

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 12

Issue 1 *The Multicultural Classroom*

Article 9

1-1-1996

Multicultural Children's Literature: Canon of the Future

Suzanne S. Monroe

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Monroe, Suzanne S. (1996) "Multicultural Children's Literature: Canon of the Future," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1505>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Multicultural Children's Literature: Canon of the Future

Suzanne S. Monroe

According to Native American scholar Paula Gunn Allen:

Literature is one facet of culture. The significance of a literature can be best understood in terms of the culture from which it springs.... A person who was raised in a given culture has no problem seeing the relevance, the level of complexity, or the symbolic significance of the culture's literature. We are all from early childhood familiar with the assumptions that underlie our own culture and its literature and art. (54)

For the past seven years, I have been teaching Children's Literature as part of our university's teacher preparation program. Most of my students are of Anglo and Hispanic heritage with smaller numbers of students of Native American, African American, and Asian American ancestry. First languages for these students have included English, Spanish, Navajo, Tewa, German, and Vietnamese. I try to emphasize the cultures and languages represented in each classroom community as well as the more predominant culture/language communities of the Southwest.

I want to share four personally rewarding approaches which have contributed to my fascination and respect for this growing body of multicultural children's literature: (1) Genre Approach, (2) Author-Illustrator Studies, (3) Theme Approach, and (4) Issues Approach. The power of these approaches lies in the underlying assumption that students learn best through self-selection of tradebooks and regular opportunities for transacting with literature. They are inspired by classroom visits with published authors and illustrators. Additional benefits have included the

empowerment of diverse personal voice, authentic alternatives to a traditionally biased canon, and the transformation of family and community stories from oral tradition into print.

Genre Approach

A successful approach to studying multicultural children's literature is through genre. A variety of authors, publications, and cultural themes are included in each featured genre. In this way, writers of diverse backgrounds are viewed as an integral part of genre development and enhancement (Monroe 1995).

Examples of such diverse poetry might include *Honey, I Love* and *Nathaniel Talking* by Eloise Greenfield; *Dancing Teepees* by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve; *Arroz Con Leche* and *Las Navidades* by Lulu Delacre. These poets have evolved a particular style influenced by personal experience, language, and cultural background. In featuring tradebooks reflective of diverse ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds, I provide

the opportunity to experience poetry from a global perspective, integrating different world views.

The genre of traditional literature also provides a natural framework for the continuing study of diverse world views. It lends itself to the study of global stories while emphasizing the contemporary phenomena of translating oral tradition into print.

The following tradebooks are examples of traditional literature included in this genre study: *In the Beginning: Creation Stories From Around the World* and *The People Could Fly* (African American) by Virginia Hamilton; *Who Speaks for Wolf* (Iroquois) by Paula Underwood Spencer; *The Woman Who Outshone the Sun: The Legend of Lucia Zenteno* adapted from a poem by Alejandro Cruz Martinez (Spanish/English); *Monster Slayer* and *Monster Birds* (Navajo) by Vee Browne; *Spider Woman* (Inuit) by Anne Cameron; *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* (African) by Verna Aardema; *Fables* (Northern European) by Arnold Lobel; *La Llorona* by Joe Hayes (Spanish/English); *Hawaiian Folktales of Earth, Sea and Sky* by Vivian Thompson; *Pecos Bill* and *Paul Bunyan* (Anglo American) by Steven Kellogg; and *Cut From The Same Cloth: American Women of Myth, Legend and Tall Tale* by Robert San Souci. In using such a variety of traditional literature, I am able to integrate the cultural and linguistic contributions of diverse experience while providing examples of tall tales, fables, proverbs, porquoi, and stories of creation, transformation, and warning.

Author-Illustrator Studies

One of the most effective ways to encourage reluctant readers is to provide transactional experiences with ideas and the creators of these ideas. Over the past several years, I have developed the practice of author-illustrator studies. Within this framework, students get to know a particular author or illustrator of diversity very well. Some students write or call the publisher for biographical and publication materials. Others write or call the author or illustrator. A few have chosen to conduct personal interviews and supported these with self-recorded audio or video

tapes. Several students have even arranged for their subject of study to visit our classroom!

