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A Closer Look: Children's and Young Adult Literature

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A Closer Look: Children's and Young Adult Literature

by Kristin McIlhagga, Ph.D.

Empowering Teachers by Disrupting Texts

I have had the privilege of teaching and learning with teacher candidates for the past 10 years. I often tell them that they give me hope for our profession. Each week they come to class with questions, concerns, and an earnestness to become teachers that positively impact children's lives. During a class discussion last October, one of my students looked me in the eye and asked with a quavering voice, "How are we supposed to do this Dr. Mac?! There is so much to think about—the curriculum that someone else mandates, standardized testing, state standards, school-wide initiatives! How are we supposed to do all of that AND meet the needs of individual students?!" A chorus of voices followed with similar concerns, questions, and near-desperation for answers. They were recognizing all of the outside forces that are pushing into classrooms that aren't always best for students. They were feeling disempowered, as are many teachers who have been in the classroom for years. We talked a lot about our "sphere of influence" but I couldn't stop thinking about how I could support them to begin to navigate the many layers and forces that they would encounter in this profession without losing their passion for it.

Fast forward to the 2018 National Convention of Teachers of English convention in Dallas. The best session that I attended was by the #DisruptTexts team of teachers Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Dr. Kimberly Parker, and Julia Torres. I had seen some of their conversations on Twitter and wanted to learn more. According to their website (www.disrupttexts.org),

Disrupt Texts is a crowdsourced, grass roots effort *by teachers for teachers* to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve. It is part of our mission to aid and develop teachers committed to anti-racist/anti-bias teaching pedagogy and practices ("#DisruptTexts", n.d., para. 1).



**Kristin
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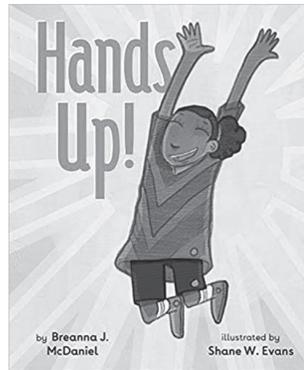
Though their presentation was focused on texts in middle and high school English classrooms, as they spoke, I realized how applicable it was to all grade levels (including college). While elementary teachers may not think that there is a canon of literature like there is at the high school level, I argue that there is very much a canon of picturebooks and lesson plans that have been taught over and over again (e.g., *Chicka-Chicka-Boom Boom*). The power of #DisruptTexts is a framework that supports a tangible way for teachers to have power in their sphere of influence. It won't look the same for everyone and will take time and effort, but choosing texts that support anti-racist and anti-bias pedagogy is a start. We must consider the drawbacks (unintended or intended) along with the benefits. For those teachers who are mandated to teach specific texts, consider adding other texts to represent other perspectives and experiences.

The books reviewed in this volume all represent stories and voices that disrupt stereotypes and single stories. For those of you on Twitter, be sure to check out the #DisruptTexts slow chats each week. For additional book titles, check out socialjusticebooks.org and the We Are KidLit summer reading lists found at <https://wtpsite.wordpress.com/>.

Kristin

Hands Up!

by Breanna J. McDaniel,
illustrated by
Shane W. Evans
Dial Books for Young
Readers
2019
ISBN: 978-0-525-55231-4
32 pgs, Grade PK-2



Hands Up! by debut author Breanna J. McDaniel is a celebration of a young Black girl’s joy as she grows up surrounded by love and encouragement. That joy is communicated beginning with the front cover which features the main character Viv leaping with both arms up, eyes closed, a wide grin, and sun beams radiating from behind her. McDaniel’s lilting text begs to be read aloud and the repetitive “hands up” invites listeners to join their own voices with Viv’s joy.

This chronological story starts with Viv as a baby, lifting her “hands up” to get dressed, play peek-a-boo, clean up, and fix her hair. Readers see Viv grow in size, age, and sophistication as she goes to school, learns to ride a bike, dance, worship, play basketball, and protest—all with “hands up.” Ballerina Misty Copeland, the first African American Female Principal Dancer with the American Ballet Theater is referenced as Viv dances in her ballet class, “Graceful like Ms. Misty.”

The only time that both Viv’s hands aren’t up in the air is when she has fallen from her bike. Visibly shaken, she is looking down with tears on her face, but still reaches up to the encouraging adult saying, “It’s all right, baby girl, I’ll help, hands up.” Showing Viv at times when she needs others to help her up reminds readers that while life may not always be joyful, people who love us help us to get back up.

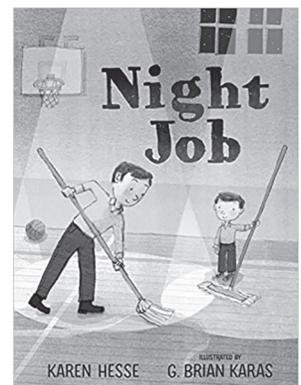
Shane Evans’s illustrations show her being supported by loving grownups that could be interpreted as parents and grandparents. The ambiguity of their identities enhances the story by allowing for multiple interpretations of what constitutes family. Evans’s

digital multimedia brings in a variety of subtle but rich textures that add a visual multidimensionality throughout the book. The bright yet subtle colors throughout always include yellows and greens, colors associated with joy and life.

