



# Breaking Down the Barriers

Article Author:

[Julia Eccleshare](#) [1]

[104](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

**Julia Eccleshare** on recent books about victims of discrimination and prejudice.

Since its publication in 1947, **The Diary of Anne Frank** has inspired generations of young people to fight against racism and intolerance. **Julia Eccleshare** discusses recent titles which will also inspire young readers to understand and empathise with peoples who suffer persecution or are discriminated against today.

<!--break-->

Children are notoriously prejudiced ? within their own tight school or neighbourhood community they form tiny cliques or gangs, finding against others on the grounds of style or other differences ? accents, haircuts, clothes, skin colour ? matters which can assume giant proportions. Children?s need to disparage those who are different or part of a minority in order to be able to value themselves is a form of intolerance. Parents, teachers and others have a major role in helping children to understand and work through this stage. Humans are, after all, one race and difference is to be valued and embraced rather than feared.

Knowledge is one of the keys to understanding other people. Barriers can be broken down by showing people who live differently or who believe different things in a positive way. Getting under someone else?s skin is one of the things that diaries or fiction do best.

But writing about minority groups in society is not always easy. If the issue rather than the quality of the writing becomes the sole point of the book, the reader will not be fully engaged. The lasting success of **The Diary of Anne Frank** is dependent on the quality and intelligence of Anne?s writing as much as on its content and the circumstances in which it was written.

If content alone were enough, **Zlata?s Diary**, ten-year-old Zlata Filipovic?s account of daily life in war-torn Sarajevo, would command the same responses. Like Anne, Zlata is self-absorbed and preoccupied about the effect of the war on herself and her friends. She grieves for the destruction of her childhood as much as for the large scale destruction of Sarajevo that is going on around her. Such a self-centred view is perfectly appropriate for her age (although her account lacks the warmth and charm of Anne Frank?s) but the expression of it needs to be considerably more gripping. Zlata is able to describe the destructive physical manifestations of civil war but little of the emotions behind it.

The horrors of ethnic cleansing or minority persecution at a national level are even harder to tackle in fiction. Dangers of sentimentality and romanticism abound. Elizabeth Laird skilfully treads a fine line in **Kiss the Dust** which explores the plight of the Kurds. Tara and her Kurdish family live prosperously in Iraq but their apparently normal life is underpinned by danger especially as Tara?s father is active in the movement for Kurdish independence. The family is forced to flee, first to the mountains and then, when that becomes too dangerous, to Iran where they are refugees. As the war between Iran and Iraq escalates they are no longer safe and must travel on to England on a one-way ticket knowing no one and with nowhere else to go. Though at times Laird comes close to presenting an action adventure, she pushes her story on so that it becomes a book about tolerance and compassion rather than merely a drama.

One of the strengths of **Kiss the Dust** lies in the insight that it gives young British readers into the former lives of those who become refugees here. Refugees are usually at the margins of the society they move to but this is not necessarily a reflection of the lives or status they once enjoyed.

Of less enormity but of no less importance is an understanding of and tolerance towards those who are dispossessed within our own society. The upsurge of social realism in books for children has dealt increasingly with such issues. Jacqueline Wilson's **The Bed and Breakfast Star** gives insights into families surviving homelessness and the breakdown of security within contemporary Britain. Beverley Naidoo's **No Turning Back** presents a bleak picture of homeless children, post apartheid, struggling to survive on the streets of Johannesburg. By using individual accounts as the basis for good fiction, both novels weave stories around an issue, helping readers to see these disadvantaged groups as people, not merely sectors of society.

Not that individuals are immune from persecution. For adolescents, ignorance about the nature of sexuality and anxiety about their own sexual identity can give rise to an intolerant fear of homosexuality. To date there have been few teen novels which tackle homophobia. Bucking the usual trend of boy meets girl, M E Kerr's **Deliver Us From Evie** is sheer delight. Set in a small farming community in Mississippi, it is the story of two girls falling in love and how their community reacts to it. Kerr tackles all the issues of stereotyping head on. Father's disbelief, mother's sorrow, self appointed boyfriend's derision, brother's despair for personal and domestic reasons ? through all of these **Deliver Us From Evie** shows how hostile the response to something so apparently threatening can be. As Evie and Patty win through, it also shows that courage and the conviction to stand by their feelings despite what others think, can change attitudes and encourage tolerance to grow.

Harnessing that courage and conviction into fiction can play a significant part in helping our children to be more open-minded and informed about persecuted minorities the world over. It can also help our minority children to know that there are stories in which they are well represented.

**Julia Eccleshare** is a critic, author and broadcaster on children's books.

**Zlata's Diary**, Zlata Filipovic, Puffin, 0 14 037463 9, £3.99 pbk

**Kiss the Dust**, Elizabeth Laird, Mammoth, 0 7497 0857 3, £4.99 pbk

**The Bed and Breakfast Star**, Jacqueline Wilson, Corgi, 0 440 86324 4, £3.99 pbk

**No Turning Back**, Beverley Naidoo, Viking, 0 670 85996 6, £10.99, Puffin, 0 14 036948 1, £4.99 pbk

**Deliver Us From Evie**, M E Kerr, Viking, 0 670 86570 2, £8.99

**Anne Frank Day**

**12 June 1997**

The Anne Frank Educational Trust, a multi-faith educational charity, has as its aim to carry out Otto Frank's wish that his daughter's diary be used as a general force for good by helping to educate against racism and all forms of prejudice. An information pack containing special assemblies for Key Stages 1, 2, 3 and 4 , classroom activities across the curriculum for all four Key Stages and a full list of learning resources is available from The Anne Frank Educational Trust, P.O. Box 11880, London N6 4LN (tel: 0181 340 9077, fax: 0181 340 9088), price £7.50 inc. postage and packing. Make cheques payable to The Anne Frank Educational Trust.

Page Number:

4

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Sep '20):** <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/104/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/breaking-down-the-barriers>

**Links:**

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/julia-eccleshare>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/104>