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Confronting Beliefs: The Value of Multicultural Children's Literature

Thomas Rodgers

Multicultural children's literature has a long history of conflicting beliefs on what determines its status as such and many wonder what is meant by the terminology. Not only have individuals offered opinions on what is multicultural, but also what is meant by quality multicultural children's literature. Some authors and readers have taken a step further to wonder what this literature offers our society and what influence it has on readers. The intention of this writing is to address some of the more conflicting beliefs in the field. In a way, this article aims to do exactly what many say is the purpose of multicultural children's literature. The intention is to confront previously held beliefs regarding the topic in order to grow as learners and leaders in our society.

What is not multicultural?

The term multicultural is used often in various fields and occupations and has become a buzzword in our culture. The editor Hazel Rochman has labeled it as a "trendy word" (17) and many have acknowledged its over usage. Readers are left to wonder what is meant by multicultural and what qualifies literature to

feature this label. Additionally, our discussions about culture are expanding and our society is beginning to have a more extended understanding of multiculturalism. If multiculturalism is something that we all possess as opposed to just being a minority/majority difference, then we are left to wonder what is not multicultural. Is it possible that *Green Eggs and Ham* is really about individuals from different cultures that eat different foods and could therefore be deemed multicultural? The newly popular *Fancy Nancy* series is about a middle class white girl that dresses in luxurious clothing and all things fancy. She often discusses her fascination with the French culture and it can be said that these "cultural exploration" books were at one point deemed multicultural.

However, there is a problem with labeling both of these books and many others as multicultural. The problem is that both of these books and many others of the type explore culture in a superficial manner. At the end of many of these types of book, there is still a sense of "othering" that is apparent. The term "othering" was popularized originally by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* and refers to how European artists, authors, and musicians utilized their work to present Middle Eastern culture as inferior. The act of establishing the superior sense of self and referring to another multicultural group as the "other" and of less value is the act of "othering". While these two examples do not effectively do that, they establish a sense of the "foreign" and "exotic". As opposed to sharing the collective human experience, Nancy's fascination with French culture is more because she identifies it as different than her own. Likewise, although *Green Eggs and Ham* ends with the main character exploring another culture and breaking boundaries, it still does not effectively act as a story about cultural exploration. In other

words, the only difference readers can note between the characters is their love and hatred of the dish and not how this connects to their entire identity. While this is not the act of "othering" and the book does not possess any undesirable qualities in terms of being multicultural, it cannot qualify s a multicultural book.

It would seem from these examples and many others that it is much easier to determine what is not multicultural as opposed to what books actually do fit this criteria. Tunnell and Jacobs define multicultural literature as writing that "explores the traditions and norms of various cultures in order to 'bridge the cultural gap'" (192) On the other hand, there are numerous books that do not fit this definition that have been identified as multicultural classics. For example, *Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats has been connected to the book award for Multicultural Children's Literature and the main character of *Snowy Day* is on the medal for this award. This story does not explore traditions and norms of the African American culture, but does bridge gaps by showing the human experience of weather through the eyes of children of various racial backgrounds. To add to the confusion of Keat's book being identified as multicultural, some have noted that the illustrations feature stereotypes about African Americans and they are presented as featureless (178).

Additionally, some stories that actively explore the traditions and norms of various cultures do not bridge the gap but rather distance the gap. For instance, there are numerous series of books in the market that act as a form of travel books for children into various cultures. Books in these series may indeed be written by an author from the culture that is being discussed, but they act more as a snapshot of the culture. Consequently, readers outside the culture may be inclined to develop their

own stereotypes because of this structure. Both the *Festivals of the World* and *Welcome to My Country* series fit this concept and while their purpose may be noble, it is questionable how the brevity of information might influence the cultural gap between the author and reader. Clearly the previously mentioned definition does not encompass all multicultural children's literature and has its faults. However, it is plausible to say that a succinct definition that encompasses all multicultural children's literature may not exist. Even after one individual proposes a book as being multicultural, another reader may disagree entirely based on another set of reasonable criteria.

As we begin to look at both informational text and narrative text as multicultural literature, it is important to consider the various forms of multicultural literature as well. Rudine Sims Bishop has outlined the three types of multicultural books in terms of discussing race and ethnicity (46). The first type of book is known as "neutral" and does not address multiculturalism or the issues regarding diversity, but rather places multicultural faces and identities in the illustrations to casually suggest the value of diversity. Books such as *Flotsam* by David Wiesner fit this model and these books certainly have had their place in the canon of multicultural literature. However, the most crucial consideration for neutral books is whether the illustrations of individuals of multicultural backgrounds are authentic. A common concern includes that characters may look like stereotypes or rather all look the same with the exception of color of skin. The second type includes "generic" books that focus on a cultural group, but don't deeply discuss the culture of the characters. Ideally these books could be used to show what has often been referred to as the "universal human experience". These

represent multiculturalism and yet also strive to bridge the gap between cultures. Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, professor and editor, cautions readers though to not always look for universal themes. She argues that, "this focus on 'universal' themes, separate from a specific cultural experience, maintains the superiority of the dominant culture and so marginalizes and excludes oppressed cultures" (qtd. in Short and Fox 17). The third and final type of literature that Bishop discusses is the "culturally specific" children's books that include cultural details that are explicit and largely influence the characters' identities. Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* features information about an African American family that lives in an apartment in Harlem and her experiences as a child in New York. Within this type of literature, it is crucial that the cultural information presented is genuine as authenticity is the main purpose of culturally specific literature.

