



Not just in black and white: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australian children’s picture books

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Received: 1 June 2023 / Accepted: 3 September 2023 / Published online: 20 September 2023
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Abstract

As they are usually chosen by adults, children’s picture books offer important insights into contemporary attitudes and values. They subsequently drive the social and academic development of young children, thereby playing a key role in their ethical socialisation and education. This article will explore the role of children’s literature in this process by analysing a range of Australian children’s picture books that deal with First Nations issues. The books were identified in a survey administered by the State Library of New South Wales’ (NSW) public library service which identified 62 books that explored diversity. Twenty-five of the books were assessed as having Indigenous characters. This article will explore the approach adopted in each of these picture books by using Rudine Sims’ three categories—Social Conscience, Melting Pot, and Culturally Conscious. By doing so, the article will assess the nature of childhood literature’s engagement with Indigenous cultures, contexts, and issues.

Keywords Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples · Children’s literature · Children’s picture books

1 Introduction

In 1968, William Stanner (2020, p. 120) coined the phrase the “great Australian silence” to describe the pervasive “cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale” that has ignored the less celebratory aspects of the nation’s history, notably European “invasion and systemic massacres”. Others had already made similar observations; in 1842 in a speech that was in other respects “the most sustained and intellectually powerful attack on Aboriginal rights ever mounted in early colonial Australia” the Sydney barrister Richard Windeyer referenced “the whispering in the bottom of our hearts” (Reynolds, 2018, pp. 20–21). A 1927

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Royal Commission later lamented what it also saw as a “conspiracy of silence” (Wood, 1927, p. iv), one that continues to blight modern Australian race relations. Nevertheless, the large moral questions that underlie the history of settler-colonial Australia and which challenge the widespread perception that it was a benign process continue to live on “in the subsoil of national consciousness” (Reynolds, 2018, p. 8). This article will assess the extent to which the subsoil includes children’s picture books used in early childhood classrooms using the three literary categories or typologies of Social Conscience, Melting Pot, and Culturally Conscious outlined in Rudine Sims (1982) *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children’s Fiction*.

The authors have analysed 25 children’s picture books created by Australian authors and illustrators identified by the State Library of New South Wales’ (NSW) public library service in 2021 as part of their Diverse Picture Book project. In response to a survey distributed to NSW public library staff, the project identified 62 Australian children’s picture books about diversity held in library collections or as part of the librarians’ personal collections. The categories were books that included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander characters,¹ culturally and linguistically diverse characters, gender diverse and non-heterosexual characters, characters with disability, and characters from regional or rural areas. As they are often chosen by parents, family members, or other adults, such as teachers and librarians, picture books such as these offer a far more valuable insight into their views regarding First Nations peoples rather than the predilections of the readers (Macdonald & Macdonald, 2022; Kerby et al., 2022a, b; Baguley & Kerby, 2021).

As Koss et al. (2018) found during an audit of 337 Caldecott (American children’s picture book award) winning books, the shifting terrain of children’s literature parallels social and political developments outside children’s literature. Representations of certain issues within children’s books, such as those linked to First Nations’ peoples, are often a barometer for their representation on a broader, societal scale. Any analysis is further problematised by the fact that texts often work subliminally, leaving readers unaware of how they internalise them or how they affect attitudes and their accompanying behaviours (Shapiro, 1999). What critics do agree on, however, is that as they are often a child’s first exposure to literature, they reflect societal attitudes as well as transmit societal values that drive the social and academic development of young children (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020; Adam et al., 2017), thereby playing a key role in ethical socialisation and education (Beauvais, 2015). Sims is aware of the power of picture books as both an indicator and a catalyst of important ideas. Drawing upon her own experiences as a young reader and later as a children’s educator, she realised that “if we are to foster a truly democratic and equitable society, we much develop a respect for multiple perspectives and multiple approaches to solving the problems we as humans encounter on life’s journeys” (Bishop, 2012, p. 216).

2 Method

Sims’ (1982) typology emerged from an analysis of 150 realistic fiction books about Afro-Americans published between 1965 and 1979. The focus of her analysis was on the intended audience of the books, the interpretation of Afro-American experiences

¹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are Australia’s first peoples, referred to as “First Nations peoples”, “Indigenous”, or “Indigenous Australians” in this article.

