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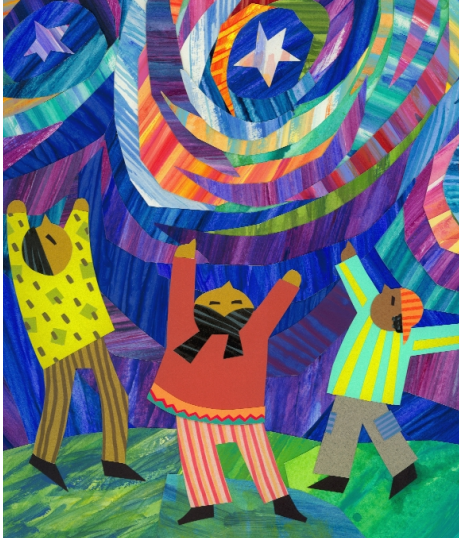
# School Talk

Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching

Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section

Linda K. Crafton and Nancy J. Johnson, Coeditors



## Multicultural Literature and Social Change

# Multicultural Literature: Story and Social Action

*by Rudine Sims Bishop, Professor Emerita, The Ohio State University*

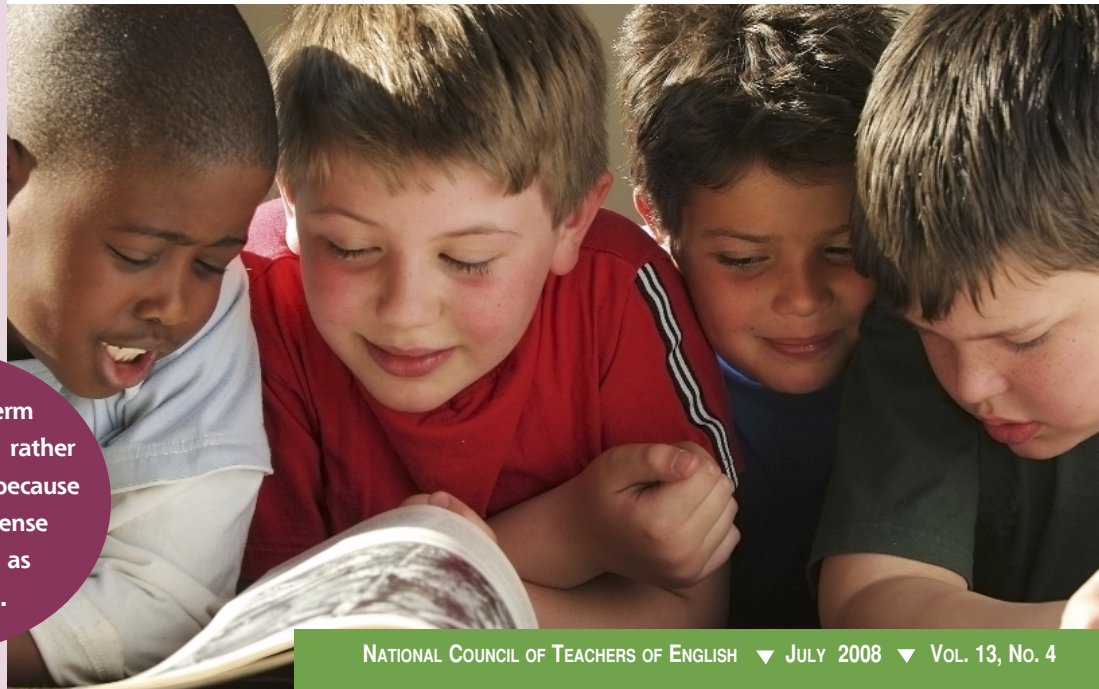
## Note from the Editors

Most educators recognize the joy as well as the obligation as they encourage their students to explore the plurality of their classrooms, society, and world. Here we challenge all educators to try on a different lens related to multicultural literature, one that sees all literature as a catalyst to help create more socially just classrooms. Rudine Sims Bishop, the NCTE Elementary Section Outstanding Educator for 2007, leads the way with a powerful piece focused on the history as well as the challenges of and purposes for using multicultural texts in education. Mary Brennan demonstrates how she uses a range of literature to develop critical readers as well as a range of 21st century multiliteracies in her first-grade classroom, and Julie Doyle, a librarian, discusses how to choose the best multicultural books for your students.