Another type of book that could be considered multicultural are moral books for kids. These do not discuss an actual culture, but reflect on issues of multiculturalism by utilizing fictional characters or animals as characters. One popular example is *Sneetches* by Dr. Seuss which indicates issues such as elitism, racism, privilege, exclusion, and acceptance. Additionally, Leo Lionni's *Little Blue and Little Yellow* uses color as characters to explore similar themes and teaches the lesson of valuing one's own identity and its connection to a greater community. David McKee's *Tusk Tusk* uses black and white elephants to teach lessons about racial violence and while still using animals, the book is still more direct and deeper than some of the lighter hearted books about diversity. The difficulty with these types of books is that they often simplify the idea of multiculturalism. The conclusion of these stories usually feature a society in which all the characters are

eventually homogenous. The ending of *Tusk Tusk* does not feature the white and black elephants resolving their conflict, but rather a gray elephant being born of their conflict. At the end of the story, all the gray elephants are able to be friends because they are the same color but soon begin arguing about differently shaped ears. This seems to reflect the melting pot metaphor that was often used to describe American society. Instead, our focus on multiculturalism in modern times lends to the mosaic metaphor where all cultures maintain their identity and we work towards understanding our similarities and differences.

The examples provided and discussion leave readers with what may be considered a frustrating task of defining multicultural children's literature. There are so many varying opinions on what identifies a book as multicultural and also conflicting beliefs on what determines the quality of this literature. There are numerous reasons for this and our decision as a society to continue the discussion about multicultural literature also encourages discussion about societal issues. This process allows us as readers to face social problems regarding diversity. Many place the purpose of multicultural children's literature into two categories. The first includes providing children of various backgrounds with role models with which they identify. Indeed, Nancy Tolson reflects that "the purpose of Black children's literature was to build the self-esteem of the Black child, to have Black achievements and creativity culturally instilled within them" (66). Another belief is that they are used for members of a culture to teach those outside the culture about their experiences. For some, the lessons about other cultures is crucial and influences social advocacy as with Hazel Rochman: "I [came of age] with the shocking awareness that the universe you've always taken for granted is evil" (18).

Although many pieces of multicultural literature can accomplish these two goals, it is not necessarily the accomplishment of them that deems the literature multicultural. Instead, it would be more practical to define multicultural children's literature as literature that encourages readers to reflect on their society. Multicultural writing encourages debate and discussion about critical social issues. If this discussion is to occur though, it needs to be an organic discussion that does not rely on stereotypes. The literature has to actually challenge the reader, as opposed to merely exposing them, to a different culture or way of living. In order for this to occur, the literature must have some merit and we as readers must critically examine our books for this quality.

Is the book any good?

Although this may seem a rather simple question to answer, there is actually quite a lot to consider whether or not a piece of multicultural literature is a quality piece of writing. We may as readers think first to how we reacted to our childhood books. Others from different socio-economic backgrounds may not have had childhood books in the home. Therefore, some may think what sort of books they would want their children to read. As adult readers, we may reflect on the quality of the book based on what we think appropriate for children. Tunnell and Jacobs acknowledge that "literature aimed at young readers has and always will reflect society's attitudes about children" (46). There is quite a lot of criteria to consider and this does not even begin to consider the actual literary quality that a book has or artistic merit of the illustrations.

One of the greatest struggles we may have as readers of literature is to remain

objective in our analysis for quality. For instance, there are books that we connect to as individual readers for sentimental reasons. However, these books are not necessarily full of literary value and the illustrations may be lacking as well. Conversely, the book may be beautifully written and feature wonderful illustrations and yet readers struggle in connecting to the literature. Even more difficult for a reader is to consider whether the literature is quality on the basis of being multicultural. The discussion regarding quality literature is in and of itself an area of study, and so we will primarily focus on the multicultural quality of the writing and illustrations.

In analyzing children's literature for racist or sexist themes, we must assess the symbols and language with a newfound historical schema as an adult. When analyzing children's literature for racism and sexism, adult readers benefit from knowledge of history and of symbolic representation. For example, children may not necessarily read *The Story of Babar* with an understanding of colonialism. However, as adults, we can observe and make sense of the symbol of a "wild elephant" who eventually rules a kingdom and forces the other pachyderms to don Western clothes. Adult readers can see this story as a display of the supposed superiority of European culture. These political and social allegories have been acknowledged by educators widely known for their focus on multiculturalism. In particular, the educator Herbert Kohl has written quite a bit on children's literature and these symbols that "portray, sanction, and even model inequity" (299). As we examine the story line though, we have to examine what writers are doing regarding these historical social problems. We must balance between two extremes that often happen in multicultural children's literature.

