

Tammi Simpson, Multicultural Lit Reflection

One truth that I have learned throughout the years, especially since I have had children of my own, is that there are at least two sides to every story – not because the events of the story change from one person to the next, but because the people involved in the events see them through different eyes. As a parent, if I continually listen to one child’s point of view over the other, I will quickly give voice to one and silence the other; this is what has happened within mainstream literature. The voice of all-White literature has dominated for so long because it is the voice that we (mainstream America) have grown accustomed to listening to – either because we have been exposed to it most often or because we have migrated towards it with expectations that it is the literature that will most connect with our personal interests. The tragedy of this is that a one-sided bias has been created and nursed for so long that to begin to reverse and undo its effects, the entire world of literature (authors, illustrators, publishers, reviewers, educators, librarians, and even readers) must step out of their comfort zones and be willing to be stretched. The voices of those who have been suppressed for so long must find courage to speak up (and out) about issues of racism in a way which forces readers to think outside of the literary box that they have comfortably secured themselves in. This is a difficult task that relies heavily on the middlemen (publishers, reviewers, educators and librarians) to help bring about meaningful experiences between authors and illustrators and their audience of readers. More importantly, it is through these meaningful experiences that these readers, also known as our students, will develop their beliefs about themselves and the world around them. As an educator, I have come face-to-face with this daunting task of filling in the gaps of mainstream literature with the missing puzzle pieces of authentic multicultural literature.

So, how do educators begin to do this? According to Bishop, “the function of multicultural literature is to ensure that students have the opportunity to reflect...to ask questions...and to inspire them to actions that will create and maintain social justice” (19). Cai seconds this opinion by saying that “these books...have the potential to stimulate the reader to reflect upon how to deal with interracial relationships” (320). I agree with both Bishop and Cai’s assertions that multicultural literature should initiate some sort of critical reflection within students which produces a positive change to their ideologies concerning the pluralistic society that surrounds them and I believe that these moments of critical reflection should regularly be incorporated into the educational curriculum. However, teachers should not dive at multicultural literature haphazardly, but with thoughtful and critical analysis instead.

Having a clear definition of the term *multicultural literature* would be helpful in our endeavors to promote it, but with such a diverse playing field this is proving to be an arduous task. Bishop supports

a definition of multiculturalism that is “comprehensive and inclusive” containing “books that reflect the racial, ethnic, and social diversity that is characteristic of our pluralistic society and of the world” (3). Cai highlights the other two extremes of this debate as well saying that some believe multicultural literature to be literature that “should include as many cultures as possible with no distinction between the dominant and dominated,” while others believe that all literature contains within its pages some aspect of multiculturalism (313). Either way, we run the risk of being too broad, or too narrow. However, I am not convinced, like Harris (110), to include books regarding one’s sexual preference in my personal definition of multicultural literature. I also have my reservations about including religious preferences as a focus in multicultural literature. Many will say that this is narrow minded, but my fear is that we will get so caught up in the controversies that stem from these latter issues that we will create our own road blocks to the benefits that multicultural literature has to offer to the whole of society. I do not believe these issues will be neglected because they will forever be a natural extension of authentic voices as they write and illustrate.

I believe that the main agenda of multicultural literature should be to promote positive changes in the way we think about and live beside each other in society and to help end stereotypes that have been established through mainstream culture (whether through books, media, etc.); this means that we must begin to listen to the voices that have previously been silenced. Authors such as Joseph Bruchac and Shonto Begay are examples of these voices. While many may not know their stories yet, it is vital for how we function as a society going forward that we start listening. In addition, since there will not likely be a general consensus concerning the definition of multicultural literature any time soon, teachers should at least begin to pinpoint racial and ethnic groups that have consistently fallen outside of the dominant power structure of mainstream culture (Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans) and who have throughout history faced attacks of prejudice because of their ethnicity or who have been misrepresented to the extent that they have been marginalized.

