
The Multicultural Ethic and Connections to Literature for Children and Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

IN THIS ARTICLE, the concept of multiculturalism and its relationship to literature for young people is discussed. As a background for issues presented, changing viewpoints of multiculturalism are noted and connections are made to related disciplines, highlighting the wide scope of the debate and the importance of the controversies. The author defines specific areas in which progress has been made in recognizing achievements related to the publication and recognition of multicultural achievements in literature for young people, and also discusses the areas in which greater progress has yet to be realized.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Multiculturalism is a concept whose time has come—again. While the United States has always been a “multicultural” country, the full acknowledgment and implications of this fact did not begin to dawn upon the American populace until the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The term has been used by some almost as a synonym for the earlier designation “minority” to refer to the disenfranchised—i.e., those whose interests were not necessarily represented by the “mainstream” white culture. In an article published in *The American Quarterly*, Philip Gleason (1991) points out that “minority” was not used to designate America’s ethnic groups until 1932 (Gleason, 1991, p. 394) as noted in Donald Young’s (1932) book *American Minority Peoples: A Study in Racial and Cultural Conflicts in the United States*. This is a title, which, unfortunately, might well be applicable today.

Prior to this, the earliest use of the term "minority" referred to the treatment of various European groups involved in World War I negotiations. "Multicultural" has undergone similar changes in meaning. In his column, "On Language," in the February 23, 1992, issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, William Safire noted, with typical ironic amusement, the many meanings of the prefix "multi." Among the various nouns and adjectives to which "multi" is applied, he mentioned "multicultural" and noted that one of its earliest appearances was in a 1941 *Herald Tribune* book review (of an unnamed book) where the book was described as "a fervent sermon against nationalism, national prejudice and behavior in favor of a 'multicultural' way of life." Safire went on to say: "When proponents of cultural diversity gained attention derogating Western civilization in the 1980s, *multicultural* became a college curriculum code word for 'not dominated by whites'" (Safire, 1992, p. 20).

The concept of multiculturalism became a more inclusive term, exceeding earlier usages, to incorporate those groups who had long resided in the United States but who had not yet become fully recognized for what they too could contribute to American culture—African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. These groups were disenfranchised politically as well as socially; one could not find adequate mention of them, for example, in the history textbooks as having been a vital and productive people, nor could one find written evidence of the contributions they had made to contemporary society.

As American society continues to become sensitized to the needs of various cultures in the United States (though, in some circles, a sensitization is taking place somewhat under protest), "multiculturalism" has assumed a somewhat broader interpretation. It is often inclusive of the handicapped, gay and lesbian individuals, and, in short, any persons whose lifestyle, enforced or otherwise, distinguishes them as identifiable members of a group other than the "mainstream."

In a recent article entitled "Sorting Through the Multicultural Rhetoric," Sara Bullard (1991/1992) commented on the dilemma of defining the concept. "Educators disagree, first, over which groups should be included in multicultural plans—racial and ethnic groups, certainly, but what about regional, social class, gender, disability, religious, language, and sexual orientation groupings" (p. 5)? The term has assumed very broad interpretations reflecting the needs and demands of contemporary society.

This being the case, however, it is still necessary, for the sake of coherence, to narrow the scope of one's discussion within an available format. Therefore, given this factor and the need to maintain

a focus on this issue, the term will be used during this discussion to refer to people of color—that is, individuals who identify with African-American, Hispanic, American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut, and Asian or Pacific Islander heritages.

MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE'S RELATIONSHIP TO LITERATURE

Concerns regarding multiculturalism and literature have begun to permeate all sectors. These interests and concerns have both long-range and long-term implications for children and youth. While the field of library and information studies is one distinguished by its own characteristics, it is also unarguably an eclectic one. Therefore, we cannot help but be influenced by the arguments taking place in other related disciplines, particularly when these have strong implications for the considerations to be pondered and the actions to be taken in our own field. The "conversations" and debates occurring within the humanities and social sciences are not to be taken lightly by library professionals, particularly since they are responsible for providing access to the materials needed for studies in these areas and for response to the calls for service stemming from changes in the thinking of society at large.

