

Sundial



What’s really different between generations? One author's answers explain change – and predict the future. p.39



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When kids' books don't age well

How (and if) to share your childhood books with the next generation

By Matt Harrison

I knew—whether by instinct or memory—that when we got to the chapter titled “Indians in the house” I was going to have to tread with caution. In fact, two-thirds of Laura Ingalls Wilder's classic *Little House on the Prairie*, which I was reading to my six year old, turned out to be an exercise in verbal gymnastics.

The first hurdle was the term “Indian.” I paused, explained the term to my daughter, told her that this was an old word to refer to First Nations people, and that, even back then, it was disrespectful, erroneous, and racist—I didn't use those exact words, I said something like the word “Indians” was wrong and unkind and wasn't how they referred to themselves. She seemed to get it. Storytime is usually the last thing a parent or a grandparent does with a child at the end of the day. Half-asleep, exhausted, and, admittedly, a little desperate to get through the book so I can plop down onto the couch, I rarely have energy left to converse with my children about heavy topics.

So in lieu of having a conversation, I tried other strategies. Initially I self-edited: every time I encountered the word “Indian” I changed it to First Nations. It was exhausting—especially the number of times the word popped up in chapters: “Indians in the House,” “Indian Camp” and the “Tall Indian.” As I got into my groove of reading, developing a certain pace and cadence, I would inevitably read aloud “Indian.” When that happened, I awkwardly paused, and glanced nervously at my daughter to see if she'd noticed (she hadn't... or maybe she had? She had the same glazed look I had, given the time of day). Whatever. I continued. But this strategy proved next to impossible when it came to a chapter entitled, “Prairie Fire.” A conversation between Mr. Edwards and Mr. Scott—neighbours of the Ingalls family on the prairie—goes like this:

“Mr. Edwards said there were too many Indians in those camps; he didn't like it. Mr. Scott said he didn't know why so many of those savages were coming together, if they didn't mean devilment. ‘The only good Indian is a dead Indian,’ Mr. Scott said.”

I was dumbfounded. What do I do now? The momentary pause over this paragraph in particular suddenly, uncomfortably lingered as I raced to figure out whether to read it, change it, or skip over it—and if I did the latter, would it matter to the narrative? This pause being much longer, and maybe stranger, it did finally cause my daughter to ask what the matter was.

I didn't know what to say. I didn't think I could explain this chapter's prejudice pretzel to my daughter; nor am I that good of an editor to, on the fly, change all of the words. I didn't think I could explain such harsh, hateful language either. So, I skipped over it, hoping this particular part of the story wouldn't affect the narrative. It didn't. She's six after all.

We got through that chapter, said goodnight, and I turned out the lights, but an uncomfortable feeling stuck with me as I couch-plopped.

Something I asked myself afterwards, was: why had I chosen this book to read in the first place? Was reading about pioneers really relevant for my daughter? There are tonnes of other good children's books I could've chosen to read instead, why this one?

Since *Little House on the Prairie* was part of my past, I think it's understandable that I wanted to share the fun I had reading about pioneer life with my daughter. But I'm white and, as such, I—and my daughter—didn't belong to one of the groups in Wilder's stories being negatively targeted. What if I had belonged to one of these groups? Would I have read these books as a child in the first place? Would I have been as endeared to them? And, would I have shared them with my daughter now?



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Anishinaabe/ Canadian, Waubgeshig Rice (author of *Moon of the Turning Leaves*, coming Spring 2023), shares an experience with racism in a children's book brought home by his son, a student in senior kindergarten.

In terms of expert advice, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, authors of *NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children*, suggest parents speak with children about race—and early on. The authors posit that children are not colour blind, in spite of the fear adults sometimes express over pointing out such specificities. The same goes for gender, sexuality, and other human traits and distinguishing features found throughout classic children's literature.

Philip Nel, author of *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: The Hidden Racism of Children's Literature and the Need for Diverse Books* argues that reading racist books to kids, whether or not they are a targeted group, can do damage. But he also argues: “You have to begin anti-racist education and anti-discrimination education as soon as you can. Racist classics of children's literature—read in context—can provide an opportunity for education.”