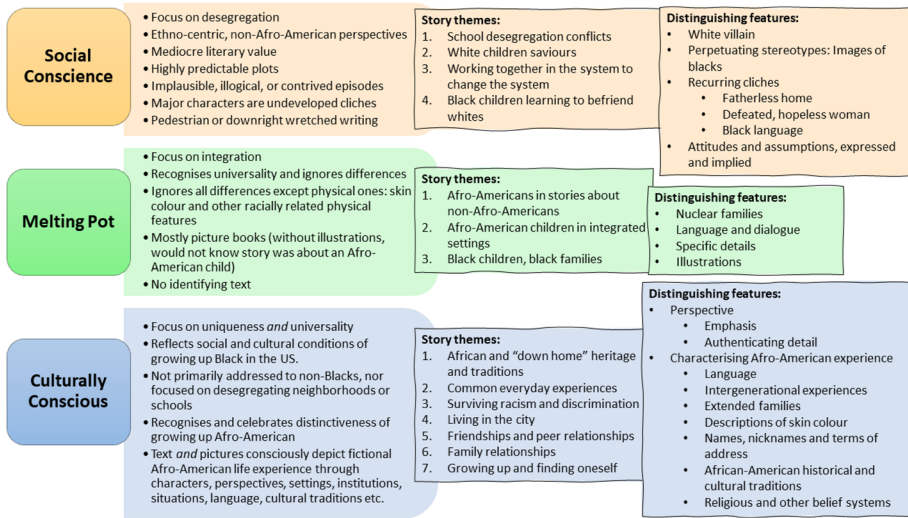


Fig. 1 Summary of Sims’ (1982) typology

represented, and the cultural perspectives that informed the stories. Sims, who is herself Afro-American, was interested in exploring whether culturally unique meanings were being conveyed in children’s books and in whether a distinctive Afro-American children’s literature was emerging at the time (Bishop, 2012). To explore how the perspectives of Afro-Americans were represented in children’s books, Sims examined the stories, text, and images in each book, along with the backgrounds of the books’ authors and illustrators. She found that of the 150 books surveyed, 54% were produced by non-Afro-American authors. Most importantly, her analysis of audience, content, and cultural perspectives motivated her to create a typology comprised of three categories: Social Conscience, Melting Pot, and Culturally Conscious books. “Social Conscience” describes books designed to raise children’s social awareness and tolerance for the book’s characters, and “Melting Pot” applied to books with similar aims, but which tended to brush over any cultural details or authentic social challenges. The “Culturally Conscious” category offers children a more genuine representation of characters’ lives, including authentic images, speech, storylines, contexts, and cultural references (Sims, 1982). Figure 1 provides a more detailed summary of ideas drawn directly from Sims’ seminal text (1982) that were used in our analysis.

The study was led by author 1 who is First Nations Australian. Other members of the research team are non-Indigenous Australians (authors 2, 4, and 5) and a Samoan from Aotearoa New Zealand (author 3). We acknowledge that First Nations peoples are the custodians of the lands we are living and working on and we are actively committed through our research, teaching and personal lives to truth-telling and reconciliation with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Author 2 carried out the initial analysis of the 25 books with a subsequent and independent analysis conducted by authors 1 and 3. Differences in the analyses were found in the Social Conscience and Melting Pot categories, but there was full agreement about the Culturally Conscious books. The differences were discussed and reconciled, resulting in the findings presented below.

To date, Sims’ typology has not been applied to Australian First Nations literature, though it has been used in several studies in Canada. In one study, Stagg Peterson

collaborated with Red Bear Robinson, an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper. They grouped a collection of Canadian children's books into four categories: "intergenerational impact of residential schools, stories using spiritual lessons from nature, autobiography and biography, and stories using teachings about relationships" (Stagg Peterson & Robinson, 2020, p. 1). This study proposed a "holistic Indigenous land-based knowledges approach" (p. 5) to analysing children's literature as an alternative to the critical literacy and reader response theories that were more commonly utilised. Sims' Culturally Conscious category could thereby be expanded by highlighting Indigenous worldviews which include relationality and spirituality, ecocentric perspectives, and connections across passages of time past, present, and future. Indigenous ideas were further explored by Eppley et al. (2022) in a study that focused on representations of rurality in children's narrative picture books. Across 43 non-Indigenous books and nine Indigenous books, they found differences in how relationships were portrayed, how the land was perceived (as a commodity or as "non-human kin"), and in the problems and challenges faced by the human characters. These studies and others (e.g. Stewart, 2002; Wiltse, 2015) highlight that books which authentically represent Indigenous worldviews do not fit neatly into Sims' categories as she originally conceived them. This provides opportunities for developing the typology further through Indigenous and First Nations lenses once it is applied to the Indigenous Australian experience.

3 Australian First Nations picture books

3.1 Social Conscience

Social Conscience books are intended to develop the social conscience of young readers. In Sims' study, the audience for these books were primarily non-Afro-American children, and the intention was "to encourage them to develop empathy, sympathy, and tolerance for Afro-American children and their problems" (Sims, 1982, p. 17). Influenced by civil rights struggles of the time and events such as the historic 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* ruling and the 1957 Little Rock Crisis, Social Conscience stories focused on desegregation and its effects. In her collection, Sims found four main types of stories: stories about desegregation conflicts, stories of white children helping a black friend deal with discrimination, stories of white and black characters co-operating within the system to change the system, and stories about black children learning to befriend whites. These stories were clearly intended to help privileged children understand the plight of less privileged people. However, none of the books in this category was written by Afro-American authors so they inevitably offered non-Afro-American perspectives. Sims argued that this explained the abundance of clichés and stereotypes, for example black children with large appetites, fatherless homes, and racism as a characteristic of poor, uneducated white people. It also explained the paternalistic tones of these stories and the inauthentic Afro-American experiences that were represented.