*Linda and Nancy*

Because story is a way of knowing, many educators believe that multicultural literature is an essential component of school literature programs, one means of helping to prepare students to become informed, active, and productive citizens of a democratic, pluralistic society. The concept of multicultural children's literature as a distinct category of children's literature can be linked to the emergence of the multicultural education movement, which seeks to reform schools and schooling by, among other things, promoting equal and equitable educational opportunity for all students. Although scholars disagree about which literatures should be gathered under the umbrella of multicultural children's literature, most agree that one very important subset of multicultural literature is that which emanates from and is focused on the experiences of members of so-called minority groups in the United States, groups whose cultures, histories, and stories have long been marginalized in

I prefer the term "parallel culture," rather than "minority," because it embraces a sense of all cultures as comparable.



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our society. Following the lead of premier author Virginia Hamilton (1986/1993), I prefer to use the term "parallel culture," rather than "minority," because it embraces a sense of all cultures as comparable. Proponents of both multicultural education and multicultural literature have been concerned with counteracting this marginalization by promoting social action and social change. Responding in the classroom to the voices of historically marginalized parallel culture groups can be one important step towards social change.

My own scholarship has centered on African American children's literature as one subset of multicultural literature. My most recent book (Bishop, 2007) traces the history and development of that parallel culture literature from its early beginning to the end of the twentieth century. One of the persistent threads that emerged from that research is the extent to which its creators view their work as purposeful as well as artistic; that is, it is intended not only to entertain, but also to serve a set of sociocultural, sociopolitical functions. For example, in the early 1920s, W.E.B. Du Bois founded a magazine, "for all children," he asserted, but especially for the "children of the sun." He outlined his goals, which had to do with, among other things, helping Black children recognize themselves as normal and beautiful, teaching them about Black history, and helping them to recognize their own potential. His list of goals was an indictment of the sociopolitical environment of his day, as well as of the instructional and literary texts available to children at the time. Decades later, Eloise Greenfield (1975) identified the goals she had for writing, which were remarkably similar to those of Du Bois, an indication of the persistence of the kind of sociopolitical issues that gave rise to Du Bois's magazine. Contemporary African American children's literature began to emerge in the late 1960s, in part from a perceived need to rectify the long-standing omission or near-omission of the history and literature of African Americans from children's literature and from school curricula. African American children's literature, then, has in a sense always been about social action. And although Du Bois aimed his magazine explicitly at "the children of the sun," in effect, particularly once African American children's literature moved into the so-called mainstream of children's book publishing, it has been for the most part two-headed—aimed both at those whose images, histories, culture, and life experiences were reflected in the literature, that is, African American readers, and those who entered through the books into experiences that were both different from and similar to their own, i.e., non–African American readers. Thus, award-winning author Virginia Hamilton was led to assert that the literature itself is social action. If one defines social action as action that is intended to benefit humankind or enhance well-being, African American children's literature, and by extension multicultural children's literature, can readily be seen in that light. For one thing, the very existence of the literature enriches the body of American children's literature in general and potentially changes the nature of that canon by making it pluralistic rather than monocultural.

In what ways, then, can African American children's literature in the classroom be seen as a catalyst for social action and social change? Following are four possibilities:

1. It can potentially empower Black children by affirming them, their cultural values, and their group history. Children who see themselves as valued, worthwhile, and part of a group that has survived against great odds may more readily see themselves as people who have the power to make a difference.

2. Literature that chronicles the struggles of African Americans—and other parallel culture groups—on their journeys across the American hopescape can shed light on some enduring social issues and generate a desire for or commitment to social change. African American children's literature, even much of the fiction, has a strong historical element. Readers who, through engaging with the literature, engage in those struggles, bring deeper understandings to their own responses to today's social issues.

3. Literature that engages readers in stories and experiences of people who are unlike themselves in culturally specific ways, but very much like them in the ways in which we are all human, helps to change the ways they see the world. This is also true of nonfiction literature that provides accurate information, fills in knowledge gaps, and belies misinformation. James Baldwin wrote that if you can change the way people look at reality, then you can change that reality (Watkins, 1979).

4. It can provide a lens through which to read and critically examine literature that is not usually labeled multicultural. Readers who have come to understand the struggles of parallel culture groups can be better prepared to question hidden or underlying assumptions about social concerns, such as gender roles or class status, in any book where such issues can be relevant.

