Club Ed Conversations

Sensitivity/Diversity Reading

Amarilys Acosta (who also goes by Amy) answered questions about sensitivity/diversity reading. The transcript has been edited for typos and clarity and to remove some of the “Hi, how are you?” conversation that happens in a live chat.

*Amy’s bio:*

Amy Acosta is a professional reader, writer, and editor of fiction who specializes in queer adult romance and YA stories. While wrangling editorial passes, production schedules, and creating digital ad and print content for Entangled Publishing is her main job, she also works on bestselling titles for Penguin Random House Audio, St. Martin’s Press, and Macmillan Children’s Publishing Group.

One of her main goals is to help LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC voices become mainstream and encourage more diversity in the publishing world. Amy lives in Puerto Rico with three very bossy rescue cats, and she ardently believes that love has no boundaries, that representation matters, and that spaceships are very cool. You can find them at amarilysfictionediting.com and @AmarilysWrites

**Question** (Jennifer Lawler): *Let’s start with just some basics. You do a lot of sensitivity/diversity reading. What does this mean and why might an editor advise an author to find such a reader?*

**Answer**: Sensitivity reading—also known as diversity reading and authenticity reading—is an editorial service that points out any descriptions, expressions, or ideas in the story which can be considered harmful to readers. This service is not meant to censor the author, but to open their eyes into new perspectives. As a sensitivity reader, I use my experiences as part of several marginalized and minority groups to check for stereotypes, harmful biases, misrepresentation, contested words, and limited perspectives that might cause offense or disbelief with readers.

Editors will often advise an author to find a sensitivity reader when the author is writing about a character or situation that falls outside of their own life experience. That is to say, characters that have a different race, culture, sexuality, religion, etc., or that have live through different and life-altering experiences, such as bullying, mental health issues, discrimination, etc. The most common requests I get for sensitivity reading are for characters that are from a different culture or speak a different language from the author.

**Question** (Jake Nicholls): *Do you have any tips for dealing with scope creep around sensitivity reading? I’ve mostly done sensitivity reading within developmental edits (e.g. I’ve agreed ahead of time to give the author specific feedback on, say, a trans character, alongside my usual edits), but I often find that the extent of guidance needed is more than I anticipated from my initial glance at the manuscript (and maybe that’s where the problem lies).*

*For example, since I work in SFF, sometimes the author thinks they just need feedback on one character, but then I realise there are problematic elements in the overall worldbuilding and they need more extensive guidance. I feel uncomfortable saying, “There’s a problem here but you need to pay me more if you want guidance on it,” but I want to be paid fairly for my time / emotional labour, too. Is this something you’ve come across in your own work, and if so, any tips for dealing with it?*

**Answer**: Scope creep is usually when the client tries to get more than what they paid for, but what you describe sounds like you want to do more than what the client asked for. And I totally get it! You want them to get it right, but you also need to be paid.

Whenever I run into a situation like this, I first finish the job I’ve been paid to do. And then in my overall notes, I briefly explain that there is X or Y extra problems linked to what I just revised. However, those will require another type of editing, and then I make an offer. Depending on the situation or client, I offer a discount for being sort of a follow-up service.

Surprisingly, I’ve always gotten a yes on a follow up edit to solve the secondary problems. You could also contact them about the secondary issues before finishing the first service, but I don’t do this in case they think I’m just trying to take advantage. By finishing up the service they hired me for, I’ve done as they requested and am being helpful by pointing out other details that need fixing…without actually fixing, because they were outside the initial service deal.

**Question** (JL): *Are there specific things we can be on the lookout for when editing? We may not know all the details of an author’s background, so what are some clues that they are writing outside their experience and may need some additional perspective?*

**Answer**: A huge red flag to look out for is when a character’s marginalized identity only reaches surface level; when it’s not part of them and becomes just a detail thrown in for diversity, but not really understood and thus incorrectly portrayed. As an editor I gently ask the author if they would be okay with a sensitivity reader taking a look at it, and as a sensitivity reader I point out what else the author should consider when choosing to use that marginalized identity for their character.

For example, an author might be writing about a group of college students, and part of the author’s personal experience in college might have been to receive financial support from their parents. So they’ll end up writing college students with no real financial struggles or surface level struggles, because that was their reality as a privileged person. But when we check statistics, we’ll see that often minority students don’t have these support systems, because receiving help from parents often means generational wealth.

And so these marginalized students that the author has written, some of them at least, would depend on other ways of paying for their classes. This opens up another layer to those characters, such as if they have too many extra jobs their education performance might be affected. Or if they have a full scholarship, then they’ll have worries of maintaining a perfect GPA and never getting into situations that might make them lose that scholarship.

This might seem like basic knowledge to people who have lived through it or are aware of these issues that minorities and marginalized groups face, but people on the outside are often blind to these details. A sensitivity reader helps open their eyes to these issues.

**Question** (JL): *This is such a great point. Authors often want to be inclusive but they don’t necessarily go beyond surface details. It sounds like it helps for editors to also broaden their perspectives – what are some good resources for editors to be aware of?*

**Answer**: My advice to editors interested in sensitivity reading or just broadening their perspectives would be to start by taking a couple of sensitivity training workshops for editors or even reading sensitivity guides. The EFA has a couple of editor-focused classes and booklets about sensitivity reading. Writing the Other continually updates their workshop offerings for both editors and authors. Another step would be to dive into one of the many diversity word lists and sensitivity style guides to directly study the word choices.

