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KEEPING STORIES ALIVE ACROSS GENERATIONS

By Erin Bailey, Ed.D., Vice President of Literacy Programs & Research, **August House Publishers**

Editor’s Note: Helping children become lifelong readers requires more than access to books; it calls for stories that spark curiosity, reflect varied experiences and make reading personally meaningful. Bailey’s perspective offers educators, families and publishers a thoughtful lens on preserving cultural storytelling while using evolving formats and technology to engage new generations of readers.



From Children’s Literacy to Children’s Publishing

Interestingly, I didn’t begin my career focused on children’s publishing. I began with a passion for children’s literacy, which is distinct from children’s literature. My master’s degree focused on child and adolescent literacy, and one of my professors encouraged us to always be reading a piece of children’s literature. We began every class by sharing what we were reading and even after the course ended, a group of teachers and I continued the practice. I remember reading many of the popular young adult titles of the time, including The Hunger Games trilogy.

As my career at Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) grew, so did my exposure to children’s literature. I had more opportunities to read books, evaluate them and recommend titles to the educators and

families in our community. Today, authors and publishers regularly share new books with me and I probably read between 200 and 300 new children’s books each year.

Over time, I began to see publishing as another way to advance the work that first inspired me: Helping children become lifelong readers. My foundation in literacy gives me a particular lens as a publisher. I’m not only thinking about whether a book tells a wonderful story; I’m also thinking about how that story can invite a child into reading, spark curiosity, build confidence and create a lasting connection with books.

Meeting Young Readers Where They Are

One thing we often say at RIF is that we need to meet children where they are. That means recognizing that there is no single pathway to becoming a reader.

For some children, the doorway into reading may be a traditional picture book; for others, it might be a graphic novel, an eBook or another format that immediately captures their interest. It also means making sure children can find stories that connect with their interests, experiences, cultures and everyday lives.

I don’t think our challenge is to make books compete with every other form of entertainment. Instead, our opportunity is to remind children that reading offers something uniquely powerful, the ability to enter another world while using their own imagination to help create it.

Publishers can support that by giving young readers both choice and access. When children have the freedom to discover books that genuinely interest them we can create positive, meaningful reading experiences. Those experiences build motivation and motivation is ultimately what helps transform a child who can read into someone who chooses to read throughout their life.

Balancing Cultural Authenticity with Universal Appeal

I look for stories that have both a strong cultural foundation and a universal human connection. The details of a story (e.g., setting, traditions, language, characters or history) may be deeply rooted in a particular culture, but the emotions at its heart can transcend generations and geography. Themes like courage, belonging, family, humor, perseverance and kindness allow readers to see themselves in stories while also learning about experiences different from their own.



I believe publishers have an important responsibility to find the balance between preservation and evolution. The story evolves, but its heart remains the same.

Folklore is a wonderful example of this. Many traditional stories have endured precisely because they carry truths and lessons that remain meaningful even as the world around them changes. At the same time, authenticity matters. We want to preserve the cultural elements that give a story its identity rather than modernizing it to the point that we lose what made it special in the first place.

I think of it as preserving the heart of the story while allowing the way we invite readers into it to evolve. That might mean fresh illustrations, a contemporary presentation or a new format, while respecting the traditions, meaning and cultural context that have allowed the story to endure.

Using Technology to Deepen the Reading Experience

I’m excited about the potential for technology to expand the ways children experience literature, particularly when technology is used intentionally to support rather than distract from reading.

We’re already seeing opportunities to bring books to life through features such as audio narration, which can increase accessibility and allow children to hear fluent, expressive reading modeled for them. Other thoughtful features, such as text highlighting that supports fluency and word recognition, prompts that encourage reflection and critical thinking and video tips that help families make the most of reading aloud together, can deepen the experience surrounding a book.

I believe the next evolution in children’s publishing will be less about technology for technology’s sake and more about asking, How can this tool help a child become a more engaged, confident reader?

The story should always remain at the center. When technology helps children access that story, understand it more deeply or share the experience with a parent, caregiver or educator, it can become a powerful extension of the book rather than a replacement for it.



Preserving Cultural Heritage for the Next Generation

I believe publishers have an important responsibility to find the balance between preservation and evolution. Traditional stories and folklore have survived for generations because there is something enduring at their core. They carry history, values, humor, lessons and ways of understanding the world that connect us to those who came before us.

At the same time, preserving these stories doesn’t mean they have to remain frozen in time. We can thoughtfully introduce them to new generations in ways that feel engaging and relevant (e.g., through contemporary illustrations or new formats) while maintaining the cultural elements and meaning that are essential to the story.

That idea is especially fitting for stories rooted in oral traditions. Oral storytelling has never been completely static. As stories are passed from one storyteller to another, each person brings something of themselves to the telling. The story evolves, but its heart remains the same.

I hope publishers can embrace that same philosophy; honoring where stories come from, preserving the voices and traditions they carry and creating opportunities for a new generation not only to read those stories, but to see themselves as the next storytellers who will carry them forward. **ED**