

# Balancing Words, Pictures, and Diversity: The Story of LEE & LOW BOOKS

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LEE & LOW BOOKS

**ABSTRACT.** A publisher of diverse books for children and young adults shares insight into the importance of finding and publishing captivating, well-written, and well-illustrated books, often by unknown or first-time authors and illustrators. With a mission to diversify the storytelling population, while also introducing new people to the children's book world, LEE & LOW BOOKS aspires to reveal a universal vision of the human spirit.

## Mission

How does an independent, family-owned publisher such as LEE & LOW BOOKS become known? It all began in spring 1993 when LEE & LOW released its premier list of three titles. On that list was *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993), about a Japanese American boy and his family who were forced into an internment camp along with one hundred thousand Japanese Americans during World War II.

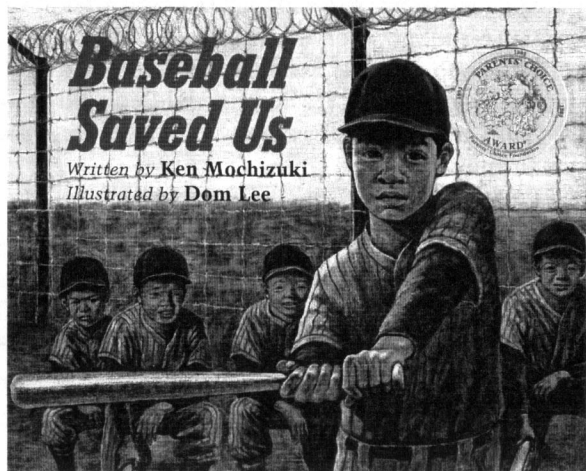
*Baseball Saved Us* is a story in layers. The first layer is a history story. The story takes place at a time when the United States ignored the rights of American citizens based solely on their ethnicity. *Baseball Saved Us* is a work of fiction with a real setting. The story gives a human face to the internees as seen through the eyes of a child. In reality many of the former internees had not spoken of the internment camps to their own children because of the bitter shame and betrayal they still felt toward their own country decades later.

The second layer of *Baseball Saved Us* is a sports story. The story shows how a love of baseball can lift people's spirits, giving them hope and self-respect even in a place devoid of basic human dignity.

The third layer of *Baseball Saved Us* is a cautionary tale—one that resonates in news headlines today with the War on Terror. Parts of the Patriot Act, such as the indefinite detainment of suspects without charging them with a crime, are unconstitutional and are eerily similar to what happened to the Japanese Americans. Yet when recorded properly, history takes note of the good and the bad. The bad includes

the mistakes made, and in 1988 the United States government officially admitted that what it did to Japanese Americans was wrong. Time will tell if history is repeating itself.

With so many themes captured between the covers of a 32-page picture book, *Baseball Saved Us* was noticed—and featured in a full-page review in *The New York Times Book Review* (Berkow, 1993). LEE & LOW BOOKS was effectively put on the map!



Since then LEE & LOW BOOKS continues to publish books for young people with diverse themes. The stories take place in historical and contemporary settings and focus on the minority experience. Our editorial mission is different from that of other publishers. From the beginning we decided to avoid talking-animal stories, since we felt we could bring nothing new to this genre. What also sets us apart from the rest of the industry is that more than half of the creators of our books are being published for the first time. In fact, we have had the pleasure of introducing 76 authors and illustrators to the world of children's books. In an industry in which it is all too common to publish the same famous faces over and over again, the infusion of fresh ideas and new visions is imperative, and keeps the children's publishing world from growing stale. In this way, LEE & LOW contributes toward the future of children's book publishing by giving writers and illustrators their start in making books for children.

Previously unpublished writers and illustrators sometimes take a long time to complete their first books. In 1997, Javaka Steptoe, son of

the late Caldecott-winning illustrator John Steptoe, illustrated his first children's book entitled *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall: African Americans Celebrating Fathers* (1997). Javaka had some big footsteps in which to follow. At one point Javaka finished the book; but, not happy with the first set of illustrations, he decided to start over again! It took Javaka four years to complete the illustrations for this book. Javaka also wrote a poem called *Seeds* (Steptoe, 1997), which is included in the book:

You drew pictures of life with your words.  
I listened and ate these words you said to grow up strong.  
Like the trees, I grew,  
branches, leaves, flowers, and then the fruit.  
I became the words I ate in you.  
For better or worse the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.  
(Steptoe, 1997)

What was the result? In 1998, *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall* won the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award.