On the college and university levels, there are current debates regarding the literary canon—i.e., the "classic" materials to which every child or young person must be exposed during his or her school career in order to be deemed literate or educated. These are issues which, while they are initiated on the higher education levels, eventually filter down to the elementary and secondary levels, affecting the lives of young persons. In the past, this canon has effectively excluded, or only marginally included, non-Western cultures. Viewed sequentially, this is relevant to the situation in schools and in all settings in which children and youth participate, for the university prepares graduates and some of these graduates become teachers, school media specialists, and public librarians who in turn may continue to perpetuate the basic tenor of what they have been exposed to over the years. If these individuals have had minimal exposure to non-Western cultures, then they do not enter their chosen professions with a background of knowledge about multicultural interests.

There have been several attempts to "open up" the canon and expand it to include literature by and about non-Western cultures. At the University of Arizona, for example, a new series of humanities courses entitled "Critical Concepts in Western Culture" has been instituted (Mooney, 1991, p. A9). These courses seek to highlight the contributions of non-Western peoples to the literary repertoire:

"Students are examining ideas associated with Western civilization, but they're looking at them from various cultural perspectives. They're studying Dante and Pope, but also Kiowan Indian mythology" (Mooney, 1991, p. A9). However, such moves are not met with approbation in all quarters. For, as some colleges and universities move toward a more equitable approach, others have shown, and continue to show, signs of resistance. This was evident at a recent American studies meeting where several pioneers of multicultural humanities research were present—as well as their opponents. Leo Marx, a professor of humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, denounced recent scholarship in American studies as responding to, among other things, "the knee-jerk incantation of race, class, and gender" (Winkler, 1990, p. A9).

In a related discipline, that of history, the Organization of American Historians (OAH) has issued a statement supporting the importance of multiculturalism as a concept to be infused within studies in history within the public school system. The OAH has stated that, "the multiple objectives of history education can best be served by curricula that afford students the opportunity in the public schools to study both the history of the larger society and the history of minority groups and non-Western cultures" (Winkler, 1991, p. A5).

What is called for is an honest presentation of Western and non-Western traditions conveyed through an approach which values pluralism while not marginalizing those whose traditions comprise the various segments of the whole, a view supported in the literature by Banks (1991/1992, p. 35) and Gates (in Winkler, 1992, p. A12), two leading figures in the multicultural debate. The field of library and information studies has responded as well. Peter Erickson (1991), a research librarian at the Clark Art Institute, has stated that:

In place of the traditionalist assumption of universalism, the multicultural approach uses the concept of "identity politics." The point is not to create absolute, immovable barriers, but to acknowledge that readers' identities need to be taken into account if we are to understand the culture we hold in common. (p. B3)

SPECIFIC ISSUES IN MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Within such a socially and politically charged concept as multiculturalism, it is not surprising to find a myriad of related "sub-issues" which often surface in isolation as foundations for debate. Some of these issues will be briefly outlined here in regards to their connection to literature for children and young people, but it is evident that they are not limited to this framework and are, in effect, indicative of the literary debate as a whole. These issues are those of "exclusivity,"

the "insider" versus the "outsider" approach to literature, stereotyping, and the issue of actual availability of resources for youth.

The term "exclusivity" will be used here to describe a situation which exists when a librarian or an educator faces a group of young people who are all from one particular racial or ethnic group. The question may arise as to whether or not it is really necessary to introduce them to literature by and about other groups. After all, the thinking may be that these young persons will probably have little contact with any of these "other" cultures within the particular environment in which they are living.

