

● CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

# *Bodies Are Cool and ABC for Me: ABC Everyday Heroes Like Me: A Celebration of Heroes, From A to Z!*

EDITH CAMPBELL

Nonfiction books are important tools that help young readers learn about the world around them. Their text and images work together to provide information to readers. Embedded in this information are ideologies about ways of being.

**WHILE WE EXPECT** fiction to expand our thoughts by taking us into someone's imagined worlds, we expect nonfiction to ground us with information. I grew up with nonfiction books serving up informational text—works presented to readers as nonbiased presentations of facts. Unless I had a keen desire to learn more about a topic, little to nothing was provided to help me develop an interest for the book. Needless to say, I stayed away from nonfiction for quite a while.

Today's young readers have a much wider choice in nonfiction selections that are developed to invite readers in with trendier formats and styles. These contemporary books can be classified as browsable, active, traditional, expository, or narrative (Stewart, 2018). Regardless of the type of nonfiction book, readers still pick them up with an underlying sense of trust in the information. We need to remember that messages in these books, even the informational texts of yesterday, extend beyond their intended purpose. Research late in the 20th century examined ideologies present in children's books surrounding race, gender, and class (McCallum & Stephens, 2011). These ideologies, defined as "systems of belief which are shared and used by a society to make sense of the world" (McCallum & Stephens, 2011, p. 370), exist alongside the

intended information, transmitting biases in ways that can be as unintentional as they can be intentional. These ideologies, as Debbie Reese (2000) reminded us, are formed by the dominant society, too often suppressing voices that are not white, cishet, male, and able-bodied.

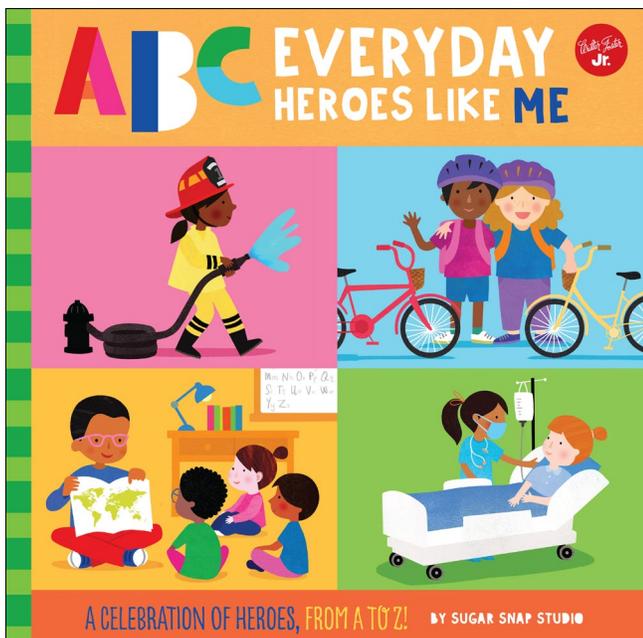
I choose to move away from literary-based reviews by using the critical questions posed by Botelho and Rudman (2009) to examine ideologies embedded in text and images. I critique structures by identifying ways some people are empowered while other people have been rendered invisible—ways we are all being positioned. I start my work by getting familiar with the author and their worldview.

*ABC for Me: ABC Everyday Heroes Like Me: A Celebration of Heroes, From A to Z!* (2021) is by Sugar Snap Studio, better known as Jessie Ford. Ford lives and works in a small town on the British coast. She has done much of her charming, bright, and colorful work as a commercial artist working for major global companies. Working with marketing departments has helped her to understand design trends that would appeal to various demographics (Ford, 2018).

Ford's attraction to the bold use of color is evidenced in *ABC for Me*. Each page of the book features a child in an occupation that begins with a letter of the alphabet. This

is more of a browsable nonfiction book that young readers don't have to read cover to cover. Each page offers bits of information that don't rely on what's on the previous or following pages to make sense to the reader. By using the back matter to list individuals who have achieved fame in various occupations, Ford speaks to the trendy desire to be influencers and works here to let young people know there is importance in performing skilled labor. Indirectly, she tells readers that people who use their talents to build successful careers are seen as heroes. Presenting workers in nontraditional gender jobs, along with the contemporary design, packages a sense of inclusion that a critical reading of the images quickly disrupts. The ubiquitous brown child who exists with no cultural markers (Afros, hijabs, or saris) brings a sentimentality of integration to the texts, with everyone fitting into a mold shaped by whiteness. These characters fit the mold quite well, all with similar body shapes and sizes. Who is missing from this seemingly diverse cast? I would suggest there are no people with physical disabilities, and someone else might suggest I remember the person with the cane who is assisted by the "U—Unsung Hero." I'd refer to this as ageism, because the only elderly person in the book needs both a hero *and* a cane to assist with mobility. It's worth noting who is wearing eyeglasses and what type of work they're doing. What message does that transmit from this particular book about those who wear glasses?