It is easy in this era of high-stakes standardized testing to lose sight of the power of literature to nurture imaginations and to educate the heart as well as the head, but these are among the most important things that teachers can do.▲

# Multicultural Literature: A Multiliteracies Perspective

*by Mary C. Brennan, first-grade teacher, Pritchett School, Buffalo Grove, Illinois*

It's the end of our first-grade year and we are looking through our class journal, reminiscing about learning events. We're recalling the storm at the beginning of the school year, our intergenerational tea, memories…

"I remember *Chrysanthemum*; the kids made fun of her because she was named after a flower!"

"How about *Feathers and Fools*?" is Vaishu's response. "In that book the birds and peacocks fight with each other."

"Yes, they don't understand each other," are Katie's words.

"It's OK to be different" says Aaron, pointing to our class mantra displayed on a bulletin board.

"Yes, I remember *My Name Is Yoon*. She looks like Ellie!"

"How about *Lowji Discovers America*?" asks Lee.

I am pleased as our conversation shifts to a discussion of favorite books, a conversation filled with connections, one that supports my intentional use of multicultural children's literature.

I teach first grade in a suburban school setting that is rich with ethnic diversity. In my current class of 21 students, half of them speak a second language. I begin each school year by putting together a text set of multicultural books with the dual purposes of building classroom community and expanding the definition of literacy learning to include a focus on multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). These multicultural books offer strong visual images of those similar to my students, their friends, and families, and also of those who are different. A wide range of books opens up opportunities for children to begin to recognize and respect each others' identities (Vasquez et al., 2003). But we unleash the power and potential of these books in the intentional way that we read and respond to them, by focusing on images (visual literacy), digital tools (digital literacy), and the critical questions that we ask (critical literacy).

First graders today live in an increasingly visual culture. Their world consists of digital tools and images. From the first day of school we focus on reading print and images simultaneously. As we explore multicultural literature, we address authors and illustrators by name: "Mem Fox uses color in ways that make us feel happy, then a little scared," is Liza's comment in response to *Feathers and Fools*. "We like listening to Mem Fox read her stories," is the consensus of the class after visiting her website (www.memfox.com). Students begin to see that authors and illustrators purposefully create text, and that as readers we must pay attention to how texts and images represent us and others. From the start we ask critical questions, such as,

- Why do you think the author wrote this book?
- Why do you think the illustrator _____…
- Who has the most power in the story?
- What words/images make you think that?
- Who doesn't have much or any power? Whose voice is silenced?
- Why do you think s/he/they don't have a voice? (Crafton, Silvers, & Brennan, in press)

These kinds of questions open up opportunities for students to think critically and offer ways for children to reach beyond the boundaries of their immediate life experiences and consider a multitude of possibilities for their futures. As Harste notes, the ability to sound out words and make meaning from texts makes children good consumers rather than good citizens; to be truly literate, children have to understand how texts, print, and visual texts work (2001, p. 2).

Our first encounter with multicultural literature is the foundation for a year filled with learning that intentionally seeks to explore and expand perspectives through multiliteracies. Instruction is both open-ended and purposeful. We identify the tools of visual literacy and develop a specialized visual grammar, a metalanguage that helps us interpret images (Callow & Hertzenberg, 2006; Unsworth, 2002). In a recent article on visual literacy, Callow discusses the "compositional, affective, and critical" dimensions of visual literacy (2008, p. 618), which, in my classroom, students move in and out of fluently.

## Critical Books about ME for Young Readers


Bridges, S. Y. (2001). *Ruby's wish*. (S. Blackall, Illus.). San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
Choi, Y. (2003). *The name jar*. New York: Dell.
De Paola, T. (1969). *Oliver Button is a sissy*. New York: Harcourt.
Desimini, L., & Mahurin, M. (2004). *My beautiful child*. New York: Blue Sky Press.
Fleming, C. (2006). *Lowji discovers America*. New York: Atheneum.
Fox, M. (1988). *Koala Lou*. (P. Lofts, Illus.). New York: Harcourt Brace.
Fox, M. (1996). *Feathers and fools*. (N. Wilton, Illus.). San Diego: Harcourt Brace.
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Hoffman, M. (2002). *The color of home*. (K. Littlewood, Illus.). New York: Dial.
Park, F., & Park, G. (2000). *The royal bee*. (C. Z. Zhang, Illus.). Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press.
Recorvits, H. (2003). *My name is Yoon*. (G. Swiatkowska, Illus.). New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
Shannon, D. (1998). *No, David!* New York: Scholastic.
Uegakui, C. (2003). *Suki's kimono*. (S. Yorich, Illus.) Toronto, ON: Kids Can Press Limited.
Yamate, S. S. (1992). *Ashok by any other name*. (J. Tohinka, Illus.) Chicago: Polychrome Publications.
Zolotow, C. (1972). *William's doll*. (W. P. Du Bois, Illus.). New York: Harper & Row.