While this may seem a narrow point of focus—too narrow, it might be thought, for professionals in the field to contemplate—I offer the following anecdote. Not too long ago, I served as a speaker at a university in the Midwest on the topic of a disenfranchised group of people residing outside the United States—the Aboriginal people of Australia. I noted during my speech that the audience was very "monocultural" in appearance—a phenomenon that tends to stand out to someone from a large urban environment with a racially and ethnically mixed population. After the presentation, a round of questions ensued from the audience. One young woman raised her hand and wondered whether, in general, it was *really* necessary to emphasize the contributions of other racial and ethnic groups to the young people with whom she was working. After all, she argued, the immediate environment in which these young persons resided, contained white persons from a distinctly northern European background with no persons of color (any color) represented. My response was that as professionals involved in the training of, or as providers of materials for young people, whether it be in a classroom, school media center, or public library, we are responsible for preparing young people to enter the world, not merely preparing them to exist within the environment in which they are currently being reared. We do not know whom these young persons will meet later or under what circumstances contact will take place. The need for "all around preparation" to facilitate human understanding is clear. Indeed, to go a step further, it is our moral responsibility. We must look toward this preparation, which is what, in fact, education is all about. Thus, we owe it to those before us to expand their horizons even if, after they leave us in the school media center or the local public library, the people they see on a regular basis still continue to be those very like their own immediate family or relatives or friends or neighbors, in short, a mini monocultural society. If we cannot do this, if library collections are severely limited, if we continue to "overlook" the need to expand and update our collections, then are we not guilty of perpetuating the known and supporting the

disenfranchisement of minority voices? While we must be wary of overgeneralizations, it is felt that the better prepared young people are to understand cultures other than their own, the more flexible they will become in "accepting" new groups with a more open mind. Admittedly, this is an extended response to an audience inquiry, but one perhaps which needs to be discussed a bit further.

Inherent in this philosophy is also the need to have a strong appreciation for one's own culture so that one can better recognize the similarities to, and differences from, the culture of "the mainstream." One should not assume that this will be "taken care of in the home." Such an assumption may not only be unrealistic in terms of opportunities available within the home and the cost and availability of multicultural materials, but, in fact, brings us right back to the issue of exclusivity, which works in opposition to all members of the populace having the opportunity to "know and grow." Multicultural literature must be shared with all and should not be thought of as exclusive property (or the exclusive domain or responsibility) of a designated group. Everyone can and must benefit through participation in the experience. It is even possible that, through the provision of a more "open" environment, new groups emigrating to the United States will find it a bit easier to adjust to American society, a situation not the exclusive dilemma of people of color.

The second issue of the "insider" versus the "outsider" is one which is being hotly debated. For years, minority populaces have been written about and "described" by essentially white authors who are outside the cultures about whom they are writing or illustrating. This practice has had negative and positive effects. On the negative side, it has often resulted in biased viewpoints regarding those groups being written about, showing agendas which are linked to social or political prejudices. This has been the case with African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. The second effect of the practice has been a good one. As a result of the interest of nonminority individuals who have researched their subjects carefully and who have empathy for the people about whom they are writing or illustrating, more information about cultures other than mainstream white cultures has been shared with the populace at large.

The question posed and often debated is whether or not material written by so-called "outsiders" is actually *valid* material. It is suggested here that, while the experience of having lived as a member of the culture one is writing about offers one the opportunity of communicating that experience in a unique way, it is also felt strongly that, if the material is properly researched and genuine and authentic in intent and presentation, the contribution of the "outsider" has

the potential of being a valuable one. This view has recently been addressed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1991) in his article "'Authenticity,' or the Lesson of Little Tree," in which he states:

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. (p. 30)

This view is particularly interesting since it represents one not often voiced, if voiced at all, by black authors. In another article, Gates seems to call for a productive sharing of culture in an equitable way, as he also suggests that we "think of American culture as a conversation among different voices—even if it's a conversation that some of us weren't able to join until recently" (Winkler, 1990, p. A8).

What we need to continue to see, however, is an *increase* in the number of minority authors and illustrators writing about and illustrating work regarding their respective groups. Through such endeavors, the reading public will be offered that uniqueness in "inside" perspective that often is unavailable when experiences have not been personally lived.

The third issue raised here, and closely connected to that of "insider" versus "outsider" viewpoints, is that of stereotyping—always a matter of concern. This refers specifically to instances where literary images are provided of a people, images which are either completely false or which single out an isolated phenomenon and present it in a light which makes it appear as though it were true for an entire group of people. This is an area of great concern, particularly in regard to materials for children and youth who inhabit the impressionable world of those beginning to form their viewpoints and opinions of the people around them. It is also a reality which several of the other contributors to this issue have chosen to explore in different ways.