The process of research begins very early in the semester and culminates in a final paper and presentation. Students provide a rationale for choice, an extensive biographical sketch, a synthesis of the writer or artist's evolving style, and a summary of reader response and personal comments. They frequently bring to the classroom visual supports such as posters, publications, slides of illustrator's work, and a colorful hand-out!

Authors and illustrators of diversity who are providing exciting biographical and publication material worthy of in-depth study include Rudolfo Anaya, Donald Crews, Carmen Lomas Garza, Virginia Hamilton, Patricia McKissack, Pat Mora, Jerry Pinkney, Patricia Polacco, Faith Ringgold, Allen Say, Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, Gary Soto, Mildred Taylor, and Baje Whitethorne.

These are only a few of many outstanding creators in the field of multicultural children's literature. They have provided many traditional as well as contemporary ideas in a variety of genres. They have also contributed to the popular format of "family stories." Examples of innovative work based on personal and family stories include *The Keeping Quilt* by Patricia Polacco, *Grandfather's Journey* by Allen Say, *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza, *Big Mama's* by Donald Crews, *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold, and *Sunpainters: Eclipse of the Navajo Sun* by Baje Whitethorne. These tradebooks suggest that everyone carries the seed of a personal story waiting to be discovered, nurtured, and shared with others. The emergence of these "family stories" supports the concept of authentic authorship and provides diverse role models for young readers and writers.

Theme Approach

I have used a theme approach to encourage students to see the circular connections that exist between ideas and experiences. Currently, I have been emphasizing the theme of quilts as a framework for family and community stories. I have used my own grandmother's quilt as the basis for introducing this unit. The response to this piece

of material culture has been overwhelming in this region of the High Plains, an isolated expanse of dry and sparse land in Eastern New Mexico and West Texas.

Because quilts have been valued in local families and passed down through generations, students can easily identify with Patricia Polacco's *The Keeping Quilt*. I have used this story of Jewish tradition as well as several quilt stories from African-American and Hawaiian communities to build a network of inter-cultural "quilt" stories. I have also used Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* as an example of picturebook format which emerged from an original story quilt, and *Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt* by Tony Johnston to develop students' sensitivity to stereotypes as well as the importance of gender equity in creative expression.

These tradebooks suggest that everyone carries the seed of a personal story waiting to be discovered, nurtured, and shared with others.

The following tradebooks may be useful in developing a multicultural collection on this theme: *Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt*, *The Patchwork Quilt*, *The Quilt Story*, *The Keeping Quilt*, *The Josefina Story Quilt*, *Eight Hands Round: A Patchwork Alphabet*, *A Quilt for Kiri*, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, *Luka's Quilt*, and *Bess's Log Cabin Quilt*.

Historically, the quilt has been recognized as a multi-faceted symbol of women's culture. It is significant as an indigenous American art form which crosses racial, ethnic, language and class lines. It has been created largely, but not exclusively, by women.

For each of us, there is a permanent collection of "scraps" and "pieced patchwork" within our memories. To respond to the call to sort, sift, and resurrect these wonderful stories is the opportunity to make visible the "hidden dimension" of our individual and common inheritance. (Monroe 1994)

Issues Approach

An issues approach has been most successful with graduate students who are willing to look at the deeper issues of racism, sexism, ageism, and invisibility in children's tradebooks. Students often formulate an issue question after reading many multicultural books and noting patterns, trends, or actual gaps in writing and publishing. Students have pursued research on self-selected topics, completed a review of literature, initiated a shelf search of appropriate books at libraries and bookstores, and developed an annotated bibliography of recommended books.

A continuing issue for me has been the invisibility of Native American female protagonists in children's literature. Since the early 1930s, the majority of images have been traditional ones, often stereotyped. This trend has regularly been perpetuated by uninformed and insensitive authors as well as illustrators, publishers, and the media. I encourage my students to look beyond the narrow, often unauthentic and commercialized image of "Pocahontas." I challenge them to search for more authentic and contemporary images of Native American girls and women in settings of home, school, career, and literacy context.