### Finding Great Stories

Writers and illustrators find us in various ways. We have close ties to the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), and the editorial section of our Web site ([leeandlow.com/editorial](http://leeandlow.com/editorial)) attracts a steady readership of creative people. Literary agents are aware of our editorial focus and often send us projects that they think are a good fit. But our search for culturally rich stories that are captivating and well-written continues to be our biggest challenge. In an effort to be more proactive in our hunt for great stories, in 2000 we established the New Voices Award. The LEE & LOW New Voices Award is given annually. The contest is open to unpublished writers of color and awards a cash prize plus a publishing contract. The New Voices Award is an extension of our mission to diversify the storytelling population, while also introducing new people to the children's book world.

In 2003, Paula Yoo's *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds: The Sammy Lee Story* (Yoo, 2005) won our New Voices Award. *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds* tells the true story of Dr. Sammy Lee, who, in 1948, was the first Asian American to win an Olympic gold medal for diving. The story begins when young Sammy discovers his love of diving at a time when minorities could use public swimming pools only on the day before the pools were to be drained and cleaned. This discrimination did not

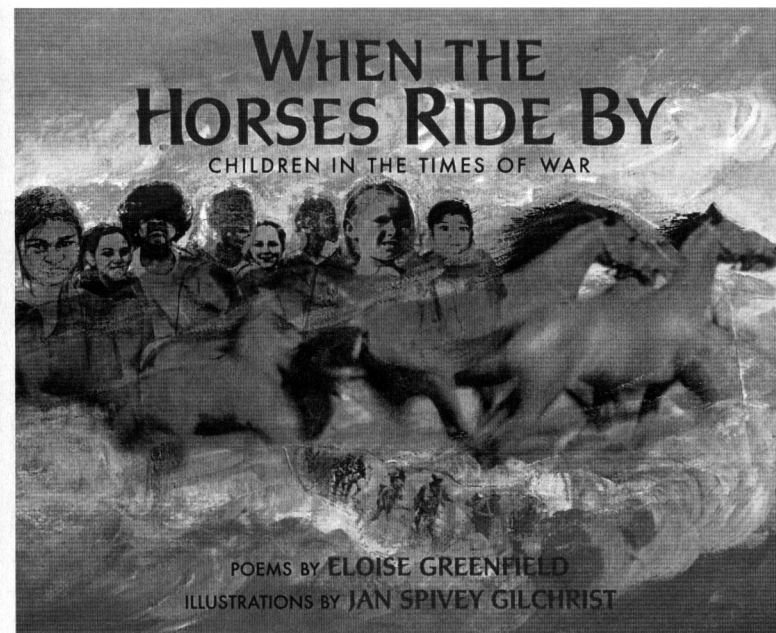
weaken Sammy's passion for diving, and soon he began his pursuit to become an Olympic champion while also realizing his father's wish for him to become a doctor.

The book's title is a tribute to patience, dedication, and execution under extreme pressure—Sammy had to wait sixteen years before making a dive that would last sixteen seconds and change his life forever. In 2005, the book was published with stunning sepia-toned illustrations by Dom Lee. The book went on to capture starred reviews from *Booklist* (Engberg, 2005) and *Kirkus Reviews* (2005) and was included on the 2006–2007 Texas Bluebonnet Award Masterlist.

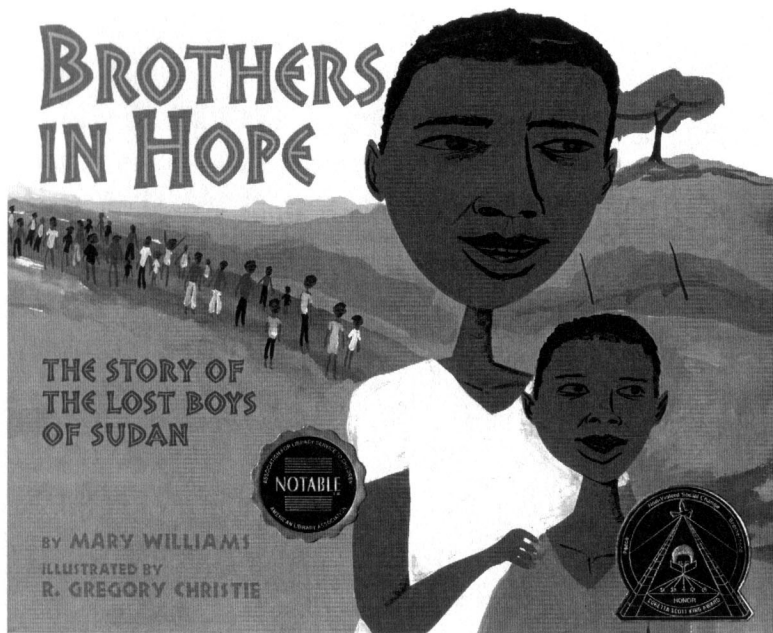
The success of *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds* disproves a common practice in the children's book industry today—to publish disproportionately a number of experienced authors and illustrators. Celebrity books also fall into this category. This theory is supported by sales projections based on book sale history. Unpublished writers have no track record to gauge success and are seen as risks. But risk taking is part of what publishing is all about. *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds* reinforces the fact that a first-time author can produce a viable, award-winning book. With one book, the New Voices Award was validated.