In contrast, the Australian creative teams who produced the Social Conscience books analysed here are a mix of non-Indigenous authors and illustrators, Indigenous authors and illustrators, and non-Indigenous authors and Indigenous artists. Sims found that in the American context, the literary quality of these books was mediocre with predictable plotlines, implausible events, and weak to average writing. As the books analysed in this article were explicitly identified by public library staff, they do not display these shortcomings. For example, the artwork in *The Spotty Dotty Lady* (Boyle & Martins, 2014) is

impressive while the storyline is rich with didactic opportunities that encourage an empathetic response to the issues of alienation and loneliness. In addition, there is no suggestion that Indigenous characters are less privileged than their white counterparts. In contrast, Social Conscience books were, in Sims' (1982, p. 104) experience, "overwhelmed by their social purpose" and might well "further isolate individuals or even families by defining them by an issue such as a disability rather than weaving the issue into an imaginative story" (Nitschke, 2019, p. 3). Non-Indigenous Australians, however, have nothing to teach Indigenous Australians, whose culture and world view are offered as correctives to broad societal failings, an approach that is at odds with Sims' typologies.

Ernie Dances to the Didgeridoo (Lester, 2006) is almost the quintessential Social Conscience picture book. The main protagonist is Ernie, a white child whose family leave the city to work for a year in a hospital in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Here he is introduced to Indigenous children, who are positioned as the equivalent of the white urban based friends he has left behind. The book's denouement sees Ernie's friends using his letters as a guide for "special Arnhem Land activities at school" which are juxtaposed with his embrace of the culture in situ. As is the case with most of the 25 books analysed, there is a pervasive ecocentric perspective, particularly in the images, which invariably emphasise the centrality of the environment to the Indigenous world view. Having visited Arnhem Land herself as a guest of the Gunbalanya Community School, Alison Lester, a non-Indigenous Australian, encourages her readers to make connections between their life in the city and that experienced by Indigenous children in a remote community. Despite the addition of two short glossaries, one of Kunwinjku and one of English terms, and an acknowledgement of the contribution made by Upper Primary students at Gunbalanya School, the book is clearly aimed at an audience that is, at a literal and figurative level, far removed from Arnhem Land. Neither group is positioned as "privileged", yet it is non-Indigenous Australia that is clearly the intended beneficiary of the book.

Big Rain Coming (Germein & Bancroft, 2002) is written by a successful white Australian author who writes picture books because "they make her heart sing" and give her readers "hopeful hearts" (Katrina Germein Bestselling Children's Author, n.d), which is hardly likely to encourage a deep engagement with Indigenous disadvantage. Her central protagonist is an Indigenous Elder who correctly predicts the approach of rain, thereby suggesting a link with the environment. The book's Indigenous sensibility is, however, far more evident in the illustrations than the text. Bronwyn Bancroft is an Indigenous artist whose work is held by the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and the Art Gallery of Western Australia. She has illustrated more than 20 children's books, including *Stradbroke Dreamtime* by renowned writer and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal.

Some Boys (Thomas & Dunk, 2018) is a very broad celebration of diversity written and illustrated by two non-Indigenous Australians. Some of the characters are racially diverse, but there is no specific engagement with Indigenous characters beyond that afforded any other character. *Hello* (Flowers, 2016) is a broadly engaging celebration of racial difference in which Indigenous Australians take their place alongside Chinese, Greek, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Lebanese, Thai, and Vietnamese children. Likewise, *The Spotty Dotty Lady* (Boyle & Martins, 2014) is not readily identifiable as a book dealing with Indigenous issues and instead tells the story of a lonely elderly lady who is inspired by flowers in her garden to paint her teacup with dots. She is so pleased by the result that she then does the same for her kitchen and then her entire home. Her neighbours are so enamoured of the artwork that they visit her to have their own teacups painted, a process which ends with her street becoming the "happiest ... in the whole town. And the spotty Dotty Lady never felt lonely again". Although some of her neighbours are Indigenous, the

story line is a celebration of the potential of human connection to challenge the loneliness of urban living and ageing. Both the author and illustrator, who are Indigenous artists, use dot painting to create a colourful and engaging narrative. Dot painting has its origins in 1971 with the Aboriginal people in Papunya, near Alice Springs, but unless it is explicitly discussed with children, it is possible that many would not make an explicit connection with Indigenous issues.

Overall, the Australian picture books categorised as Social Conscience show some distinct differences from Sims. Rather than being low quality and playing on stereotypes, contemporary picture books are engaging and make a clear effort to offer a more nuanced representation of First Nations peoples. This may be in large part to the social changes that have occurred since Sims undertook her survey of books in 1979. These Social Conscience books still have the same overarching goal of “highlighting prominent social issues of concern to everyone” (Sims, 1982, p. 29); they are doing this in a more culturally conscious manner.