This makes me think of my own experience reading racist literature.

I was a big fan of Tintin books growing up, which I had inherited from my uncle and my mother. Hergé's scrappy, adventurous journalist and his white dog Snowy and their global adventures (or, looking back, adventures as colonists?) fascinated me—as they now do with both my daughters. I just hadn't noticed that all of the non-white characters in the comic books



were usually gross, racist characterizations.

For example, Hergé callously depicts Black people with exaggerated and distorted features, such as always having oversized lips and acting in subservient and/or buffoonish manners for comedic purposes. (Other groups, such as the Japanese, Chinese, and Indigenous people, endure similar treatment in Tintin books.)

I thought I had collected the entire catalogue of Tintin books, until, as an adult, I visited Belgium and discovered one that was never listed as available in North America: *Tintin in the Congo*.

Given Belgium’s horrific history with that African country, and Hergé’s already racist depictions of Black people, you can probably imagine why North American booksellers kept this one off the shelves.

But I bought it nevertheless. I was an adult, I understood the context, and I wanted the complete Tintin collection. I’ve since passed on my collection to my 12 year old. Even though I’ve explained to my daughter the racist depictions in it and Belgium’s history with the Congo, my wife continues to squirrel *Tintin in the Congo* away to the basement.

My wife’s argument remains that reading books contextually, together, is one thing; but, out of all the positive books out there, our children shouldn’t be left alone to absorb and normalize such racist imagery. Just because it’s old and part of a collection, doesn’t mean it should be valued. This begs the question: is shelving certain books okay? Or do we drag out every racist book and use them as teachable moments?

Perhaps it is easier to simply not read these books anymore. After all, the children’s book industry in the U.S. made an estimated two billion dollars in 2021. If you’re not planning on having a conversation with the little ones about the content, then this is probably the best route to take.

Self-editing without explanation isn’t really a solution; at some point you’ll slip up and read aloud something you didn’t want to. Moreover, your children will likely read the book for themselves when they’re older, but won’t have the understanding behind what’s been written to navi-

"I think our desire as parents or grandparents to share books we loved as children is valid. But..."

gate the language or content successfully.

I think our desire as parents or grandparents to share books we loved as children with others is valid. But, like Nel says, we need to also be prepared to have conversations with our children and/or grandchildren about it. When we encounter difficult language or subject matter, we can choose to use these as “teachable moments”—opportunities for learning something about a particular aspect of life.

There may be better books to read to our children/grandchildren, certainly. But shying away from difficult conversations, even at bedtime, is not the best option—for them or us.

The Raising Race Conscious Children blog is written by Sachi Feris, who holds an MA in Sociology and Education from Columbia University, and an M.P.A. in Public Policy from Baruch College. There, this mother of three says: “We can start talking about race even if we don’t have all the answers. We can start talking about race even if we are afraid we will say the wrong thing.

It is inevitable that we will make mistakes—that’s a part of the process. But if we commit to collectively trying to talk about race with young children, we can lean on one another for support as we, together, envision a world where we actively challenge racism each and every day. It starts one conversation at a time.”

I don’t have all the answers. Maybe none. In spite of the expert advice, I find myself still asking questions and wavering between whether to share or not, and if I do, what strategy to use.

But, despite how exhausted I may be at the end of the day, I have decided that, if I choose to share certain books with my children, I will also accept the responsibility I owe them to have that conversation.