One concern is that children are

sometimes presented with an egalitarian society where social problems are nonexistent and inequity does not occur. These books exist not only in children's literature, but all forms of multicultural literature. For example, racial relations have often been idealized in class novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone with the Wind.* Mitchell's novel has often been criticized for the portrayal of the character Mammy as a content slave and others believe the Ku Klux Klan "plays [a] romanticized role … and appears to be a benign combination of the Elk's Club and a men's equestrian club" (14) in *Gone with the Wind*. In this way, these classic novels present a modified sense of reality and therefore are offensively discounting the experiences of numerous individuals. When we take into account that our adult literature has ignored the painful history of our society, readers can only imagine what realities are not being accounted for in children's literature. The author Mingshui Cai asserts that "If children read mostly these books, they may form a false idea that, despite cultural differences, the world is always a nice place. The major problem with this approach is that it oversimplifies the difficulty of crossing cultural borders" (18). In the past, issues of diversity and race relations have been decidedly ignored in the children's literature canon. Perhaps one of the most widely known articles describing the discrepancy between reality and children's literature is Nancy Larrick's *The All-White World of Children's Books.* In this article, Larrick discusses how Cleveland, Ohio students live in a community that is 56.9% black and yet only 6.7% of the 5,206 trade books published by the Children's Book Council in the years 1962-1964 feature African Americans in text or illustrations. This type of literature in which reality is modified effectively eradicates the experiences of an entire culture from the canon. This signifies

a book not only of low quality, but also the type of literature that could be considered dangerous and leading to more social problems. Larrick discusses how this practice can lead white children to believe in their superiority and he believes that "there seems to be little chance of developing the humility so urgently needed for world cooperation, instead of world conflict, as long as our children are brought up on gentle doses of racism" (19).

If we take this practice of presenting inaccurate literary representations of reality or cultural experiences a step further, the next extreme is presenting the social problems we have as acceptable. Some children's books may go to even present the multicultural social problems we face as desirable norms. Indeed, a closer look at the gender stereotyping in children's literature will quickly reveal how the status quo is presented not as a social problem but as a norm of our society that is to be maintained. One of the larger literary movements for young males is Jon Scieszka's work with the Guys Read organization. This group aims to provide young men with books that stereotypically masculine. The website organizes books based on topics such as "war", "dragons", "fighters", "scary", and "how to build stuff". These books are being written for a multicultural purpose and are meant to heal the gap that is occurring between male and female readers. A gap that author on reading, Jim Trelease, discusses in *The Read-Aloud Handbook*: "Because the vast majority of primary-school teachers are women, young boys often associate reading with women and schoolwork" (78). However, these books that are being advertised towards boys are not aiming to change the cultural problems that exist with gender inequity. As opposed to literature that aims to show boys and girls breaking gender boundaries, these books aim to fit the mold in a way with the belief

that the literature will be more marketable. On the other hand, books such as Jane Yolen's *Mightier Than The Sword* present tales "in which boys manage to win by using their wits, using their intelligence, or having good friends" (Yolen interview). She reflects on these stories saying, "Those were harder to find than the strong young women stories". However, there is an element of quality within these tales because they acknowledge the social problem and aim to use story to combat the issue of gender stereotyping.

Conclusively, there are two larger features that multicultural literature has to possess in order to be considered of true quality. First, the literature must have a sense of authenticity. There must be some sense of reality within the literature that is felt by the readers. That reality must also be approachable in that the reader can see themselves in the characters or at least be confronted by the differences between themselves and the characters. These characters cannot be other worldly or possess some characteristics that are unattainable for society as a whole. One poor example of this would be Spinelli's book *Maniac McGee* in which the main character is able to cross racial borders simply because he is color blind. Readers cannot connect to this because the fact is that we do not live in a color blind society and, indeed, we should not hope to live in one. African-American author Toni Morrison addresses the fact that we live in "a highly and historically racialized society" (qtd. in Wolf133). and quality multicultural literature shows these divides or what Cai refers to as "cultural borders". Additionally, the characters need to be individuals that are human in their roles and are not idolized or made to be super human. Professor of African American studies, Danielle McGuire, acknowledges this issue with the story of Rosa Parks: "I think maybe it's

because we like our heroes simple. The idea that a simple little seamstress just one day decided to refuse the rules and the walls of segregation came down is preposterous. But it allows us to worship her instead of emulate her" (qtd. in Spratling 3).

