**The Right to Write**

Jodi Picoult is a best-selling American author of novels such as *Leaving Time*, *My Sister’s Keeper*, and *The Pact*. Her books often discuss difficult themes such as power, suicide, privilege, and terminal illness, but they have done extremely well; about 14 million copies of her books have been sold internationally, and they have been translated into more than 20 languages.

In 2016, Picoult published *Small Great Things*, a novel about an African American nurse, Ruth, who is blamed for the death of a baby under her watch and finds herself in court over a case that is underscored by racism. In her author’s note, Picoult, who is white, states that she felt obligated to write a book about racism after seeing unprovoked attacks on Black people and realizing her own “color blindness” to race. She knew from the beginning that she wanted to include specific perspectives such as that of the Black nurse. In order to learn about these experiences, Picoult states that she conducted in-depth research by attending racism workshops and interviewing Black women about their experiences with racism. But near the end of the afterword, Picoult briefly addresses a possible criticism: “I will have people of color challenging me for choosing a topic that doesn’t belong to me.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is precisely what happened to Jeanine Cummins. In 2020, Cummins published a novel titled *American Dirt*, which featured a story about a migrant Mexican family that travels across the U.S. border. The novel quickly became popular following positive reviews from well-known authors and being chosen as Oprah’s book of the week. However, Cummins, a white author, was heavily criticized for painting an inaccurate picture of the experiences of Mexican refugees, despite claiming that she did five years of research about the topic.

In recent years, there has been a growing discussion about whether authors should be given “permission” to write from the perspective of a race that they do not identify with. Many argue that there are plenty of quality stories written by people of color that accurately capture their experiences in ways that a white author cannot. For example, in 2015, the #ownvoices movement began advocating for people to read books written by authors from the same underrepresented group their protagonist is from. Furthermore, by seeking out and supporting authors of color, the literary world can become more diverse and include a variety of perspectives instead of relying solely on the voices of white authors.

However, some people argue that by restricting authors to solely write from the perspective of their own racial identity, creative potential is hindered. In a New York Times opinion article, American author Lionel Shriver states, “If we have permission to write only about our own personal experience, there is no fiction, but only memoir.”[[2]](#footnote-2) If authors were restricted to only writing what they know, then the fiction genre ceases to exist; it requires the author to write from the imagination, not from fact. Additionally, books written by popular authors such as Picoult are likely to reach a wide audience and prompt more discussions about important issues such as racism and immigration laws. But these books arguably need to include the perspectives of characters of different racial identities in order to write a more complete story about these topics.

**Study Questions:**

1. Should an author write from the perspective of someone with a different racial identity?
2. Does a story belong to a certain group of people? Who should have the power to decide who gets to write that story?
3. Does an author’s research on race relations make their work, written from the perspective of a person of a different race than the author, more ethical?
4. To what extent could limitations on the “permission” to write from other racial perspectives restrict creative potential?
5. What does an author owe to their audience in terms of transparency about their identity and their writing process?

**Sources:**

* <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/no-authors-should-not-be-constrained-by-gender-or_b_592281cbe4b0b28a33f62db1>
* <https://www.vulture.com/article/american-dirt-book-controversy-explained.html>
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* <https://www.vulture.com/2019/10/who-gave-you-the-right-to-tell-that-story.html>

1. Jodi Picoult, *Small Great Things* (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2016), 463. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/23/opinion/will-the-left-survive-the-millennials.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)