The Little Mermaid, Diversity and Bias

Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events

Topic Summary

Throughout Disney’s history, White women have almost exclusively portrayed their movie and television princesses. Over the years there have only been five Disney princesses of color: Jasmine (1992), Pocahontas (1995), Mulan (1998), Tiana (2009) and Moana (2016).

In July 2019, Disney announced that Halle Bailey, an African-American actress and singer, will play the starring role of Ariel for the upcoming live-action remake of “The Little Mermaid.” She is the first Black woman to portray a princess in a
Disney film. Halle Bailey currently stars in the popular TV series “Grown-ish.” Her sister Chloe and she form the R&B duo known as Chloe x Halle.

**Controversy About Casting Decision**
There has been controversy about the casting decision. Many fans and several celebrities praised and applauded the choice of a Black woman to play Ariel. They expressed how essential it is to have racial representation. Young people should be able to see themselves reflected in all aspects of media. Since so few women of color historically have been cast as Disney princesses, it felt to many like it was “about time.” Artists immediately began to create illustrations of Ariel as a Black women and people posted on social media their excitement about being able to see a Black woman cast as a Disney princess.

In the 1989 version of “My Little Mermaid, Ariel was a White, red-headed character. So when the new Ariel was announced, critics questioned why an African-American actress was chosen for the role. They voiced their strong discontent with the casting decision. Some of the detractors complained on social media and used hashtags like #BoycottAriel to express their negative opinions about the choice.

**General Public Weighs In**
The general public weighed in. A recent poll found that 60% of adults who were shown a picture of Halle Bailey supported her being cast as Ariel. Only 17% said they opposed the decision.

The fact that Ariel will be portrayed as a Black woman shows we have made progress. Historically, people of color have been under-represented in television, movies, books, games, etc. This controversy has brought out some the bias people still have when it comes to seeing diverse characters, especially when that character is one that they have a set idea for how they should look. But it also
highlights the pride and enthusiasm many people feel when they see a Black woman portrayed as Ariel.

**Age**
7 and up

**Questions to Start the Conversation**
- When you first heard about the decision to cast a Black woman as Ariel, how did you feel?
- Before this what was your impression about whether there is racial diversity among past Disney princesses?
- What do you think about the decision to cast Halle Bailey as Ariel?
- Why do you think some people feel excitement and pride about the decision?
- Why do you think some people are angry and disappointed about the decision?

**Questions to Dig Deeper**
(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)
- What is diversity and why is it relevant in TV and movie casting decisions?
- In what ways does having one race of princesses (or other characters) spread stereotypes?
- Do most characters on TV and movies and in books and games look like you or not in terms of race, ethnicity and skin complexion? How do you feel about this?
- Do you think it's important that characters in TV, movies, books, games, etc. reflect different races, ethnicities, skin complexions? Why or why not?
Take Action
Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?

- Write to Disney or the director of “The Little Mermaid” and tell them what you think about the recent casting decision of Ariel as an African-American woman.
- As a family, reflect on the TV, movies, books, games, etc. that you see and consider the extent to which it reflects diversity or not. Depending on what you find out, consider how to increase that diversity.
- Engage your class or school in a discussion about bringing more diversity into the books you read, curriculum, bulletin boards and other resources.

Additional Resources

- Casting of 'The Little Mermaid' Brings Pride and Prejudice (ADL Lesson Plan)
- Diverse Books Matter (ADL Lesson Plan)
- Dolls Are Us (ADL Lesson Plan)
- How Can I Help Children Appreciate Diversity?
- Safe and Inclusive Schools for All

BACK TO TABLE TALK