

The Color of Authenticity in Multicultural Children's Literature

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[*Editor's Note: This is the second part of a two-part series. See Does It Matter Where You Come From? in VOYA October 2011 for Part 1.*]

Most students know Rosa Parks as the woman with tired feet who refused to move to the back of the bus. What they don't know is that, for all of her life, she was an avid Civil Rights worker. Elementary school children learn about Christopher Columbus as an adventurous explorer, not as a mercenary who hunted only for gold and who cut off the feet of captive Indians who failed to return with the allotted gold.

Sure, the traditional stories are cherished, but we have to ask ourselves: Are they accurate? Are they authentic? Are these the stories that we should be passing along to our students?

Most educators believe that exposing students to multicultural literature will open a student's eyes to other ethnicities which, in turn, enhances their understanding of others in a global world—a theory that almost anyone would see as a worthy classroom goal. But, initially, the genre was dominated by European American authors: White authors telling the Hispanic migrant worker story, white authors sharing the black slavery experience, white authors writing the journey story of Native Americans to the reservation.

Through the years, the genre has progressed to incorporate the stories of many races and cultures and has increased author opportunities to share their own stories. Now, despite its complicated history and many faces, educators who are looking for a way to simply categorize multicultural literature can use the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) definition, "Books by and about people of color."

One of the groundbreakers in multicultural literature criticism was Rudine Sims Bishop. Her book, **Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction**, laid the groundwork upon which multicultural literature is evaluated, even today. In her book, Sims Bishop identified three categories of multicultural books: the Melting Pot books, Culturally Conscious books, and Social Conscience books (Sims Bishop, 1982). Though these book types are fairly self-explanatory, where a book fell within a particular category depended on what was actually written between its pages, not the color or race of the author

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who wrote the book. Those debates (i.e. Can a story about an African American be authentic only if it is written by an African American?) are the questions that continue to swirl about the multicultural literature community. It depends on who you talk to whether it matters or not.

Before Sims Bishop, one could essentially pinpoint the evolution of multicultural literature to changing cultural sensibilities, like the Civil Rights Movement, school segregation, and other changing social events. In addition, Nancy Larrick's 1965 *Saturday Review* article, "The All-White World of Children's Books," created a national buzz about multicultural literature (Larrick, 1965). The creation of the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) also brought these issues to national attention. In fact, we have the CIBC to thank for the writing

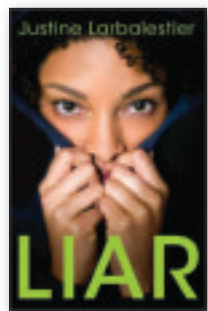
careers of such notable authors as Walter Dean Myers, Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, Sharon Bell Mathis, and Mildred Taylor. But, with all of these events came a changing population with increased immigration, legal and illegal, and our schools became multicolored as well as multicultural. All of these transformations forced the issue of who should write these books, and how they should be written.

Still, the publishing industry, even to this day, has lagged woefully behind all this progress, and in fact, inhibits the diversification of children's literature in ways that continue to foster certain historical misconceptions and perceptions. Early on, smaller, more ethnic publishers like Arte Publico, Lee & Low, and Third World Press walked the proverbial plank by successfully publishing books from authors of color. Larger publishing houses have been slow to increase their rolls of multicultural authors. In fact, in 2010, the CCBC received approximately thirty-four

thousand titles, and of those thirty-four thousand books only two hundred fifty-eight books were written by African American authors or contained African American-oriented content. Only thirty-one books were written by American Indian authors and/or contained American Indian themes, topics, or characters. Just one hundred twenty-four books were written by Asian Pacific authors or contained Asian Pacific cultural content. Finally, only one hundred twenty-one books had Latino content or were written by Latino authors. Since the CCBC has been keeping track of these numbers (since 1985), they haven't changed much from year to year, says Kathleen Horning, executive director of the CCBC, noting that they have never seen more than five percent of the books published for children written by people of color.

