

9-1-2008

Multicultural Literature that Brings People Together

Stan Steiner

Boise State University

Claudia Peralta Nash

Boise State University

Maggie Chase

Boise State University

Multicultural Literature that Brings People Together

Stan F. Steiner, Claudia Peralta Nash & Maggie Chase
Boise State University

Over the past ten years we have been tracking a specific type of multicultural literature. We diligently look for literature for youth that reflects multiple cultures within the story line or images projected through illustrations. The books we focused on in this theme depict multiple characters reflecting a variety of ethnic backgrounds because this mosaic of characters is what we see to be more of a reflection of our changing world. The interaction of young people today across ethnic lines is more prevalent and we believe will continue to become common place as long as adults allow and encourage this interchange to happen. A good example is a book by Maya Ajmera, Yvonne Wakim Dennis, Arlene Hirschfelder and Cynthia Pon called *Children of the U.S.A.* It is filled with rich photos of children in 51 cities across the United States and celebrates their ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Subtle and effective ways to project this natural occurrence is through literature. The dilemma we see is the lack of such multicultural literature, so we wrote this article with two goals in mind. One is teachers and librarians would be encouraged to use this literature in their classrooms and libraries. Second, we hope that more authors and illustrators are encouraged to write and illustrate stories that portray an interaction of characters from multiple ethnic backgrounds.

Stories can generate an attitude that does not see race as a barrier, but as a natural identity making up the beauty of our world as a whole. Exposure to multicultural literature can result in youth asking for change that does not discriminate against any individual regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability and other differences. Multicultural literature is a viable medium for teaching about cultures originating outside of the United States that are soon becoming part of United States' mosaic of culture. Using multicultural literature, both factual and fiction, written by cultural "insiders" may help teachers, counselors, administrators, and policy makers gain greater understandings of the challenges children of diverse backgrounds face (Nilsson, 2005). We hope that readers of multicultural literature will raise social consciousness. Students of all cultures will benefit from multicultural literature in the classroom for numerous reasons: it provides an opportunity for all children to see

themselves in literature, fosters development and positive self esteem, prevents people from feeling isolated, and it cultivates respect, empathy, and acceptance of all people (Steiner, 2001).

With the exception of one book we only included books published since 2007 in this article. We decided to group our most recent finds into two categories: One that features group biographies of people who have made tremendous contribution to our countries cultural and social fiber, and another category that features stories showing our similarities across families, across cultures, and across the world. Have we included every book that may fit into our view of the needed multicultural literature? Not likely. Due to the thousands of books for youth that are published each year, it is more likely we missed some and would encourage readers to submit titles to us via e-mail so that we might keep the list growing. Feel free to contact us at Boise State University if you would like to receive the complete bibliography of books from the last five years.

People Doing Amazing Things

Music has long held a position in learning about cultures and this book *Sophisticated Ladies: The Great Women of Jazz* is a great resource for understanding the role that amazing women played in the growth and popularity of jazz singing. Leslie Gourse, a noted jazz historian, and Martin French provide insightful bibliographic sketches of 14 of the greatest jazz singers of all time. Readers will learn that it was these diverse women's strong desire to sing jazz, despite the challenging odds most faced in their burgeoning careers, that left the world as beneficiaries to a style of music that is still vibrant today.

At various times of history music was used as a barrier and sometimes great integrator of people. Deborah Hopkins', *Sweet Land of Liberty*, illustrated by Leonard Jenkins chronicles an historical moment for music great Marion Anderson. It is well known that she was denied the right to sing at Constitutional Hall due to the color of her skin, but one man, Oscar Chapman, had seen enough racial injustice in his life and promoted an idea that brought over 70,000 people to hear the first female black vocalist to sing from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

A good companion book for looking at music as a natural form to integrate people is *Steel Drumming at the Apollo: The Road to Super Top Dog* by Trish Marx and supported

with great photos by Ellen B. Senisi. In this book you will also find fascinating biographical sketches of a contemporary group of interracial steel drummers who are passionate about the music they perform. Music is not the only place to find great people.

