

Radical Respect and Truth-Telling in Children’s Books Help Us All Grow Up

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Introduction

In 2018, Dottir Press published a children’s picture book I created that names whiteness and the lie of white superiority as the root of racism and all the violence and suffering it creates. *Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness* begins with a white mother trying *not to see* another recorded incident of police killing an unarmed Black person. “Oh no, not again,” she says. Her child,

who is supposed to be doing homework, turns around to find out what’s going on right behind their back (Figure 1).

During the uprisings that followed the murder of George Floyd in the spring of 2020, a friend tagged me in a post on social media. Two years after publication, *Not My Idea* was suddenly appearing on required reading lists and in demand. Her friend commented on the post: “Hattie still returns to Anastasia’s book almost every day at the moment.” The friend included a picture of her white, elementary school-aged daughter sitting cross-legged on the carpet, looking at the pages that show and tell how systemic racism plays out in the U.S. economy, housing, voting, and domestic labor. What’s moving about the photo is the way Hattie tilts forward, the book open across her knees, with the top of her head pressed and resting against the bed in front of her (Figure 2). It seems like she’s been staring at these pages for a while. One wonders if, without the bed there to support her, she might be facedown in the carpet. I commented to her mother, “She looks the way I felt when I was making that spread.”

My most furious critics complain that the book makes white kids feel bad for being white,

Figure 1. Image features the narration “When grown-ups try to hide scary things from kids . . .” as a woman covers her own eyes and her child asks questions (from *Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness* by Anastasia Higginbotham; reprinted with permission from Dottir Press).



and this picture could stand as proof. But I think many kids already feel conflicted about being white, and reading this book may be the first chance they've ever had to identify this discomfort and connect it to a system of state-sanctioned violence they never consented to carry forward. I point readers like Hattie to what their bodies are already telling them: racism is wrong. I then go a step further to share what else I've learned: my white family and I are part of this.

Rather than close off to a painful truth, *Not My Idea* invites white children to contribute to racism's undoing right now by examining

Figure 2. Child with two braids in her light brown hair leans over pages 34 and 35 of *Not My Idea*. Her grey tee-shirt dress, worn over leggings, is a pattern of multicolored stars.



the choices white people have made for centuries: the choice to deny a bank loan to someone not white; the choice to evict and refuse housing to someone not white; the choice to block Black people's access to voting; and the choice to exploit the love and labor of Black women so that more white women can gain wealth and power. None of this was an accident. There was always another choice that could have been made. The book encourages kids to tune into their own instincts, shape their own history, and make choices rooted in justice instead: "An internal sense of justice will not fail you, even when a lack of justice in the world does" (p. 63).

Not My Idea is the fourth in my *Ordinary Terrible Things* book series, which includes *Divorce Is the Worst*, *Death Is Stupid*, and *Tell Me About Sex, Grandma* (Figure 3).

Though the emphasis on justice in the first three books is not as overt, each expresses my belief that kids benefit from being told a plainer truth about what things are in a crisis—no spin and no promises about what it means or what's to come. The premise of the *Ordinary Terrible Things* book series is that we can come alive rather than shut down in a moment of rupture, and my books offer the smallest of repairs—a tree to lean against, a candle you can light for the living and the dead, and an afternoon with a trusted person who hears your questions and will be with you as you ask them to help you to sort it all out.

I make the books in collage on grocery bag paper, which I cut with a long knife along the

