Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 19
Issue 1 *Relevance*

Article 12

1-1-2003

Books that Make a Difference: Finding the Relevant and Critical Texts for Today's Classrooms

Toby Kahn-Loftus
Michigan Schools in the Middle

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm

Recommended Citation
Kahn-Loftus, Toby (2003) "Books that Make a Difference: Finding the Relevant and Critical Texts for Today's Classrooms," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 12.
Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1282

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Books that Make a Difference: Finding the Relevant and Critical Texts for Today's Classrooms

Toby Kahn-Loftus
Michigan Schools in the Middle

Reading scores, reading methods, reading strategies, reading programs, reading mandates...our current list of reading "musts and shalls" goes on and on. Teachers in Michigan, and throughout America, have been inundated for years with a myriad of reading agendas from every conceivable perspective imaginable. When whole language and authentic literacy gradually gained ground in the 1980's, basal publishers recognized what they needed to do to stay in business. Now English language arts teachers often have anthologies to use in their classrooms that consist of collections of wonderful poetry, good literature, and captivating nonfiction, whole pieces of great texts from prominent authors. Compared to the basal readers and boxed programs of the past, these new anthologies are big improvements. Nevertheless, the foundation textbooks available in the core content areas are often unable to provide the diversity of texts, topics, issues, and genres that teachers desire when building a critical classroom curriculum.

The teaching challenges of today are fierce. Knowledgeable teachers know that one textbook, no matter what the content area, cannot furnish all of the critical texts that are necessary to address the demands of our constantly expanding curricula, nor the challenges of our constantly changing world. As a literacy teacher and consultant, one of my primary goals is to find powerful, critical and engaging texts for the middle school classroom. My research has unearthed numerous selections of young adult literature, engaging nonfiction and exquisitely illustrated short stories (picture books) that enhance and enlarge middle school and secondary curricula, as well as address the varied needs of our adolescent readers.

Engaging adolescent literature and poetry, along side provocative expository texts, are the perfect resources for exploring the many issues of critical literacy: justice, equity, race, gender, and access in our democratic society. The text suggestions that follow can provide numerous opportunities for rich classroom dialogue, powerful composition, and intense small group discussions. These book are excellent sources for shared and guided reading, strategic character analysis, provocative journal topics and vivid class research. Most importantly, these are the texts that capture the imaginations and the emotions of our adolescent readers, the authors that bring our students into what Frank Smith calls the "literacy club." The kinds of texts that help turn our young people into life-long, independent readers.

Here are just a few of the titles I've recently discovered in my search for powerful texts that teachers can use to confront the issues of critical literacy in today's classrooms. Because I work with teachers across the curriculum, my interests have broadened beyond the language arts. I include here texts that inspire authentic, curriculum integration and address critical literacy issues across content areas.

They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War by
De Anne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook

Blanton and Cook's newly published history is a must for teachers of American History. Their research has produced evidence "of about 250 women soldiers in the ranks of the Union and Confederate armies." (Page 7) This text is full of powerful and descriptive primary sources that tell the true story of these women soldiers. Like the excerpt that helped name the book from the letter home to a father by an Illinois infantryman, Sgt. Robert Ardry wrote, "They fought like demons, and we cut them down like dogs...I saw 3 or 4 rebel women soldiers in the heap of bodies." (Page 19) This powerful text

ends with a discussion of the changing historical perspective of American women soldiers, explaining how and when these recorded histories were changed and eventually left out of American history books for decades.

Freedom: A History of Us by Joy Hakim.

Joy Hakim is the prize-winning author of the wonderful ten-volume American history series written for a middle school audience, *A History of Us*. In this new text *Freedom*, Hakim takes her readers from colonial America to post-September 11, 2001 and prompts us to question our rich and often troubling history and to ponder what it takes to build and maintain a democracy. This colorful text is full of hundreds of superb illustrations, sidebars and historical documents.Additionally, this text is the companion to the PBS series airing in January of 2003 from Kunhardt Productions.

All Times, All Peoples: A World History of Slavery by Milton Meltzer, illustrated by Leonard Fisher

I'm often stunned by how few teachers I meet have ever heard of this effective text. In sixty accessible pages, accompanied by stunning black and white illustrations from the award winning artist Leonard Fisher, Meltzer traces the history of slavery from the ancient tribes of Mesopotamia to the slave labor that has followed us into the twenty-first century. This text is an excellent resource for thematic teaching and provocative writing. It provides a superb opportunity to help students take a "long view" of several topics surrounding issues of justice, power, wealth, and war.

The Birchbark House by Louise Erdrich.

I discovered this book when I heard an interview with Louise Erdrich on National Public Radio. Erdrich, who usually writes for adults, was explaining her motivation for this Ojibwa story of Indian life that existed in the Minnesota north when the white settlers arrived in the 1800"s. Discussing the cultural disconnect she felt growing up around the *Little House on the Prairie* mentality, Erdrich explained to the radio audience, "I wanted to tell the Ojibwa story of the 1800's, and describe what happened when the Indians heard the sound of Pa's ax clanging in the woods." This rich and memorable story is filled with Ojibwa language and was built upon Erdrich's research of her own family history from Madeline Island in Lake Superior.

