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And Yet . . . Beyond Political Correctness*

THE MULTICULTURAL DEBATE

Multiculturalism is a trendy word, trumpeted by the politically correct with a stridency and oversimplification that has provoked a backlash. There are p.c. watchdogs eager to strip from the library shelves anything that presents a group as less than perfect. Ethnic characters must always be strong, dignified, courageous, loving, sensitive, wise. Then there are those who watch for authenticity: How dare a white write about blacks? What's a Gentile doing writing about a Jewish old lady and her African-American neighbors? The chilling effect of this is a kind of censorship.

It's easy to laugh at the lunatic fringe. According to p.c. labeling, I should change my name to Hazel Rochperson. I am vertically challenged (short), my husband is differently hirsute (bald), my mother is chronologically gifted (old), my brother differently abled (brain-injured), and some of my best friends are people of size (fat). Not at all comforting are the same kind of euphemisms from the corporate world: words like downsizing (firing workers). Then there's caloric insufficiency (hunger) and ethically different (corrupt).¹

But the greatest danger from the politically correct bullies is that they create a backlash, and that backlash is often self-righteous support for the way things are. Whether we are weary or indignant, we wish the whiners would just go away. Or we focus on the absurd, and then we can ignore real issues of prejudice and hatred that keep people apart.

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Ethnic cleansing is the latest euphemism: It's an attack on multiculturalism, and it isn't funny at all.

Books can make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building community: not with role models and recipes, not with noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling stories that make us imagine the lives of others. A good story lets you know people as individuals in all their particularity and conflict; and once you see someone as a person—flawed, complex, striving—you've reached beyond stereotype.

In reviewing children's books, we have to resist the extremes: the mindless conformity to the p.c. of multiculturalism, and also the backlash. As with that other current fad, "whole language," the pretentious jargon is only now catching up with what we've been doing all along—selecting and promoting great books from everywhere, stories that grab us and extend our view of ourselves.

Recently it has become much easier to find good books about diverse cultures. A lot more books are being published with ethnic characters and cultures that have long been ignored. There are many more books set outside the United States. Instead of just a couple of titles per season, there's a flood of them now. Some are ephemeral, just cashing in on the trend; but some tell a good story, rooted in a particular culture and reaching out to universals. The best of these change the way we see ourselves, and they shake up the world of children's books.

African-American literature, particularly, is flourishing: fiction, picture books, and history; stories of slavery and of the civil rights movement that focus not just on leaders but also on ordinary people. Styles vary from soaring rhythms to the sparest poetry. There's an increasing complexity in contemporary realistic stories, which reach beyond simple role models to confront issues of color, class, prejudice, and identity, without offering Band-Aids of self-esteem. Deborah Taylor, young adult services specialist at Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore (and consultant for the African-American bibliography in my book *Against Borders*), says, "It's great that books no longer have to show us as perfect" (D. Taylor, personal communication). Coming-of-age stories can combine individual conflict with a stark social realism and also reach out to universal myth. In biography, from Sojourner Truth to Malcolm X, the struggle is not only with the racism in society but also with personal hatred and despair. There's also laughter, stretching back to the old subversive trickster tales. Comedian Dick Gregory (1989) says that once they did get around to giving us a Black History Month, "it would be the month of February, with all them days missing" (p. 424). Of course, these books about African-Americans will help promote

Black History Month and special curriculum projects. But these are great books for all of us, about all of us, all year long. You don't need a special month to make you want to read the best writers.

One of the positive effects of the whole multicultural emphasis is that—even with books that have nothing to do with ethnicity, books about making friends or sibling rivalry or mathematics—you no longer have all-white classrooms and all-white neighborhoods. The multicultural cast is becoming the norm in illustration of a concept picture book, and I seldom comment on it now in a review. The same is true of books like Alvin Schwartz' (1992) collection of children's folk verse *And the Green Grass Grew All Around*, illustrated by Sue Truesdell with wildly energetic drawings that show kids of many backgrounds. It's interesting to look at the revised editions of some of the great Let's-Read-and-Find-Out Science series, such as Paul Showers' (1991) *How Many Teeth?* first published 30 years ago. There's almost no change in the funny, informative nonhectoring text, but the illustrations by True Kelley are new: full color and multicultural. In Helene J. Jordan's (1992) *How a Seed Grows*, illustrated by Loretta Krupinski in the same series, the revised edition has a cheery African-American girl on the cover.