READING LIST

NutureShock: New Thinking About Children
by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman

Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: The Hidden Racism of Children's Literature and the Need for Diverse Books
by Philip Nel

Raising Race Conscious Children
raceconscious.org





01 Book Review

Becoming Big Sis

Grandma captures the oft overlooked big-sister coming-of-age story

By Emily Kennedy

When children welcome siblings into the world, their story usually plays second fiddle. Understandably, moms and dads are generally too busy with the new baby to document a first-born’s point of view; and young children won’t be able to recall the big-sibling coming-of-age tale for themselves. Enter grandmother, and Canadian children’s book author, **Iris Waung**. Waung thoughtfully documents the developing relationship between her two grandchildren, sisters Ava and Lia, in her second book: *I’m a Big Sister Now!* The book follows Ava from the ages of three to six, as she tells the story of welcoming her little sister, Lia, into the family. Ava quickly grows into the role of big sister. “Right away the instinct was there,” says Waung of watching her oldest granddaughter interact with the baby. “I thought to myself: ‘Oh my goodness, the younger one is going to go to school soon too! I better put something down so when they grow up they can see some of the moments that I caught.’” These moments in the book range from helping dad decorate the baby’s room to helping her

Nai-Nai (paternal grandmother in Mandarin) make traditional **red eggs** to celebrate Lia’s one-month milestone. Ava’s adventures teaching her little sister the alphabet and learning to share toys, are also documented. Although specific to Waung’s granddaughter’s experience, this book engages any young reader expecting a sibling. Children will easily relate to Ava’s story and the special relationship she develops with her little sister Lia. Like Waung’s first book, *Nai-Nai and Me*, which talks about special moments that a grandmother and grandchild spend together, Waung’s Chinese heritage peppers the pages, a tribute both to her family’s history and Canada’s multiculturalism, she says. Waung’s appreciation for moments spent together with family can be traced back to the challenges she, her younger brother, and her parents faced immigrating to Canada in the 1970s. For example, just days before they were set to fly out of Taiwan, the hotel at which they were staying caught fire in the night. “So we very literally had nothing—not even a shirt on our back: pyjamas.”



Photography by Emily Kennedy

I’m a Big Sister Now!
Words and cover by Iris Waung, Illustrations by Pia
40 pp. Friesen Press. CAD\$9.99 paperback
(Ages 7-11).

From her immigration experience, Waung says, “Material things are not that important really—it’s the togetherness.” A retired librarian, Waung looks for a theme or a lesson from the children’s books she buys and borrows. So, for her own book, a unique theme was paramount. *I’m a Big Sister Now!* quietly shows the theme of togetherness across generations, while spotlighting the big sister story. Waung’s latest book shows how becoming an older sibling is not just one moment, but a collection of moments. This grandmother’s steady and watchful eye of her expanding family aggregates these moments into a beautiful big sister’s coming-of-age tale.

02 Book Review

Make Love, Not Generation Wars

How to recognize and guard against destructive generational thinking

By Emily Kennedy

With every new generation come new generalizations: “Boomers are arrogant;” “**Millennials** are selfish;” “**Gen Z** is too sensitive.” These are just some of Google’s most-searched generational queries. Few people will tell you they agree with their generation’s labels. So, why does modern society continue to label each new generation in a fixed identity? What if instead, we sought to link the generations through our commonalities that affect all ages as they move through life? In his latest book, *The Generation Myth: Why When You’re Born Matters Less Than You Think*, U.S. professor and researcher Bobby Duffy debunks generational myths and suggests a theory for how the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of all ages change over time. Duffy argues that, although individuals can benefit from understanding generational dynamics, we won’t learn anything valuable about ourselves from a mixture of stereotypes, manufactured conflicts, and tiresome clichés. He challenges the concept of fixed generational identities, suggesting the generation we are born into is not static and, even then, is only one part of the story—alongside the influence of our individual lives and the impact of historical events. Duffy’s review of pervasive and unhelpful discourse around generation “warfare” helps readers take the first step in reconciling generational differences: understanding and recognizing their own bias.