While there is not enough time for teachers to be all-inclusive of every culture and sub-culture in between, we cannot sit back and wonder where to begin. Instead, we must just begin. The good news for teachers in the twenty-first century seems to be that while the voice of the “Other” may have been somewhat silent only decades ago, it seems to be getting louder. Harris saw the percentage of multicultural literature begin to rise in the early 1990s as awareness concerning the general necessity of it began to rise (108). This is also true according to Denise Johnson who says that “today, there is more high-quality multicultural children’s literature available than ever before” (302). Not only this, but the strength of the arguments pressing for multicultural literature is also growing and can be seen in some

heated debates over what is authentic and what is not. Reese's article, *Contesting Ideology in Children's Book Reviewing*, gives us hope by stating that "the quality and quantity of multicultural literature has increased over the past two decades."

With multicultural literature becoming popular, many European Americans are left struggling to meet the criteria of the definition only to face the intense criticisms from those within the cultures that they are trying to represent. While their attempts may be genuine, there is much to be considered when one culture is trying to be the voice of another. There were several examples of this throughout our reading and the appearance of inconsistency was evident to some degree in most of these attempts. Bishop shows readers that details matter in literature, especially multicultural literature where the standard is to "help change the way its readers see the world (9)." She teaches us to be aware of misrepresentations of all sizes— everything from the characters' hairstyles as pointed out in Catherine Stock's *Secret Valentine* to obvious stereotypes from such books as *The Story of Little Black Sambo* or *Dr. Doolittle*. After my brief submersion into multicultural literature, I am convinced that authorship matters. This was evident in our back-to-back readings of Beth Kanell's *The Darkness Under the Water* and Joseph Bruchac's *Hidden Roots*. Two books focusing on similar issues but with two very different tones. Kanell's non-Native perspective made it difficult for her to see the blaring controversies of her book as pointed out by several Native American reviewers – Seale, Dow, Slapin, Reese and Bruchac. Emily Rouls stated within our team discussion that "since American Indians have experienced many hardships (and still are), it is naïve to think that just anyone could tell their stories (or illustrate them). An outsider's perspective most likely could never portray the feelings that American Indians felt and nor should an outsider even try to." While I agree that an outsider's perspective will most likely always lack something – whether passion, detail, thoughtfulness, carefulness, depth or understanding – I do not think that an outsider should *never* try. I like how James Ransom described his hesitation to write about other cultures when he said "I haven't held their babies". He understood just how delicate and careful one must handle the heart of another culture. In this same vein, however, I do not believe that simply being Native American is a ticket to write about Native American heritage, but that only those with rich experiences, passion and understanding of the culture should enter their voices into the dialogue of multicultural literature, especially if meaningful learning experiences are to be promoted.

Only a few weeks ago, however, I may have supported a different argument. I began this discussion about multicultural literature with strong feelings of protection for the author's freedom of speech. I realize that this is a tricky topic because it gives people the right to publicize fallacy as well as truth and people have had to deal with the hurt caused by this for centuries. Nevertheless, one of my

fears is that once censorship is promoted towards any one group it becomes very difficult to draw the line where that censorship should end. Furthermore, allowing this type of censorship puts tremendous power in the hands of individuals and groups to determine what is right for the majority; this requires much trust from the rest of us.

Likewise, I find myself protecting the author's freedom of speech under the argument that readers also have freedom – freedom of choice to discern and embrace their own beliefs about what is true or not true. Therefore, I could accept freedom of speech as a viable point within the argument of multicultural literature simply because as a reader, I have freedom of choice. In this same manner, as a reader exercising this freedom of *choice*, I expect to have *choices*; this means I want to hear different perspectives and to know different sides of the argument. If something is not right or true, I want those who know what is right or true to speak up and give me the opportunity to exercise my freedom of choice with as much information as possible. I feel that Reese presented a very strong argument against Roger Sutton, the Editor-in-Chief of Horn Book, in her article, *Contesting Ideology in Children's Book Reviewing* and I was strongly admonished by Reese near the end of her argument, when she said,