But it would be insulting to say that these books are good *because* they're multicultural. Betsy Hearne, editor of *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, was appalled at a recent conference to hear people recommend a book only because it was "multicultural," as if no further evaluation was needed.

In fact, one kind of book that doesn't work is the one that deliberately takes multiculturalism, and only multiculturalism, as its subject. That's like making *life* the theme. An anthology, for example, must have variety, even opposites, but it can't be just a book about variety. Otherwise, you can just throw in anything you like from anywhere and call it a book. You have to have a unity of tone, however subtle, so that the book feels like a whole. It doesn't work to have too many genres, themes, and tones, as well as places and cultures. One anthology that does have a beautiful unity is Ruth Gordon's (1987) *Under All Silences: Shades of Love*, where the poems from across the world connect people everywhere by common experience.

EVALUATING MULTICULTURAL BOOKS

How do you evaluate books across cultures? Are there special criteria? What are the pitfalls? And in a time of declining book budgets in libraries and school media centers, when librarians do have to select very carefully, how do you balance all the demands of literary quality and popular appeal and intellectual freedom and curriculum support and multiculturalism? And how do you make kids want to read?

Of course, these issues aren't new, and there are no simple answers. In the current arguments about political correctness, at times I find myself agreeing and disagreeing with everybody. If there's one thing I've learned in this whole multicultural debate, it's not to trust absolutes. I say something and then immediately qualify it with, "And yet. . . ." And it's usually because I find a book that upsets all my neat categories. That's what good books do: They unsettle us, make us ask questions about what we thought was certain. They don't just reaffirm everything we already know.

Underlying much of the debate is the demand that each book must do it all. If you think that the book you're reviewing is the only one kids are ever going to read on a subject—about the pioneers or about Columbus or about the Holocaust or about apartheid—then there's intense pressure to choose the "right" book with the "right" message. If we don't watch out, reading becomes Medicine, Therapy. We start to recommend books because they give us the *right* role models, depending on what's considered "right" in the current political climate.

The poet Katha Pollitt (1991, 1992) wrote in an article in *The Nation* that it's because young people read so little that there's such furious debate about the canon. If they read all kinds of books all the time, particular books wouldn't matter so much. The paradox is that if we give young people didactic tracts, or stories so bland that they offend nobody, we're going to make them read even less. If you're going to grab kids and touch them deeply, if you want them to read, books must have tension and personality, laughter, and passionate conflict.

The novelist E. L. Doctorow (1989, p. 90) says that one of the things he most admires about George Bernard Shaw is that he gives some of the best speeches to the characters he disagrees with. A good story is rich with ambiguity. You sympathize with people of all kinds. Read Anne Fine's funny YA novels, such as *My War with Goggle-eyes* (Fine, 1989), and you get swept up into furious family quarrels about relationships and about ideas, and neither side wins. The best books celebrate ambiguity, they glory in conflict, they make us aware that something can be itself and its opposite at the same time. This is especially so with political themes where everything can degenerate into propaganda if the characters become mouthpieces for worthy ideas. Susan Sontag (1992) sees the vitality in disagreement: "literature is a party," she says, "even as disseminators of indignation, writers are givers of pleasure" (p. xviii).

WRITERS AND MULTICULTURAL BOOKS

A library *collection* does have to satisfy all kinds of requirements. But *each book* can't do it all. Walter Dean Myers (1990) spoke at the

Columbia Children's Literature Institute in 1990, and someone in the audience asked him why he wrote a book about black kids playing basketball; it's such a stereotype, why was he feeding it? "Every book I write," he replied, "can't take on the whole African-American experience." He said he had written other books in which kids did other things. But, he said, he likes basketball; lots of African-American kids like basketball; and this one book is about that world.

