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Focus on Family & Culture



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Characters for a New Generation

The Amy Hodgepodge series of children's books was born from the reality of the blurring cultural lines that authors Kim Wayans and Kevin Knotts are witnessing around them every day in the city they call home, Los Angeles, and in their extended family. The two actors are introducing young people to characters that really reflect the world they live in.

EXPERIENCE

Visit [Amy Hodgepodge Online](#):

[Amy Hodgepodge Read Reviews & Buy Amy Hodgepodge Books](#):

[The Secret's Out #5 \(Amy Hodgepodge\)](#)

Visit [Kim Online](#):
[Kim Wayans](#)

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Kim Wayans and Kevin Knotts come from very different backgrounds. The two are actors who converged on Los Angeles, as actors do. They met, and were married, as actors sometimes do.

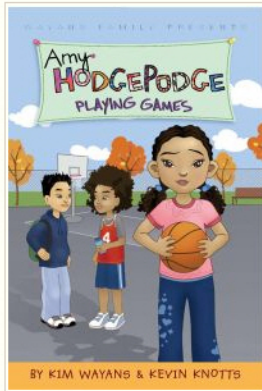
But these two part from the Hollywood stereotype pretty quickly after that.

Taking note of the changing demographics of the city around them and the world in general, and the even more obvious cultural mesh taking place within their own extended family, they felt a growing tug, a sense of purpose or mission.

With 38 nieces and nephews at last check, representing an impressive blurring of the lines between cultures, Wayans and Knotts began connecting the dots from their respective upbringings to the present. Those dots led them to create Amy Hodgepodge, the multiracial lead character of the children's book series that they have developed under the same name.

The first of the Amy Hodgepodge series was published in May of 2008 and the fifth book in the series was released this week.

"Throughout my life, many of the really good and lasting friendships that I've made have been with multiracial people," said Wayans in a recent conversation with BLUR. "I grew up in New York City which is a very diverse place to begin with, and my friends were a broad mix between Japanese, Black, White, Hispanic, you name it."



Knotts grew up in Oklahoma, a somewhat less diverse place, where the most obvious people of color where Native Americans.

"As I was growing up, we never really spoke about race. I was a child of the '60's. We were sensitive to everything, but I was most impacted by the injustices that we would see occurring in the world around us," Knotts added.

It isn't so surprising that they wound up together, BLURs in their own right. Knotts and Wayans met at the Gym, and they connected from the start.



"I fell in love with Kevin's soul" said Wayans, "and the fact that we were from different backgrounds, different races, really was of no consequence for either of us or our families. My family was just happy that I'd found someone like Kevin who I connected with on this level."

While both had established careers as actors, their family life was providing an interesting creative motivation of another ilk. Through the litany of nephews and nieces, Wayans and Knotts regularly heard anecdotally about how they were doing at school, and often of the challenges of dealing with kids who would say mean things to them about their cultural makeup, as kids sometimes do.

"These kids were dealing with identity issues in still fairly innocent ways, and beginning to be challenged to align in one way or another with only part of who they were," said Wayans. "It struck us that here was an opportunity to provide these kids, and other kids of their age, with a constructive role model to help them embrace all that they are."

Together they discussed the need for kids of all cultures, but specifically kids of mixed heritage, to have access to a cast of characters that resonated with them. "Kids that look like them."

"This would be a great way to address a void in children's literature, and at the same time give these kids a fun way to get a sense of validation and self-esteem. By creating Amy and her friends, we were giving these kids positive role models that they could relate to."

The themes of the Amy Hodgepodge series are really universal, and children of all backgrounds are connecting with them. These books resonate with kids in a simple way teaching about the importance of embracing our differences, of exploring tolerance.

"But it's important that we don't get too heavy, too preachy with the messages", adds Knotts. "Kids learn best when it feels less like learning and more like spending time with good friends. That's what we're trying to do with Amy, to create a connection."

Wayans' friends from growing up are happy that they have been given a character and books they can share with their kids that reflect them and their lives. Their kids and all of Wayans' and Knotts' nieces and nephews think it's great when the authors of Amy Hodgepodge visit their schools or local libraries and festivals for readings.



In fact, much of the early success of the series has been due to sharing the books through these readings, interacting with kids, and getting positive word of mouth from both children and their parents.

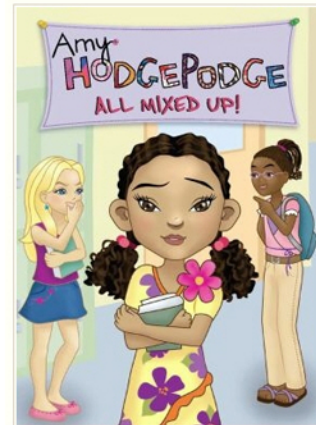
The Amy Hodgepodge series, which is published by Penguin Young Readers and sold through most bookstores as well as Amazon.com, has been purchased by major library systems including all 71 branches of the L.A. Public Library system.

For Wayans, Knotts and the books' growing fan base, this is hopefully just the beginning for Amy Hodgepodge. While the intention of the series has been to connect with kids in a meaningful way through the books and build a following, "we've been told by many that they'd love to see a cartoon series and a movie at some point. And we'd obviously love to do that, but first things first," said both.

"It takes a while in the world of children's books to build up momentum, and that's what we are focused on now. For us it's been a labor of love. With our fifth book out this week and books six and seven to come in June and the fall of this year, we'll keep exposing more and more people to Amy and her friends, and hopefully the rest will fall into place."

While Wayans and Knotts would obviously love to achieve commercial success with Amy Hodgepodge, their definition of success for the series is purer, more sincere.

"The real intention in our hearts is to provide good, wholesome and yes somewhat innocent stories during a time when kids are being influenced to grow up and behave in an adult fashion too soon. If we can help even one child to feel a sense of commonality and place with the characters, or to impact another to think more openly about our differences, then we've been successful."



The stories are simple, but effective, and the character make-up is still unique in chapter book series.

Kids, parents and educators are all providing positive feedback. Consumer reviews of the books have been very complimentary, with parents clearly pleased to be able to find these types of characters for their kids, "characters that are unlike anything we could find when we were growing up. Our kids feel a connection, and we feel great because we see a change in their sense of identity."

Kevin Knotts and Kim Wayans have created in Amy Hodgepodge characters that reflect the New America. And these characters are a product of their own reality, a reality that is changing and shifting in compelling ways for all of us.