

# The Heavy Cost of Banning Books About Black Children

By: Anna Gifty Opoku-Agyeman

*Adapted by Fishtank Staff*

- 1 On May 23, Amanda Gorman's *The Hill We Climb* became part of the long list of books authored by Black people to be [banned by counties in Florida](#). Such books include *The Black Friend* by Fred T. Joseph and *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George Johnson. In Gorman's case, a single parent [filed a complaint](#) for the book to be removed, erroneously citing Oprah as the author, and the inclusion of "[critical race theory](#)" as justification for removal.
- 2 Since Gorman performed her poem for President Biden's [Inauguration ceremony](#) two years ago, millions have flocked to her platform, including children. For months on end, photo after photo appeared across social media of kids of all races, genders, and backgrounds sporting Gorman's iconic yellow coat and bold red headband. Black children especially saw themselves in her braided updo, gleaming eyes, and infectious smile. She was their ordinary, and extraordinary. She was mine, too.
- 3 When I was five years old, I graduated from Head Start, a government program for children of low-income working families, and attended a newly-created, local private school on full scholarship. As one of the few Black children in the school, and the only Black girl in my grade, I became keenly aware that my classmates, who were white and wealthier, did not go home to an affordable housing neighborhood like me. They did not eat the same food as me. Their parents did not work the jobs my parents did. Rather, they lived in detached, single-family houses with green lawns and white picket fences. Their pantries were stocked with snacks I could only dream of.
- 4 Navigating these realities led me to books. At least there, I thought, I could begin to understand the two worlds I stood between.
- 5 As I began to write at the age of seven, I drew inspiration from *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* and *Where the Wild Things Are*, which eventually led to *The Babysitters Club*, *Nancy Drew*, and *Junie B. Jones*. I loved these stories. They made me laugh, cry, and think. Yet, the harsh reality was that all of these characters shared more similarities with my classmates than ordinary Black girls like me—or like Amanda.

- 6 Books are windows into the ordinary. We read them to see ourselves, to comprehend our lived reality, and sometimes to envision something better. But, as has always been the case, imagination is a privilege, popular narratives often only reflect the few, and any increase in representation is, more often than not, met with backlash. At the onset of Halle Bailey being announced as the new Little Mermaid, the hashtag #NotmyAriel trended online. As more roles in science fiction and fantasy are cast with people from underrepresented groups, more hate seemingly follows.
- 7 A [recent study](#) conducted by economists Anjali Adukia, Alex Eble, Emileigh Harrison, Hakizumwami Birali Runesha, and Teodora Szasz found that popular children's books published in the past century consistently depict characters with lighter skin color, even when they aren't white. Additionally, the study highlights the underrepresentation of Black and Latinx characters, while white characters are disproportionately overrepresented. Among 495 mainstream children's books analyzed, 88% of the depicted faces were identified as white, and 92% of the famous figures mentioned were also classified as white. In contrast, the faces of Asian, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous characters collectively accounted for only about 12%. Surprisingly, even books designed to promote diversity still featured over 50% white faces and famous figures among 635 titles.
- 8 These findings are compounded by the fact that books with diverse characters are less likely to receive mainstream children's book awards – which boost sales more than diversity book awards– had lower library checkout rates, and were consistently more expensive on average than all other children's books. Not to mention that at least through 2019, Black and Brown people only [made up approximately](#) 6% of the publishing industry while white people made up 86%. The added insult to injury is that navigating the industry is [notoriously difficult](#) for Black authors, literary agents, bookstore owners, and editors.
- 9 There is a real cost when the stories of ordinary Black children, which are already limited, are ignored by publishing houses or silenced by book bans. By allowing a [single bad faith request](#) like that of *The Hill We Climb* to usurp children from a vibrant rendition of hope and promise, opponents of diverse storytelling are robbing the next generation of an opportunity to be unabashedly curious about the world around them. The question is at what cost?
- 10 We lose so much when Black children cannot be ordinary. That is why we must be intentional in our efforts to protect and preserve Black stories and storytellers. This insight is exactly what professors of early childhood education S. Mia Obiwo and Francheska Starks respectively discuss in [The Black Agenda](#), which I edited. In their essay, "The Immeasurable Value of Black Children's Books", they argue that Black children's books offer young readers the chance to examine the past, question the present, and ponder future actions through affirming stories of exhilaration and triumph. As cultural artifacts, children's books present models through which readers can come to understand themselves and the world in which they live."

- 11 If we believe that Black people are human, then we must also believe that Black children can be ordinary, too. Black children's literature reflects the world in which we live by centering the histories of Black people and providing commentary on the current state of social affairs. Black stories inspire hope, joy, and reflection—oftentimes demonstrating what is possible and what could be. The optimism Black stories elicit may be one of the most important functions of how we can use our imaginations to materialize a more equitable world. One that leaves no one behind.
- 12 It is not enough to buy a book with Black and Brown children as characters. PEN America and Penguin Random House's recent [legal action](#) against the book bans in Florida is just the beginning. We must be intentional in our efforts to challenge those who think that ordinary stories are only relegated to children who look like them. And like Amanda Gorman, we must be brave enough to hear, honor, and exalt the Black children and those who dare to tell their stories.