There are also two huge dictionary-like lists—Conscious Style Guide and The Diversity Style Guide—which cover sensitive vocabulary from topics like age, disability, race, gender, etc. I would also advise the editor to start reading widely (books, articles, even twitter threads), choosing more diverse media in what they consume, and following the discussions of marginalized authors online. A good SR knows the different views on the identities they read for, but a great SR knows their own identities and is aware of other marginalized identities as well.

**Question** (JL): *I like the point about a good SR knowing the different views on the identities they read for, as no group is some big monolith with all the same ideas, perspectives, and experiences.*

*I’ve worked with authors who are writing about a character with, say, cancer, and they have had cancer themselves—but they think their experience is universal, that everyone has exactly the same frustrations and problems and so on. I admit I don’t always know how to tackle this except with some gentle guidance that maybe they shouldn’t assume so much.*

*I don’t think this is exactly a question. Maybe just an observation: educating ourselves outside our own perspective, even on an issue we know about personally, is probably good for authors and editors.*

**Answer**: Exactly! I too have run into authors who are writing from their own experience and yet are presenting a limited view into the matter. So a gentle hand is a must, but I do push for them to try to think outside by presenting different scenarios for them to consider. It’s ultimately the author’s choice whether to take the advice or not as well.

“[E]ducating ourselves outside our own perspective, even on an issue we know about personally, is probably good for authors and editors.” – This is SO IMPORTANT!

**Question** (Patti Neufeld): *It’s my understanding that the issue of cultural appropriation has deterred many writers (including myself) from writing characters outside our cultures; however, I very much love to write and read about various peoples. So could a sensitivity reading help here (to still allow the writing), or is it best not to assume the perspective of an outside group at all?*

**Answer**: My thoughts on this are twofold, because while I believe in sensitivity reading, I also work in publishing and have seen the strong bias system.

First, I do believe that with enough research into the topic, interviews with people from the marginalized identity they’re trying to write about, and a good sensitivity reader, any author can do a decent job of writing outside their perspective. Never as accurate, but workable in a sensitive way. Note that an SR is not a guarantee that the internet won’t come for the author when they realize they’ve written outside of their perspective.

Second, I also see the point in asking, why are authors writing main characters outside of their experience, especially when it comes to racial and cultural identities? They often end up writing a main character POV that acts like the minority they’re trying to portray, but isn’t really. Publishing has shown a preference to pick white/cis authors writing about minority experiences than minority authors themselves. In the end, it’s a question the author has to ask themselves. Is it their place to be writing any type of outside representation when often minority authors are ignored or dismissed?

**Question** (JL): *I find it so irritating that publishing always prefers white/cis voices writing about minority experiences to minority voices writing about minority experiences. It has been a subject of criticism since I began working in this industry more than 20 years ago, and little has changed.*

*I have a tendency to make a distinction between, say, a cis-gender white person writing a queer Black protagonist versus a cis-gender white person having a queer Black character in the book. In the first case, why not step out of the way of other authors who share that protagonist’s identity? In the second case, that is more about creating a story world where not everyone is exactly the same as the author. Would you say the same?*

**Question** (Patti Neufeld): *Your latter example, Jen, is what I meant in my question–representing the diverse characters in one’s life and town. I imagine it more suitable for these characters to be secondary ones.*

**Answer**: Oh, absolutely! Allow me to clarify my earlier reply, since I only focused on main character POVs outside of author perspective since that’s what I mostly run into as an editor. But I am all for author making their story worlds diverse as long as they don’t resort to harmful tropes and stereotypes. They will still need a general SR at minimum. But yes, fiction worlds should include characters of every walk of life

**Question** (JL): *I know you edit a lot of romance, and in romance, we have two main characters – two protagonists – who usually, but not always, have viewpoint scenes. Often these characters will have different backgrounds – in M-F romance, the author is probably going to be writing from a gender they don’t identify with, and in other cases, maybe because they want to celebrate the diversity of love, they’ll have characters of different ethnicities/backgrounds—and, again, one of these will be outside the author’s experience.*

*I would hesitate to say that white romance writers should only write about two white people falling in love, etc. so what is your take on this situation?*

**Answer**: I have the same twofold stance: I agree romances should come in all flavors and colors and it’s great when author want to give use diversity, but I also question any privileged author making bank specifically with characters outside their perspective, while minorities continue to struggle in the industry.

I have both edited and done SR on romance novels, so I’ve gotten to see a range of successes and tragedies. I’ve seen more success when the character they write has part of the author’s own experience. For example, a white author who grew up in Latinx district writes a Latinx-American character.

They still need a Latinx SR, but they can rely more on their lived experience. The fails come when authors write so outside their perspective, they don’t even know the basics and resort to harmful portrayals.

For example, it’s often the romantic hero who is a foreigner, and then 90% of the portrayal is cringe in some way, because they either focus too much on the character’s “sexy natural tan” or their “sexy accent” or some other detail that marks them as a foreigner…and that somehow equals sexy.

Another fail example is when in a MF series, an MM book suddenly appears to follow the story of a secondary queer character, but then the plot is basically a closeted man, internalized homophobia, and bullying. A valid story, but coming from a cis author, it’s like…Why did you choose this overused/harmful plot when queerness is more than those two experiences?

I’d say, write widely because the world is diverse, but also write with sensitivity and awareness. Reach out to professional editors and SRs who will help you write that perspective well and as accurately as possible.

*JL: Thanks to Amy for her insight into these issues!*