Figure 3. The *Ordinary Terrible Things* book series by Anastasia Higginbotham

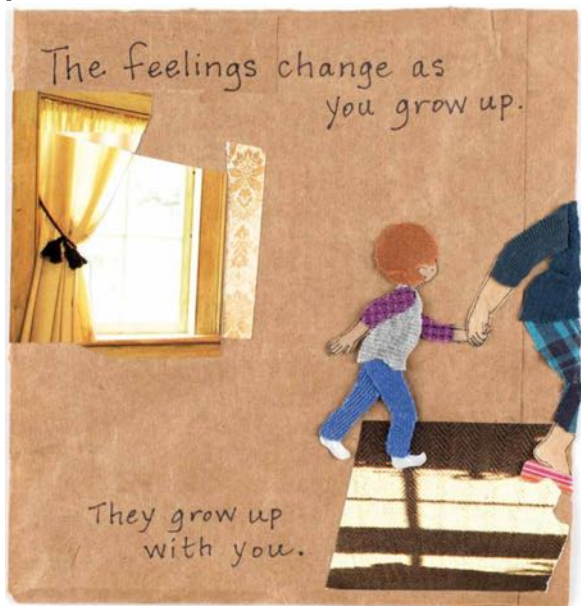


creases the way I've seen my mother do before wrapping a care package. Each book is a care package filled with skies and trees and paper dolls dressed in fabric scraps. For the scenes indoors and out, I search magazines and catalogs for brick walls, cement porch steps, screen doors, aluminum siding, ugly tomatoes, scuffed floors, window and door frames with the paint peeling off, rugs with a wrinkle in them, wallpaper that shows the light falling against it, and shadows. Every detail feels like choosing a tattoo so I better be in love with it (Figure 4).

The children's environments must offer solace. This makes the process of illustrating spiritual as well as practical: "Look at what lovely scenes we can make with scraps and recycling! Look at what wholeness we can achieve with stuff that was in pieces and a mess!"

Each book centers on a child whose grown-ups appear only in the periphery, at a distance, or partly embodied on the page—unless I really trust them. In the first four books, grandmothers are the only adults who appear fully embodied, faces and all. The child's gender is unclear,

Figure 4. Image shows a child holding their grandmother's hand as they walk through a sunlit room (from *Tell Me About Sex, Grandma* by Anastasia Higginbotham; reprinted with permission from Dottir Press).



and their clothes, hair, and eyes are meant to signal both girl and boy. Only in *Death Is Stupid* does the child present as a boy on account of me *needing* to put them in a suit and tie for the funeral (a child dressed in a suit usually means something celebratory is happening or something awful already did—either way, I'm gonna cry when I look at them) (Figure 5). Though book reviewers often ascribe a he or she gender, I refer to "the child" as a way of allowing gender to not be the point, except when it *is* the point or a real-life child wants us to know.

The children in my books have comfortable beds for sleeping in, windows for letting in the light and the dark, and nature is always outside. No matter what's going on inside their homes or minds or bodies, nature is present and lavish and real-ish. Narration is spare for a reason. The topics are hard, and I want these books to go down easy, with minimal effort from whomever is reading. I want to offer something powerful and relatable—even to someone who doesn't read—by creating scenes meant to evoke emotion, sensation, and memory. I leave space for a

Figure 5. Image shows a child lighting a candle while their father sobs (from *Death Is Stupid* by Anastasia Higginbotham; reprinted with permission from Dottir Press).



child's beloved grown-ups, teachers, librarians, and the child themselves to project more onto the page than who and what I put there, ask any question they like, and go deeper if they want to. I don't know what all needs to be spoken aloud to the child who is being read to, so I leave space for people to personalize, teach, and layer in their own care and compassionate understanding of what this kid may be going through. I never tell the reader that everything will be fine. I have no idea if this is so.

My titles are overblown on purpose. Divorce is, of course, not the worst thing that could happen to a child (Figure 6). If you look up books for kids about divorce, mine appears right beside Judy Blume's *It's Not the End of the World*. And while I am certain she and I are on the same page about steadying children through a family separation, who is served by that title? What person in the throes of change has ever been reassured by someone saying "It could be a lot worse, you know." And yes, death is inevitable and mysterious and merciful . . . blah blah blah . . . but you would never say that to the parent of a child who is dying with cancer as though it's part of some divine plan, so why would we say that to a kid who only wants to be able to hang out after school with their grandparent forever, just like always? Nobody's laugh is as joyful as hers. Nobody's skin feels as soft. Death *is* stupid.

