

Literacy on the Margins

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<http://greatstorybook.com/literacy-on-the-margins/>

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Literacy on the margins is a topic I've only ever discussed with other writers and teachers. This is the first time I've ever written about it.

I was sent an email from a new subscriber asking for help and for some reason I'm unable to respond directly to it, so I'm going to do my best to answer it here. It's important.

The letter came from an African American Athletic Coach who is a mentor and guide for young men of color. As he put it, "I want to write books that will capture the mind of the jock, thug, casual drug user, pimp, hip hop kid in school."

He knows what he wants to achieve, but isn't sure how. "I am not sure how to create the compelling conversation that must happen..." and he's looking specifically for an agent who is willing to accept the challenges that come with "literacy on the margins."

Look to the first margin line.

When we look at the goal, and only at the goal, this task seems Herculean - nearly impossible, certainly. But so is writing any kind of book, really. So first we need to step to the scrimmage and look at the first margin line, or the first thing we need to tackle as a writer.

Character.

That's your first point that you need to consider. All the things about your character that you need to think about would be same things you would need to keep in mind for any kind of book. But because of your ultimate goal, which is to engage the minds of kids who live on the margins, **these points will feel more intense.**

[For more detail on developing character, go HERE.](#) It's all about how to create a solid character who feels real and that really connects with readers.

If we're writing for a 15-year old drug user, the character we create and the character arch we devise will be quite different from the type of book we'd see for a younger reader or a reader who has more social advantages.

Whenever we decide to write for a particular subculture or group, this is exactly what happens. Our focus must be heightened in order to pull off the story properly.

Why? Because when we write to a particular someone, we aren't really writing for us (the lone writer), anymore. We are writing for someone or some people we love. So we give them part of us in words, from our imaginations. That's hard to do.

So here are some things to think about:

Age is Important

Your protagonist (especially in this case) cannot be an adult. Ideally, the main character should be either the same age as your intended reader or slightly older (maybe 2-3 years older).

No Preaching

Your story should never come across as preachy or moralistic. However, it *should absolutely* have a moral to it. All good stories do, whether we notice it consciously or not. What you need to be sure of is that you've got a compelling story. You do that by creating a solid character, and then by revealing details of that character as you unfold the story. (More on that below.)

Location, Location, Location

If your story is for people in a certain neighborhood, one you know well, then it's probably a good idea to place the story there. That isn't to say that travel shouldn't be involved. In fact, you can write a Road Story or a Fish Out of Water type of story.

But if the readers you want to reach live in a certain neighborhood, then write about that neighborhood. Make the protagonist from that place, because it's in that place that your readership has been made who they are right now. Who they become can be influenced by a great story.

Show Culture, Show Detail

Publishers don't want vanilla stories about Any Person. They want culture-specific stories and protagonists who wake us up to an aspect of life we wouldn't otherwise know.

Not surprisingly, many agents are looking for this as well (because publishers want it!). Don't think that your story needs to be broadly appealing. It will be broadly appealing IF you are specific and detailed and - *not broad* - because humans are naturally curious. We want to know more.

People only pretend to lack curiosity if they've learned that they should hide who they really are. We ALL are curious.

One BIG + One Small = Story

Create a situation for your main character where they must face the one thing they do not want to face above all else - whatever it is. One thing. That's your primary story, how the protagonist deals with having to learn this particular lesson they don't want to learn.

Action movies are often thrilling and fantastical ways we can address an uncomfortable theme. If you teach or mentor kids, find out what kinds of stories they like. What movies are they watching?

There should also be a secondary storyline, but that doesn't mean it has to be about another character or characters. Your two story themes can both be about the main character - just that one of the lessons (all stories are really about lessons that need to be learned) is more important and more difficult to tackle than the other.

Warning: Don't make the mistake of trying to address every problem you see in one book. It's just going to overwhelm the story and the reader will get confused about The Point. Keep it simple. That isn't to say you should avoid other problems or issues altogether. You can mention them or include them - but don't have too many focal points. Have one big theme, and one secondary theme that isn't as painful to the protagonist.

To the Coach

The email was unsigned and had no email address. But I hope that whoever You Are who sent me the

note will find this and write me again. I'd like to continue this discussion and provide more specific details if I can.

It's so worth it.

Writing a book – any kind of book - is hard. Writing for someone else, someone you care deeply about – that's much harder. But if we as writers persevere and aren't afraid to ask questions along the way, there's no end to what we can do.

I believe in that very strongly, and I think most writers do too, whether they want to admit it or not. Writers want to change the world. Words incite and inspire. Stories build. Stories build people. Great stories make people better.

Keep creating, no matter what.

This entry is part of the series

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