*“By electing to stand on freedom of speech and the fear of censorship, people who hold to this ideology are adhering to structures that hinder the growth of the quality of children's literature. Proponents of multicultural literature want better literature, free of positive or negative ethnic stereotypes that fail to provide children with an accurate picture of people of color. Proponents of multicultural literature believe the literature can only become better if we allow books to be criticized for their content as well as their literary aspects.”*

I realize that Reese is not arguing against freedom of speech here, she is arguing for it from the point of view of the opposition. If there are not strict guidelines and criteria about what is labeled authentic multicultural literature, then the true meaning of multicultural literature will become overstrained and ineffective, forever chasing its own tail but never catching it; this, however, is not what multicultural literature is intended to be. Instead, it has the potential to be a powerful tool that, if used correctly, can help readers make meaningful connections to cultures that were once off limits and foreign to them. In *The Joy of Children's Literature*, Johnson highlights Bishop's ideas that multicultural literature acts as “a mirror and a window for the reader. As a mirror, it shows children reflections of themselves; as a window, it shows them what other people are like (309).” Without authentic, thoughtful multicultural literature that is labeled as such for more than just its literary value, perspective

is lost and society blindly maintains its biased opinions that continually suppress cultural minority groups.

After the readings of this module, I hold fast to my belief that it is important for anyone involved in children's literature – teachers, librarians, authors, illustrators, publishers, etc. – to remember that our ideologies do not become deeply rooted in us only when we reach adulthood, but rather they form in our minds and hearts at very young ages. With this in mind, and because of “freedom of speech”, we should tread on these grounds thoughtfully and respectfully doing everything we can to listen to knowledgeable voices and decipher truth. This is why I agree with Debbie Reese in her article *Contesting Ideology in Children's Book Reviewing*, where she advocates the need for more knowledgeable voices to speak out. I appreciate Reese's passion on the subject and feel that to fully exercise “freedom” we have to allow all voices to be heard, especially those who understand the cultures being represented (or misrepresented) in the literature.

This brings me to the authenticity and accuracy of Joseph Bruchac's voice throughout each of his books that we read: *The Dark Pond*, *The Faithful Hunter*, *Hidden Roots*, and of course, his autobiography, *Bowman's Store* which gave him a tremendous amount of credibility as a Native American writer. I was unsure of this credibility as I was reading *The Dark Pond*, simply because I had not had the chance to “get to know” Bruchac yet. I read this book cautiously, looking for inroads to gain understanding of Native American culture. Typically, I would not consider books in the “horror” genre to carry much depth in terms of multicultural learning. But I was pleasantly surprised by how much I actually did encounter. Right off the bat, Bruchac's words in the dedication of his book where he urges all of his nephews to “stay gentle, stay strong,” spoke volumes about Armie's character; it caught my attention when I read *The Dark Pond*, but it really made sense to me after reading *Bowman's Store* and realizing that it was one of the greatest lessons Joseph Bruchac learned from his grandfather, Jesse Bowman. Just as Armie's gentle strength drew respect from his peers, Jesse Bowman's gentle strength is undoubtedly what caused me to admire and respect him. These two words alone, *gentle* and *strong*, go a long way towards dissolving stereotypes about Native American Indians.

Nevertheless, Bruchac doesn't stop with these two words. Readers get a tremendous sense of Armie's respect and understanding of nature, Bruchac portrays Armie as a real person – one with intelligence, beliefs and real feelings, especially of loneliness as he longs for the attention of his parents. Readers learn that Armie has a healthy fear of the dangers posed by nature, a fear that only serves to heighten his awareness of his surroundings. Then, on top of presenting rich insight into Native American heritage, Bruchac ingeniously throws in an opportunity to learn about the horrors of the Armenian

Genocide of 1915. He gives just enough information for readers to be enlightened as they grow in their perspective and understanding of the world in which they live. At the end of this module I can say that this is multicultural literature at its best. It appeals to those outside the norm of what multicultural literature might look like, yet it still offers an opportunity for critical thinking and stretching on the part of the reader.

