



KOLIBRI Cultural diversity in children's literature

OUR CRITERIA

For many children and young adults today, living with people from other cultural backgrounds is both reality and normality. Culturally mixed societies, with all their opportunities and challenges, are also reflected in the literature for young people.

Baobab Books, a non-profitable organisation based in Basel, promotes throughout its work a respectful stance towards people from different cultural, social or religious background. Our position is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which we understand as interrelated and indivisible.

Our committee members evaluate the representation of and the exchange between different cultural backgrounds in contemporary books for children and young adults. The following set of criteria and questions are applied in drawing up the appraisal.

Cultural diversity versus ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism describes an attitude in which one's own feelings, thoughts and behavior and one's own lifestyle, culture or religion are not only placed at the center of the world but are also perceived as superior to other ways of life. The strange and the unfamiliar are perceived as threatening and are dismissed as being inferior.

→ We recommend books that enable and deepen encounters with the «other».

Parity versus paternalism and sexism

Paternalism has its roots in the patriarchal value system. Well-meaning and with protective sentiments, the "strong" make the decisions for the "weak," instead of facilitating independence and encouraging self-awareness. Paternalism is revealed for example in the attitude and behavior of members of consumer societies toward those in so-called developing countries, but also by the stereotyping and discrimination of others on the basis of their sex.

→ We recommend books that show different societies, classes, or gender as diverse but equal.

Respect versus racism

Racists consider their own group's biological, i.e. innate, characteristics as placing them above other ethnic groups or peoples. The arrogance inherent to racist thinking and racist systems often leads to the repudiation and repression of other ethnic and cultural groups. Power and economic advantage are the goals of such attitudes. In a racist paradigm, the mixing of ethnicities and cultures is condemned.

→ We recommend books that depict foreign ethnicities with respect, and whose situations and stories allow the reader to experience other human beings as individuals with feelings, needs and abilities.

Dialog versus fundamentalism

The term fundamentalism can be used in several different ways. In general today, it denotes the tendency within religious communities to interpret holy texts literally and to declare them as absolutely binding and infallible. This position is often accompanied by the rejection of a democratic and emancipatory society.

→ We recommend books that contribute to dialogue and understanding between the religions.



USEFUL QUESTIONS

The reviewers for “Kolibri” base their evaluations on their own experiences and their own cultural perspective. To appraise publications on the basis of the above-mentioned criteria, they may consult a list of questions. These can assist them to resolve uncertainties and to reflect on their own point of view. They understand culture as something changeable and refer to the concept of transculturality.

Characters

- Which are the main characters?
- Characters of minority group: which role do they play?
- What do have people to do in order to get recognition?

Relationships

- How are different cultures shown? (E.g.: languages, religions, forms of life)
- How is the relationship between ethnics shown? (Or between native people and migrants)
- Is there a hierarchy between social classes or man and women (boys and girls)?

Different forms of life

- Which forms of life and which social values can be found in the book?
- How subtle is the insight in to a certain form of life (geographical, social)?
- How does the book help to learn about other values than my own?

Recognition

- Are members of (different) social groups recognized in their identity?
- How are problems and conflicts solved (independently, mutually, hierarchically)?

The illustration

All the questions above are important for illustrations as well.

- Do the pictures connect with the culture described in the text?
- Is there a connection between the story and the images?
- What is the relation between members of different social groups, ethnics, class etc.? (Size, position on the page, colours etc.)

Language and style

- How is language used? (Phrase, structure of the text)
- Which vocabulary is used? Does it match the characters?
- Moral message: is it accessible and relevant for children?