3.2 Melting Pot

Sims’ Melting Pot category describes books that simply refer to people as people, who exist within a homogenous society (Sims, 1982). In Sims’ original study, the “Melting Pot books” had three sub-categories: books about a white child or from a white perspective, although including black characters; books about black children in an integrated society; and books with only black main characters and perhaps some white background characters. Melting Pot books were not intended to reflect any distinct cultural experience and were primarily written and illustrated by white authors. Readers could only tell the characters’ race and ethnicity by the pictures as it was never explicitly stated in the story, although occasionally the names of the characters would hint at a particular cultural background. These books contained nuclear, middle-class families and the characters spoke standard English. They promoted an Afro-American middle-class existence aligning with white sociocultural norms and values, brushing aside any perspectives that might be distinctly Afro-American. In promoting societal universality, Melting Pot books excluded culture-specific experiences or traditions and avoided altogether important issues such as racial prejudice, discrimination, or conflict.

Sims’ conception of Melting Pot books is consistent with the Australian examples, though the question of why important issues are avoided is an interesting one. The avoidance of trauma in the Melting Pot books on Indigenous Australians is partly the result of a belief that children’s literature should be “sanitary, benign, and didactic” (Tribunella, 2010, p. 102). Trauma may find a place in the picture books if it is a work of non-fiction, but it is shaped, manipulated, and distorted to serve a didactic purpose (Kerby & Baguley, 2020, p. 283). Although trauma is sometimes directly confronted in children’s literature, it is the exception rather than the rule. This is typical of the Australian examples. *Our Home Our Heartbeat* (Briggs et al., 2020), written and illustrated by an Indigenous author and illustrated by two artists, one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous, is very much an exploration of character empowerment that avoids confronting big issues such as trauma. It is instead a celebration of Indigenous achievements, many of them in a non-Indigenous context. Briggs’ observation that “We are all our community, it’s our time we’re home” is thereby robbed of its radical potential. Instead, the reader can take solace from the fact that talent and hard work is invariably rewarded as they are introduced to a range of Indigenous Australians who have gained prominence in politics, the arts, and sport.

I want to be a Superhero (Humes & Kwaymullina, 2020) is likewise intended to inspire Indigenous youth, though the character's race plays little part in the narrative. Written by the author when she was 8 years old, it uses a dual understanding of what constitutes a superhero to explore Indigenous character empowerment. The lead character, the eponymous Breanna, wants to be a superhero so that she can fly. Her conception of a superhero is grounded in popular culture, which is pictorially evident in her decision to wear a cape. She tries to wish upon a shooting star, in a reference perhaps to Walt Disney, but to no avail. Her mother challenges her conception of a superhero but explaining that she could still “be a superhero by going to school every day”, “study hard to become a superhero doctor ... or a superhero lawyer ... or a superhero engineer ... or a superhero vet”. It is readily categorised as a Melting Pot book as it encourages achievement through hard work and an appreciation for education's capacity to act as a vehicle for social mobility rather than engaging directly with an Indigenous experience.

Kick with my left foot (Seden & Briggs, 2018) equally avoids issues that might more explicitly engage with the Indigenous experience in remote communities. It was produced through the emerging Indigenous Picture Book Mentoring Project, an initiative which gave six novice Indigenous artists and writers an opportunity to work with leaders in picture book publishing. The book tells the story of an Indigenous child in an Indigenous community preparing to play Aussie Rules football and discovering that he kicks the ball more effectively with his left rather than his right foot. Its strength lies in its use of a popular sport in Indigenous communities and the central protagonist discovering a skill through his own initiative. Yet like the family in *Going to the footy* (Coombes, 2019) were it not for the skin colour of the protagonist, it might just as easily be a story relevant to any group, though in the latter's case, the artwork lends it an Indigenous sensibility.

This development of a physical skill and the benefit of personal initiative also drives *Look see, look at me!* (Norrington & Huxley, 2010) and *I Love Me* (Morgan & Kwaymullina, 2016). Journalist and writer Leonie Norrington, who grew up at Barunga Aboriginal community, and the illustrator Dee Huxley, visited three northern Indigenous communities, Wugularr, Barunga, and Manyalalluk, to workshop words and drawings. Though the rhyming text makes it a skilfully executed “read aloud book” and the images provide an equally skilfully executed insight into outback life in a First Nations' community, the book is better understood as a celebration of the growing autonomy of a 3-year-old child who happens to be Indigenous and who happens to live in an outback community. They are not central components of the narrative. Similarly, *I Love Me* is rightly promoted by its publisher as a celebration of “individuality and joyous self-esteem”; the additional observation the book “aims to build self-esteem in Indigenous and non-Indigenous children” is less self-evident (Fremantle Press, n.d). The protagonists are Indigenous yet there is little in the text that makes this an Indigenous story; that role is filled by the illustrations of Ambelin Kwaymullina, an Aboriginal writer and illustrator who comes from the Palyku people of the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