The second requirement in order to be quality multicultural literature is that in acknowledging the reality of our society and the reality of the writer's characters, there is also an understanding that this reality features social problems that can be changed and should be changed. Conflict has long been acknowledged as a crucial element in narrative literature and issues of diversity are often the source of conflict in quality multicultural literature. If solutions are proposed in the literature, they need to be solutions that are practical and do not simplify the issue or act as methods to ignore diversity. Truly great multicultural literature presents these issues and may not provide solutions but awaken a desire in the heart of the reader to act as an agent for change. The young adult author, Avi, reflects on this philosophy: "If you have a vision that the world was different than it is today, then you embrace the notion of change. If you accept the idea of change, then there is going to be change in the future and you become part of the process of change" (Avi interview). Authors can accomplish this in multiple ways and yet there is a warning to authors who write as advocates for change. Indeed, the problem for writing about a cause or social problem is that the focus may be on the cause as opposed to the strength of the actual literature. The approach to problems such as racism, classism, sexism, and other problems needs to be organic and the focus needs to be on humanity rather than satisfying a publishing need. When these elements are present, the literature can be identified as quality multicultural literature. Naturally, there are many more subtle

criteria and there are methods to accomplish these two larger goals. However, we can use these broader criterion to assess the literature for some aspect of quality and value.

How do they do that?

With the previously mentioned criteria for quality multicultural children's literature outlined, the next question is how does an author accomplish these objectives. As discussed, there are numerous pitfalls for an author of multicultural literature to fall into in their writing. However, there are also a few exemplary pieces in which authors have really propelled readers to consider their social realities and change their ways of thinking.

Quite possibly one of the easiest mistakes an author can make in their writing about multicultural themes is to present stereotypes in their story line and illustrations. By their very nature, stereotypes are not genuine and therefore do not represent reality. Regardless, there are still countless books on the market that do not only feature stereotypes, but even go so far as to rely on them in order for marketability. Even more dangerous is the fact that textbooks and history books in the classroom often perpetuate misinformation and inaccurate historical accounts that reinforce stereotypes. If teachers and parents want to align their curriculum with narrative text, then the search is on for books that match these stereotypes would appear logical, even reasonable perhaps. Professor James W. Loewen writes in his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me* about many of the historical inaccuracies that are presented in textbooks regarding Native Americans: "Our culture and our textbooks still stereotype Native Americans as roaming primitive hunting folk" (131) The

Native American community has in many ways been one of the greatest targets of perpetuated stereotypes and there are numerous children's books that reflect these inaccuracies. One of the most easily recognizable representations of this is Lynne Reid Bank's novel *The Indian in the Cupboard.* The book relies on various stereotypes of Native Americans as people that use broken English, love violence, live in teepees, and consistently wear traditional "Indian" clothing. The character of the Indian is in no way authentic and so the book does not give us a sense of reality. Not only does it fall short of the criteria of being genuine, but it actively accepts some of the worst generalizations that have been made regarding European and Native American relations throughout history. The story is essentially about a European boy that acts as a God for the unassuming Native American. The young boy must teach the Native American about the "advanced" world that to the Native American appears to be part of the future. The Native American is presented as a character worthy of pity and the story does not act as a reflection or call to action against ethnocentrism. Instead the novel tries to endear the reader to the young boy as someone saving and protecting the hopeless Native American living toy.

In contrast to the work of Banks, Naomi Shihab Nye effectively tries to challenge stereotypes in her collection of poetry titled *19 Varieties of Gazelle*. Indeed, she was inspired to write this piece after her grandmother's request to challenge the beliefs regarding Arab-Americans after 9/11: "Speak for me too. Say how much I hate it. Say this is not who we are." (qtd. in Bloem 8). After the events of 9/11 and the images that followed, the stereotype that emerged for many Americans was that Arab-Americans were a violent people. Nye instead writes about the daily activities of her family and friends and some of the

memories that she has of her culture and experiences. Each of the poems explores a wide range of emotion and examines the human experience through the lens of a Palestinian-American author and feels incredibly real to readers. These poems are multidimensional and stem away from the one-dimensional and stereotypical images that Nye and others have to work against. It is as Sims Bishop indicates for readers that "understanding our common humanity is a powerful weapon against the forces that would divide us and alienate us from another" (qtd. in Cai 121).

In addition to breaking from stereotypes in terms of representation, there is also a need for rich vocabulary and words in quality multicultural literature. The genre is loaded with often changing catchphrases that have been exploited by authors and publishers alike. Some of these words about diversity include "different", "unique", "special", or a variety of other synonyms. These books have a vocabulary with an agenda to try and force readers into a shallow acceptance of multiculturalism. Meanwhile, other books try the approach of multiculturalism in which we realize a universal human culture (although most of the time assumed to be reflective of white and middle class values) and discuss our similarities. There are buzzwords and clichés featured in this phenomenon as well. Mem Fox writes a book that acknowledges differences and similarities titled *Whoever You Are* in which these phrases are repeated consistently. Within thirty two pages of whimsical illustrations and limited vocabulary, the book makes a weak attempt to unite humanity and encourages the reader to accept multiculturalism. There is no reality within these pages though in terms of the vocabulary because it relies on overly used words and phrases.