Our reputation for not shying away from serious subject matter also attracts writers looking for the right publisher for personal pieces. Naturally, in times of war, writers will offer their perspectives on conflict, but in ways that are new and different. Author-poet Eloise Greenfield approached us with a book of poems about the history of war and how it impacts children. Eloise was troubled by the Iraq War, especially by the number of Iraqi civilians, many of them women and children caught in the cross fire between insurgents and coalition forces. *When the Horses Ride By: Children in the Times of War* (Greenfield, 2006) was published in spring 2006 with stirring collage illustrations from Jan Spivey Gilchrist. This excerpt demonstrates the subtle power of Greenfield's poetry:

When the horses ride by,  
with men on their backs,  
we pretend they're going  
anyplace, but war.



Sometimes we pursue stories that we feel must be told. Despite the atrocities of the Holocaust, acts of modern-day genocide have occurred in Rwanda, the Middle East, Cambodia, Yugoslavia, and most recently Sudan and Darfur. In 2003, one of our editors saw a story about the Lost Boys of Sudan on *60 Minutes* (Mihailovich, 2003). She searched the Internet and located a foundation based in Atlanta that worked with resettling Lost Boys in the United States. She then attended a Lost Boys' convention, where she met Mary Williams, founder of The Lost Boys Foundation. After hearing the collective stories of the Lost Boys, the editor persuaded Mary to write a book based on the experiences of the Sudanese boys she worked with on a daily basis.



The result was *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (Williams, 2005). *Brothers in Hope* pushes the boundaries of what is appropriate for a picture book, but it also serves as the only book for children on this human tragedy at this time. Books can make a difference, as they inform children who will grow up to be leaders whose responsibility it will be to right the wrongs left unresolved. *Brothers in Hope* was named an ALA Notable Children's Book (2006) and a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Book (2006). Winning these awards was so important because it exposed the book to librarians across the country, thus spreading the word about war-torn Sudan and the unrest that still exists in the region today.

### Balancing Culture and Role Models

Have you ever wondered why there are so many books about Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jackie Robinson? For the most part, nonfiction biographies published by large publishers center around "first-tier historical figures." This creates a misconception in children's minds that these people alone were responsible for events such as the s.\* In actuality there were countless brave, smart, innovative people who played significant roles in the Civil Rights Movement and in every major

event throughout history.

Over the years we have made different choices when it comes to nonfiction biographies and have chosen subjects such as John Lewis (Haskins & Benson, 2006), Peg Leg Bates (Barasch, 2004), Su Dongpo (Demi, 2006), Chiune Sugihara (Mochizuki, 1997), Toni Stone (Hubbard, 2005), and Ira Hayes (Nelson, 2006). Are any of these names familiar? If not, they should be. Here is a quick recap: John Lewis is the Civil Rights leader who led the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, that exposed the brutality of Jim Crow laws to the world. John Lewis has also served as a U. S. Congressman for the last twenty years. Peg Leg Bates lost his leg in a childhood accident but did not let this stop him from becoming one of the most famous tap dancers in the world. Su Dongpo was a politician, artist, poet, and champion of the people in eleventh-century China. Chiune Sugihara, also known as the Japanese Schindler, saved thousands of Jewish refugees from Hitler's armies despite his government ordering him not to interfere. Toni Stone was the first woman to play professional baseball in the Negro Leagues. Ira Hayes was one of the Marines who raised the U. S. flag on Iwo Jima, an event captured in a photograph by Joe Rosenthal that served as a symbol of American patriotism and a turning point in World War II. While these individuals are not household names, their stories are so amazing that those who read them wonder out loud how it is possible that they had never heard of these people.