Other examples of Melting Pot books embrace societal universality through the celebration of nuclear families, often set against the backdrop of the Australian environment which is presented as a welcoming place rather than a threat or a source of income. *On the Way to Nana's* (Haji-Ali et al., 2017) is a homage to family trips made by the Haji-Ali family to visit “Nana Phyllis” in the small country town of Wyndham in the far north of Western Australia. Though the title suggests a focus on family, most of the narrative is in fact a pictorial exploration of the Outback, dominated by wide expanses and the reds of the soil, couched in the same narrative framework used in the 12 Days of Christmas. As Foucault (1990, p. 23) explains, books are “caught up in a system of references to other books, other

texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network”, hence the reader is shown, among other images, “Fourteen rugged anthills”, “Eleven alert goannas”, “Seven bulging boas” before ending with “One excited Nana waiting for me”. First Nations’ issues are peripheral to the narrative and the story could just as easily involve any family group, appearing in the form of fellow travellers, and “Ten happy children”, both black and white, hands linked, playing in a park. Similarly, *I Remember* (Crawford & Jordinson, 2019) is a nostalgic take on family holidays rather than a First Nations’ book. It is a very effective exploration of memory and family, as befits Joanne Crawford’s background and expertise—she is a descendent from the Nhunda people of the Geraldton area of Western Australia, an award-winning author, and is well versed in the creation of educational resources. Anne Jordinson’s artwork, both for this book and elsewhere, explores the beauty of the West Australian landscape and therefore complements the author’s exploration of family camping trips, but it too lacks a First Nations’ sensibility.

The Rabbit-Hole Golf Course (Mulvey & Briggs, 2017) tells the story of a young girl travelling with a group of women and children from their desert home to try and catch a pet rabbit and it gives readers a glimpse into remote desert community life “including the taste of ‘maku’ pulled from tree roots, the smell of damper baking around the fire, and the thrill of sleeping in swags under the night sky” (The National Centre for Australian Children’s Literature Inc., n.d). Ella Mulvey spent part of her childhood in Ernabella, or Pukatja, a remote community 30 km from the Northern Territory border and the illustrator, Karen Briggs, is a descendant of the Yorta Yorta people in Northeast Victoria. These formative experiences with the landscape pervade the book but as is the case with several of the texts analysed, the environment rather than the First Nation’ peoples who inhabit it are the primary focus of the narrative.

Two Mates (Prewett & Prewett, 2012) also embraces this lack of specificity to explore an issue other than one grounded in a purely First Nations’ experience. The book tells the story of Jack, a First Nations boy, and his friend Raf, who have grown up together in the coastal town of Broome in Western Australia. The narrative sees Jack and Raf going fishing, hunting, going to the markets, exploring rockpools, riding quad bikes, swimming, and going to school. Although the book’s real strength is its refusal to position a cross-racial friendship as an “issue” to be explored, the focus is really on the fact that Raf has spina bifida and is in a wheelchair, a denouement which is revealed only in the illustration at the end of the story.

Sims’ Melting Pot categorisation works effectively for these texts, particularly in the use of Anglo-Australian summer holiday stereotypes, such as the family road trip and the singing of Christmas carols, to show how First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians can share in these experiences as they are all “just people”. However, many of the texts also engage extensively and explicitly with the distinctly Australian environment, highlighting that these shared experiences take place in a distinct setting. While none of the texts foregrounds First Nations’ connection to country, the unique landscapes of Australia play an important role in the establishment of a shared or common Australian identity, defined not by race but by a relationship with the land.

3.3 Culturally Conscious

Sims’ final category is Culturally Conscious books which seek to depict an authentic representation of Afro-American lives and experiences. With an intended audience of Afro-American children, these books offered a celebration and recognition of black culture

from a black perspective (Sims, 1982). Distinguishing features of books in this category included being set in an Afro-American community or home, and some means of identifying the characters as black through physical descriptions, language or other aspects of cultural behaviours, institutions, and traditions (Sims, 1982). Another unique aspect of these books was the communication style. Not only was the language of black Americans used, but Afro-American worldviews were a central focus, with references to culturally specific topics and details, such as black church services, voodoo, extended families, black child-rearing practices, and respect for elders (Sims, 1982). Further, Culturally Conscious books addressed themes that the other categories either neglected or presented at a surface level, themes such as oppression, racism, discrimination, explorations of Afro-American identity, and survival (Sims, 1982). Of all the categories, the Culturally Conscious books came closest to constituting a body of Afro-American literature for children.