Conversely, the book *Red Glass* by Laura Resau uses language creatively and

connects us to the characters and the relations these characters have with one another. As opposed to describing herself as "unique" and "special", the main character states that, "I always thought of myself as an amoeba, minding my own business…Not particularly noticed, definitely not appreciated, just an amoeba swimming around aimlessly" (9). Resau goes so far as to explain what the feeling of uniqueness can be like for an individual. Sometimes it is not something that is easily embraced. There are times in literature when members of various cultures have wrote about feeling disconnected if they find themselves surrounded by larger groups that connect to one another. Indeed, it is this emotion that connects the main character to the other outsider character in the novel. Additionally, their cultural exploration of one another seems to stem from this connection as well as an understanding of differences. Language that strikes the reader such as the "amoeba" metaphor will stick with people much more than words that have been almost habitually heard by readers in various other books. Therefore, the language plays a large part in the quality of the book as well.

Not only does the uniqueness and strength of the words influence the quality of the literature, but the accurate portrayal of language usage is also important. To be sure, this accuracy in language is a huge component of the larger goal of a multicultural book to be reflective of reality. For example, the usage of racial slurs in our society has a long and painful history and there are rampant discussions about the usage of the word "nigger" by both white and black individuals happening currently. Some books have been banned for usage of this word and cannot be found in classrooms. Regardless of the fact that this word was used regularly through our history as a tool to oppress and dehumanize African

Americans, the shelves of many classrooms seem to be devoid of the subject matter. True multicultural quality literature though takes a look at language as an extension of power and oppression. One wonderful example of this sort of exploration can be found in the book *Elijah of Buxton* by Christopher Paul Curtis. During a scene in this story, the main character begins using the word "nigger" much to the disappointment of another character named Mr. Leroy. Mr. Leroy begins to question Elijah's decision to use the word: "How you gunn call them children in that school and you'self that name them white folks calls us? Has you lost your natural mind? You wants to be like one n'em? You wants to be keeping they hate alive?" (96). There is an acknowledgement of language and the power it has to establish cultural lines and hatred. Racism and the usage of racial epithets are connected and Curtis explores this without hesitancy. As a reader, we can react to this language strongly coming from various cultures and our reactions can lead to a discussion and discussions can lead to growth and change. Not only can the racial slurs be considered, but also the dialogue of the characters. The language must be authentic and the speech must reflect the oral traditions of a particular culture. Multicultural literature that presents language in its most beautiful and crudest forms, and yet consistently honest, is of significant value and quality.

Before we begin to analyze how the use of plot and conflict can also influence the quality of multicultural literature, it is important to reiterate that there are a variety of types of multicultural children's literature. Earlier the provided second criteria for multicultural literature is that it awakens the realization by the reader that there is a social issue at stake that requires action or at the very least a reflection. However, some multicultural literature,

especially neutral books, is not directly focused on issues of diversity and multiculturalism. Some multicultural children's books are intended for entertainment and not encouragement for social advocacy. Notable authors in the field of children's literature such as Newberry and John Locke were of the belief that "youngsters should enjoy reading" (47). Certainly if all books were written with the intent for social action, then we would sadly face something similar to the phenomenon of the 1990s when lesser quality books were being rapidly produced with the singular goal to address social issues of the time. Then the consideration needs to be how multicultural children's literature of this sort still influences the society that we live within and how it causes us to reflect on some of the issues of multiculturalism. A great example of this would be the previously mentioned *Snowy Day* by Keats. The story is a simple tale of a child experiencing the adventures of a traditional snow day and features little to no conflict. However this is a deeply appreciated book because of its simplicity and the fact that it does not address social problems through the story. Instead, the act of writing a book with a child of color having a universal experience that is so often presented in children's books, is an action against the social problem of underrepresentation of minorities in multicultural children's literature.

However, there are books in the field that speak more directly to the issues we face as a society in regards to diversity. These culturally specific books also have a set of criteria that makes them ineffective and others truly groundbreaking. As has already been discussed, one of the issues that often arises with these types of books is mass production of low quality books. As issues get brought to the forefront of our society, publishers and authors acknowledge

the market for these books. Although this problem can occur, we are lucky enough as readers to have access to wonderful literature that addresses these issues with candor and poignancy.