FIGURE 1  
Cover of *ABC Everyday Heroes Like Me*



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The physical sameness of the children and the gentle presentation of the professions chosen seem to position readers to desire a rather white-oriented, middle-class future. In the drawings, firefighters, tennis players, judges, and artists are all isolated and working independently. Who does this empower and how? Using Botelho and Rudman's (2009) questioning practice in reviewing helps me fully understand how some people are privileged, while others are made invisible.

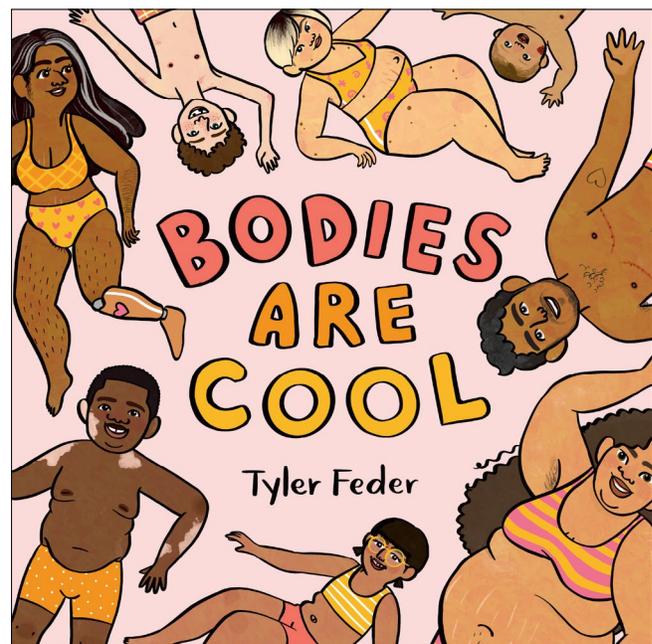
These particular questions work well for reviewers and educators, but would have to be amended to help children interact with the text from a critical stance. A more age-appropriate process would have to be implemented to help them identify for whom a story is written and how an author is positioning readers. This learning process is designed to decode ideologies, not to decide if a book, or a message, is "good" or "bad." All books are political; all books position us. I think it's important to understand how.

Tyler Feder brings a different ideology to her design work.

I started making body positivity and self love-themed illustrations as a means to combat my own complicated feelings about my body. Drawing cute self-portraits of my chubby, hairy body reminds me that being Tyler-shaped is just fine!

My goal is to help other people feel better about their bodies by drawing all different shapes and sizes in an equally loving and careful way. (Feder, 2018, Body Image section)

FIGURE 2  
Cover of *Bodies Are Cool*



*Bodies Are Cool* (2021), Feder's second picture-book, like Ford's, contains a vibrant color palette. Also a browsable nonfiction, this book consists of double-spread pages with curvy, four-line stanzas that invite readers to read (or sing!) about ways to celebrate the fact that bodies are cool. The images portray people of varying ages, genders, sexual orientations, abilities, sizes, and shapes involved in activities they seem to enjoy. Feder uses exposed skin to prominently display that bodies are cool. The text offers descriptive words for skin colors: "dark skin, olive skin, every shade of brown skin, pinky-pale or peach skin. Bodies are cool!" However, there is no curling, swerving, rhyming line that addresses the disabilities presented in the images. While artificial limbs, insulin pumps, and alopecia are visualized, these disabilities are invisible in the text. The characters in this book form communities that play in parks, ride on trains, and paint neighborhoods. Who does this empower?

Ford wants readers to believe that anyone can choose a career that will make them a hero. Feder tells readers that all bodies are cool. Their messages are clearly stated

in the titles of their books; however, engaging with the text through critical literacy provides a deeper understanding of the ideologies presented.

Nonfiction has become much more inviting to young readers. I think it helps to provide them with skills that support them in uncovering how this information is positioning them. You might even consider how this review is meant to position and empower you! ■



*Edith Campbell* is an associate education librarian in the Cunningham Memorial Library at Indiana State University (ISU). She is a founding member of the We Are Kidlit Collective and of See What We See. She currently serves on the advisory board for the Research on Diversity in Youth Literature journal. In 2016, she served as a faculty fellow to the ISU Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence's Multicultural Curriculum Learning Community. Campbell was a member of the 2019 Robert F. Sibert Medal Selection Committee. She blogs to promote literacy and social justice in young adult literature at Cotton Quilts.

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Sugar Snap Studio. (2021). *ABC for me: ABC everyday heroes like me: A celebration of heroes, from A to Z!* Walter Foster Jr.