Among the many publications most representative of life in contemporary rural and urban settings are the following: *Jenny Redbird Finds Her Friends* (Ojibway), *The Spider, The Cave and the Pottery Bowl* (Hopi), *Lucy Learns to Weave* (Navajo), *Alive Yazzie's Year* (Navajo), *Red Ribbons for Emma* (Navajo), *Not Just Any Ring* (Pueblo), *Goodbye, My Island* (Inuit), *A Promise Is a Promise* (Inuit), *Children of Clay* (Pueblo), *Kinaalda* (Navajo), and *A First Clay Gathering* (Pueblo). Each of these books presents Native American women of both youth and age in strong and positive roles, and a realistic image of the balance between traditional culture and contemporary social and political issues.

In addition to selections which feature Native American female protagonists, I also feature Native American women writers and their works. Three Native American women are continuing to contribute to the quality and authenticity of Native American children's literature. Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve (Lakota Sioux) has written

Dancing Teepees: Poems by American Indian Youth and *The Sioux: A First Americans Book*. Paula Underwood Spencer (Iroquois) has published *Who Speaks for Wolf*, a community-learning story based on several thousand years of oral tradition. Vee Brown (Navajo) has collaborated with illustrator Bajé Whitethone, Sr. (Navajo) on two tribal creation stories of "Changing Woman" entitled *Monster Slayer* and *Monster Birds*.

Students are encouraged to become familiar with Native American authors and illustrators through author studies, author visits, genre studies, and issues approach. These are all legitimate ways of learning more about the culture, language and world view. In contrast, the theme approach is limiting to the study of Native America simply because it has been over-used, often insensitively. As an alternative to this erroneous imaging of Native America as a culture of the past, I attempt to present more authentic and contemporary images of a living and dynamic people!

Resource Development

The following resources have been most useful in the development of a graduate course in Multicultural Children's Literature as well as workshops for in-service teachers. I have used *Teaching Multicultural Children's Literature K-8* edited by Violet Harris, as a required text. I have supplemented this basic text with two additional resources: *Multiethnic Children's Literature* by Gonzalo and Janet Lee Ramirez, and *Kaleidoscope* by Rudine Sims Bishop. All of these resources address recent multicultural publications. A major resource for updating my classroom collection of tradebooks have been issues of *Language Arts*, particularly the March, 1992 issue. Other resources I have used include *Multicultural Voices in Contemporary Literature* by Francis Ann Day and *Instructor* magazine, which has featured lengthy author-illustrator studies with fold-out photo-biographical sketches. I am currently using the December, 1995 issue of *Instructor* which features the article "How to Choose the Best Multicultural Literature" (Murry) as a resource for updating our classroom and library collections of books.

In conclusion, multicultural children's literature is not an isolated genre as featured in most traditional texts. It should be integrated throughout the curricular year rather than being taught just prior to holidays or monthly celebrations. It is more than food, festivals, and ceremonial dress. Multicultural children's literature is the very "fabric" of contemporary life in a multicultural and global society. With our continued nurturing, it will become the established canon of the future!

Works Cited

- Aardema, V. *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1975.
- Allen, P. G. *The Sacred Hoop*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.
- Bishop, R. S. *Kaleidoscope: A Multicultural Booklist For Grades K-8*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994.
- Browne, V. *Monster Slayer*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northland, 1994.
- . *Monster Birds*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northland, 1994.
- Cameron, A. *Spider Woman*. Madiera Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing Company, 1988.
- Clymer, E. *The Spider, the Cave and the Pottery Bowl*. New York: Atheneum, 1972.
- Coerr, E. *The Josefina Story Quilt*. New York: Dial, 1989.
- Crews, D. *Big Mama's*. New York: The Trumpet Club, 1991.
- Cruz-Martinez, A. *The Woman Who Outshone the Sun*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1991.
- Day, F. A. *Multicultural Voices in Contemporary Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.
- Delacre, L. *Arroz Con Leche*. New York: Scholastic, 1989.
- . *Las Navidades*. New York: Scholastic, 1990.