The Generation Myth: Why when you’re born matters less than you think
Written by Bobby Duffy
288 pp. Basic Books. US\$30.00
paperback

Peppering this landscape are theories the author finds insightful at challenging such assumptions. For example, how a sense of stalled progress exists generation over generation (we expect to see our children and their children do better than ourselves); or how social identity is formed by coming of age in the face of societal traumatic experiences; or the increasingly separate lives we live from others due to geographics and technological changes. These theories explain how connections between generations can become strained, resulting in deeper misperceptions. The author argues there are three “effects” that explain how all attitudes, beliefs and behaviours change over time: period, life-cycle, and cohort. Period effects are responses to major events that affect everyone. Life-cycle effects are those that change us as we age (life events like having children or retiring). Cohort effects is the category most often associated with generational thinking: the results of being socialized in different conditions from other generations. But, as Duffy points out, “explaining all of a

person’s attitudes and behaviours according to when they were born relies solely on identifying cohort effects—and misses out on two-thirds of our understanding of societal change.” We follow Duffy as he applies this three-pronged analysis to some of the largest surveys conducted in the world over the past 50 years on topics ranging from work, religion, sex, marriage and family structures; to attitudes towards porn, racism, gender roles, politics and the environment. The book gets misperceptions out of the way to give a clearer view of how we got to where we are in the generation wars; and how to come to understand each other and redefine a peaceful social contract between generations. On Duffy’s ideas that when you were born matters less than you think, some will no doubt agree with his assessment: we need to separate the myths from the realities in order to regain a sense of optimism for future generations and end the generation wars for good.

Read more from author Bobby Duffy on understanding true differences between generations, p.39.



03

Reading about writing

Books to get you writing

By Dianne Wing

I have been an avid reader since childhood. Every Saturday I would borrow the maximum allowed six books from the Waterloo Public Library. By Wednesday, the books were read. At the age of 11, I had reached a point of despair: I had read all the books there were to read—in the children’s department.

My mother ushered me through that crisis by introducing me to the adult section of the library and, consequently, to a vast new world of reading. It has been smooth sailing ever since. There is always something to read or re-read.

I know I am a great reader, but I would like to be a great writer too. Sadly though, writing is hard work. It takes discipline and perseverance. How do writers do it? That is why I started reading about writing. Maybe books about writing would help me write better? Although that hasn’t been the case so far, books about writing are fun to read and they do enhance my appreciation of great writing.

Stephen King’s *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* is a must-read for anyone interested in trying to write. He tells the story of how he became a writer while also ad-

vising aspiring writers in typical King verbiage, such as “The road to hell is paved with adverbs.”

A good handle on grammar helps minimize confusion for the reader. Most of us have hazy memories of learning grammar; but, I loved parsing sentences, one line under the subject, two lines under the verb; arrows connecting adjectives to nouns, adverbs to verbs, and a thick vertical line separating the subject and the predicate. Grammar lover or not, everyone can enjoy Lynne Truss’ best-seller, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, which offers a funny, witty primer on grammar.

One of my favourite books about writing is Stanley Fish’s *How to Write a Sentence*. Reading and re-reading this wonderful book provides a key to understanding how great writing works, as well as paying tribute to the craft of William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Henry James, Martin Luther King Jr. and Elmore Leonard. Like those who appreciate fine art or fine wine, Fish appreciates fine sentences.

And then there are books about writing and about life along the way. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* by Anne Lamott is a funny, helpful and provocative guide for anyone with writing ambitions. Lamott talks about the perils of perfectionism and how to know when



you’re done. The title comes from her father’s advice to her 10-year-old brother who was struggling to write a school report about birds: “Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, ‘Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.’ And that’s just good advice to live by.

READING LIST

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft
by Stephen King

Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation
by Lynne Truss

How to Write a Sentence
by Stanley Fish

Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life
by Anne Lamott



Boomers vs Millennials

Free yourself from the phoney generation wars

By Bobby Duffy

Generational thinking is a big idea that’s been horribly corrupted and devalued by endless myths and stereotypes. These clichés have fuelled fake battles between “snowflake” millennials and “selfish” baby boomers, with younger generations facing a “war on woke” and older generations accused of “stealing” the future from the young.

As I argue in my book, *Generations*, this is a real shame. A more careful understanding of what’s really different between generations is one of the best tools we have to understand change—and predict the future.

Some of the great names in sociology and philosophy saw understanding generational change as central to understanding society overall. Auguste Comte, for example, identified the generation as a key factor in “the basic speed of human development.”