The final double-page spread shows Viv along with a crowd of people with hands up holding signs of protest and support. Sun rays shine down upon them from the upper right side of the page, while all of the people are facing the left, insinuating movement beyond the confines of the story and physical book. Be sure to read notes from the author and the artist to learn about the inspiration for the book.

Night Job

by Karen Hesse, illustrated
by G. Brian Karas
Candlewick Press
2018
ISBN: 978-0-7636-6238-7
32 pgs, Grade PK-4



Night Job is the story of a young child’s Friday night adventure going to work with their father, a custodian at a middle school. Told in first person by the child, this book reclaims the often-scary night time by making it a special time of bonding. Hesse’s sensory-rich text combined with Karas’s gentle illustrations invite readers to slow down and linger in this book. It also begs extended conversations about how schools and our communities stay clean, and what goes on in the world while many of us are asleep.

The story begins on the title page with panels showing the child making sandwiches and leaving home with their father. They head into the night on a motorcycle (wearing helmets of course!) over a “darkening bay” and park in “our spot,” arriving at a school where Dad is a custodian. Karas’s use of small square, framed panels reveals unique details, and together they show passage of time as father and child move from space to space in

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the school. As they travel from gym to cafeteria to stage, a baseball game soundtrack plays from a radio. They break for sandwiches in a courtyard before heading to the library where Dad begins cleaning again while the child lays down on a sofa, saying “I read to him until I fall asleep.” The adventure ends with a celebratory ride across the “brightening bay, two of us airborne, hooting” as morning sun begins illuminating the day.

The adventure comes full circle as four panels show the motorcycle “glide silently into our spot.” The same language of parking in “our spot” at the school insinuates that this Friday night adventure is a part of a beloved routine for the father/child pair. Rich, creamy, matte paper, and subdued colors throughout add to the sense of calm that comes with a nighttime ritual.

The Firefly Letters: A Suffragette's Journey to Cuba

by Margarita Engle
Henry Holt and Company, LLC
2010 ISBN 9780805090826
151 pgs, Grade 5 and up

*Guest Review by Carolina
Frederick, Oakland University*

In *The Firefly Letters*, Margarita Engle transports readers to Cuba, which she describes “as one of God’s most beautiful creations—an island of eternal summer” (p. 69). *The Firefly Letters* tells the story of Cecilia, a pregnant slave, Elena, the master’s daughter, and Fredrika, the free-spirited feminist from Sweden who gave up her wealth to roam and write. Fredrika documents her observations of the island and falls in love with exotic fruits of sapote, mamey, mango, and tamarind. Unless you have tried these fruits, it is difficult to imagine their juicy sweetness and unique flavors. Engle could almost be writing a travel blog inviting readers to Cuba to enjoy the lush gardens, moonlit beaches, and lying in a hammock if it were not for the slavery. As a child who spent summers in Mexico, this book transported me back to chasing fireflies, or luciergas in the evening hours.



I am reminded of life in Mexico where it is very common to have household help. Usually the maids, cooks, and nannies are indigenous women. Although not slaves, their freedoms are limited; their lives limited by time, lack of resources and education, prejudice and racism. Fredrika asks, “Do they ever wonder about the slaves who chop the cane that sweetens their tea?” (p. 143). Do we ever wonder about the immigrant who willingly works in the fields to harvest the crops, who works 12-hour days as a cook, who works at construction, landscaping, or driving a cab?

“We go out at night to rescue fireflies” (p. 37), states Cecilia. In this book, not even the fireflies are free as women tie them to dresses as ornaments, and “girls weave them into their hair like flashing jewels.” Fredrika, Cecilia, Elena, and Beni explore the meaning of freedom and what they are willing to give in order to obtain it. Engle exemplifies that man cannot enjoy beauty in the world while others are not free to do the same.

Make Lemonade

by Virginia Euwer Wolff
Henry Holt and Company, LLC
1993
ISBN 13:978-0-8050-8070-4
212 pgs, Grade 9 and up

*Guest Review by Alyssa Silver,
Oakland University*

Virginia Euwer Wolff’s novel, *Make Lemonade*, is a heartbreaking story of the hardships of poverty and the importance of family to overcome obstacles. Wolff’s use of free verse told in first person point of view by LaVaughn provides multiple ways for readers to connect with the main character.

Fourteen-year-old LaVaughn decided years ago that she was going to college despite, “This word college is in my house, and you have to walk around it in the rooms like furniture” (p. 122). Her mom’s response to LaVaughn’s ambition is “nobody in this building—went



to college, nobody in my family” (p. 123). LaVaughn who is in disbelief that no one in “64 apartments” has ever gone to college, sets out on a mission to achieve her goal through hard work and constant reminders from her mom about being diligent.

