

Student self-publishes children's book to broaden Asian American representation

Daily Bruin: University of California - Los Angeles

January 8, 2020 Wednesday

University Wire

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Section: NEWS; Pg. 1

Length: 880 words

Byline: Janice Yun

Body

Children's books have told stories with heartwarming lessons for decades, but many have failed to include minorities.

In 2018, 77% of characters depicted in children's books were either white people or animals and objects, whereas only 7% were Asian or Pacific Islander.

Graduate student Angel Trazo said she aims to address this lack of diversity in children's publishing. In July, Trazo self-published her first children's book titled "We Are Inspiring: The Stories of 32 Inspirational Asian American Women." Trazo said the idea of creating a children's book highlighting notable female Asian American figures came to her as she was exploring a local bookstore in San Jose, California. While looking at the shelves, she came across a book about black women in history, but failed to find a similar book about Asian American women.

"It made me think that people aren't aware of Asian American women who are alive right now doing amazing things, so that's definitely a gap that I could fill," Trazo said.

Some of the women in the book are activists whom she learned about in her first Asian American studies course, she said. One of these figures is Yuri Kochiyama, a Japanese American civil rights activist who fought for reparations for those held in Japanese internment camps during World War II. Another activist Trazo said she included is Helen Zia, a Chinese American journalist who promoted Asian American rights.

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However, Trazo said she did not only want to highlight women from the past, so she also included more recent activists, such as Filipina American rapper Ruby Ibarra. The book features Trazo's illustrations of the 32 women alongside a brief biography describing their backgrounds and contributions to society.

Trazo said the reason she decided to self-publish was to be free of the various restrictions that come with using a publisher for a children's book, such as specific words she could use or the overall word count. Trazo said she wanted to use more justice-oriented words, such as "incarceration camps" rather than "Japanese internment camps," which she may not have been able to do with a publisher.

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"I also wanted to have the ability to put in biographies of people who I thought were less known, and I didn't want a publisher to say those people aren't important," Trazo said.

Katie Quan, a friend of Trazo who artistically inspired her, said the book selling out on Amazon sheds a positive light on self-publishers as a whole. Most writers, she said, tend to assume someone must publish their book for them. However, being able to self-promote and connect with people through self-publishing was an important part of Trazo's goal to create more Asian American representation in children's literature.

"You're the one who creates everything, distributes everything and promotes everything versus other publishers who go through a lot of channels and often times want to see how much they can monetize the book," Quan said. "People who self-publish do it because they really are passionate about it and want to see it grow."

Inspired by Trazo's decision to create and self-publish a book centered on Asian Americans, Asian American studies lecturer Lily Anne Welty Tamai invited Trazo to speak about the book to her class. She said she chose to invite her to speak because she wanted to show her students that activism among Asian American women does not only exist in the past, but is still being carried out by women like Trazo.

Tamai said it is meaningful to make a book that highlights strong female Asian American figures for children, especially because representation can empower young children. Tamai said that seeing families eating with chopsticks or shopping at an Asian grocery store allows children to feel legitimately represented.

Reflecting on the book selling out on Amazon, Tamai said the book's success could be compared to the Asian American representation in 2018, specifically in the movie "Crazy Rich Asians." She said Asian Americans worldwide were extremely excited about finally being represented in a large Hollywood movie, but the movie was also relevant to non-Asian people as well.

"Everyone talks about movie, which wasn't just for Asian Americans," Tamai said. "There were non-Asians who really enjoyed the movie because it's a story about the human condition, and I think that is what resonates with everybody."

[Related: Alum uses animation to depict relationship of black father, daughter in short film]

When Trazo saw her book's success, she said she realized how much of a need there was for a book about notable Asian American women. She said one of the largest obstacles she faced during the publishing process was external doubts from people who questioned whether there was even a demand for the type of book she was making. However, when the book sold out on Amazon, Trazo said she proved that there is indeed a market for a book centered on female Asian Americans.

"I just hope that children and people who aren't children will be able to take away a story that inspires them or become more interested in studying nonwhite historical figures," Trazo said. "To people who aren't Asian American, I hope the stories are inspiring to them."

Load-Date: January 9, 2020