One book can't carry the whole ethnic group experience. In Sook Nyul Choi's (1991) *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*—chosen as a Best Book for Young Adults last year—the Japanese occupiers of North Korea during World War II, as seen through the eyes of a young Korean girl, are cruel and oppressive enemies. Japan-bashing is a problem in the United States now, but that doesn't affect the truth of this story. You could recommend that book with Yoko Kawashima Watkins' (1986) *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* about a Japanese girl on the run from cruel Koreans after World War II, or with Yoshiko Uchida's (1981, 1991) fiction and autobiography about how Japanese-Americans were treated here during World War II.

What's more, one writer is not the representative of a whole ethnic group. Maxine Hong Kingston, who wrote the classic memoir *The Woman Warrior* (Kingston, 1976), complains about "the expectation among readers and critics that I should represent the race. Each artist has a unique voice. Many readers don't understand that. What I look forward to is the time when many of us are published and then we will be able to see the range of viewpoints, of visions, of what it is to be Chinese-American" (Sumrall, 1992, p. 77). Nor does one reviewer speak for a whole ethnic group. Phoebe Yeh, a children's book editor at Scholastic (and consultant for the Asian-American bibliography in *Against Borders*), says that she is a reader before she is a Chinese (P. Yeh, personal communication). I'm a Jew, but I can't speak for all Jews. Nor for all South Africans; not even for all South Africans who are anti-apartheid.

Every time an artist or writer does something, it doesn't have to be about her race. Sheila Hamanaka's (1990) book *The Journey* is based on her five-panel mural painting that shows the World War II experience of Japanese-Americans, including her own family, who were herded up and sent to concentration camps. It's a story of prejudice and fierce injustice, personal and official, and Hamanaka is passionate about what happened to her people. But Hamanaka also illustrates books that aren't focused on the Japanese-American experience at all. *A Visit to Amy-Claire* (Mills, 1992) is a picture book about a family, about sibling rivalry, and the family happens to be Asian-American. Recently, she illustrated a cozy picture book, *Sofie's Role* by Amy Heath (1992), about a family bakery, and there were no Asian characters at all. The illustrator Ed

Young was born in Shanghai, and he draws on the richness of his Chinese roots to give us *Lon Po Po*, the version of *Red-Riding Hood* that won the 1990 Caldecott Medal (Young, 1989). But he has also illustrated dozens of stunning books from cultures he has found here, including the illustrations that capture the mystery of Coleridge's (1992) *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, or his witty, exuberant pencil drawings for *Bo Rabbit Smart for True: Folktales from the Gullah* (Jaquith, 1981).

Now, there are people who say that Young can't illustrate African-American folklore because he can't really know the culture. One of the big debates at the moment relates to authenticity. Of course accuracy matters. You can get a lot of things wrong as a writer, an artist, or a reviewer when you don't know a place or a culture. Junko Yokota Lewis (1992a, 1992b), who's from Japan, has pointed out some important errors in Japanese costume and custom in picture books published in the United States. For example, she shows that one illustration has characters wearing their kimonos in a style that only dead people are dressed in; another shows characters with chopsticks in their hair; a third depicts food in a manner appropriate only when served to deceased ancestors. I'm from South Africa, so I do know that culture better than the average American does, and in reviewing a book about apartheid, I might find things that you could miss. One obvious example is the use of the word "native," which is a derogatory term in Africa with overtones of primitive and uncivilized, quite different from the way it's used here. It makes me realize that I must miss things when I review books about, for example, Japan, or about Appalachia.

And yet . . . that isn't the whole story. Sometimes I worry that I know too much, that I can't see the wood for the trees, that steeped as I am in the South African culture, I can't always know what an American child doesn't know. Would an American reader be confused by something that I take for granted? One of the things that does help me is that I no longer live in South Africa, so to some extent I can see things from outside as well as in—from both sides of the border.