"Back in the 1980s and into the 1990s, we used to hear that publishers wanted to publish more multicultural books, but that they didn't have authors and artists of color submitting things," Horning said. "The last ten years we have been hearing that [it is] marketing that drives the decisions. The book buyers claim that books with kids of color on the cover don't sell or, in order for the buyers to purchase these books, a kid of nondescript color needs to be on the cover."

Recently the blogosphere exploded with controversy when Bloomsbury USA used a white model on the cover of Justine Larbalestier's book, **Liar**. In her book, she describes her main protagonist as "black with nappy hair." So, Larbalestier spoke out. Enraged bloggers spoke out, also, and one, LaTonya Baldwin,



mobilized her followers, founding the organization, Readers Against WhiteWashing. While Bloomsbury USA backed down and replaced the cover, they aren't the only publishers who have "white-washed" covers, and they continue to rationalize that books with white models sell better than those with models with varied skin colors. For Horning, these are enormously sweeping assumptions. "I mean, do we just believe these booksellers and buyers, that people of color don't buy books, or that they don't come into the bookstore to buy books, or that white people don't buy books with people of color on the cover?" Horning said.

As multicultural literature evolves, issues of accuracy and authenticity remain. One of the most persistent questions is whether or not an author must be a person of color to write the story of a person of color. Some authors argue that all fiction is the fruit of the imagination and that that imagination can carry through a plotline despite color, race, or ethnicity. Other authors argue that that kind of authenticity can only be achieved by a person of color who has lived in that particular "skin," encompassing all the customs, idiosyncracies, values, and language that come from a particular racial group.

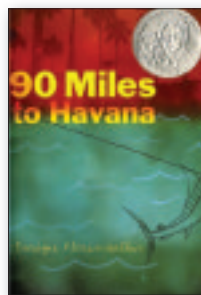
Chinese American author of **Bitter Melon**, Cara Chow, believes that, although it is not impossible, it is a lot more difficult for a writer who has not had the experience. "To make the depiction authentic, that author would have to have an intuitive grasp of that culture," Chow said. "That would require a

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tremendous amount of research and/or second-hand experience." Even for Chow, she consulted with her own mother about Chinese cultural details and observed family and friends for how Chinese American families operate.

Those writers who believe that the imagination, as well as some first-hand credible research, can lead to a thoughtful and accurate multicultural story, have often gone to great lengths to conduct this research. For instance, when Ruta Sepety researched for her book, **Between the Shades of Gray**, she literally immersed herself in historical research about Stalin's prisons by participating in a simulation experience in a Soviet prison. In her research for her book, **Sold**, Patricia McCormick traveled



to India and Nepal where she met with and interviewed young girls who had been rescued from brothels about their experiences as child slaves. From those interviews came her character, Lakshmi. For his book, **90 Miles from Havana**, Enrique Flores Gabri drew upon his own experiences as a participant in the Operacion Pedro Pan in the 1960s. Christina



Diaz Gonzalez took the stories that her parents told throughout her childhood and incorporated them into her book, **The Red Umbrella**. All these meaningful connections brought a first-hand authenticity to each of the stories that they authored.

In some cases where ongoing literature has been prolifically inaccurate, more intimate research by an author is mandatory, even if they are an author of color. It is not enough to rely upon what has been written, since that information may be considered inaccurate. Author of the *American Indians in Children's Literature* (<http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>) blog and numerous articles on Native Americans in children's literature, Debbie Reese believes that authenticity can only be achieved if an author has a meaningful connection to that race or culture. She acknowledges that a lot of materials are available for research for authors who want to write on another culture or race, but often those materials are written by people who really didn't have a full understanding of that race and culture. Sometimes, too, these materials are just plain inaccurate.

"An author can do what they think is good research, but if they haven't read the voices or writings of that particular group, then they may miss the meaning," Reese said. "There are very tangible kinds of things within a culture that you can only get from the people of that community, meaning that you have to actually talk to the people of that community."

