

WHITE AUTHORS, ETHNIC CHARACTERS

by *Racialicious* special correspondent [Latoya Peterson](#)



On a lazy Sunday afternoon, I decided to give my overly analytical brain a break and delve into some light reading.

I love to read, and as a result of being willing to read anything and everything, I have picked up a few interesting habits.

Case in point being my affinity for paranormal romance novels. I don't know what it is, but for some reason I love reading about the exploits of women with supernatural powers. After blowing through most of Kelley Armstrong's *Women of the OtherWorld Series*, and waiting on the library to stock Kim Harrison's *For a Few Demons More*, I was drawn to pick up MaryJanice Davidson's work.

A bit fluffier (and more in line with the typical romance novel) than I am used to, I picked up the first few novels while smirking at the ditzy Valley Girl Vampire Queen Heroine. I was amused for three books, but was brought up short at the fourth. In fourth friend, the protagonist's token black friend is riding in a car, and instigating a conversation about the n-word, much to the chagrin of the other white characters in the car.

"It's just a word, I'm past it..." says the black character, before turning to a white character and saying, "You can call me it *just once*." The white character stutters on the page.

I take a break from reading. I flip to the back flap to check out the author's photo. Yup, just as I suspected...white. I continued reading the book to see how the situation was handled. Luckily, the conversation was dropped in favor of other pressing matters - like staking the undead.

Still, I felt a little shaken by the exchange. Can an author realistically portray someone of another ethnicity?

As a writer, I would say I hope so. Having cut my teeth working on short stories and screenplays (non-fiction writing didn't happen until recently), my stories do not work in a mono-racial bubble. Some of my characters are black, some are Americanized Latino, some are mixed race-Asian, some are white...the character's racial background and physical characteristics are chosen with care. The images that are afloat in my mind become realized on the page in the form they shaped. It is almost as if I do not choose a character's ethnicity - it is simply there, one small part of the overall character. And while I do occasionally assign racial characteristics to my characters for social commentary purposes (i.e. the

token white character in my screenplay, office friend to my two protagonists, largely serving as the sidekick/comic relief), for the most part, I let the story unfold as it will.

Some authors can write about different races with considerable aplomb. James Patterson, for instance. In all of the Alex Cross novels I have read (and I've read them all), I can only remember one instance that drew me out of the narrative of the story. In one of the earlier books, there is an extremely long passage (a paragraph or two) detailing the suffering that African-Americans experienced at the hands of whites in the segregated South. The passage was fitting, just went on a tad too long...long enough for me to think "Would Cross really spend this amount of time dwelling on dead and buried history when he is trying to track a psychopath before the trail grows cold?" Other than that, all the other novels have painted an excellent portrayal of Cross, Sampson, Nana, and the other characters that populate Patterson's novels.

Unfortunately though, there are authors that misstep a bit, focusing more on race than the character. I remember reading a supernatural collection, including a story about a white woman being pulled into the world of ghost-hunting by a Mexican Shaman. The story was pretty wan, but what made it worse was the shaman's character. A Latino stereotype in the making, he is described as "dirty" with "greasy" hair. For a protagonist, he is described as quite unappealing and rough. He also seems to come with five pre-programmed Spanish words - si, chicha, senora, lo siento, por favor - that he uses as punctuation to his sentences. At the end of the novel, the mousy heroine is swept away by his strange and exotic savagery.

Excuse me while I vomit.

[Note: Now, I could just be bitter. In the course of writing my screenplay, I realized that I had a major problem - my main character knows enough Spanish to fluctuate between Spanish and English. I know about as much Spanish as they teach on Sesame Street. When I told my college theatre teacher about the issue I was having, she told me that characters are often smarter than the writer giving them a voice, and that's why good writers do research. Silly me - I should have just fallen back on rote Spanish stereotypes.]

Still, I tend to give writers the benefit of the doubt when they write across racial lines. Characterization, time period, and historical perspective all factor into play when I read and encounter harsh language or stereotypical depictions of characters.

Unfortunately, my broad range of acceptance still did not spare someone who formerly occupied the position of my favorite writer.

In the late '90s, early '00s, I discovered Stephen King. Though I hate horror as a genre, for some reason King's novels gripped me. I read until 4 AM some mornings, too afraid to sleep while finishing the unabridged version of *The Stand*. I highly enjoyed King's work.

Unfortunately, King tends to use the word nigger (in full, unabbreviated form). In his writing, it appears so much, it is almost as if it is another character. At first, through the Shining and other novels, I was able to write it off. Normally, the n-word appeared from the mouth of evil, as a way of breaking down a character.

Made sense. I still didn't like it. I still kept reading.

I read more novels, until finally hitting upon a short story collection called Skeleton Crew. It was originally published in 1986 - yet, with King's popularity surge following the Shining, Carrie, and Pet Sematary, it was reissued in hard copy, and sat on the new books shelf at the library.

It was that book that ended my reader relationship with Stephen King. Skeleton Crew contained one of my all time favorite stories from Stephen King - The Mist - and I devoured the other stories as quickly as the first. Then, I hit upon a story in the middle of the book. It has been a few years, so I can't quite remember the actual story. I believe it was about a guy with a monkey doll - but I could be wrong.

Anyway, the narrator of the story is lamenting his fate, raging against life, debating things in his mind. Then, the narrator thought about something his uncle said. I forgot the context, or why it was said (maybe describing the doll?), but I remember the line. It stands out clearly in my mind to this day:

Grinning like a nigger.

I felt like the page rose up and slapped me in the face.

I remember trying to wrap my head around the usage. The narrator attributed the line to an uncle. Something that just popped into his mind. Something that, for story reasons, was completely unnecessary. The story could have been complete without that line being there. Its existence did not make any sense to me. It just seemed like...well, a way to use the word nigger.

I remember feeling vaguely betrayed. I put the book down after completing the story, and did not return to it.

I have not read another Stephen King book since then. Now, I am aware that Stephen King has legions of black fans, who do not take issue with his use of language. And I will point out that I have not read any of his new works, so I am not sure if his language has changed.

But for me, just me, that was the line in the sand.

So, to all the authors out there, penning tales and populating worlds, I must ask that you use some common sense. I do not believe in censoring works, characters, or thoughts. Racist characters happen, characters can behave in stereotypical ways, do whatever it is you need to do to convey your masterwork to the world.

However, if you are going to cross over into new territory (or take liberties with language/cultural customs), I implore you: Please tread lightly. Readers place their faith in the author, opening their mind to your world and looking forward to the experience you provide, believing -particularly with fiction - that it will be a pleasurable trip.

To have that trust betrayed hurts worse than you will ever know.