Come Back, Salmon by Molly Cone, photographs by Sidnee Wheelwright

This Sierra Book Club text is a photographic journey of environmental awareness that ends in an ecological miracle. An elementary school in Everett, Washington takes a two-year journey to reclaim and clean up the damaged creek that runs through their community. It took more than two years, but success belonged to these dedicated students and teachers when in 1986 the salmon returned to spawn in Pigeon Creek. The photographs of Sidnee Wheelwright make this story come alive and it's a wonderful example of how a small group of dedicated folks can create an environmental miracle. This text is a great vehicle to delve into environmental issues of pollution and steps groups can take toward social action.

If the World Were a Village: A Book About the World's People by David J. Smith, illistrated by Shelagh Armstrong

This is one of those texts that I describe as a "whole curriculum" in one book. With rich illustrations and accessible language, this text tells the story of our world and people as one global village. Smith writes, "what if we imagined the whole population of the world as a village of 100 people? In this imaginary village, each person would represent about 62 million people from the real world." (Page 7) From there, Smith takes us on a journey to understand issues of access, power, resources and language. His closing pages are an explanation of what he calls "world-mindedness" where he tells

teachers and parents how to connect our students' lives to communities in other parts of the planet. This text will inspire some extraordinary research and world connections for every student.

It's Our World, Too! Stories of Young People Who Are Making a Difference by Phillip Hoose

To me this text is a classic, but I've found that it's new to many of my colleagues. In *It's Our World, Too!* Hoose provides a step-by-step guide for young people to become politically and socially active. He begins with fifteen inspiring stories of adolescents who took a stand and made a difference in their own community. From there he tells us how to get started and identifies ten tools for change like letter writing, petitions, boycotts, and influencing political elections. This book is a must for any democratic classroom where student voices are valued and teaching students the power of language is a reality.

Patrol: An American Soldier in Vietnam by Walter Dean Myers, illustrated with collages by Ann Grifalconi.

This exquisite new illustrated story-poem is an excellent addition to the language arts classroom, as well as classes that study American history or cultures in conflict around the world. Myers continues to amaze us with his writing in so many genres. His simple, yet compelling text, takes us into the life of a young soldier who comes face to face with the enemy in a foreign land. Juxtaposed with Grifalconi's evocative collages this book is a must for the middle school classroom. *Patrol* is a rich resource for writing responses, class discussions and as a doable writing model for young adolescents.

Zulu Dog by Anton Ferreira

This new piece of adolescent literature takes place in post-apartheid South Africa where a young Zulu boy and his dog become friends with the daughter of a white farmer. Ferreira paints a rich detailed story of Zulu tribal life, as well as a realistic view of the ongoing inequities and racial tensions that abound in South Africa. This is vivid novel that will help young readers engage in rich discussion, develop new cultural insights and investigate critical historical events.

Before We Were Free by Julia Alvarez

This new piece of historical fiction by Julia Alvarez takes place in her birth place, the Dominican Republic. Alvarez tells the story of a twelve-year - old girl in the 1960's who becomes increasingly aware of the political situation in which she lives. Eventually the main character is able to escape a repressive dictatorship. As Alvarez explains in her author's notes at the end of the text: "There is a tradition in Latin America countries known as *testimonio*. It is the responsibility of those who survive the struggle for freedom to give testimony. To tell the story in order to keep alive the memory of those who died."

The titles above are just a sampling of the numerous, powerful texts available for teaching critical issues in today's classrooms. How fortunate we are that the shelves of American bookstores are teaming with historical fiction, environmental nonfiction, and rich adolescent literature that address so many of the critical issues in today's world. The number of diverse authors and texts grows larger everyday. As Frank Smith states, "teachers are the keepers of the books," and it is up to each of us to find the right author for every student and the critical texts for every curriculum. As we face another century in a world filled with global tensions and cultural conflicts, it is crucial that we continue to bring the stories of the struggles and dignity of the world's people into our American classrooms.

Works Cited

Alvarez, Julia. *Before We Were Free.* New York: Random House, 2002.

Blanton, DeAnne, and Cook, Lauren M. *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002.

Cone, Molly. *Come back, Salmon.* San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1992.

Erdrich, Lousie. *The Birchbark House.* New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1999. First Scholastic printing, September 2000.

Ferreira, Anton. *Zulu Dog.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

Hakim, Joy. *Freedom: A History of Us.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Hoose, Phillip. *It's Our World, Too! Stories of Young People Who Are Making A Difference.* Canada: Little, Brown and Company, 1993.

Meltzer, Milton. *All Times, All Peoples: A World History of Slavery.* New York: Harper Collins, 1980.

Myers, Walter Dean, and Grifalconi, Ann. *Patrol: An American Soldier in Vietnam.* New York: Harper Collins, 2002.

Smith, David, and Armstrong, Shelagh. *If the World Were a Village: A Book About the World's People.* Toronto, Ontario: Kids Can Press, 2002.

Smith, Frank. *Joining the Literacy Club: Further Essays into Education.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988.