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**REVISING HISTORY LEARNING THROUGH THE  
READING AND WRITING OF PEOPLESTORIES:  
USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE MULTI-  
DISCIPLINARY CLASSROOM**

**Miriam Bat-Ami**

Once upon a time there was a boy who said, "I cannot tell a lie," and he was the Father of our Country, or was it, Once upon a time there was a boy who rode miles to return a nickel or was it a dime, and that boy also did something with the Declaration of Independence, but his handwriting wasn't as big as John Hancock's. And that all happened before Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves at Gettysburg saying, "Four score and seven years ago our Fathers brought onto this competent a new nation conceited in liberty . . .".

I begin this essay with nonsensical inanities. The way I learned history was fraught with inanity: names and dates and places to memorize, swallowing history whole like a snake swallows a rat, then throwing it all back up onto pieces of paper for reasons I couldn't fathom except I wanted a good grade, so I wrote neatly and spelled correctly. And as I sat, trying to decipher meaning out of the books which fell onto my desk with the weight of unquestionable rock, I grew up believing that this history had to be true even while, simultaneously, it held no meaning for me. The dutifully memorized people were somehow mythical: mainly white males, similar to the kinds of heroes I saw on TV, who popped into the world full grown, shouting, "Give me liberty or give me death."

Consequently, I was deathly bored by history. Unfortunately, some of my own college students come to me feeling no differently. One student expressed her frustration, writing: "As a child I don't remember liking history much. I only remember when things happened. California Gold Rush, Vietnam, Watergate is very confusing." And yet I have learned that across the country language arts teachers are revising methods of history teaching and

learning. Particularly, those fortunate enough to implement Whole Language techniques into the classroom are integrating historical studies into a unified theme-based curriculum so that history (or social studies) is no longer taught in isolation: it exists alongside reading, writing, science, etc. Moreover, the teaching-learning experience is becoming just that—a process that has moved from the act of transmission (whereby the giver/active teacher imparts knowledge to the taker/passive student) to the act of transaction (wherein teacher and student alike seek out answers to self-generated questions).

For these teachers the question becomes not *how* to make students learn but *what materials* to use in the language arts classroom to stimulate active history teaching and learning. I introduce English Education students to the issue of text selection by discussing the kinds of texts which all too often are chosen, even though indirectly they not only encourage passive reading and writing but also subtly pander to the assumption that teachers and their books are the absolute authorities upon which students wait. (Unfortunately, selection oftentimes is made because a text will imply that it appeals to a multicultural curriculum with a Whole Language emphasis when in fact it does something quite different). From Lesson 5 in the Grade 2 level text *Going Places* (McGraw Hill Social Studies series):

The family below lives in Nigeria. Nigeria is a country in Africa. It has hot, wet lands. It also has hot, dry lands. There are many different groups of Nigerians. Sometimes, people from different places cannot understand each other. Nigerians also dress in colorful clothing. (44)

On first glance, this passage appears fine for introducing a second grader to social studies. As Nigeria is one of several countries introduced in terms of location, climate, and cultural habits, the child-reader gains a multicultural perspective while learning formal methods of comparison and contrast. The vocabulary is easy with repetitive words and sequential patterning for reader predictability. Key words are placed in bold letters, and there are accompanying pictures acting as visual aides.

And yet the child-reader is presented by this passage with the world of historical fact which is most often written in third-person singular. There are no doubts or varying interpretations for the child to consider. There merely is a what-is-ness. Then, too, there is the matter of passive reading and

writing. At the end of the lesson, study questions are asked. Question 2 is "What is Nigeria?" Students, without reading the whole passage, quickly flip from the question section to the text. They skim read for an answer which they duplicate verbatim. (The correct answer to question 2 – and there is only one correct answer – is "Nigeria is a country in Africa.") Sometimes, too, if a teacher doesn't ask for complete sentences, students will merely write "a country in Africa" for answer 2 (44). They figure out how to write an answer with as few words as possible.

