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Professional Book Reviews

Mary R. Harmon

Broadening Horizons by Expanding the Canon: Two for Teachers' Bookshelves

Five years ago during my daughter's sophomore year in high school, her English teacher handed out a list of books. Students were to choose books from this list to read for the four prescribed book reports due periodically throughout the remainder of the school year. On the list appeared no works by women, save Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, no other works written after 1955, and no other works by authors other than white males. Despite the mixed reactions of my daughter, I visited her teacher, a man who I liked a great deal and whose teaching to this point

I'd admired, and asked him about the exclusive nature of his book list. He agreed that the list was a pretty narrow one and added, "I choose the books I know. What can I add? How can I change things?"

Although I made several suggestions of works and gave sound reasons for their use, I must not have been persuasive enough, for I saw no change in the book list that year. Looking back, I wish I had been able to hand my daughter's teacher a copy of Liz Whaley and Liz Dodge's *Weaving In The Women* and one of Eileen Iscoff Oliver's *Crossing the Mainstream: Multicultural Perspectives in the Teaching of Literature*.

These two books not only offer sixth to twelfth grade teachers a myriad of drama, short story, essay, novel, and poetry titles and authors, they also, in a lively and down-to-earth fashion, offer teachers a rationale for more inclusive, gender-balanced literature classes. They suggest and detail methods—the nuts and bolts of single-day lessons and entire units—for weaving in works by women and multicultural writers based on their own classroom experiences and those of other teachers. Doing so, they contend, will expand students' knowledge and appreciation of themselves, literature, diverse peoples and stories, and the world beyond their communities and

beyond the worlds constructed in traditional literary works. *Crossing the Mainstream* will transform literature curricula and the English classroom as the inclusion of diverse works by previously marginalized and often alienated peoples and cultures enlarges students' awareness and appreciation of the diversity around them.

Whaley and Dodge provide a convincing rationale for including women writers and other under-represented writers which will greatly assist those teachers eager to engage in gender-balanced literature teaching but who meet resistance from colleagues and administrators. Whaley and Dodge label their approach to the teaching of literature "feminist," and state, "Feminists believe that social, economic, and cultural barriers exist for women....[they] work in both the public and the private sphere to break down those barriers....[they] look over their shoulders to see what they can do for the young people, especially the young women, coming behind them" (2). Teachers already constructing inclusive classrooms will find support and encouragement, an abundance of teaching ideas and strategies, and book annotations and suggestions for works to use in student-centered classrooms. Preservice teachers will love the book's enthusiastic tone, its practical content, and its theory-based host of

teaching suggestions. My senior Methods of Teaching English students tell me that this is a book they'll not sell back to the bookstore, even when strapped for cash; this is a book they know they will use and use again as they begin their teaching careers.

Teachers already constructing inclusive classrooms will find support and encouragement, an abundance of teaching ideas and strategies, and book annotations and suggestions for works to use in student-centered classrooms.

Fully aware that many teachers are tied by their school curricula to current and/or outdated literature anthologies, Whaley and Dodge help teachers use these anthologies in ways which promote greater gender balance, despite the male-heavy list of selections most of these anthologies contain. And they advocate using the Xerox machine, sharing copies, and reading aloud as means of weaving in women writers. Each chapter contains many specific suggestions of authors and titles; each ends with further suggestions of works, often briefly annotated. In addition, teachers are urged to help their students become aware of and query the ways women are depicted in selections by male and female writers.

After the two introductory chapters, the next seven follow the curricular sequence still found in many high schools as they cover gender-balancing in ninth and tenth grade literature classes, then move to American literature, divided into three eras, and finally to British literature, divided at 1850. In each of these chapters, Whaley and Dodge provide means for introducing women writers and women's perspectives, even in eras in which they have not been able to locate many titles by women such as the Medieval period in British literature. One thing Whaley and Dodge might do more of is bridge time by suggesting contemporary points of view by women or works by women which comment on or parallel those of men in past times. For example, Cotton Mather's

chronicle of the witch trials in early Massachusetts might be paired with the much later *The Devil in Massachusetts* by Miriam Starkey, or James Joyce's "The Dead" might be paralleled with Joyce Carol Oates' "The Dead." Students might also find it enlightening to read Alice Walker's comments on Phillis Wheatley as they read her eighteenth century works. However, in light of the number of suggested works and authors included in their book, to make much of this omission seems a bit over-demanding.

