chapter in the second person. For Asha, I have her alone with a favorite old toy, noticing how she's gotten bigger, but doesn't have friends. I think there are many ways to experience loneliness, and for me, finding my character's voice was key to how they would express that feeling.

A4)

- Jamilah: Self-advocacy is important. Showing the gradual release to self-advocacy as well.
 - YOUR NAME IS A SONG line to reference: "The next day the girl didn't want to go to school, but she had songs to teach" after her Mom teaches her about the beauty in names. Then, the girl sings the teacher's name and other students' names until she is finally ready to teach them to sing her name.
- Alison: I completely agree with Jamilah about self-advocacy. I find, personally, there are so many ways to show power. And, there needs to be room for all of those ways to come through in books, so that kids can see themselves doing the same, whether that be an internal acknowledgement of power that leads to greater confidence in the world, or outward actions that we often associate with power, like speaking out, speaking up, taking a stand! In my debut the main character processes the world quietly, internally, much like myself. An act of bravery/power occurs when the main character speaks up to ask for the truth. (Read short excerpt.) Just like Jamilah said, this form of self-advocacy finds a way of affirming who we are inside so that we can be our bravest self in the outside world.

A5)

- Alex: Some of the recent books that I've absolutely loved and do an amazing job of centering teens that are outside the mainstream include, *We Are Not From Here* by Jenny Torres Sanchez; *Disturbed Girls Dictionary* by NoNieqa Ramos and *Mirror Season* by Anna-Marie McLemore. In each of these books, a multifaceted identity

that could easily be compressed or stereotyped is explored with deep humanity and nuance.

- Katey: A few books that do a great job centering and empowering kids who show affection differently, dislike certain forms of touch, or have sensory processing differences include *Don't Hug Doug* by Carrie Finison, illustrated by Daniel Wiseman; *Don't Touch My Hair*, by Sharee Miller; *A Friend For Henry* by Jenn Bailey, illustrated by Mika Song; and *Will LadyBug Hug* by Hilary Leung. All show age-appropriate, relatable situations, and use tools like repetition, gentle humor, and engaging art.
- Jamilah: *A History of Me* by Adrea Theodore and Erin K. Robinson and *The Arabic Quilt* by Aya Khalil and Anait Semirdzhyan
- Meera—So here are a few I could mention, but edit down depending on the types of books you all say: *Piecing Me Together* by Renee Watson, *New Kid* and *Class Act* by Jerry Craft (I love, among other things) that they show two Black kids in the same environment having somewhat different experiences, *Get a Grip*, *Vivy Cohen* and *The Many Mysteries of the Finkel Family* by Sarah Kapit, and the Thai inspired fantasy *A Wish in the Dark* and the *The Serpent's Secret* by Sayantani Dasgupta.

A6)

- Meera I think the first step is to ask yourself why and how? Why this story? Why this character? How do I want these characters received by all my readers? How do I work on my craft to ensure that my words do what I want them to? Also, if you value this work, go in being open to feedback and making things better with each draft.
- Katey: Agree that it is critical to reflect on whether you are the right person to tell this story, and then to start reading. Read books that already exist in the space and consider what they do well and where they fall short. Read posts, memoirs, news from people similar to your character and get a sense of their emotions, their strengths, their challenges, the way they want to be seen by the world and the way it

perceives them. Make notes of stereotypes and clichés. Think about your audience - what is the world already telling and showing them? What messages are missing? What can you communicate that will be different, meaningful, and memorable? Be prepared to listen. To be wrong. To rewrite.

- Alex: As Meera and Katey have said, after you have asked yourself the important question of whether you should write a specific character, and meditated on the reasons why you want to write this character, I think that - again - Katey and Meera's excellent advice! Reading other work that centers those character's experiences is so necessary. I'd add two things: First, go beyond reading to talking, if you can, to people in that community. Alison told me about a Highlights Faculty member, Jason Ransome, who said that you should be close enough to a community you write about that they'll let you hold their baby - I think that's so beautiful because in a sense, writing an experience that is not your own is like holding a precious part of someone else's family. Secondly, do the same deep reflection when writing about your OWN identity and culture - because we can be lazy when writing about ourselves too, and the best way to serve the children we write for is to give true, layered representation that sparks curiosity and recognition.

Q&A SESSION