But what about those who say that an American can never write about Japan, that men can't write about women, that Chinese Ed Young cannot illustrate African-American folklore? In fact, some take it further. Only Indians can really judge books about Indians, Jews about Jews. And further still, you get the extreme, whites should read about whites, Latinos about Latinos, locking us into smaller and tighter boxes.

What I hear echoing in that sort of talk is the mad drumbeat of apartheid speak. Apartheid, which means "separate development," made laws on the basis of so-called immutable differences. Not only should whites and blacks be kept absolutely apart and educated separately, but among blacks, each "tribe" should be separate, so that Zulus should live only with Zulus and be taught in Zulu about Zulus and to do things

that only Zulus do. The apartheid planners wrote that all most blacks could do was simple manual labor, that science and abstract thinking weren't part of their culture, and that their training should prepare them to be good servants. It's so absurd that it's hard to believe so much of it was carried out, and with untold suffering to millions. The white government set up separate "homelands" for each tribe, forcibly uprooted millions of people from their homes, and resettled them all "together with their own kind" in a barren Gulag in the veld.

As a white privileged child growing up in that society, I didn't read books about black people. I didn't dream that there could be such books. Even the newspapers didn't have stories or photographs that showed a black person as an individual with a personal life. If "natives" were mentioned, they were seldom given names, and never second names. There was no television; radio was state controlled. The effect of that separation and that censorship was that I couldn't imagine the lives of black people. And that's exactly what the racist government wanted.

When I went back to South Africa in 1990, I interviewed Nadine Gordimer for *Booklist* at her home in Johannesburg, before she won the Nobel Prize for Literature. I asked her if she felt that as a white she could write about black experience; how she answered those who said she was using black suffering. She got angry. "How does a writer write from the point of view of a child?" she said. "Or from the point of view of an old person when you are 17 years old? How does a writer change sex? . . . How could the famous soliloquy of Molly Bloom have been written by James Joyce? Has any woman ever written anything as incredibly intimate? I mean, how did Joyce know how a woman feels before she's going to get her period?" (Rochman, 1990, p. 101).

Then this year, for Black History Month, I interviewed Virginia Hamilton, and she spoke about her frustration in not being allowed to write *outside* of the black experience. "People don't allow it; critics won't allow it," she said. "If I would do a book that didn't have blacks, people would say, 'Oh, what is Virginia Hamilton doing?' I feel the limitation," she said. "I'm always running up against it and knocking it down in different ways, whichever way I can. But I know that it's there and will always be there. I mean there were people who said in the middle of my career, 'Now Virginia Hamilton has finally faced who she is.' Well, how dare they?" (Rochman, 1992, p. 1021).

In her collections of folklore and creation stories, Hamilton brings together some of the oldest stories from many cultures all over the world: the Russian witch Baba Yaga along with the African-American Wiley and the Hairy Man. "I really think there are universals in those kinds of materials," she said. "I mean I love Baba Yaga. It's not my culture, but it's a wonderful tale" (p. 1020). She says that these stories show that "people have the same mind about certain things. They have the

same fears and the same need for order. . . . In the beginning people would come inside the cave where the fire was and tell about what happened" (pp. 1020-1021).

Roger Sutton (1992), executive editor of *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, in "What Mean We, White Man?" sums it up this way: "If we cannot reach beyond the bounds of race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, and class, literature is useless, leaving writers few options beyond Joni Mitchell-style confessional lyrics. Literature—language—is meant to communicate. . . . It is a way to jump out of our own skins" (p. 156).