The book ends with chapters on teaching novels, teaching a women's literature course, and evaluating student learning in gender-balanced, student-centered classrooms. As has been the case in previous chapters, readers will find many annotated works and detailed ideas for their use. Throughout the book, Whaley and Dodge stress that they do not **prescribe** teacher mandates; rather, they **describe** works their students have read, classes they have taught, and strategies they have used successfully in the hopes that teachers will find them useful and will adapt them to their own classrooms and teaching situations.

She speaks of the need to educate the "illiterate intellectual," one who is unaware of or scoffs at multicultural texts or who maintains narrow definitions of literature and art.

Oliver's *Crossing the Mainstream* also adopts a non-prescriptive tone even while it convincingly argues for the inclusion and integration in literature classes of works by "non-mainstream" writers, that is, writers who have not until recently, and, in many schools, still do not make frequent appearances in English language arts classrooms. Oliver contends that all students should read and discuss a wide diversity of texts, both those considered "canonical" and those "outside the canonical mainstream." Any majority culture which fails to include the works of minority cultures, she insists is "culturally deprived." She backs her views with evidence from current and

future demographics, current dropout rates in high schools, and statistics which clearly reveal the inequality of education and living situations in the United States. Teachers **can** make a difference, she states. By diversifying literature offerings, by integrating works by authors from many cultures, teachers can expand students' worlds, assist students in identifying with literature's stories, make education far more democratic, help eliminate myths of hate, and aid students in discovering people's sameness, even while they come to understand and appreciate their differences. Oliver's stance on diversity calls for the inclusion of not only texts by minority writers and women, but also for texts which treat "ableism, ageism, sexism, and homophobia." She speaks of the need to educate the "illiterate intellectual," one who is unaware of or scoffs at multicultural texts or who maintains narrow definitions of literature and art. For Oliver, clearly the classroom is an arena in which to move students well beyond Eurocentric and ethnocentric values.

Oliver details two classes she taught in which she worked to do just that and narrates both her greater and her lesser successes as she shares the books she used, her students' reactions to them, and a semester-long project in which her students researched, read, wrote, and spoke about non-mainstream authors. She offers nine integrated, thematic units; assists those teachers who prefer genre approaches to literature; comments on culturally-based, diverse learning styles; and discusses the implications of the multicultural classroom for the teaching of composition. In addition, she gives advice on dealing with censorship, which she sees as being, too often, racist in nature.

The midsection of her book, the very long Chapter Eight, may be the one most useful to teachers already committed to integrated, multicultural teaching who desire to know more about "what's out there and where can I find it."

Here she lists and briefly comments on works by African-American (where is Rita Dove, current U.S. poet laureate?), Asian-American (which she helpfully divides into Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hmong, Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese), Jewish (where is Grace Paley?), Latino (Cuban, Mexican American, Puerto Rican—her categories unfortunately cause her to leave out Isabel Allende and Julia Alvarez, both writers well worth reading), and Native American authors. In addition, she includes cross-cultural literature as well as literature which features disabilities, the homeless, homosexuality, Vietnam veterans, teenage suicide, and older adults. Sometimes, as indicated above, omissions might be questioned, although to do so may seem to be quibbling in light of the extensive and broad-based nature of the listings present. This valuable listing can only serve as a major assist to teachers and librarians eager to widen their classroom and school holdings and to all persons interested in more widely diversifying their readings and outlooks.

Both of these books should sit prominently on teachers' and preservice teachers' bookshelves. Readers will likely come away from them not only with their heads full of new ideas and new works to read and teach but also with hearts full of confidence that we, as English Language Arts teachers, **can** make a difference in our students' lives and in their worlds.

Works Cited

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