Culturally Conscious Indigenous Australian books include *I Saw We Saw* (Yolŋu students at Nhulunbuy Primary School [with Ann James and Ann Haddon], 2019) which was published as a collaboration between the Indigenous Literacy Foundation (ILF) and the Yolŋu students at Nhulunbuy Primary School in the Northern Territory. The extent of the immersion into the community and the contribution of the students themselves ensures that this book is one of the most culturally conscious of the 25 surveyed. Rather than exploring abstract concepts such as family links, growing up, or character empowerment, the Foundation simply aimed to “produce a beautiful book that captured the students’ lives, language and culture”. The ILF soon realised that “the sea and surrounding land was an absolutely integral part of their lives, and the final idea for the book – a journey around Nhulunbuy – was born” (Indigenous Literacy Foundation, n.d). Each student had an artwork included and contributed to the text, hence the sense that the book explored Indigenous culture in a distinct manner grounded in the local language and environment.

Similarly, *I can count to 10 in Wiradjuri* (Brandy & Williams, 2020) was written as a means of ensuring the survival of Indigenous culture. Larry Brandy, a Wiradjuri man from Condobolin which covers a large part of inland New South Wales, has written a counting book supported by photographs of Wiradjuri people and supported by a free downloadable Wiradjuri language app developed by the Wiradjuri Study Centre. The book’s real purpose is to maintain the Wiradjuri language. Jasmine Seymour’s *Baby Business* (2019) is likewise driven by the desire to ensure the survival of Indigenous culture. She is a Dharug woman and member of the Dharug Custodian Aboriginal Corporation; her book, therefore, is written by an Australian Indigenous woman for Indigenous children and published by an Indigenous publisher. It tells the story of a smoking ceremony that welcomes a Dharug baby to country. The smoke is a blessing, one that celebrates new babies and their connection to the land.

Respect (Muir et al., 2020b) also depicts Indigenous culture from an Indigenous perspective rather than the superficial engagement which is sometimes characteristic of Social Conscience or Melting Pot books. Aunty Fay Muir, a Boonwurrung Elder, and Sue Lawson, an award winning author, give voice to Indigenous peoples by noting that “Our way is old, older than red earth, older than flickering stars”, before moving on to stories that “shimmer through tall grass”, “for songs that soar over mountain tops”, “for ancestors always with us” before implying broader cultural characteristics that the dominant Anglo-Saxon peoples might do well to emulate. “Our way is respect. We listen. Learn. Share. We respect Country, each other, me” is more than just a celebration of Indigenous life but a gentle indictment of any society that does not share an approach characterised simply as “Respect”. The same three authors and artists collaborated on *Family* (2020a), which also overtly explores Indigenous life on its own terms. It celebrates “family, stories, and songs”,

“Sharing how to care for mob and Country”, and “Kinship that binds, Showing the way”. There is also a preparedness to engage with the widespread politicisation of picture books by arguing for a continuation of traditional Indigenous life grounded in an acknowledgement of the need to listen to “Aunties, Uncles, Elders, and Ancestors” and to connect “to ancestors, to who we are, to who we will be”. Though the book no doubt would have value for non-Indigenous readers, it is primarily an Indigenous book written as a didactic tool for Indigenous children.

Welcome to country (Murphy & Kennedy, 2016) is similar to *Respect* and *Family*, though it lacks the political undertones of the former. It explains the now ubiquitous welcome to country, which “is a ceremony performed by a local Aboriginal person of significance (usually an Elder) to acknowledge and give consent to events taking place on their traditional lands” (University of New South Wales, n.d). Murphy and Kennedy explain how this might be conducted when welcomed to the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri People:

We invite you to take a leaf from the branches of the white river gum. If you accept a leaf, and we hope you do, it means you are welcome to everything, from the tops of the trees to the roots of the earth. But you must only take from this land what you can give back.

The link between the land and the people is pervasive and the intermittent use of their traditional language reminds the reader that the picture book deals with a distinct culture with its own belief systems and protocols. There are no false equivalencies drawn between the Wurundjeri People and white Australians.

It is not a coincidence that one of the books most easily categorised as Culturally Conscious is a non-fiction book exploring the Uluru Statement. *Finding Our Heart* (Mayor & Douglas, 2020) offers an interpretation of the 2017 petition by Australian First Nations leaders calling for a change in the constitution to improve the representation of Indigenous Australians. The picture book is both a muted celebration of modern Australia and a more overt celebration of Indigenous life. It opens with an inclusive statement that “We live in a big, beautiful country. And we come from many different parts of the world. Together our nation is called, Australia”. Like *Respect*, the identification and celebration of Indigenous culture implies a similar identification of what white Australia is not. The use of the term “we” is now a more limited one—“We cared for our country, the plants, and the animals. We sang, we danced, we worked, we learnt, we shared ... We have the oldest living culture on the planet”. Colonisation left “our country ... sad and we need to find our nation’s heart to make it better”. To do so, “we started with the truth”, and that truth shows a disconnect between white Australia and the heart of the nation. The author and illustrator make it clear that the heart of the nation resides with Indigenous Australians, who offer it to all Australian people as a gift dependent on the acceptance of “our voice and our culture”. It is one of the most overtly political picture books identified by the State Library and the one most prepared to lay claim to Indigenous exceptionalism.