The problem of stereotyping leads us directly into another area of concern—that of availability of resources. Many library collections which are responsible for providing resources to the young (and also to those who teach the young) are deficient in the depth and variety of their collections. The collecting philosophies which affect collections—their growth (or lack of growth) and adequacy (or lack of it)—are directly responsible for what one sees on the shelves in libraries. These philosophies do not necessarily come about as a result of purposeful neglect on the part of the individuals in charge but often are the unhappy results of budgetary deficits or misplaced priorities. As a result, young people will often see, in their school and public libraries, outdated and inaccurate materials which continue to circulate unchallenged by the presence of better materials.

It must also be added that current economic conditions in this nation as a whole are causing libraries to face serious dilemmas in the purchasing of new books; there is often a long period between the time that materials are published and the actual point at which the material appears on the shelf of the local library. This is a situation which causes great frustration on the part of academics, practitioners, and other members of the public as well. James Fish (1992) has expressed concerns regarding the limitations in resources and selection and service criteria:

When resources are severely limited, it is difficult to find the wherewithal for meeting the needs of new service groups. Sometimes, the choices force a reduction of some service or activity for other library users. This not only goes against a good librarian's instinct to want to do more for the public, it also invites a negative reaction from those who see themselves losing service. The desire to respond to cultural diversity requires some significant rethinking of the library, both philosophically and operationally. What languages get represented in collections, and how large should those collections be? If space is already limited, where do you find room for new collections? Do you concentrate subject/language strength in a few facilities so that users get a better product or spread things around to most facilities to get closer to potential users?...As a multicultural, multilingual staff is recruited, what languages and cultures should be represented in what numbers and in what locations? (p. 35)

It is felt that, if there is an increase in the number of offerings from multicultural authors and illustrators demonstrating the sensitivity needed to present the cultural experience, the problems of inaccurate and inappropriate images as they are present in books for the young will become fewer as a greater number of more "culturally correct" images begin to enter the market. Such awareness will also result in positive models for authors and illustrators working outside their respective cultures in that they will be more aware of negative and positive images of various cultures. Nevertheless, the issue of available resources, as indicated, is far more complicated for it goes beyond the framework of what is made available in a literary sense and speaks to the issue of the severe economic conditions with which all professions, particularly the service professions in our nation, are attempting to cope. However, the provision of high quality resources from qualified and informed authors and illustrators will provide the competitive edge needed to keep up the standard in publishing. When financial resources are expended, therefore, there will be excellent opportunities to purchase materials selected from among high quality offerings.

RESPONSES TO THE NEED FOR MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Despite the challenges presented by differing philosophies regarding "how to get the job done," the lack or inadequacies of

available resources, and the prevailing poor (and historically, cyclical) economic situation, one notes periodic reawakenings of interest in the children's publishing world in providing resources both of a trade and professional nature. Again, this reawakening cannot be separated from prevailing political considerations but is rather an outgrowth of that phenomenon.

During the 1960s and 1970s, there was tremendous interest in the idea of multicultural materials for children and young adults, an interest not divorced from the civil rights movement, as indicated in the beginning of this discussion. It was recognized that there was a terrible void; authors and illustrators were encouraged to come forward and fill this void. One such group which played a role in meeting this need was the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC), whose bulletin served as a valuable vehicle for revealing issues involving evaluation of multicultural children's literature as well as encouraging new authors and illustrators to enter the publishing field.