Students, though, aren't at fault here. They are not "lazy" writers. The passage begs for a mindless response. Moreover, aside from fostering pat answers, it also distances readers from what they are reading. In this sense, the whole purpose of the reading is defeated. Rather than gaining a sense of global awareness that "people live in different ways in different places," children are removed from the reality of the people about whom they read (41). Nigerians are generic: they have no real individual identities. Finally, when I transpose Nigerian with American, asking something like "What is the United States?" and answering, "The United States is a country in North America," or even worse yet, "Americans also dress in colorful clothing," I realize the full horror of simplistic (rather than simple) language.

Still, like any social studies trade book, this text can be used as a reference guide, a starting point for further student inquiry. Even the line about clothing can elicit fruitful questions rather than senseless answers. For example: What kinds of "colorful" clothes do Nigerians wear? Why do people (American/Nigerians) dress the way they do? What do Nigerian children wear during the day? Do they wear PJ's at night? Do boys and girls dress differently? Indeed, questions are endless when teachers and students alike see that the best questions are those which elicit more questions.

Endless, too, is the multiplicity of interpretations which good selections from children's literature provide. One of the chief benefits of wedding children's literature with social studies texts is that the former allows children to explore multiple perspectives. A child who reads three different books on one period of history or about a famous person immediately sees how history is, in part, subjective. There is some objectivity, to be sure (i.e. the date when an event occurred), but the author of any text controls much. What facts are written about and how they are presented; where information is located in a text and how much space is afforded it; the language in which a book is written – all these are elements which a writer controls and which influence

the reader. Children, given the kind of time essential to real learning, can see this complexity. Myra Zarnowski has documented this from her interview with a 4th grader whose class had just finished a three-month long project around Ben Franklin's life. After the children had read a number of books, "they began to see that there was considerable variation in the treatment of Franklin's life. They not only discovered that one book might have a more complete explanation than another, but they also discovered at least one instance of conflicting information" (139). Children who make these discoveries are on their way to realizing that when reading, interpreting, and writing about history they can be part of the process of reconstruction; for the act of making meaning out of history is, in part, an act of reconstruction—each reader brings to bear upon history his or her own personal history which influences reading and subsequent writing.

Children's literature also presents historical information in the most digestible form. The narrative form structure which writers use to tell a story is, according to Linda Levstik, a scholar-educator who has documented research on "the long association between history and narrative," simply easier for a student to read than formal history book language (849). The nature of fact learning also changes—from a game of Trivial Pursuit to a necessary acquisition which helps the child-reader understand story. History learning happens, oftentimes without the child-reader realizing it, and the names and dates gain importance because the reader sees them as affecting character(s) in the story.

Finally, the story book format which tends to concentrate on one character also makes the child-reader believe what is happening: history is something that is really happening to another child who, in some ways, is like the reader. Children, immersing themselves in the narrator's point of view, actually feel that they are experiencing the event.

The question becomes then not "Should I use children's literature in my social studies classroom?" but "How can the literature be integrated into a unified curriculum?" The remainder of this essay is devoted to a unit which I have named "Personalizing History: Peoplestories." In some form or another, this particular unit can be used by language arts teachers in the primary grades or by history teachers in the secondary classroom since it first gives students the chance to explore the meaning of history and examine the ways in which history operates in their lives. Because the unit begins with

the very personal, children relate to it easily; they and their own personal worlds become the focus on which to build a historical awareness.

I place this unit in the fall because I believe that children don't naturally walk into the classroom sensing the personal quality of history, nor do they see their own lives as part of history. Particularly in the lower grades, children have a totally distorted concept of time. My own son, questioning his Dad one day, asked, "Did you know George Washington?" Being born 40 odd years ago is not that much different for a child who has walked the face of this earth for a mere five years than being born 240 years ago.