*The Faithful Hunter: Abenaki Stories* was a thought-provoking read for me. I saw instances, mostly in regards to creation, where the stories reflected tidbits of Biblical truth that have obviously been changed through many generations of storytelling (for instance, the idea of a creator, forming people out of the dust of the ground and breathing life into them). This was very intriguing to me and I can only imagine that without written documentation of the Creation account (the Pentateuch) this would be very easy to do over an extended period of time. What is significant about these stories though is that they are not told by non-Natives about the Abenakis, but they come from the very heart of the Abenakis themselves. Bruchac did a beautiful job of telling these stories and portraying the Abenaki's view of relationships with people and nature, of humility and selflessness, and of family and responsibilities. Plus, after happening upon Marc Fink's post from team 3, I discovered that this book portrays the intelligence of the Abenakis as well. Marc points out the knowledge that the Native Americans must have had (before the Europeans could have passed on their data) about the earth being round and about how only half of the world receives daylight at a time. This was a fascinating discovery for me and could be a great topic of exploration for students. In summary, this book provides a thoughtful foundation to get students thinking about how character, integrity and knowledge matter in all areas of life, especially in the way we treat each other. And, since treating each other respectfully stems from our understanding of each other, we should be very cautious about whom we let tell our stories and whose voices we regard when listening to the stories of others.

Unfortunately, Beth Kanell, in her book *The Darkness Under the Water*, did not give me much hope that a cultural outsider has much potential to represent the philosophies, values and traditions of those inside the culture with accuracy. Honestly, I was thankful to have read Bruchac's *The Faithful Hunter: Abenaki Stories*, before reading *The Darkness Under the Water* because it taught me much about Abenaki relationships, on several different levels, and helped me keep an open eye for these truths in Kanell's book. While I am in no way an expert on the Abenaki way of life, I found myself paying attention to the relationships among all the members of the family, looking for respect being given to the elder members (in this case the grandmother), and looking for evidence of traditions and beliefs being passed down from one generation to the next. I was also looking for the evident selflessness

portrayed by *The Faithful Hunter* himself. I was a bit confused when I did not see this happening like I was expecting. For instance, in the conversation with Me-Mere and Mama, Me-Mere tells her, “You’re not a true Daughter of the People, or you would respect me!” Mama then answers with a very harsh reply of, “If you want respect, you have to be respectable!” Also, there was significant evidence that Molly didn’t know as much as I expected her to know about Abenaki traditions or of nature (i.e. the fawn in the woods). As far as being “selfless”, I saw them all as hard workers willing to do what it takes to care for each other as a family, but I also saw Molly as a typical teenage girl who actually thought about herself quite a bit – although she did seem to mature towards the end of the book when she realized that Me-Mere’s loss was greater than her own when the house burned down and the river began to overtake the land. However, from what I had already learned just from reading *The Faithful Hunter*, I didn’t feel like I was looking at the “typical” Abenaki family. Truthfully, my overall thought is that Kanell’s story could be told in about half the time and I felt that the climax when Molly’s Mama went into premature labor was extremely heavy for this novel and for this age group. Finally, after some personal research concerning the Vermont Eugenics Project I was able to evaluate this book for its historical accuracy which turns out was not very precise at all.