Eloise Greenfield, writing in an article appearing in the bulletin in 1979, clearly stated what she saw to be the aims of multicultural literature for children. In considering the needs of young people thirteen years later, one notes that the priorities must necessarily still be the same:

The books that reach children should: authentically depict and interpret their lives and their history; build self-respect and encourage the development of positive values; make children aware of their strength and leave them with a sense of hope and direction; teach them the skills necessary for the maintenance of health and for economic survival; broaden their knowledge of the world, past and present, and offer some insight into the future. These books will not be pap—the total range of human problems, struggles and accomplishments can be told in this context with no sacrifice of literary merit....A book that has been chosen as worthy of a child's emotional investment must have been judged on the basis of what it is—not a collection of words arranged in some unintelligible but artistic design, but a statement powerfully made and communicated through the artistic and skillful use of language. (Greenfield, 1979, p. 4)

Indeed, the message cannot be adequately communicated *unless* all of these ingredients are there.

MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE PUBLICATIONS, AWARDS, AND CONFERENCES

We see renewed interest in the provision of multicultural materials for children and young persons. Recently, the Cooperative Children's Book Center published its third edition of *Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults*. The first edition of this book was published in 1988 and the most recent issue in 1991. Kruse and Horning (1991) note in their introduction, for example, that,

while in 1985 only eighteen books published in the category of children's books were written and/or illustrated by African-Americans, in 1990, fifty-one titles were documented (p. xii). While this represents an increase in the numbers of books written and/or illustrated by African-Americans, one must also realize that, in 1985, approximately 2,500 children's books were published as opposed to almost 5,000 in 1990. Thus, while we see an improvement in the representation of books by African-Americans, it must be realized that the representation is still small when compared to the total number of books published. Further, the two authors point out that the contributions by other people of color were considerably fewer.

The current focus on multicultural literature has resulted in a number of bibliographic tools for gaining in-depth information on various ethnic and racial groups. Merri Lindgren (1990) has produced *The Multicolored Mirror: Cultural Substance in Literature for Children and Young Adults*, which includes contributions from noted individuals in the area of children's book publishing such as Walter Dean Myers, Cheryl Hudson and Wayne Hudson, Doris Seale, and Tom Feelings. Isabel Schön has provided annotated bibliographies as part of the Scarecrow Press series *Books in Spanish for Children and Young Adults*, the most recent having been published in 1989 with an updated version scheduled to be released soon. Meena Khorana has provided a unique reference tool with the 1992 publication of *The Indian Subcontinent in Literature for Children and Young Adults: An Annotated Bibliography of English-Language Books*. This extensive bibliography facilitates access to literature associated with Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, the Himalayan kingdoms of Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim, and Tibet.

Some controversy exists regarding the isolating of multicultural authors from "mainstream" authors and illustrators in the provision of separate lists or bibliographies, an issue discussed in depth in Francis Smith Foster's excellent essay "What Matters the Color of the Tiger's Stripes?: The Significance of Bibliographies by Ethnic Identification. However, Foster (1988) states:

Bibliographies by ethnic identification can serve the same functions as bibliographies by nationality, genre, era, or theme. As resources, lists of works grouped by some common factor, they can make our jobs of selecting representative materials easier...Such bibliographies can introduce new writers, new titles and new subject matter as they expand our ideas of literary history and traditions....And finally, bibliographies by ethnic identification can help us see the absence, hear the silences, of writers whose works are not available. When we see the precipitous decline of new titles by or about particular groups, subjects, or attitudes, we can at least be aware of the threatened extinction. (p. 82)

Another publication entitled *Our Family, Our Friends, Our World: An Annotated Guide to Significant Multicultural Books for Children and Teenagers* (1992), edited by Lyn Miller-Lachmann, is

indicative of the kind of interest being generated in multicultural children's materials. The compilation takes an international approach to multiculturalism, including works about ethnic and racial populaces who reside within the United States and chapters on literature representative of the many regions around the world.