What we initially need to do, then, is to show young children that their lives are part of history, and they are connected to people who came before them and who will come after them. The latter is very important because it allows children to see that they can be history makers. Also, each person's story is uniquely his or her own while there is a commonality between people's stories. What binds us one to the other is our peoplehood. My "Peoplestories" unit starts with grandparent/grandchildren stories. My rationale for beginning this way is three-fold: (a) These stories get children into seeing a personal and familial time-line; (b) many children have a special relationship with their grandparents; (c) there is a multitude of quality books devoted to this theme.

For openers I suggest starting with something like Cynthia Rylant's wonderful picture book *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, an account of a young girl who spends some time with her grandparents in the Appalachian mountains of West Virginia. In terms of selection criteria, *When I Was Young* is written in very easy and enjoyable language. It makes a good read-aloud for a beginning reader since there is patterning—each event is prefaced by "When I was young in the mountains." The pictures themselves, sometimes depicting humorous scenes such as the main character's walk to the outhouse after she has eaten too much okra, help children decipher meaning out of the text. Finally, used as a point of departure, Rylant's book is a natural lead-in to discussions of what it's like to visit grandparents and what kinds of special things one does at a grandparent's house. It is also a natural lead-in for children to explore the multicultural heritage of classmates.

As for activities to accompany such a text, Leslie Williams, in her "Diverse Gifts: Multicultural Education in the Kindergarten," suggests that children can spend a session talking about "the special names they have for their grandparents, and how they felt when a grandparent died" (2). Second

and third graders, I think, can write a short story about what it's like to visit grandparents. A student of mine chose to read Rylant's book and model a pattern-based writing assignment after it. Children began with "When I was young in the city" or "When I was young in the country." They then listed things they did such as "I used to tease my brother," or "I walked back and forth to school." What children see from this is not merely their own aging but their change and growth through history.

There are a number of other texts which language arts or history teachers can use to explore the generations theme. *In Coal Country* by Judith Hendershot is a beautifully written book about an author's memories of growing up in a small Ohio coal town during the 1930's. The charcoal-like drawings make one actually sense the texture and sight of all that coal. Then there is Valerie Flounoy's *The Patchwork Quilt* about a young black girl, Tanya, who is taught the value of her family history when she helps her grandmother make a quilt from scraps of the family's old clothing. Karen Ackerman's *Song and Dance Man* shows grandchildren delighting in their grandfather's vaudeville routine. Upstairs in the attic, under the spotlight of lamps, the children's Grandpa becomes a song and dance man whose feet first make "soft, slippery sounds" and then move into sounds that are "too many to make with only two feet." Watching their grandpa, the children seem to move back to a bygone era, and the child-reader experiences the beauty of the past. Finally, in Montzalee Miller's *My Grandmother's Cookie Jar* a young girl listens to her grandmother tell stories of "Indian people of long ago," and she is able to "feel and see the days of old." History, no longer an abstraction, takes on a sensory reality wherein the child is, as Spiegel suggests, transplanted: "I could smell the smoke of the open fire. The chants sung by the painted dancers filled the clear night air." Aside from creating for the child-reader a guided visualization into the Native American past, this picture book also deals with the very difficult issue of accepting a grandparent's death. What children learn is how they can keep a whole people alive through the continued transmission of stories. As the grandfather says: "If you tell one of Grandma's stories with each of the cookies . . . then her spirit, and the spirit of those who went before her, will live on."

All of these aforementioned texts beg their audiences to explore history in a vital hands-on way. I know several teachers who have used *The Patchwork Quilt* to introduce children to the art of quilting and show how story transmission is often bound up with quilt creation. My own son's class made

a communal quilt, and the children saw, in the most tactile and concrete of ways, their own singular patches as part of the whole class scene. Children who read Ackerman's text often want to know more about vaudeville, and so, from the very personal, they move into research on entertainment during a period in American history. Ms. Linda Platt, a former graduate student of mine, begins her Native American unit with *My Grandmother's Cookie Jar*. She brings a "special" blanket into her kindergarten classroom. Then she has her children sit around it. The specialness of the blanket and the circular grouping immediately excites the children. Before Linda begins reading, she shows her students a cookie jar, passing it around— one cookie per child— until the jar is empty, as it is in the story. And the emptiness suggests a positive potential: it serves as a vessel waiting to be filled with the children's own stories.