Needing a paying job to help her get out of the projects and into college, LaVaughn accepts a job babysitting the two children of 17-year-old Jolly. The story juxtaposes Jolly’s despair and loneliness with LaVaughn’s ambition supported by her mother. LaVaughn describes her mom as “big,” meaning a big presence, someone who has always been a steady presence in her life, supporting her throughout. Jolly does not have the support of a parent and admits to living in boxes in the past. She repeatedly says, “I can’t do it alone” (p. 7), a phrase LaVaughn is not accustomed to. LaVaughn’s mother is her rock, supporting her through her words and actions, a presence Jolly is lacking.

LaVaughn’s plan to save money for her future is jeopardized by Jolly losing her job and her inability to pay LaVaughn. She grapples with the decision to babysit Jolly’s children for free as a show of belief, which means sacrificing her need to earn money for college. LaVaughn wants to help and support Jolly the way LaVaughn’s mom has taught her. In the end, *Make Lemonade* is an inspiring story of how one loving and supportive individual can change the course of a life.

The Storm Runner

by J.C. Cervantes
Rick Riordan Presents - Disney
Hyperion
2018
ISBN 978-1-3680-1634-6
448 pgs, Grade 3 and up

*Guest Review by Libby Dunlap,
Oakland University*



For his whole life, people have called Zane Obispo a freak. His left leg and foot are smaller than his right causing him to walk with a limp. Despite his identities

as a freak and a boy who can’t run, Zane finds himself at the center an adventure in which he releases the Maya god of death, darkness, and destruction (Ah-Puch) from an ancient prison. As Zane’s quest to prevent the destruction of the world by Ah-Puch unfolds, he also discovers the reality of his own lineage.

In the beginning of the story, Zane is overcome with feeling powerless, even as he strives to defeat Ah-Puch, prevent the destruction of the world, and prevent himself from becoming a soldier of death. He is frustrated by his perceived lack of choice in fulfilling the prophecy in which he releases Ah-Puch, he is devastated that he couldn’t save Rosie, and he is especially worried that he won’t be able to defeat Ah-Puch given that he is both mortal and a freak.

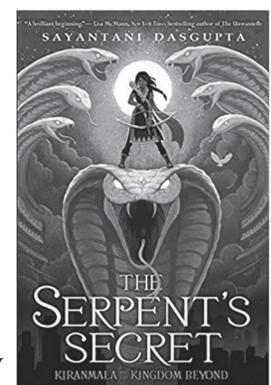
After discovering that he is the son of the Mayan God Hurakan, Zane learns more about Mayan gods and goddesses and begins to see himself as much more than a boy with a limp. As he discovers his inner strength and develops the ability to wield fire, Zane begins to believe that he may actually have a chance at defeating Ah-Puch.

Throughout the story, Zane is empowered by multiple relationships including his uncle, his mom, Brooks, his father, Jazz, Ms. Cab, and Mr. O. In the end, his physical powers were critical to his victory, but so was his internal power and the sense of self he developed over the course of his adventure.

The Serpent's Secret

by Sayantani DasGupta
Scholastic
2018 ISBN: 978-1338185706
328 pgs, Grade 3 and up

*Guest Review by Nicole
Williamson, Oakland University*



The Serpent's Secret tells the story Kiran (Kiranmala), who *thinks* she is living a regular life with her Indian parents in

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Parsippany, New Jersey. She has always thought of herself as a normal kid, until she wakes up on her 12th birthday to discover her parents are missing and the house has been destroyed by a “carnivorous, snot-trailing demon” called a rakkhosh. Shortly after, Lal and Neel—two princes from another dimension—arrive to warn her of the peril she now faces. Kiran soon realizes the endless folktales her parents told her were true, along with the fact that she is an actual Indian princess from another dimension. Though the protections that have been in place since her birth are beginning to wear off, Kiran and the princes depart on a quest to save her parents from grave danger. The journey is filled with solving complex riddles, fighting off serpents and more carnivorous snot-trailing demons.

Princess Kiran is a strong female warrior who embodies the spirit of self-determination. She is not a damsel-in-distress, waiting to be rescued. Several times in their adventures, she puts her life on the line to rescue the princes. Kiran is smart, solving life threatening

riddles and problems without help. She says what is on her mind and does not allow anyone to talk down to her.

Author Sayantani DasGupta has drawn on her own experiences of growing up biracial and navigating across two cultures. Discovering that she is an Indian princess sets Kiran on a journey of self-discovery, learning how to code-switch between different languages and the variation in the meanings of words. Though frustrating for her at the beginning of the journey, Kiran discovers strength in learning to live and navigate two worlds.

Author Biography

Dr. Kristin McIlhagga is an Assistant Professor of Reading and Language Arts at Oakland University. Her interests include children's and adolescent literature, teacher education, language arts methods, English education, and multicultural literature. She can be reached at kmcilhagga@oakland.edu.