There needs to be an increase in the number of publications providing updated information about multicultural authors and illustrators, their work, thematic modes, and methods of work. Such tools assist young persons, as well as those responsible for educating them both inside and outside the framework of schools, in gaining insight into the creators of artistic works as individuals and assists in promoting better understanding and appreciation of and for their work. Barbara Rollock's *Black Authors and Illustrators of Children's Books: A Biographical Dictionary*, second edition, identifies black authors and illustrators and offers basic and helpful information about their backgrounds. Pat Cummings's (1992) beautifully illustrated book, *Talking with Artists: Conversations with Victoria Chess, Pat Cummings, Leo and Diane Dillon, Richard Egielski, Lois Ehlert, Lisa Campbell Ernst, Tom Feelings, Steven Kellogg, Jerry Pinkney, Amy Schwartz, Lane Smith, Chris Van Allsburg and David Wiesner*, presents fourteen black and white illustrators, offers brief vignettes of their lives, sources of their inspiration, photographs of the individuals, and examples of their artwork. This book concentrates upon the skill of the craft rather than ethnic identity, but, through its visual format and remarks shared by the illustrators, informs the audience about which of the illustrators are black and also shares an overview of the craft of all represented.

As mentioned earlier, during the 1960s and 1970s, the efforts of the Council On Interracial Books for Children had been significant in encouraging new children's publications by authors and illustrators of color. This was also accomplished by the council through the holding of an annual contest for the best new manuscript as well as featured columns promoting the work of new illustrators. Through such efforts, authors and illustrators such as Mildred D. Taylor, Walter Dean Myers, Pat Cummings, and Leo Dillon and Diane Dillon came to be recognized as strong voices at the forefront of creating books for children and young adults.

Awards are an important mechanism for recognizing literary and artistic excellence in any discipline and make a powerful statement about the "validity" of a type of literature in the minds of the public. Given the difficulties encountered in the field of children's literature in the acknowledgment of this field as one worthy of scholarly research (an issue often mentioned in the literature about the field), the presentation of awards of excellence for achievements in the field

is particularly important. This is a practice which much be maintained, encouraged, and promoted among all areas of the field. The Coretta Scott King Award, an award presented by the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association, was first established in 1969 and is given to the most outstanding works written or illustrated by black authors or illustrators. Among its selection criteria is stated the requirement: "The book must portray people, places, things, and events in a manner sensitive to the true worth and value of all beings" (n.p.). While one notes over the years many authors and/or illustrators who have either won the award or who have had their books named as one of its honor books on more than one occasion—as exemplified by Virginia Hamilton, Mildred D. Taylor, Walter Dean Myers, and Eloise Greenfield (these last two authors are 1992 winners in the award and honor categories, respectively)—the Coretta Scott King Award continues to offer African-Americans a unique forum for recognition of new talent in the field.

In 1992, HarperCollins and ScottForesman announced the creation of a mentoring program and annual awards in conjunction with the Center for Multicultural Children's Literature. The stated purpose of the center will be to provide a mentoring service for talented multicultural writers and illustrators seeking to be published in this field. The center proposes a unique program whereby candidates will be paired with established authors and illustrators who will act as mentors (Center for Multicultural Children's Literature, 1992, n.p.). Such a move on the part of two major publishing companies has the potential of serving as a highly motivational force for future authors and illustrators in much the same way as the Council for Interracial Books awards did during the 1960s and 1970s.

It is also significant to note the many conferences and seminars recently devoted to the area of multicultural literature for children and young adults. At their May 1991 meeting in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, held at the University of Southern Mississippi, the Children's Literature Association had a special panel on the topic of multiculturalism in which such issues as the defining of multiculturalism, as well as multiculturalism and its relationship to comparative literature, historiography, and reader response, were topics discussed.

The American Library Association, in an important pre-conference entitled "The Many Faces in Children's Books: Images in Words and Pictures for Our Multicultural Society," on June 27 and June 28, 1991, explored this theme through the representation of such authors and illustrators as Mildred Pitts Walter, Keiko

Narahashi, Allen Say, and Rosa Guy. And, certainly, the issue is annually addressed by the presenters of the Virginia Hamilton Conference held each year on the campus of Kent State University. The 1991 conference, for example, included such speakers as Sheila Hamanaka, Mildred Pitts Walter, and Nicholasa Mohr.

Such events are evidence of the present strong interest in, and positive effects of, the multicultural forum. It is to be hoped that the current focus is indicative of a permanent trend, capable of withstanding the realities of uncertain social and political forecasts, and that this trend will be recognized more universally within our nation as the potential source of creating and bonding better human relationships.

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