I titled the sex book as a demand to put children in charge of their own exploration. *Tell Me About Sex*, *Grandma* skips the anatomy lesson, the threatening language about pregnancy and disease, the promise of love, and the appalling notion that sex is something that *happens* when you're older. **Notice:** We're supposed to laugh when kids are horrified by this information because we know better, wink, wink, but our language and attitude is what's horrifying. *Grandma* keeps the focus on pleasure, consent, and a few rules of engagement (the rules are for the adults, by the way), all while modeling respect and communication. She waits when the

Figure 6. Image shows a child in pajamas, looking disheveled, sitting up and awake in their bed at night (from *Divorce Is the Worst* by Anastasia Higginbotham; reprinted with permission from Dottir Press).



child says wait, attends to the child's hunger, and asks how high the child wants to be pushed on the swing—simple stuff. I also put *Grandma* in charge to subvert patriarchy because that system needs to be brought down, too.

When I was little, I made books with paper, pens, scissors, glue, and a stapler, same as I do now. They mostly imitated books I'd read in which a lesson is shared about how to be a well-mannered child. The *Highlight Magazine* series *Goofus* and *Gallant* affirmed my belief that there was a right and a wrong way for a child to behave. Right was any action or behavior that considered the needs and feelings of people besides yourself and made you pleasing and useful to those around you. Wrong was any action or behavior that could be called selfish, mean, greedy, or careless. My sense of morality hasn't changed much, but I have flipped the tables. In my books, it's the adults who must grow up and learn how to behave—the adults on the page, the ones reading, and the one making the book. Right behaviors include those that demonstrate curiosity about how a

child is navigating a crisis and actions that create the conditions (however imperfect and blundering) for a child to move through it. Wrong behaviors are any attempts to define for a child what a crisis means, deny it even qualifies as a crisis, or tell them how to feel about it.

Children are my audience, and aligning with them can mean putting myself between the child and their own grown-ups as a boundary. My aim is not to divide the family but to create an energetic distance between a child and all who may try to turn them against their own innate wisdom, body intelligence, and instinct. There is a profound difference between telling a child, “This isn’t even the worst thing that can happen,” and telling them, “Pain is part of the process of growing up—and I am still learning to deal with it, too.” One demands that kids count themselves lucky they were spared a more terrible fate. The other acknowledges that not knowing, not understanding, and wishing things were different is very human, and there’s room for all of us in that. We can care for each other in times of crisis and, sometimes, that is *all* we can do.

Unlike the books I made as a child which instructed children in manners and obedience, the books I make now give permission for wild feelings, grief, numbness, and rage. Are the kids ever wrong in my books? Nope. Freaked about your parents’ divorce? That makes sense—tell me more. Afraid of your own death and everyone else’s? Totally understandable—tell me more. Confused about sex being the most awesome *and* the most disgusting thing you could get into? Me too, child. Feel free to say more about that, and I’ll keep my own responses simple, direct, and inclusive of every body, gender, and color of the rainbow.

One criticism I struggle with is specific to *Not My Idea* in the way that telling young children about the system of white supremacy introduces a whole new level of real-life violence into their lives—guns, no charges for murder, torture, dehumanization, and grief on a scale that can and should shatter a human being. It

is body-wrenching, soul-crushing information. Ours is a history and current reality so disturbing people actually can’t believe it. Reverend angel Kyodo williams (2020), a Black, queer, Zen priest and prophet who is so liberated she can hold white people in love even as she holds us accountable for clinging to the cold, false comforts of whiteness, refers to systemic racism in her @zenchangeangel Instagram post as “beyond belief.” In another post on June 2, 2020, Rev. angel writes, “our labor is beyond your imagination. your perpetual collective extraction is beyond comprehension.” But if there is an aspect of our daily life that is so upsetting we cannot bear to admit it and do not want our children to find out about it, the problem is not *when* we tell them or *how*, but *why* we won’t tell them when everything is already wrong and they can see it for themselves. The nightmare is real, and there is no waking up from it. *Not My Idea* doesn’t even begin to excavate the horrors of colonization by European invaders and religious crusaders—a whole other series at the very least.

So when is a white child ready to learn about their involvement in oppression? Should they learn about it before or after their Black classmate faces harsher punishments for the same behavior that the white child was also engaged in right then? Should they be told before or after a Black classmate experiences being pulled over and frightened to death by a police officer who instructs their grown-up to step out of the car? Should they be told before or after a Black classmate, friend, neighbor, or cousin is followed around in a store where the white child is free to wander? Children should not have to bear the weight of white supremacist violence, but very young children who are Black always already do. I believe white children appreciate being trusted to help bear, expose, and dismantle this ordinary, terrible reality, secure in the knowledge that racism was not their idea and they need not defend it. I have no academic studies to prove this; I have no stats or science.