While I was warm in regards to how my initial feelings lined up with the experts, I did not know the intense heat of the debate over Kanell’s book until I started reading the reviews of it by Seale and Dow, Reese, Slapin and Bruchac. Seale and Dow point out several discrepancies from *The Darkness Under the Water* in their essay – such as the historicity of the Vermont Eugenics Project, why Henry Laporte was not a target of the eugenicists, Henry and Molly’s lack of knowledge about where to find willow branches and black ash, and the overall tragedy of the dam being built. They call Kanell’s book “a travesty” and say that “such a sensational story obscures, ignores, and even functions to belittle the deep and enduring wounds that continue to poison our families and communities today.” In Beverly Slapin’s *Open Letter to Beth Kanell*, Slapin addresses Kanell’s insensitive discussion questions for *The Darkness Under the Water* on Kanell’s website accusing Kanell of racism for “dehumanizing the Abenaki peoples...heaping shame on Abenaki people...and encouraging non-Indian young people to feel superior.” These are very strong criticisms that I do not feel Kanell rectified in any of her explanations. In my opinion, Kanell’s book only serves to give readers a distorted part of the whole of the tragedy that took place in Vermont and leaves readers with confusion (confusion that I did not know needed cleared up until after I read Bruchac’s *Hidden Roots*) about Native Americans and what really happened in Vermont during the 1920s and 1930s.

So what happened with Kanell's book? Clearly, Kanell is "a cultural outsider with no ties to the story, other than having gone shopping" (*Oyate Criteria for Evaluating Books*); this, as I have learned makes a big difference. I think Bruchac said it best in *After the Darkness* when he acknowledges that "the cultural insider usually has a big head start and it takes a long time and a lot of close listening for an outsider to catch up." So, instead of helping the Abenakis have a voice by telling their story like Kanell said she was trying to do, she actually ended up stealing their voice and their story. The tragedy here is that if Kanell's book is the only interpretation that students encounter about this time in history, they will be left with a misguided understanding of the people and the time. I stated in one of my posts that I was not ready to throw in the towel and say that no one should write about a culture or ethnicity unless they are part of it. So, while I lean towards Bruchac's conclusions in the above statement, I think that even with "close listening" there is going to be a hole that only the passion and understanding of one's heritage can fill.

Thankfully, I was not left with the taste of Kanell's book in my mouth. Bruchac's *Hidden Roots* did beautifully what Kanell only dreamed about doing. The differences are obvious and extreme, and can be seen in the title as well as the central theme of both books – Kanell focuses on "darkness" which is symbolic of fear, death, evil, the negative and the unknown and Bruchac focuses on "roots" which symbolizes life, growth, stability, strength and connectedness. Also, because Bruchac set his story in the 1960s rather than the 1920s and 30s like Kanell did, the reader can get a sense of victory for the Abenaki Indians seeing them as overcomers working to gain back their freedom and their voice and finding their strength in the roots that have remained steady throughout the tragedies of the Vermont Eugenic Project.

There is no doubt in my mind that the greatest difference between *The Darkness Under the Water* and *Hidden Roots* is found in the authorship of these two books. If Bruchac's authority to tell the story of Native Americans was ever in question, reading *Bowman's Store* cleared it up. Bruchac's writing about Native American heritage is a natural extension of who he is and because of this, I trust Bruchac to not write anything that would "embarrass or hurt" Native Americans. In all honesty, I appreciate Bruchac's openness and honesty about himself in his autobiography because it gives me, as a reader and as a teacher, the confidence I need to trust his voice.

As a teacher, I am realizing more and more the need to have this depth of trust before exposing students to literature, especially when that literature could be damaging to the individuals it misrepresents and also damaging to their views of the society in which they live. This type of power found in literature is a big deal and cannot be taken lightly. However, I must admit that I do not fully

understand this power yet, and while I have surfed a tremendous amount of information in just a little bit of time, for me to assume that I have arrived would not be wise. Truly, for me, the discussion about multicultural literature has only just begun.

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GRADE: 100%

Spectacular Tammi. Quite an extensive, well thought out paper. One of your strengths is your consideration of free speech and what that means to multicultural literature. I get a little confused at times though. Sometimes, it feels like you are saying we can't censor books like Bruchac's because they are excellent examples of literature, authentic, and can pull down systems of oppression. But then sometimes it feels like you are saying that we shouldn't critique books like Kanell's since that would violate free speech. (although you do critique her book so I don't think that is what you mean). Great job though. One of the best papers.

Bevin Roue