There are many great people who contributed to the social fabric of the United States and twenty can be found in *Tales of Famous Americans* written by Connie and Peter Roop. People who impacted the lives of many through their heroic actions such as: Pocahontas who played a role in the survival of early immigrants to America; Harriet Tubman who risked her own life time and time again to bring slaves to freedom; Madam C. J. Walker who developed a line of hair products protecting her dignity and thousands of other African-American women; Dolores Huerta who along with César Chávez brought justice to farm laborers; and Mia Hamm who played a significant role in elevating women's sports including the three gold medals and scoring the most soccer goals of any player male or female, are all featured as caricatures illustrated by Charlie Powell. Biographical narrative overviews highlight their contributions to history.

One of the most compelling times in contemporary history has been the American Civil Rights Movement. That tumultuous time in US history involved many heroic Americans across ethnic lines as pointed out in *Heroes for Civil Rights*, written by David Adler and illustrated by Bill Farnsworth. This book identifies many key people beyond and including Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, Andrew Goodman, James Earl Chaney, Michael Henry Schwerner, Fannie Lou Hammer, Thurgood Marshall, James Meredith and Lyndon Baines Johnson are just a few of the people featured in this book who played a role in the groundwork and passage of the Civil Rights Act.

Universal Interconnections

The sense of wonder and play have a universal quality as Ysaye M. Barnwell and Brian Pinkney reveal to readers in *We Are One*. Each child that is born is special to their parents and grandparents. Children grow in this world through caring adults, siblings, relatives and friends.

Alice B. McGinty's book *Thank You, World*, Illustrated by Wendy Anderson Halperin reflects the many things we are thankful for no matter where we live in this world. Children throughout the world see the clouds, feel the rain, watch the stars, walk through the

plants on this earth and each night get tucked into their beds. Parents throughout the world have a special way of making their children feel this uniqueness as Robin Cruise demonstrates so well in her book, *Only You*. Margaret Chodos-Irvine's illustrations show this unconditional love for children happening with mothers and fathers of various ethnic backgrounds.

Parents have a lot of influence over their children's well being, but children are also heavily influenced by their peers. Whether you are a new child coming to a school that does not reflect your homeland, as Grace Lin expertly shows in *Lissy's Friends*, or you are facing the dilemma of a friendship gone awry, as in Peggy Moss and Dee Dee Tardif *Our Friendship Rules*, you will find friendships that cross ethnic lines in authentic school and neighborhood settings.

Connections across the globe go even deeper in, *We*, written by Alice Schertle and Illustrated by Kenneth Addison. The author presents a compelling look at our evolutionary origins from the continent of Africa to the interdependent world we live in today. The progression of people is driven by natural curiosity about the next frontier, the way things work and how to improve on tools and ideas from the past and present. Readers will see the complexity of today's world is the result of ethnically diverse peoples, but all rooted from the same origins.

Taking the idea of origins a step further, Rachel Isadora does a fantastic job of showing how marriage across ethnic lines takes place in her book, *What a Family! A Fresh Look at Family Trees*. She traces physical characteristics of children and adults from one family through their ancestry from the past and present. Similarities among cousins are shown through hair, dimples, ears, noses, freckles, eyebrows, toes, glasses and more. The effect of Rachel Isadora's illustrations is very heartwarming.

Similarities among family and friends are part of this world, but nothing is more unique than you. Poet Laureate Jack Prelutsky gets a fresh look for his poem, *Me I Am!* through Christine Davenier's playful illustrations. Each child character in the book celebrates life through imagination and play in their own way.