Minorities have been repeatedly omitted from American history books despite their contributions. It is important for children to see faces like their own staring back at them from the pages of a book. It also makes a lasting impression when the people in the book have made a difference or contribution. When the status of heroes and world changers are equated with people who resemble *all* the children in a classroom, a connection is made that makes children realize that their ancestors played significant roles in shaping attitudes not only in this country, but in countries around the world. From there a cascade effect takes place and children see that people, despite the color of their skin, share a desire to improve the world and fight for the common good. This sends a positive message that we are all connected despite cultural differences. In our own way, by choosing to publish these stories, we are doing our small part in redistributing credit where credit is due and



making history a more inclusive and more balanced reflection of the world.

### **Diversity From the Start**

In 2000, LEE & LOW entered the field of educational publishing. Our first educational imprint, Bebop Books, consisted of leveled books for grades K–2. We felt we could broaden the scope of materials already being offered in the marketplace by publishing books that focus on diversity for children just learning to read. We noticed that many of the existing books available for beginning readers were poorly illustrated, and the diversity that was present was superficial at best, squandering a valuable opportunity to allow students to learn about and experience other cultures.

Bebop titles address all of these shortcomings and are designed specifically for the classroom, featuring text and illustrations that correlate directly, as well as repetitive sentence patterns and text structures that make them applicable for guided reading instruction. Bebop also offers the company another tool for adapting to changing times and initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and Reading First’s five essential components of reading. Bebop titles are co-published with Spanish editions in order to address the needs of the growing Spanish-speaking population, and they are incredibly useful and convenient for ELL and dual language programs. Finally, Bebop gives us the flexibility to provide books that meet National Standards in several subject areas.

What has been the result? Today, Bebop Books are used in classrooms across the country. In addition, Bebop titles were selected for inclusion in a K–2 reading assessment kit developed by Teacher’s College. The kit is being piloted in a number of New York City’s top elementary schools. If the pilot phase is successful, the kit will roll out to schools nationwide.

### **Publishing Today**

Publishing has changed a great deal from the old days. Historically, publishing houses were family businesses, passed down from generation to generation. Today most publishing companies have been acquired by multinational conglomerates. In contrast, LEE & LOW BOOKS is a privately-owned, independent, family business that takes book publishing very seriously.

The stories we publish are ones that we hope will help form young people’s sensibilities and beliefs. The questions that arise while reading our books may trigger dialogue, followed by understanding. In many of our stories there is conflict between people who are under the assumption that they are different from one another because of the color of their skin or cultural or religious differences. These kinds of stories might involve volatile emotions, hatred, or racial prejudice that enable parents and educators to discuss why people felt this way in the past and continue to feel this way now. It is a parent’s natural instinct to protect children from such harsh, negative realities, but it is an even scarier notion to pretend that these feelings do not exist in people’s hearts and minds. Parents and educators cannot let unspoken questions go unanswered. Unasked questions lead to ignorance and misunderstanding. It is the responsibility of parents and educators to prepare and teach children how to diffuse hostilities, take pride in their heritage, and establish connections with all members of the human family.

### **The Future of Publishing**

The children’s book industry is a competitive field. Balancing the creative and business sides is a challenge that does not get easier as years go by. We have not developed a tried-and-true formula for making successful books, and we got out of the crystal ball business years ago. We passionately believed in every book we have published, but not all of our books have been successful. We publish stories that we think should be told. This is an unscientific approach that relies on gut instinct and the belief that readers will share our enthusiasm for stories that are important.

In our office in New York City, we have a wall lined with all of our books. Although the books are grouped by ethnicity, it becomes clear after reading them that recurring themes appear from book to book. The stories show our differences but reveal our similarities. Our books are written by people from different walks of life and ethnicities; but when read as a body of work, the human spirit is revealed as universal. Reading stories is like planting seeds. The walls of intolerance and racism are pushed aside by the knowledge that grows from seeds rooted in young people’s minds. With knowledge, children can make informed decisions about people who are deemed *different*, and come to their own conclusions. Our children are tomorrow’s problem solvers and

peacekeepers.

Multiculturalism or *multiple* cultures, is our greatest achievement. The cultures of the world are the result of separate and combined efforts of people interpreting, recording, and passing down traditions and customs that define who we are. The preservation of culture is crucial. We must resist the tendency to assimilate and fit in to such a degree that we forget what our ancestors stood for and how generations of families fought for and sacrificed so their children could live better lives. Books are one way to save our collective histories and dreams with ink and paper, between the safety of a sturdy cover and held securely together with strong binding. The stories that LEE & LOW BOOKS publishes are a vision of a possible future together, showing a world based in reality that avoids idealism and revealing us as we are, warts and all, for better or for worse.

**Jason Low** is publisher of LEE & LOW BOOKS, an independent children's book press that specializes in award-winning books that feature diversity. For more information visit [leeandlow.com](http://leeandlow.com).

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