Equally political though far more prepared to engage with trauma is Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter’s *Took the Children Away* (2020). It is comprised of the text of a song written and recorded by Roach describing his experience as a member of the “Stolen Generations” which refers to the children of Indigenous Australians who were removed from their families by the Australian federal and state government agencies and church missions between 1905 and 1967. The policy of child removal and the intergenerational trauma are linked to high rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, suicide and poor health, social and economic outcomes (Australians Together, n.d). Roach’s lyrics/text are imbued with a

very personal anger: “Teach them how to live they said/Humiliated them instead/”, “Breaking their mother’s heart/tearing us all apart/Took them away”. Roach emphasises more than just the personal impact by extending his vision to encompass the cultural destruction; “Told us what to do and say/Told us all the white man’s ways” and “Sent us off to foster homes/As we grew up we felt alone/’Cause we were acting white/Yet feeling black”. Despite the overt acknowledgement of trauma, Roach ends more hopefully by celebrating the day “The children came back/Back where their hearts grow strong/Back where they all belong ... to their mother’s land”.

When We Say Black Lives Matter (Clarke, 2020) is the most overtly political of the books chosen by the New South Wales Library staff. Indeed, it is pervaded by a sense of anger, acting as a clarion call for black children to join the struggle against racial discrimination and oppression. “Walk with us” when we “march against falling night” and to “all Black folk still suffering, we stand with you, we vow”. Clarke is an award-winning author of Afro-Caribbean descent, and it is her background that shifts her focus from a purely Australian one. The transnational approach to oppression explains the absence of identifiable Indigenous characters and the American sensibility to the book.

Not all Culturally Conscious books are driven by anger and trauma, though this does not equate to a celebration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous connections. *Mrs White and the Red Desert* (Boyle & Prewett, 2019) is the story of three Indigenous students who live in a corrugated iron house in the desert. The house is clearly in a state of disrepair as the family is exposed to the hot desert wind during the day and the icy cold wind of night which “raced around the house as if it was crying out for the moon to protect us”. The children are excited at the imminent arrival of their teacher who is coming to dinner. They see it as an opportunity to show her why their homework is always “grubby”. Their efforts to clean the house come to nought when a dust storm coats the house, and the family and their teacher, in red dust. It is an insight for the well-meaning Mrs White, a characterisation that sets her apart from the indictment of white attitudes by someone like Roach. Some destruction of Aboriginal culture, as Boyle and Prewett acknowledge, is the result of ignorance rather than malice.

These Culturally Conscious books not only celebrate and foreground First Nations culture but engage children with the complex issues stemming from the settler-colonial invasion of First Nations lands almost 250 years ago. This category mirrors all of Sims’ suggested features, showing the Culturally Conscious picture books have had a persistent and stable form for more than 60 years, which would suggest both a relevancy, appeal, and marketability. When dealing with Indigenous issues, however, they adopt an ecocentric perspective that facilitates connections between past, present, and future.

Table 1 provides a summary of the books which were analysed and discussed, along with details for each book collated by the NSW State Library (2022).

4 Conclusion

The application of Sims’ typology to 25 books with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander characters provides insights into how First Nations perspectives are conveyed through children’s picture books. Our findings suggest that Social Conscience books have improved since Sims’ original analysis. This category has moved somewhat towards being more Culturally Conscious than Sims’ experience, reflective of broader social change. Melting Pot books tend to focus on the shared and common experiences of Australians regardless of

Table 1 Summary of books with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander characters (NSW State Library, 2022) categorised with Sims' (1982) typology

Sims' (1982) typology	Book title	ISBN	Author	Illustrator	Publisher—location	Publisher	Year
Social Conscience	<i>Big rain coming</i>	9780143500452	Germein, Katrina	Bancroft, Bronwyn	Australia	Puffin Books, published by the Penguin Group	2002
	<i>Ernie Dances to the Didgeridoo</i>	9780733621055	Alison Lester	Alison Lester	Australia and New Zealand	Hachette Children's Books Australia	2006
Melting Pot	<i>Hello</i>	9780642278876	National Library of Australia	Tony Flowers	ACT, Australia	National Library of Australia	2016
	<i>Some boys</i>	9781760640897	Thomas, Nelly	Dunk, Sarah	Australia	Some Kids' Books	2018
	<i>Spoty doty lady, The</i>	9781922142108	Boyle, Josie	Martins, Fern	WA, Australia	Magabala Books	2014
	<i>Going to the footy</i>	9781925936964	Debbie Coombes	Debbie Coombes	WA, Australia	Magabala Books	2019
	<i>I Love Me</i>	9781925591637	Sally Morgan	Ambelin Kwaymulina	WA, Australia	Fremantle Press	2016
	<i>I Remember</i>	9781925360769	Joanne Crawford	Kerry Anne Jordinson	WA, Australia	Magabala Books	2019 (2018)
	<i>I want to be a superhero</i>	9781925360400	Breanna Humes	Ambelin Kwaymulina	WA, Australia	Magabala Books	2020
	<i>Kick With My Left Foot</i>	9781760632953	Paul Seden	Karen Briggs	Australia	Allen & Unwin	2018
	<i>Look see, look at me!</i>	9781741758832	Norrington, Leonie	Huxley, Dee	NSW, Australia	Allen and Unwin	2010
	<i>On the way to Nana's</i>	9781925360301	Frances Haji-Ali and Lindsay Haji-Ali	David A. Hardy	WA, Australia	Magabala Books	2017
	<i>Our home, our heartbeat</i>	9781760504168	Adam Briggs	Rachael Sarra and Kate Moon	VIC, Australia	Hardie Grant Egmont (Little Hare Books)	2020
	<i>Rabbit Hole Golf Course, The</i>	9781925266290	Ella Mulvey	Karen Briggs	NSW, Australia	Allen & Unwin	2017
	<i>Two mates</i>	9781921248450	Prewett, Melanie	Prewett, Maggie	WA, Australia	Magabala Books	2020 (2012)