One of the greatest examples of this literature is *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan which analyzes the various racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic divisions that the main character experiences. It is not an easy read by any stretch of the imagination and there are no simple solutions to the problems presented in the story. This story explores the experience of a character who goes from living life as the daughter of a rich rancher in Mexico all the way to living as a field worker in America. The story is full of corruption and the oppression of women and there is no simple solution to the legal land disputes that will influence the rest of the character's life. There is depth in the final lines of the story that state we should "never be afraid to start over"(253). The final statement carries numerous implications such as the acceptance of one's culture and identity. However, there is also the question of assimilation into a new culture and the acceptance of the way things are as opposed to revolution. There is clearly a reason that the book has won the Jane Addams award which is given to literature that "promotes the cause of peace, social justice, world community, and the equality of the sexes and all races". The book challenges readers to consider inequality and oppression and how it influences all of our identities. The journey that Esperanza makes across the "river", or more figuratively the cultural borders, allows readers regardless of their own socioeconomic background to connect to this young girl. The representations of the cultures and various forms of oppression are realistic and accessible to the reader. Her sense of losing identity and finding herself in a new culture is one that is felt by

many. The plot of the story and the ending that leaves us with more questions than answers is used effectively in order to move readers towards reflection and social advocacy.

How many words are in a picture?

The proper utilization of these literary tools to accomplish the goals of presenting reality and inspiring change is crucial to creating a quality piece of multicultural children's literature. However, the illustrations are also important to consider when looking for quality. Coincidentally, many of the same things that we assess the writing for transfers to the assessment for the quality of the illustrations. We must examine the illustrations of characters and settings for any overt stereotypes as well as accurate representations of culture. Additionally the art must be rich and unique, which is the same criteria we have for the vocabulary of the written element. The artwork must add to the plot in expressing the social and emotional reactions that are at play within the story. There needs to exist a cohesiveness between the text and the pictures within multicultural children's books and for that matter all children's books. In other words, the artwork needs to actively communicate messages to the reader as opposed to being a supplementary addition to the work.

Unfortunately, the representation of multicultural characters in children's book illustrations has been done rather ineffectively throughout the years. In some books, each character is represented as a stock figure with nothing to differentiate one another with the exception of skin tone. These books aim to say something about the value of diversity, but they accomplish quite the opposite. Many of the manners and friendship books put out by the author P.K. Hallinan do this such as *Heartprints* and *A*

Rainbow of Friends. The illustrations feature almost identical pen drawings of boys and girls that are simply filled in with watercolor washes of varying colors. The features are cartoonish and the hair lends itself more to the traditional look of Euro-Americans. Contrast this to the artwork of the Caldecott winning book, *All the World,* that is illustrated by Marla Frazee. There are countless characters in here with unique facial expressions and facial features. These characters are each engaging in their individuality and we as readers find ourselves connecting to the story and its story of a human experience. Additionally, the characters do not adhere to the horrific stereotypical images that have been found in books such as *Little Black Sambo* and *The Three Golliwogs.* Both of these books feature Jim Crow imagery of African Americans with wide white eyes, broad noses, and exaggerated red lips. While we are more cognizant of this sort of imagery in modern publishing, there are still some controversial items to consider when choosing imagery for multicultural imagery. For instance, Faith Ringold's Caldecott Honor winning award book *Tar Beach* features African Americans eating fried chicken and watermelon. These stereotypes have been presented in African American history in the United States and yet the author and illustrator, Ringold, is an African American. While this book is award winning and the illustrations add a richness to the story, it is possible to still debate whether the usage of these images was appropriate in her children's book. Naturally, the discussion regarding stereotypes and accurate representation for culture through images is just as riddled with conflicting information as the discussion regarding the written portion of the literature.

Equally important in evaluating the quality of the illustrations is their use of

visual elements to bring something to the story that is unique to the piece of literature. As language and words must be rich in their inimitable story telling ability, so must the use of these elements in the literature. However, in terms of multiculturalism within the illustrations of the children's literature, there is quite a lot to consider about these elements. For instance, each culture has a very different artistic heritage to bring to the literature. Additionally, the symbols we all use with line, color, and texture carry different meanings in different cultures. In terms of media used, some of the most beautiful printmaking images can be found within African American children's literature. The Harlem Renaissance saw a surge of printmaking by artists that were concerned with presenting the black aesthetic in art. As this history has influenced the African American tradition, it has reappeared in the illustrations of children's books. Even artists such as Brian Pinkney utilize painting techniques in books such as *The Faithful Friend* that give the appearance of printmaking. Likewise, the white illustrator Rachel Isadora pays homage to this tradition with the juxtaposition of black and white silhouettes in her Caldecott Honor winning book, *Ben's Trumpet.* The depth of these images and the way they bring modern and unique understanding to historically rich techniques is crucial to the appreciation of these pieces as quality illustrations.

If we take a step further than the media utilized though, there is the more subtle consideration of the use of design in multicultural images. For example some of the textures and layout decisions made by American picture books have been shown to misrepresent Japanese culture. Japanese professor of children's literature, Junko Yukota Lewis, has assisted others in pointing out illustrations that feature characters wearing kimonos and eating food

prepared in ways that are only suitable for the deceased (21). It isn't that these illustrators are necessarily relying on stereotypes or even being lazy in their cultural research. The issue is that these cultural subtleties regarding customs are difficult to be aware of unless one is completely immersed in the culture being presented. As always, we have to make sure that no matter how richly beautiful the illustrations are, they are first and foremost presented in an accurate manner.