TRANSCENDING CULTURAL BARRIERS

And yet . . . only gifted writers can do it, write beyond their own cultures. Fiction and nonfiction is full of people who don't get beyond stereotype because the writer cannot imagine them as individuals. In the apartheid history of South Africa, blacks are sinister primitives, waiting to be "discovered," their land waiting to be "opened up" to civilization. When the Zulus win, it's a massacre; when the whites win, it's a brave victory against desperate odds. More recently, images of suffering have gotten mixed in with the romantic-adventure clichés, but the view is still sensationalized and stereotyped. There's little sense of South African blacks as individuals. "Black on black violence" is the new cliché; somehow the ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe is not called "white on white" tribal war. In fact, according to the apartheid view, Africa didn't have a history until the whites came. The mouth of the Nile wasn't there until white explorers found it. Now, it's fine to write a book about European explorers in Africa, if you make clear that that's what you're doing. But a book about African history that begins with the coming of the whites is, to say the least, incomplete.

Traveling to foreign places—or reading about them—isn't necessarily broadening. Many tourists return from the experience with the same smug stereotypes about "us" and "them." Too many children's books *about* other countries—written without knowledge or passion—take the "tourist" approach, stressing the exotic or presenting a static society with simple categories. Some writers who try to tackle a country's complex political and social issues seem to think that in a book for young people it's okay to do a bit of background reading and then drop into a country for a few weeks, take some glossy pictures, and go home and write a book about it.

There's nothing wrong with writing a book about travel, about how it feels to be in a foreign place, even about your finding a foreign place exotic or feeling an outsider there. But don't pretend you're writing

about the place or the people there. If the book takes a tourist approach, just touching down from the cruise ship for some local shopping, then you get the kind of nonfiction photo-essay so common in children's literature, where the pictures are arranged so that the child—usually attired in national dress—goes on a “journey,” a journey that allows the book to include some colorful scenery and local customs. Such an attitude is really a failure of the imagination. The “others” are a shadowy mass. They're not complex characters, like me, facing conflicting choices. In the popular safari-adventure “Out of Africa” stories, the black people are like the wild creatures: innocent, mysterious primitives offering respite to the jaded sophisticates of the West.

The other side of the savage primitive stereotype is the reverential. It's just as distancing, just as dehumanizing. And it's the most common form of stereotyping now. Michael Dorris (1993), a member of the Modoc tribe, acted as consultant for the Native American list in *Against Borders*. He says:

In the world of contemporary books dealing with American Indians, the road to the unhappy hunting ground is paved with good intentions. Perhaps in reaction to a previous generation's broad categorization of native peoples as savage, dangerous, or just plain odd, the modern approach to tribal societies seems a curious mixture of reverence and caution, with a heavy dollop of mysticism thrown in for ethnic flavor. (p. 219)

He says that we don't get

a complex view or a matter-of-fact attitude toward everyday life, past or present. . . . Historical Indians seem always teetering on the verge of extrasensory perception. Their dreams prognosticate with an eerie accuracy that any weather reporter would envy. They possess the convenient ability to communicate freely with animals and birds, and they demonstrate a knack for nature-based simile. In the politically correct vocabulary of multiculturalism, native Americans of whatever tribe or period tend to be an earnest, humorless lot, stiff and instructive as museum diorama.

In other words, quite boring.

As a child, I seldom identified with Indians in books because for the most part they were utterly predictable in their reactions to events. They longed for the past, were solemn paragons of virtue, and were, in short, the last people I would choose to play with. (p. 219)

The African-American poet Lucille Clifton (1991, p. 8) attacks the reverential stereotyping in her poetry collection *Quilting*:

. . . the merely human
is denied me still
and i am now no longer beast
but saint.

Of course it's great to read about your own culture and recognize yourself in a book, especially if you have felt marginalized and demonized. The writer Jamaica Kincaid, who grew up in Antigua, talks about the joy of finding the books of fellow Caribbean Derek Walcott,

the 1992 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature: "I thought we were just part of the riffraff of the British Empire until I read this man and thought: 'Oh yes, that is me. That is us.'" (Rule, 1992, p. C30). When I first read Doris Lessing's (1965, 1988) *African Stories*, such as "The Old Chief Mshlanga," I suddenly recognized things about myself that I hadn't been conscious of. I didn't find role models, but I understood how apartheid had conditioned me when I was growing up. One of the things Lessing gets perfectly is the way other people's languages always sound not only foreign but "uncouth" and "ridiculous." She's also hard on the sentimentalists who think you can just put things right with "an easy gush of feeling."

