



BfK's Brilliant Children's Bookshops: Letterbox Library

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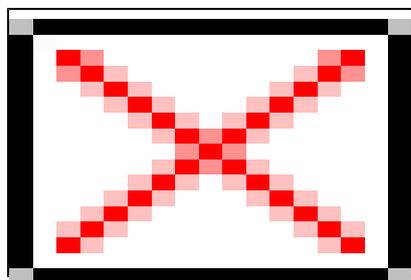
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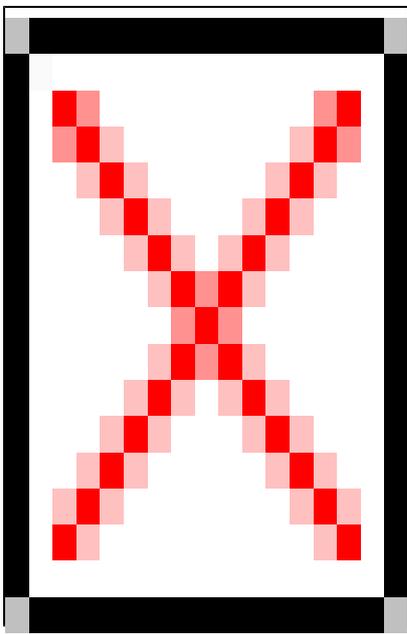
30 years ago, two single parents had a simple ambition: to find books for their daughters which featured active, bright, adventurous girls, girls who did something rather than waiting for something to happen to them, girls who were just like them! As they set about their search, their friends were soon asking, 'What about us? Where are the books which show our children, our families?' And so, a quest became a passion which became a business plan which became, in 1983, a small book club. **Letterbox Library** launched from a front room in Hackney with a catalogue of just 16 books. Dr Fen Coles explains.

30 years on from our launch, **Letterbox Library** has a mini-warehouse in Stratford, run by a small staff team and an indispensable team of volunteer book reviewers. We produce a book catalogue and we have a website. Happily, our catalogue now lists over 300 books.



And, 30 years on, **Letterbox Library** goes on striving to meet that seemingly simple ambition: for all children to be able to see themselves in the books they read. We aim to source books which open up as many worlds as possible, which make as many lives visible as possible - which means providing diverse and inclusive titles, such as: multicultural and multifaith books; stories starring disabled characters, emotionally intelligent boys, rough-and-tumble girls, people from Traveller/Roma/Gypsy communities; books which celebrate our many different family structures etc. Books, in other words, which show the world, simply, as it is and, wherever possible, which do so naturally and casually.

Letterbox Library's key customers are primary schools, early years settings, children's centres, childminders and libraries. Books can be bought online, through our catalogue, at the many exhibitions we attend, via our books-on-approvals service and through personal visits. Our books come from a wide range of home-grown and international publishers. Our review process is famously stringent and balks at tokenism. 75% of the samples publishers send us are rejected in-house; the remaining books are posted out to our 25 volunteer reviewers (made up of teachers, librarians, EY staff, parents and children) who reject another 75%; a book is only 'approved' if it gets 3 positive reviews; only then will it find a home on our 'yes' shelves, from which we pick our selections for the catalogue/website.



Over the years, **Letterbox Library** has had its perennial best sellers: **The Animal Boogie**, **My Mother's Sari**, **But Martin**, **My World Your World**, **Global Babies**, **Man's Work**. These favourites still trip off our shelves, but have been joined by new texts which have come along to meet new demands. The recognition that there is no single 'traditional' family unit to speak of is being wonderfully reflected by upbeat books such as **The Great Big Book of Families**. The education sector especially is now hungry for sunny titles featuring same-sex parents such as **King and King**, **Spacegirl Pukes** or **Mommy, Mama and Me**. Representations of mixed race families are requested so often that we've entered 'mixed race' as a search term on our website - latest titles include **Anna Hibiscus's Song** and **Mary Had a Little Lamb**. The tireless work of charities such as Scope and Booktrust has raised awareness amongst publishers of the need for 'casual' images of disability. **Child's Play** publishers have been absolute trailblazers in rising to this challenge - do look out for their new **Little Movers** series!- and there are other exciting new entries to watch out for: **Max the Champion**, **The Art of Miss Chew and Whisper**. In a market saturated with princesses, fairies and pirates, held together by some pretty numbing gendered marketing campaigns, we have noticed a real resurgence of interest in anti-sexist books. Our gender-blasting bestsellers include **Little Drivers**, **My Mum is a Fire Fighter** and **Samuel's Baby**.

There are still some yawning gaps in the landscape of children's literature, lives which aren't being portrayed or just not very authentically. For example, multicultural contexts are now much more common in children's books, but there are still far too few Asian and Black protagonists; we see more books featuring refugees but almost always within tragic narratives, rarely when they are simply getting on with their lives; Traveller/Roma/Gypsy representations remain far too few; and, where are the characters living with mental health issues, the looked-after children, the transgender representations, the different socio-economic backgrounds?

There remains a great deal to be done but it does feel as if there is a renewed passion and thirst for an inclusive children's book world. **Letterbox Library** spoke at this year's London Book Fair's Equal Measures seminar and it was delightful to join a panel and an audience so committed to exploring diversity in children's books. We have also witnessed the birth of a bright new project called **Inclusive Minds**, set up to bring together book people with 'a passion for inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility in children's literature' (www.inclusiveminds.com/ [3])> www.inclusiveminds.com [4]). The founders, Alex Strick and Beth Cox, are absolute specialists in their fields and we're excited to be a partner in this new venture. The next issue of the online journal, **Write4Children**, has a focus on 'Diversity, Inclusion & Equality', to which we've contributed an article on whether children's literature is suited to big political ideas (yes!). Finally, we have had a wonderful time this year running a brand new children's book prize, **Little Rebels**, on behalf of the Alliance of Radical Booksellers. There are exciting times ahead.

Letterbox Library is a workers' cooperative, a social enterprise and a not-for-profit. All of the books mentioned above

are available from their website www.letterboxlibrary.com [5]

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