Who has the know-how and the say-how?

By now the writing has stressed the value of accuracy in multicultural children's literature. We have discussed what deems children's literature as multicultural and also the ways in which these pieces of work can recognized as quality literature. In both of these discussions, we acknowledge that depicting the realities of society and culture should be the primary goal of multicultural children's literature. The question now is who determines exactly what reality is and whose reality are we depicting. Not only that, but can someone from outside a culture provide the sensitivity as a writer and artist to present the realities of those from a different cultural group? These questions strike at the heart of what the purpose of multicultural literature aims to accomplish. This is not only a question of the writer's purpose in multicultural children's literature, but also about what the role of a writer is in literature.

Essentially the opinions regarding the question of an author's authenticity fall on a spectrum between two extremes. There are those of the belief that only those of the culture should produce literature regarding that culture. For example, some writers such as August Wilson believe that "Someone who does not share the specifics of a culture remains an outsider, no matter

how astute a student or how well-meaning their intentions" (A25). In particular, many proponents of the black aesthetic believe that the African American experience can only be retold by African Americans. Along this same line, there is the belief of some that authors have a social responsibility to write about their own culture. However, many reject this belief because this social responsibility is often only placed on the shoulders of people of color as opposed to white authors. This is due to the lack of authors of color in the multicultural children's literature canon and yet one can see the added stresses that an author of color must face in writing multicultural literature. Professor and writer Violet Harris argues that "authors of color are often viewed as representatives of their racial identity" (qtd. in Short and Fox 12) and one can only see the downfalls of this sort of reaction to multicultural literature.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, some authors see this as limiting and feel frustrated by the belief that their authorial freedom is restricted. An even further extreme is the possibility that there are actual benefits to an author writing outside of their own culture. After all, any member of a particular culture will take for granted some of their norms until the explore the differing norms of a different culture. Is it possible that writers outside of a culture can more adequately write on these subtleties because they do not take them for granted. Rochman very briefly insinuates this sort of thinking when wondering, "Would an American reader be confused by something I [as an individual from South Africa] take for granted?" (22). Additionally, some people believe that the very purpose of literature is to develop empathy with others. Roger Sutton very dramatically states in one of his articles, "If we cannot reach beyond the bounds of race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, and class, literature is useless"

(158). Regardless of whether or not there are benefits for reading literature from an author of a different culture than the one presented, there is no doubt that many authors do feel the desire for freedom in writing about our world on a larger scale.

Coincidentally, this argument is also one in which the author of the viewpoints must be considered. It would not be over reaching to acknowledge that the former argument that authors should write about their own culture has traditionally been proposed by authors of color. Meanwhile, the argument for authorial freedom has often been fought for by white authors. One of the proposed reasons for this revolves around the idea of white privilege and white authors not being familiar with their societal advantages. There is a strong social danger that is present in the debates regarding authenticity in children's multicultural literature. It is one that many authors and professors are warning us as readers about by reflecting on their experiences as authors of color. Consider for a moment the power that white authors have had established for years in the ability to write about individuals from cultures outside of their own. It is a phenomenon that has existed since the 19th century of slave narratives written by white writers. Then consider the history of authors of color who have been subjected to expectations of readers to present themselves as fitting into the role that white authors have presented. The Native American novelist, Louis Owens reflects on the work of multicultural children's author, Sherman Alexie and his own experiences, "What do Euro-American readers want to see in works by American Indian authors? They want what they have always wanted […] Indians who are romantic, unthreatening, and self-destructive" (47).

This power struggle in which white authors set the standards for all cultures and

authors of color must adhere to these standards in order to be published is fearful. It is unjust and cruel and leads to the silencing of minorities and disallows authors of color to validate their experiences. This pattern leads to what the educational theorist Lisa Delpit refers to as the "silenced dialogue". One can see with that image how a world in which individual authors only write about their own culture would be preferable. After all, the ones truly being experiencing disservice by this standard will be the white authors who have had the freedom and encouragement of writing outside of their culture for centuries. However, there are writers of color that express disappointment in this proposition as well. Consider the fact that no advancements will necessarily occur if we are limited to writing about our own culture. African American literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes "Our histories, individual and collective, do affect what we wish to write and what we are able to write. But that relation is never one of fixed determinism. No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world" (qtd. in Short and Fox 10) Clearly we cannot benefit as a society by placing ourselves at either end of the spectrum. We have to take a look at the deeper issue. Once again, the multicultural children's literary canon as a whole makes us reflect as a society on our social problems.

