

Staying Radical

with Librarian
Sarah Wiles

BY ALISON FRYE

Sarah Wiles won't SSH! you. "When students walk in the door of the library, I want them to say, 'There's a book about me.'"

A statement like this should not be radical, and yet. And yet. For sixteen years, librarian Sarah Wiles has actively worked to build representation and inclusivity into the school's library culture, to create a welcoming space for all students and adults at Putney.



Browsing the "featured books" displays today, we see *My Beloved World* by Sonia Sotomayor, *Sister Citizen* by Melissa Harris-Perry, *Period Power* by Nadya Okamoto, and many more that celebrate Women's History Month. Other titles that share the featured space? *Pink Sari Revolution* by Amana Fontanella-Khan, *Moshi Moshi* by Banana Yoshimoto, *Supporting Transgender Students* by Alex Myers, and *Hood Feminism* by Mikki Kendall.

In that paragraph alone, the library highlights stories about or by Hispanic, African-American, Japanese, and transgender people. Does your library do that? Sarah Wiles sees to it that ours does. "The books belong because they belong," she says.

Many of us think of libraries as quiet spaces with dusty corners, leatherbound classics faded with time, perhaps with light filtering through a stained glass window, vaulted ceilings. Patrons whispering quietly, the turning of pages audible.

"My real deep goal as a librarian is that I want every single student and faculty member to be able to find themselves reflected in our library. And not just in one book. In many books. One book is tokenization. I want people to truly feel seen in the library."

Not here. Libraries are *happening* here. Do you remember the librarians who brought light and fuel to your young imagination? Your emerging self finding a mirror in those shelves? From J.R.R. Tolkien, to Nancy Drew, to the Nick Adams stories, libraries are where people dream. And if you're not white, not straight, not cis-gendered, not wealthy, your stories matter, too, and you, too, get to dream.

LEARNING

Not surprisingly, the world of librarians is rich with opportunities to learn. In the last few months alone, Sarah has attended a "How to Build an Anti-Racist Library Culture" workshop offered by the Library Journal, as well as the People of Color Conference, the preeminent National

Association of Independent Schools conference for people of color and their allies. "It was a really deep place of learning with other white people," said Sarah. "Hearing others' experiences when they're actually living with true diversity on a daily basis was educational. The reality is that because I live in small-town New England, I don't have to face my racism frequently."

Sarah's interactions with other librarians have highlighted how much freedom she has at Putney, and the institutional support for her work. "I have privilege working here because I don't get pushback from my patrons about the titles that I have. I don't have parents trying to erase race or LGBTQ+ issues from our library. We have a great student-parent body and administration that support me in building an anti-racist library."

Additionally, diversity audits play an important role in building an anti-racist library culture. Sarah evaluates our collection and looks at the population in our community, making sure

our collection reflects at least that same percentage of books about or by people who fit into those categories. Moreover, she strives for neutrality, and isn't interested in banning books. "I may disagree with someone, but it doesn't mean I exclude them. Ann Coulter to Jimmy Carter, and plenty in between."

OWN VOICES

Enter the "Own Voices" movement. Unless you run in librarian circles, you probably have not heard of it. "Own Voices" highlights the importance of letting people from marginalized populations tell their own stories, in fiction, poetry, memoir, and so on.

From social sciences, to poetry, to books about New England, the library is

fortunate to benefit from several named endowment funds that enrich its offerings every year. In its diversity work, the cornerstone of the school's collection is the Claude Winfield '61 Afro-American Collection. The largest collection of books by African-American authors and about the African-American experience in Vermont, it contains over 1,800 books. The original goal, set by Claude, was 1,500 titles. To get a sense of that scale, if the books were stacked on top of each other, they would reach 30 stories tall, give or take. Claude, an educator who spent his professional career as a teacher and principal, ensured that the libraries at the schools where he worked contained many books by African American authors. Over the last 20+ years, his donations have expanded the school's collection and its inclusivity, a few important books at a time. James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison share space with Claudia Rankine, Ibram X. Kendi, and bell hooks. The collection is shared with the entire state of Vermont through the Catamount Library Network and the Clover (VT) Department of Libraries system. "The books are just the mechanism for opening up all of that experience. And trying to create a learning environment where everybody shares in everybody's experience, not to the exclusion of anybody's experience," Claude told Vermont Public Radio for a 2019 story.

"It can't just be white men writing about people of color," explains Sarah. After sixteen years, Sarah knows the collection and keeps it dynamic, always seeking to represent all people. There are emerging areas of importance: Asians and Asian-Americans, for example, have been the victims of pushback and hate crimes in the U.S. since the pandemic hit. Sarah has responded by finding books with Asian-American characters, queer Asian-American characters, and memoirs and fiction by immigrants. "One of the ways to combat hate is to know who people are. It's been a tough couple of years for our Asian students."

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