Despite unique characteristics, many times the skills to make friends or work through a friendship quarrel do not come naturally to children. Often adults or other children must demonstrate such acts of kindness. A good book to illustrate this universal virtue of treating

others as you would like to be treated is Ilene Cooper's *The Golden Rule*. In this story a young boy gets a practical lesson on The Golden Rule which he learns is one of the foundations found in many world religions. We have never had a more opportune time to teach world religions through literature in classrooms than today, and Ilene Cooper's *The Golden Rule* illustrated by Gabi Swiatowska is a solid example. Through practical examples of expressing kindness in the book the boy's grandfather emphasizes this virtue in ways all children can relate to and understand.

When friendships experience unresolved conflict, problems can become compounded. Probably the worst case scenario is war. It seems a giant leap from neighborhood friendships to war, but *The Golden Rule* applies to cultural groups and nations not hurting each other because they too do not like to suffer. A reason to discuss and rethink the concept of war today with students has to do with the universal impact any war in any location has on everyone, as this next book reflects so well. *Why War is Never a Good Idea* written by Alice Walker and illustrated by Stefano Vitale is a very compelling look at "collateral damage," a term used to mask the side effects of war. In this thought provoking book readers realize the casualties of war include innocent women and children, destruction of homes, schools and churches, devastation of farmland and natural habitats, and contamination of air and drinking water sources. War knows no boundaries, whether your land is under attack or you suffer the loss of a loved one defending what they believe to be right.

Children's literature has many applications and one of the greatest accomplishments we can promote is using books to bring people together regardless of culture. We hope the books we have highlighted moves readers in ways to help children understand the complexity of their actions. These books can engage children in a discussion of amazing people, social consciousness and interconnected actions found across the globe.

Stan Steiner, Claudia Peralta Nash and Maggie Chase teach literacy courses at Boise State University and can be reached via e-mail at: <stansteiner@boisestate.edu>, <claudianash@boisestate.edu> and <maggiechase@boisestate.edu>.

References

Nilsson, N. L. (2005). How does Hispanic portrayal in children's books measure up after 40 years? The answer is "It depends." *Reading Teacher*, 58(6), 534-548.

Steiner, S. F. (2001). *Promoting a Global Community Through Multicultural Children's Literature*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited/Teacher Ideas Press Inc.

Literature Cited

Ajmera, M., Dennis, Y.W., Hirschfelder, A. & C. Pon. (2008). *Children of the U.S.A.* Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge Publishers.

Adler, D. (2008). *Heroes for Civil Rights*. Ill. B. Farnsworth. New York: Holiday House.

Barnwell, Y. M. (1993/2008). *We Are One*. Ill. B. Pinkney. New York: Harcourt.

Cooper, I. (2007). *The Golden Rule*. Ill. G. Swiatowska. New York: Abrams Books.

Cruise, R. (2007). *Only You*. Ill. M. Chodos-Irvine. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Gourse, L. (2007). *Sophisticated Ladies: The Great Women of Jazz*. Ill. by M. French. New York: Dutton.

Hopkins, D. (2007). *Sweet Land of Liberty*. Ill. L. Jenkins. Atlanta, GA: Peachtree.

Isadora, R. (2006). *What a Family! A Fresh Look at Family Trees*. New York: Putnam.

Lin, G. (2007). *Lissy's Friends*. New York: Viking.

Marx, T. (2007). *Steel Drumming at the Apollo: The Road to Super Top Dog*. Photos by E. B. Senisi. New York: Lee & Low Books.

McGinty, A. B. (2007). *Thank You, World*. Ill. W. A. Halperin. New York: Dial.

Moss, P. & D. D. Tardif. (2007). *Our Friendship Rules*. Ill. A. I. Geis. Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House.

Prelutsky, J. (1983/2007). *Me I Am!* Ill. C. Davenier. New York: Random House.

Roop, C. & Roop, P. (2007). *Tales of Famous Americans*. Ill. C. Powell. New York: Scholastic.

Schertle, A. (2007). *We*. Ill. K. Addison. New York: Lee Low Books.

Walker, A. (2007). *Why War is Never a Good Idea*. Ill. S. Vitale. New York: HarperCollins.