Table 1 (continued)

Sims' (1982) typology	Book title	ISBN	Author	Illustrator	Publisher—location	Publisher	Year
Culturally Conscious	<i>Baby Business</i>	9781925768671	Jasmine Seymour	Jasmine Seymour	WA, Australia	Magabala Books	2019
	<i>Family</i>	9781925936285	Aunty Fay Muir and Sue Lawson	Jasmine Seymour	WA, Australia	Magabala books	2020
	<i>Finding Our Heart</i>	9781741177176	Thomas Mayor	Blak Douglas	Australia	Hardie Grant	2020
	<i>I Can Count to Ten in Wiradjuri</i>	9780646854427	Larry Brandy	Otis Williams (photos)	NSW, Australia	Larry Brandy Aboriginal Storyteller	2020
	<i>I saw we saw</i>	9780648155492	Yolnu students at Nhulunbuy Primary School (with Ann James and Ann Haddon)	Yolnu students at Nhulunbuy Primary School	NSW, Australia	Indigenous Literacy Foundation	2019
	<i>Mrs White and the red desert</i>	9781925360578	Josie Boyle	Maggie Prewett	Australia	Magabala Books, Western Australia	2019
	<i>Respect</i>	9781925936315	Aunty Fay Muir and Sue Lawson	Lisa Kennedy	WA, Australia	Magabala Books	2020
	<i>Took the children away</i>	9781760857219	Roach, Archie	Hunter, Ruby	NSW, Australia	Simon & Schuster (Australia)	2020
	<i>Welcome to country</i>	9781922244871	Aunty Joy Murphy	Lisa Kennedy	NSW, Australia	Walker Books Australia	2020
	<i>When we say black lives matter</i>	9780734420428	Maxine Beneba Clarke	Maxine Beneba Clarke	Australia and New Zealand	Lothian Children's Books	2020

race, a particularly dominant theme in Australia's social history; the ending of the White Australia Policy in the 1970s, which since Federation discriminated against anyone who was not Anglo-European, saw Australia reconceptualise itself as a melting pot of multiculturalism. In ignoring cultural distinctiveness however, these books can work to silence First Nations and others' cultural identity to instead promote a homogenous "Australianness". Culturally Conscious books remain unchanged from Sims' categorisation, with the emphasis on culture, language, and political and social struggle. However, the foregrounding of First Nations connection to country and distinctly Australian landscapes (particularly Outback and natural settings rather than urban spaces) in all the books analysed suggests that a fourth category could be added to Sims' model. This emergent category could include books that are environmentally conscious, culturally sustaining and centred on Indigenous worldviews and perspectives of colonisation and its past and ongoing effects, in alignment with contemporary social perspectives.

Every book discussed in this article has value for young readers. For example, the Social Conscience books, while they remain more superficial and didactic, nonetheless offer readers the chance to learn about cultures other than their own. However, using guidelines or a framework such as Sims' typology can help the significant adults in children's lives (parents, carers, educators, librarians, and so on) select children's literature more discriminately. The avoidance of themes such as oppression, racism, and discrimination is at odds with broader societal attitudes, a situation that adults need to acknowledge in their book buying choices. School and public libraries might also be encouraged to update their collections and increase the number of Culturally Conscious books they offer to their readers. This may help address the sparsity of quality Indigenous resources in public libraries' early childhood collections (Macdonald & Macdonald, 2022). Research into representations of other aspects of diversity in children's literature (religion, gender, neurodiversity etc.) is recommended so we can deepen our understanding of the values that are conveyed through picture books. Research from children's perspectives would be especially helpful in enriching our knowledge about the ways stories help to shape young children's minds.

Author contribution All authors contributed to the study conception and design. The first draft of the manuscript was written collaboratively and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

Data availability No data is available for this study.

Declarations

Ethics approval No ethical approval was required for this study. Given the nature of the content of the article, the authors adhered to the four principles of the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* (AIATSIS, 2020): Indigenous self-determination, Indigenous leadership, impact and value, sustainability and accountability.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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