He argued that “we should not hide the fact that our social progress rests essentially upon death; which is to say that the successive steps of humanity necessarily require a continuous renovation ... from one generation to the next.” We humans get set in our ways once we’re past our formative years, and we need the constant injection of new participants to keep society moving forward.

Understanding whether, and how, generations are different is vital to understanding society. The balance between generations is constantly shifting, as older cohorts die out and are replaced by

new entrants. If younger generations truly do have different attitudes or behaviours to older generations, this will reshape society, and we can, to some extent, predict how it will develop if we can identify those differences.

But in place of this big thinking, today we get clickbait headlines and bad research on millennials “killing the napkin industry” or on how baby boomers have “ruined everything.” We’ve fallen a long way.

Myth busting

To see the true value of generational thinking, we need to identify and discard the many myths. For example, as I outline in the book, *gen Z* and millennials are not lazy at work or disloyal to their employers. They’re also no more materialistic than previous generations of young: a focus on being rich is something we tend to grow out of.

Old people are not uncaring or unwilling to act on climate change: in fact, they are more likely than young people to boycott products for social purpose reasons.

And our current generation of young are not a particularly unusual group of “culture warriors.” Young people are always at the leading edge of change in cultural norms, around race, immigration, sexuality and gender equality. The issues have changed, but the gap between young and old is not greater now than in the past.

Meanwhile, there are real, and vitally important, generational differences hidden in this mess. To see them, we need to separate the three effects that explain all change in societies. Some patterns are simple “lifecycle effects,” where attitudes and behaviours are to do with our age, not which generation we are born into. Some are “period effects”—where everyone is affected, such as in a war, economic crisis or a pandemic.

And finally, there are “cohort effects,” which is where a new generation is different from others at the same age, and they stay different. It’s impossible to entirely separate these distinct forces, but we can often get some way towards it—and when we do, we can predict the future in a much

more meaningful way.

There are many real generational differences, in vitally important areas of life. For example, the probability of you owning your own home is hugely affected by when you were born. Millennials are around half as likely to be a homeowner than generations born only a couple of decades earlier.

There is also a real cohort effect in experience of mental health disorders, particularly among recent generations of young women. Our relationship with alcohol and likelihood of smoking is also tied to our cohort, with huge generational declines in very regular drinking and smoking. Each of these point to different futures, from increased strain on mental health services to declining alcohol sales.

But lifecycle and period effects are vitally important too. For example, there is truth in the idea that we grow more conservative as we age. One analysis suggests that this ageing effect is worth around 0.35% to the Conservatives each year, which may not sound like a lot, but is very valuable over the course of a political lifetime.

And, of course, the pandemic provides a very powerful example of how period effects can dramatically change things for us all.

Reaching beyond the avocado

When there is such richness in the realities, why are there so many myths? It’s partly down to bad marketing and workplace research—that is, people jumping on the generation bandwagon to get media coverage for their products or to sell consultancy to businesses on how to engage young employees.

This has become its own mini-industry. In 2015, U.S. companies spent up to US\$70 million (£51 million) on this sort of “advice” according to the *Wall Street Journal*, with some experts making as much as US\$20,000 an hour. Over 400 LinkedIn users now describe themselves solely as a “millennial expert” or “millennial consultant.”

Campaigners and politicians also play to these



imagined differences. Our increasing focus on “culture wars” often involves picking out particular incidents in universities, such as the banning of clapping at events or the removal of a portrait of the Queen to exaggerate how culturally different young people today are.

Maybe less obviously, politicians such as former U.S. President Barack Obama repeatedly lionise coming generations as more focused on equality, when the evidence shows they’re often not that different. These assertions are not only wrong, but create false expectations and divides.

Some have had enough, calling on the Pew Research Center in the U.S., which has been a champion of generational groups, to stop conducting this type of analysis. I think that misses the point: it’s how it’s applied rather than the idea of generations that’s wrong.

We should defend the big idea and call out the myths, not abandon the field to the “millennial consultants.”

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Watercolour Prints

Watercolour artwork from Issue #20 of *Damn Magazine*. Printed on museum-quality poster. Size: 12" x 16"



Book Bag

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