Further accuracy becomes even more critical when past representations have been inaccurate, but are entrenched in children's literature. For Reese, the beloved *Little House* books are one such culprit. When she has advocated pulling these books from the classroom, she has been called anti-American, even though others have agreed with her. "Teaching a book like *Little*

House as a piece of literature to a group of third graders affirms those misconceptions, unless teachers actually challenge that,” said Reese. So we must, Reese says, become more educated consumers of literature, especially multicultural literature. Even still, this can be difficult, since there are so many misrepresentations. “If I piled the books that have poor depictions on any point of Native Americans next to the pile that have the accurate representations, it [the difference] is huge,” Reese said. “I would like consumers to apply a discerning eye to Native American literature just like they do when they are buying in the market.”

Unfortunately, misrepresentation will continue to exist if educators and critics don’t insist on accuracy. Of course, anyone can write whatever they want, says Horning, but it becomes a conflict when people criticize what’s been written. “I know everyone wants to write the best book that they can, but I think that people of that culture or race have every right to criticize the book if something doesn’t ring true to them or they know that there is inaccuracy.” Criticism, too, isn’t limited to those of that race or culture, or to our lofty book reviewers. Criticism should be an innate process in the educator’s role, before that literature makes it to the classroom of impressionable students.

While most teachers have only a finite amount of time for literature evaluation, a school library media specialist can help fill this gap by evaluating and recommending titles that accurately and authentically represent various colors and cultures. If they aren’t already, librarians should be well-schooled in evaluation theories like the critical race theory or the racial identity theory. Although a variety of means to evaluate multicultural literature exists, some basic rules of thumb can be gleaned from Rudine Sims Bishop’s book, **Shadow and Substance**, according to Kathleen Horning.

“In **Shadow and Substance**, Sims Bishop identified five aspects of African American literature to measure authenticity, such as names, family relationships, descriptions of skin color and hair, elements of church and religion, and its importance to culture, and language,” Horning said.

Essentially this means that it’s all in the details, folks. It’s about being culturally-specific, looking for those details that not only make a story more graphic and interesting, but also lend greater accuracy and believability about that race or culture—for instance, identifying Sitting Bull as a Hunkpapa Lakota rather than a Cheyenne, or identifying Nannie Rose as a Lakota rather than a Sioux, as was done in **My Heart Is on the Ground** by Ann Rinaldi (Reese, 1999).



Most importantly, the discussion on multicultural literature must be allowed, Horning says, to take place regardless of these questions about whether or not someone can write about someone outside their culture. “We need to read with a more critical eye and have the freedom to discuss without feeling like it will become a polarized discussion,” Horning said.

For those librarians who are simply over the idea of talking about authenticity in multicultural literature, pushing the discussion beyond this square one to more expansive levels, like class issues within a race or culture, or the differences between a Cuban perspective and a Mexican perspective, can result in a more in-depth classroom discussion (or discussion among colleagues). Our students are open to it. In fact, one could argue that kids today are more inclined to these discussions than we assume, says Horning, so that we might just be able to learn something from them. “I find that when I talk to high school or college students, they don’t have this narrow world view. They are the first to be

critical of literature as representing only white middle class,” Horning said.

Greater authenticity and accuracy in multicultural literature has not just randomly happened through the years. It has been pushed by people like Horning and Reese, and authors like Chow, with an insistence that widens our discussions, as well as our viewpoints, about others and their cultures. Though we may not realize it, we owe a lot to those early pioneers, like Rudine Sims Bishop, Nancy Larrick, Walter Dean Myers, Mildred Taylor, and others, who pushed this envelope. If it hadn’t been for these pioneers and those who continue to raise these arguments, we would still view Rosa Parks as merely a tired seamstress, rather than a woman who not only refused to go to the back of the bus, but also refused to quiet her voice in the face of prejudice. Or we may still see Squanto as a stereotypical red-faced Indian, rather than the dignified and brave presence of Tisquantum, native of Patuxet who belonged to the Wampanoag federation of tribes, a former slave who learned English and whose role was integral to the very survival of the Pilgrims. ■

RESOURCES

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INTERVIEWS

- Email Interview with Cara Chow, April 19, 2011.
- Telephone Interview with Kathleen Horning, August 30, 2011.
- Telephone Interview with Debbie Reese, September 2, 2011.

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