- Driving Hawk Sneve, V. *Dancing Teepees*. New York: Holiday House, 1989.
- . *The Sioux: A First Americans Book*. New York: Holiday House, 1993.
- Ernst, L.C. *Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1985.
- Flourney, V. *The Patchwork Quilt*. New York: Dial, 1985.
- Greenfield, E. *Honey, I Love*. New York: Harper Collins, 1978.
- Greenfield, E. *Nathaniel Talking*. New York: Black Butterfly Children's Books, 1988.
- Guback, G. *Luka's Quilt*. New York: Greenwillow, 1994.
- Haller, D. *Not Just Any Ring*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1982.
- Hamilton, V. *In the Beginning: Creation Stories From Around the World*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.
- Hamilton, V. *The People Could Fly*. New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc., 1985.
- Harris, V. *Teaching Multicultural Literature in Grades K-8*. Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon Publishers, Inc., 1992.
- Hayes, J. *La Llorona: The Weeping Woman*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 1987.
- Hoffman, V. *Lucy Learns To Weave*. Phoenix, AZ: Navajo Curriculum Press, 1974.
- Hopkinson, D. *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*. New York: Alfred Knopf & Sons, 1993.
- Johnston, T. *The Quilt Story*. New York: G. P. Putnam, 1995.
- Kellogg, S. *Paul Bunyan*. New York: W. Morrow, 1984.
- . *Pecos Bill*. New York: W. Morrow, 1986.
- Language Arts*. Theme Issue: Multicultural Children's Literature. March 1993.
- Lobel, A. *Fables*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.
- Lomas Garza, C. *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1990.
- Long, D. *A Quilt For Kiri*. Wellington, New Zealand. Learning Media, Ministry of Education, 1991.
- Love, D. A. *Bess's Log Cabin Quilt*. New York: Holiday House, 1995.
- Maher, R. *Alice Yazzie's Year*. New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, Inc., 1977.
- Melton, D. *How To Capture Live Authors and Bring Them To Your Schools*. Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc., 1986.
- Monroe, S. "Quilt Scraps: A Framework for Family and Community Stories." *New Mexico Journal of Reading*, 14.3 (1994): 4-7.
- Monroe, S. "Spider Woman's Intent: Reweaving the World Through Voice and Vision." *New Mexico Journal of Reading*, 14.2 (1995): 7-11.
- Munsch, R. *A Promise Is a Promise*. Toronto: Annick Press, Ltd., 1988.
- Murry, W. "How to Choose the Best Multicultural Literature." *Instructor*. December 1995: 46-53.
- Naranjo-Morse, N. *A First Clay Gathering*. Cleveland, OH: Modern Curriculum Press, 1994.
- New Mexico People & Energy Collective. *Red Ribbons For Emma*. Stanford, CA: New Seed Press, 1981.
- Paul, A.W. *Eight Hands Round: A Patchwork Alphabet*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.
- Polacco, P. *The Keeping Quilt*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988.
- Ramirez, G., and J. L. Ramirez. *Multiethnic Children's Literature*. Albany, N.Y: Delmar Publishers, Inc., 1994.
- Ringgold, F. *Tar Beach*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1991.
- Roessel, M. *Kinaalda: A Navajo Girl Grows Up*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publications Company, 1993.
- Rogers, J. *Goodbye, My Island*. New York: Greenwillow, 1983.
- San Souci, R. *Cut From The Same Cloth*. New York: Philomel Books, 1993.

- Say, A. *Grandfather's Journey*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993.
- Spencer, P. U. *Who Speaks For Wolf*. San Anselmo, CA: A Tribe of Two Press, 1991.
- Swentzell, R. *Children of Clay*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publications Company, 1992.
- Thompson, V. *Hawaiian Myths of Earth, Sea and Sky*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1966.
- Whitethorne, B. *Sunpainters: Eclipse of the Navajo Sun*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northland Publishing, 1994.
- Young, B., et al. *Jennie Redbird Finds Her Friends*. Independence, MO: Independence Press, 1972.