Now, I also get immense pleasure and the shock of recognition when I read Sandra Cisneros' (1989) stories in *The House on Mango Street* about a young Chicana girl, Esperanza, coming of age in Chicago. Esperanza says that her great-grandmother "looked out of the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow" (pp. 10-11). That image makes me catch my breath. It makes me think of so many strong women trapped at home. I remember my mother-in-law, an immigrant from Lithuania, well-educated, spirited, but a stranger, who got stuck in the rigid role prescribed for her in Cape Town's Jewish community. She used to sit like that, chin in her hands, elbows on the table, angrily watching us eat the food she'd cooked.

Amy Tan's (1989) *The Joy Luck Club* does give you an idea of what it's like to grow up Chinese-American, and that is a good reason to read it. It's important for Asian-Americans to read about themselves in books, and it's important for everybody else to read good books about them. It does show women struggling for independence, and that does give me pleasure. But it isn't reverential; the people aren't always wise and admirable. The extraordinary success of *The Joy Luck Club* has little to do with our need to know about "other" cultures or our own. This book is a best-seller because, rooted as it is in the Chinese-American experience, it explores the complexity and conflict, the love and anger, between mothers and daughters everywhere.

I love the Yiddish idiom and the shtetl setting in the stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer; he makes me laugh and makes me remember my mother's stories and how she loves books and he gives me a sense of my family and who I am. But that's only part of it. And just as I love Sandra Cisneros, so non-Jews can find themselves in the humor and humanity of Singer's stories.

I was on the U.S. IBBY committee that selected Virginia Hamilton as the 1991 U.S. nominee for the international Hans Christian Andersen Award. When the nomination was announced, some people said that she didn't have a chance of world recognition because foreigners wouldn't understand her, wouldn't read her, wouldn't translate her. She

was too idiomatic, too difficult, too local, they said. They were wrong. She won. And, in fact, her books have been widely read in countries such as Japan for years.

CHILDREN AND MULTICULTURAL BOOKS

We're too quick to say, "kids won't read this." We each live in a small world and talk to people like ourselves and reinforce each other, and we think everyone agrees with us. If you choose good stories and if you promote them, it's not true that books in translation or about foreign cultures are only for the "gifted," that young people won't read books with a strong sense of a foreign place. Singer (1977, p. 13) says that the opposite is true, that the more a story is connected with a group, the more specific it is, the better. In an opening note to *When Shlemiel Went to Warsaw*, he says, "in our time, literature is losing its address" (Singer, 1968). That's such a wonderful pun—losing its sense of place, its identity, and because of that, losing its ability to speak, to address, an audience. Singer says that in writing for children, he's not concerned with using only words that the child will understand. "A child will not throw away a book because there are a few words that he does not understand. . . . A child will throw away a book only if . . . it . . . is boring" (Singer, 1977, pp. 14-15). E. B. White said the same about *Charlotte's Web*. "Children are game for anything," he said. "I throw them hard words, and they backhand them over the net. They love words that give them a hard time" as long as they are interested in the story (Plimpton, 1988, p. 20; Gherman, 1992, p. 93).

It's obvious that for mainstream young people, books about "other" cultures are not as easy to pick up as *Sassy* magazine, or as easy to watch as "Beverly Hills 90210." And, in fact, they shouldn't be. We don't want a homogenized culture. If you're a kid in New York, then reading about a refugee in North Korea, or a teenager in the bush in Africa, or a Mormon in Utah involves some effort, some imagination, some opening up of who you are.