Figure 7. Image features the narration, “Some white people joined the leaders of Black liberation,” defines liberation as “love + freedom,” and depicts hand-drawn images of the Grimké sisters, Julian Bond and members of the SNCC, Nina Simone, white nuns and Black marchers on the Selma to Montgomery March, John Lewis and fellow demonstrators, including children, kneeling in protest in 1962, and Colin Kaepernick kneeling in 2017 (from *Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness* by Anastasia Higginbotham; reprinted with permission from Dottir Press).



All I know is that I have never felt so much joy in the presence of so much pain as I do when I move in alignment with people who paved our path to liberation, generation after generation after generation (Figure 7).

When I return to the picture of Hattie (Figure 2), I remember that she is not only contemplating, at age 9, four centuries of anti-Blackness, but also four centuries of resistance to injustice—four centuries of coordinated, impassioned, relentless, Black-led movement toward peace, solidarity, mutual assistance, and our collective liberation from the lie of whiteness as goodness, as innocence, and as deserving and mattering *more*. Now, at least, she knows racism is built on a lie. She knows human beings made it this way and that means she can help make it a new way.

Hattie needs agency in her own life story, and the information in the pages of *Not My*

Idea and the other books in the series can help. You can't remake a world you have no say in. You can't reimagine a world you've never been told the truth about. If her heart is broken by what's real, she no longer has to wait for adulthood to confer the realness of her own life upon her. It's real now. Her life is happening now. We need for her to hear *her own ideas* forming within her in childhood. Not only is Hattie not weakened by her vulnerability, she can use her heartbreak to connect to all life on this planet, including plants, animals, air, and water. What's more powerful than that? We belong to one another, every being, all the elements. We are each other's best chance at wholeness, made out of brokenness and scraps, and healing—borne out of love and our willingness to be changed by what things *really* are. The sooner children know this, the better.

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About the Author

Anastasia Higginbotham launched her *Ordinary Terrible Things* children's book series in 2015 with *Divorce Is the Worst*. She followed that with *Death Is Stupid* and *Tell Me About Sex, Grandma*. Her most recent book, *Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness*, tackles white supremacy and was published in 2018 by Dottir Press. Higginbotham makes her books in collage on grocery bag paper, using recycled materials, including jewelry and fabric. Her workshops and author talks demonstrate a way to cope with change and loss, using the raw materials available to us and drawing on the wisdom of our own lived experiences. A direct challenge to the status quo, Higginbotham's work undermines systems of domination, such as white supremacy and patriarchy, by empowering children to recognize when they are being lied to and demand to know the truth. More information about the author, her books, and public appearances can be found at <https://anastasihigginbotham.com>.

IRC Publications

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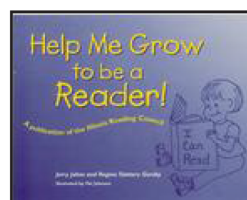
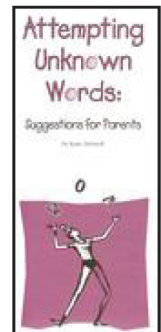


Some ABC's for Raising a Reader

Parents are their child's first teachers, and it's never too soon to introduce your child to books. By reading aloud to your child, you provide the sounds of written language, demonstrate book handling skills, develop your child's expectation that the print and pictures carry a message and build positive attitudes toward reading. Use this ABC listing of ways that you can encourage a love of reading and make reading fun for your child.

Attempting Unknown Words: for Parents

As the parent of a young child, you are a very important person for your child's reading and language development. You are your child's first teacher! This tri-fold brochure will provide strategies to aid your child as s/he attempts unknown words.



Help Me Grow To Be A Reader

This little 16-page booklet helps parents understand how children grow to be readers, as told from the child's point of view. Strategies for helping young readers develop their reading skills are outlined in a fun format.