(continued from page 3)

Purposeful talk about important books makes a difference as young children negotiate their visual world and seek to understand differences.

We discuss and examine the use of color, line, perspective, tone, and size—the compositional aspects of visual literacy. Students also create images, paying attention to these same elements in their representations. Often they employ the tools of digital literacy in their renditions (i.e., use of font, size, color, placement). It is quite common to hear students discussing how the dark colors add an element of sadness or fear to an illustration or how a picture seems to demand our attention by its space on the page. They love selecting different fonts and sizes to support their messages. This purposeful discussion of images and creation of messages ties in with Callow's (2008) affective dimension of visual literacy.

A book's visuals are more than picture clues for decoding text. From the start, we discuss how images (and words) make us feel, and we wonder about the author's and illustrator's purposes. Students will often add language to characters or to a scene when reading the pictures. But it is the critical dimension of reading text and images that becomes transformational for students and their identity development.

Asking critical questions of both images and text serves to empower young learners and helps them to see that their individual perspectives are important. Purposeful talk about important books makes a difference as young children negotiate their visual world and seek to understand differences.▲

In today's shrinking world, students new to America arrive every day from countries all over the globe, and our schools reflect a wide diversity of ethnic, religious, and cultural groups.

## Selecting the Best
# Multicultural Resources

*by Julie Doyle, retired librarian, Clark County School District, Las Vegas, Nevada*

A fourth-grade teacher in my building was encouraging all of her students to participate in the school's storytelling festival, when a new student arrived speaking fluent Spanish and very little English. This student came to our school library looking for a book in order to participate in the storytelling festival, and when I held up Alma Flor Ada's *Tales Our Abuelitas Told / Cuentos Que Contaban Nuestras Abuelas*, she burst into tears and began to tell me about her own abuelita (grandma). Even though I couldn't understand everything she said, I could see that this book provided an important literary transition from her home country of Mexico to our school in Nevada. In today's shrinking world, students new to America arrive every day from countries all over the globe, and our schools reflect a wide diversity of ethnic, religious, and cultural groups.

Classroom and school libraries should include a wide spectrum of multicultural books so students can not only develop an understanding and appreciation for someone whose life differs from theirs, but also so they can find themselves in the literature. As teachers and librarians, we know the importance of students' personal connections to what they read, but these connections go beyond developing comprehension; they are also important in developing self-esteem, accepting differences in others, and learning to appreciate literature. Keeping the various parallel cultures found at our school in mind, we need to be sensitive in selecting books so that our students can find works that represent a reassuring, positive image of their cultural group. Richly diverse collections will offer readers multiple perspectives.

How can classroom teachers find books that reflect multiple perspectives and introduce rich cultural lives? A school or local public librarian can help you select books for your students, find resources, and order books that will meet the needs of all students. Many schools have access to an online library catalog that can highlight folktales, novels, picture books, biographies, or informational books on a specific culture or country. If your school is a part of an online union catalog, you can borrow from other school libraries. Public libraries usually have online catalogs that allow you to broaden your search from your home or classroom computer.

As a school librarian for the last 20 years, I have served diverse populations and always found that literature became the bridge to each child's culture. To find the best multicultural books to introduce to your students, become familiar with book awards such as the Coretta Scott King Award, the Pura Belpré Award, and the American Indian Youth Literature Award, as

(continued on next page)

# Selecting the Best Multicultural Resources

*(continued from page 4)*

well as the authors and illustrators whose work is recognized through these awards.

Different books are suitable for different purposes. If a teacher asks me to recommend a read-aloud, I might suggest *Indian Shoes* by Cynthia Leititch Smith. It is a collection of humorous short stories about Grampa Halfmoon, who comes to live with his grandson in Chicago. The author's website (www.cynthialeitichsmith.com) includes a readers theater script to accompany one of the stories. Smith's website also includes current information about Native American authors and illustrators, with sections and bibliographies devoted to diversity and multicultural literature.

If you are looking for books that focus on relationships between different cultural groups, I might recommend *Brothers* by Yin and illustrated by Chris Soentpiet because of the ways it talks about immigrants from different cultures helping each other. *Brothers* is a historical fiction picture book telling the story of a young Chinese boy who comes to San Francisco in the 1860s and must keep his brother's store going. He is only successful because of an Irish immigrant boy who helps him and teaches him English.