Stories about foreign places risk two extremes: either they can overwhelm the reader with reverential details of idiom, background, and custom; or they can homogenize the culture and turn all the characters into mall babies. There's always that tension between the particular and the universal, between making the character and experience and culture too special, and making them too much the same. On the one hand, we don't want to be bogged down in reverential details about the way of life and the deep mystical meaning of everything the protagonist sees; we don't want to wade through thickets of idiom, background, and culture before we can get to the story. And yet . . . Elizabeth Laird's

(1992) exciting story *Kiss the Dust*, about a Kurdish teenager caught up in the Iran-Iraq War in 1984, has almost too little to do with Kurdish culture. We are quickly swept up into a fast-paced refugee story about someone—just like us—forced to flee home, school, safety. There's nothing wrong with the story, and kids will grab it for the adventure, never doubting for a moment that she'll make it through the mountains and camps to safety.

A much better book is *Shabanu, Daughter of the Wind*, by Suzanne Fisher Staples (1989), about a young Muslim girl living with her nomadic family in the desert of Pakistan. Shabanu has spirit and intelligence and that's dangerous in a girl, especially when at the age of 12 she's promised in marriage to an old man. As we come to care for Shabanu and what happens to her, we imagine what it must be like to be her. At the same time, the story is rooted in the particulars of her culture, and the sense of her place is deeply felt. The important thing is that there's no sense of the exotic; the desert is very much there but not as scenery or travelogue. This book is remarkable in showing a sense of individual personality within a tight social structure. Through Shabanu's first-person, present-tense narrative, we see the diverse, complex inner lives of her family, as well as their strictly defined cultural roles. Her father is as trapped as she is, loving her proud spirit, suffering even as he battles her into submission. As many of us do, she finds a mentor in the extended family. Her strong aunt shows Shabanu that she has a choice and tells her that no one can reach her inner self. Shabanu's culture locks her up, but inside she can be free.

Shabanu has a glossary, but I didn't know that until I got to the end of the book. I didn't need it. I got swept up into the world of Shabanu, gave myself over to the story, and even if I didn't understand every single nuance and every foreign expression, I got meanings from the context. I can't believe that reviewers object to the "Briticisms" in a book from England. That's what makes a world; and if you don't get every detail, so what? As a child in South Africa, I loved the Briticisms and I loved the Yankee talk in American movies and books; they were a draw, not a barrier.

When I was working on editing the anthology *Somehow Tenderness Survives: Stories of Southern Africa* (Rochman, 1988), both my editor Charlotte Zolotow and I were reluctant to have a glossary. We felt that readers would get the meaning of strange words from their context. If you know there's a glossary, it makes you stiff and wary instead of allowing you to give yourself over to the world of the story. What persuaded us that we did need a glossary was the fact that the racist categories and insults needed clarification. Americans didn't know that "kaffir" was

the worst insult, the equivalent of “nigger” here; they didn’t know that “native” is derogatory. In fact, it’s a sign of the shame of apartheid that it has spawned such a list of racist names.

CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS IN CHILDREN’S BOOKS

I started this paper with a joke about names. And yet . . . what you call people does matter, especially in a society where groups are angry and divided. When Malcolm Little dropped the last name which had been given to his family by slave owners and took on X to stand for his lost African heritage, he was making a powerful statement about his identity. His renaming was like a rebirth: He was freeing himself from the self-hatred that kept him enslaved. He was rejecting the white mainstream that rejected him (X & Haley, 1965). To call a man a “boy,” as they do in South Africa, is a vicious racist insult. Many whites there never learn the last names of their servants; the woman who looks after their children is “the girl.” If servants are nameless, they aren’t people.

Books about apartheid, about slavery, about the Holocaust, can be grim. Do you give young people books about racial oppression and mass suffering? How do you evaluate such books? Young people want to know about these things, and it is important that they should know. But whether it’s fiction or nonfiction, the account should not exploit the violence; it shouldn’t grab attention by dwelling on sensational detail. Nor should it offer slick comfort; the Holocaust did not have a happy ending. Nor should it fall back on exhortation and rhetoric; after a while, words like “horror,” “atrocities,” “terrible” cease to mean anything.