Authenticity cannot be decided by the publishers who decide to give into the stereotypes that sell what parents and teachers and students have come to expect. As consumers, we cannot fault individuals such as Sherman Alexie that provide text that feeds into these stereotypes regarding his culture. We as a society need to open the dialogue regarding all forms of diversity and culture in order to lead to a change in

authenticity in the field. If any author desires to write about cultures outside of our own, then first and foremost there needs to be reasonable intentions in doing so. The problem is that we as a society are feeding into the monetary needs of publishers that are providing inauthentic and low quality literature. We need to be more discerning as a society and teach our students how to look at literature more critically. The need for cultural sensitivity is growing and our literature will improve when this is acknowledged. As readers, we have to read from diverse writers with various experiences and styles. The accurate representation of unique literature belonging to authors of similar backgrounds will keep us from relying on a small amount of authors to stand for the entire culture in which they belong. We must end the belief in the "death-of-the-author" literary criticism. This belief does not acknowledge or respect that authors are very real people that belong to a culture with a very real history. The "death-of-the-author" model only acts to silence the dialogue that so desperately needs to occur. As learners of all cultures, we need to talk to others about their life experiences and challenge our previous held beliefs about members of various cultures. We have to also challenge our own cultural values by talking to those within our own culture. These are lofty goals and we as a society face some norms and standards that will be hard to fight against. However, the fight is important in order to create a world in which authenticity is valued above all else and writers of all different backgrounds can grow in their ability to reflect and write about all cultures.

How do we go about all this?

As educators and parents, the question now is what to do with this information. More importantly, what are we to do with all of this conflicting information that leaves us with more questions rather than answers. Now that we have opened the discussion on what multicultural literature we desire for our children and for our own enjoyment, how do we go about exposing it to our youth? In the home, some parents may decide to read aloud to their child or read the book together and discuss it. Others may decide to provide the literature to the child and allow them to read it independently and the book may not be discussed in the family. In the classroom, similar choices are made. The teacher may read a book out loud to the entire class and elicit a discussion or simply request a written individual response. Children may have their independent reading that they pick individually and do not discuss these books with other classmates unless they bring it up naturally. We may have literary circles where groups of students read different books and talk about their reading in smaller settings. There is a number of ways to present wonderful multicultural literature to students and children and we have to consider what our goals are in providing these types of books.

We have already discussed the importance in providing students with the ability to critically look at their literature. However, many educators may be wondering what critical analysis looks like in lower elementary grades. These are the grades in which teachers can begin to model looking at books and showing what makes a good book. We can talk about the cultures being presented and have small discussions about how we as individual class members experience the norms discussed in the book. It is important not to make generalizations in these discussions, but to grow in our

understandings of each other as individuals at a very young age. After all, each individual is a unique combination of diverse cultures that sometimes compliment and other times contrast one another. When students get in upper elementary grades, then teachers and parents may want to show students low quality literature and begin talking more deeply about culture values. Our students are the future consumers of literature for themselves and their future children and so we must model how to talk openly about culture and to look for quality in multicultural children's literature.

However, on this quest for quality, there still needs to be the acknowledgement that we want students to be excited about reading. After all, some students do find themselves engaged in what many of us would consider low quality literature. In particular, the *Goosebumps* series has engaged numerous boys and yet the books are not of particular literary merit and the series is quite formulaic. As long as the literature does not rely on stereotypes or reinforce them, then it may take time for students to consider the merit of the vocabulary in their reading. Luckily, this develops over time and we must concern ourselves with showing students books that interest them in order to make them avid readers. We are even more fortunate in that quality books and books that are popular are not always contradictory and in fact often coincide.

After all is said and done though and we are attempting as a society to achieve these goals and as teachers we are striving to provide the best for our students, what really is the point of multicultural literature? We have established what it is and what the best forms of it aim to provide for readers. The fight about who can write it has been argued and finally we have talked about how to use it. Now we reach the existential question of why do we even care about this literature.

What is it about multicultural children's literature that has everyone in an uproar and has authors writing some of the most passionate work that has ever been read by child and adult audiences alike? I very humbly present a reason that is diverse as the literature that has been discussed. To each of us, the purpose of multicultural children's literature is incredibly different. We all need to consider though that our childhood is very formative in the believes we have as adults and so children's literature has quite a bit of strength. However, for many the purpose of writing and reading multicultural children's literature will be providing role models that one can relate to and readers having these available for them. Others desire to explore a culture separate from their own and so will write and about their experiences. The readers of these books will benefit in learning about the cultural journey that their author has traveled. More than anything though, the author Dasenbrock states that these books "will cause us to come face-to-face with our own values in a way that will either cause those values to change or […] become more aware of them and more reflective of their value" (700). The reason why we care so much about multicultural children's literature is because of the power of the genre. It is literature aimed towards the future of our society and presents the values of our society and various cultures. Multicultural children's literature acts not only as a reflection of our current state of affairs, but also as a catalyst for societal change and revolution. If we begin to see multicultural children's literature as such, then we as educators and a society can work together more cohesively in bettering the quality of the literature and consequently the multicultural quality of our lives.

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