If you plan on sharing the joy and fun of poetry and music, recent award winners such as the 2008 Coretta Scott King Award winner *Let it Shine* by Ashley Bryan and Honor winner *Jazz on a Saturday Night* by Leo and Diane Dillon are great read-alouds that will enhance students' cultural knowledge. *Jazz on a Saturday Night* even comes with a CD.

Your collection of multicultural books should represent a diversity of genres. Folktales, myths, and legends should cover every corner of our globe, from Armenia to Zambia. So that students can develop positive role models, you should include biographies of important figures from many different backgrounds. Poets should include Naomi Shihab Nye, Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni, Walter Dean Myers, Gary Soto, and Janet Wong. Information books should be selected that include photographs and represent a full range of perspectives and experiences. An interesting new series of nonfiction books is Global Connections, published by Compass Point Books (for grades 5–7); this series focuses on the social customs and traditions in specific countries, and the photographs feature young people involved in everyday activities. For example, an Iranian student at my school used the photographs in the book *Teens in Iran* to show her American friends that kids in Iran have cell phones, wear stylish head scarves, and even have blogs.

When selecting multicultural literature, take advantage of the online subscription databases that many schools and districts provide. One of the best is Culturegrams from ProQuest (http://online.culturegrams.com/index.php), which includes not only factual information about a country's people, history and geography, but also traditions, recipes, and photographs. A similar subscription resource is CountryReports.org, which offers subscriptions for individuals as well as for schools. Information about countries and cultures can also be found for free on the Internet at resources like InfoPlease (http://www.infoplease.com), Around the World Countries at Yahoo Kids (http://kids.yahoo.com/directory/Around-the-World/Countries) or the UNICEF country site. A valuable free website for teachers is called Multicultural Resources for Children (http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/multipub.htm). This site includes extensive bibliographies of books by ethnicity or religion.

With thousands of books for children and young adults being published each year, it sometimes feels impossible for a classroom teacher to keep up. But it's an important responsibility, since everyone benefits from a diversity of multicultural books that promote understanding and appreciation of others. Keep your collection fresh by asking librarians, colleagues, and students for recommendations, by selecting award-winning multicultural books, and by making a commitment to read, read, read.▲

## Multicultural Literature Awards and Websites

The **Coretta Scott King Awards** are given annually to African American authors and illustrators of children's books. http://www.ala.org/ala/emiert/corettascottkingbookaward/corettascott.cfm

The **Jane Addams Children's Book Awards** are given to books that promote peace, social justice, and equality. http://home.igc.org/%7Ejapa/jacba/index_jacba.html

The **Pura Belpré Award** is presented to Latino/Latina writers and illustrators whose work affirms and celebrates the Latino cultural experience. www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/belpremedal/belprmedal.cfm

The **Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature** presents annual awards for illustration and for text in children and young adult literature. www.apalaweb.org/awards/awards.htm

The **Tomás Rivera Children's Book Award** started in 1995 and is awarded to a Mexican American author. www.education.txstate.edu/departments/Tomas-Rivera-Book-Award-Project-Link.html

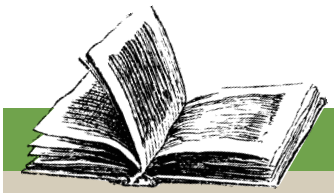
The **Américas Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature** recognizes works of fiction, poetry, folklore, and nonfiction that authentically and engagingly portray Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinos in the United States. www.uwm.edu/Dept/CLACS/aa/index.html

**Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People.** The National Council for the Social Studies puts together a worthy list of high-quality literature that emphasizes human relations, representing a diversity of groups and sensitive to a range of cultural experiences. http://downloads.ncss.org/notable/notable2007.pdf

The **Carter G. Woodson Book Award** is also awarded by the National Council of Social Studies for the most distinguished social sciences books for young people. www.socialstudies.org/awards/woodson/

The **Schneider Family Book Awards** honor authors and illustrators for books that embody an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences. www.ala.org/ala/awardsbucket/schneideraward/schneiderfamily.cfm

**American Indian Youth Literature Awards** are given by the American Indian Library Association. http://www.ailanet.org/



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***Next Issue:*** The October issue of *School Talk* will focus on Revisiting Writing Instruction.


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