The best stories tell it from the point of view of ordinary people like Anne Frank, like us. A Holocaust account like Ida Vos’ (1991) *Hide and Seek* is understated, allowing the facts to speak for themselves, true to the Jewish child’s bewildered point of view. (Why must she wear a star? What does it mean, going into hiding?) No gimmicks such as time travel and easy escape; no harangue and melodrama. The winner of the 1992 Batchelder Award for the best book in translation, Uri Orlev’s (1991) *The Man from the Other Side*, has none of the sentimentality that pervades so many children’s books about the Holocaust. While the teenager’s first-person account is unequivocal about the evil of the Nazi genocide, the misery of the crowded ghetto, and the stirring events of the brave Warsaw Ghetto uprising, it also bears witness to the way hunger and fear affected individual behavior. The Jews weren’t an amorphous group of victims and heroes. Some were brave; some weren’t; there were traitors among them. Many Poles were anti-Semitic; some were indifferent; but some transcended prejudice. In Lyll Becerra de Jenkins’ (1988) *The Honorable Prison*, the political terror in a Latin American

country is personalized through one girl's experience. When her family is placed under house arrest because of her father's politics, though she loves her father and admires his ideals, there are times when she hates him, even wishes he would die, so that the family can go free. Stories like these defeat stereotype. They overcome the evil institution, not by making the character a heroic role model or a proud representative of the race, not by haranguing us with a worthy cause, but by making the individual a person.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to take all these criteria into account for my book *Against Borders: Promoting Books for a Multicultural World* (Rochman, 1993). At first I felt overwhelmed by the demands of political correctness. How was I going to choose the "right" books for the bibliographies and book discussions? What about all the watchdogs from everywhere who would pounce: How could you put that book in? How could you leave that title out? Even with my editors—Bill Ott, editor and publisher of *Booklist*, and Bonnie Smothers, acquisitions editor at ALA Books—and lots of wise and committed consultants, there were going to be so many *problems*.

My husband is a long-time apartheid fighter. "Not *problems*," he said, "*Riches*."

And that's really the point about the whole multicultural debate. When I lived under apartheid, I thought I was privileged—and compared with the physical suffering of black people I was immeasurably well-off—but my life was impoverished. I was blind and I was frightened. I was shut in. And I was denied access to the stories and music of the world. Groups like Ladysmith Black Mambazo were making music right there, and I couldn't hear them. I didn't know that in the streets of Soweto there were people like Nelson Mandela with a vision of a nonracial democracy that would change my life. I was ignorant and I didn't know I was ignorant. I thought I was better than someone like Mark Mathabane's mother because she spoke English with an accent; but she was fluent in four languages (Mathabane, 1986). I didn't know anything about most of the people around me. And because of that I didn't know what *I* could be.

Borders shut us in, in Johannesburg, in Los Angeles and Chicago, in Eastern Europe, in our own imaginations. The best books can help break down that apartheid. They surprise us—whether they are set close to home or abroad. They extend that phrase "like me" to include what we thought was strange and foreign. And they change our view of ourselves.

You know that old story about the man who searched for treasure all over the world and then found it right there in his own backyard?

Mythologist Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty says that the story doesn't mean that you should stay home and never go out into the world—what the story's really saying is that it's only *because* you've traveled that you can find treasure at home.² When you get lost in a story, when you get to care about a character, you find yourself in a new world that makes you look at yourself in a new way. You think about things you took for granted. You imagine other people's lives—and that makes you discover your own.

NOTES

¹ My main source for these terms is *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook* (Beard & Cerf, 1992), which scrupulously documents its references to the usage of these terms.

² My friend Darlene McCampbell, an English teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, told me this wonderful story that Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (1988) told when she visited the school during Arts Week. In her book *Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes*, she quotes the great Indologist Heinrich Zimmer's comment on the myth of the Rabbi of Cracow: "Now the real treasure . . . is never far away; it lies buried in the innermost recess of our own home; that is to say, our own being . . . but there is the odd and persistent fact . . . that the one who reveals to us the meaning of our cryptic inner message must be a stranger, of another creed and a foreign race" (p. 138).

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