Ultimately, what Linda Platt does is what other language arts teachers and Whole Language practitioners do: drawing upon a theme, she integrates different areas of study into a unified whole so that reading, writing, and history become things a student learns through the study of Native American Peoples. Students aren't conscious of simultaneously learning writing, reading, and social studies. Rather, they learn about an area of concern which demands that they use all these skills. (Linda also has children draw for this unit. When they learn about Indian sand painting, they create their own sand pictures.) And learning happens in this kind of teaching— because it excites student interest, because it relates to the making of some meaning, because it is not abstracted from the personal or made to seem unreal.

Grandparent stories easily lead to child-centered stories, particularly stories children hear about themselves. Bill Martin's Native American *Knots on a Counting Rope* could begin this segment of the unit. The child who listens to this story hears not only the tale of a child's own triumph over enormous odds, but how stories bind generations. There is delight one takes in hearing and rehearing the story of one's birth. As for classroom activities, children can record versions of their own birth. No doubt their parents have different stories, different perspectives, separate and yet no less valid truths. In this sense, children get to see how the perceiver influences the way in which history is told. Children can record what they believe are the objective facts: time of birth, hospital, city of birth, etc. alongside more subjective material. They can see that the power of truths lies in multiplicity, complexity, and changeability, and that to understand history is to understand our own



complex and ever-changing selves. From personal and familial stories, a class can move to communal exploration of customs and manners by examining both familial customs which have a cultural basis and historical customs as well. Ina Friedman's *How My Parents Learned to Eat*, a picture book about a girl whose father is American and whose mother is Japanese, is a good introductory text since it explores things children like to learn about: foods from different countries and how various people go about eating food. The pictures can elicit much class discussion and show-and-tell sessions, since they show Japanese and American cooking utensils and condiments such as soy sauce or ketchup. Children can bring in favorite bowls, cups they've saved, utensils "unique" to their families, or ones they've picked up on trips somewhere. Then, too, the child in this book integrates both the Japanese and American way of eating and of being, a point which, in our diverse and multicultural society, children need to see happening both in the literature that they read and in their lives.

Ann Grifalconi's *The Village of Round and Square Houses* can be used in conjunction with Friedman's book, since after reading this book children might examine the hierarchy involved in eating. There is meaning behind who is served first. Also, children get to explore how one eats without utensils, out of a large bowl. Finally there is Barbara Cohen's *Gooseberries to Oranges*, a text beautifully illustrated by Beverly Brodsky. The girl in this text, a young Jewish immigrant, gets her first taste of an orange when she arrives in America. Activities accompanying this segment of the personalizing history unit are numerous. Some successful ones which teachers have shared with me are having children set a table the way they do at home and getting other members of the class to play-act other members of their families, or bringing in favorite family foods, particularly traditional fare, and explaining how parents got the recipes.

From discussion of familial customs, a teacher can quite easily lead students to customs of the American past. Donald Hall's *Ox-Cart Man* depicts the day-to-day life of an early 19th-century New England family as it moves through the cycle of a year. The book illustrates each family member's role and the importance of homemade goods in the lives of early settlers. Students might be encouraged to write and dramatize a scene where two parties are engaged in exchanging goods or, as Evelyn Freeman and Linda Levstik suggest, they can write an experience chart of similarities and differences

between the book's time and today. This would lead to studies on changes in products and marketing as well as class visits to a local museum (33).

I have primarily concentrated on "little" people stories about ordinary life. Authors who write about famous people have been most successful when they have shown children the "ordinariness" of these people's lives. Particularly, Jean Fritz and F. N. Manzo allow children to see that famous people start out no differently than other children do. They just work hard and have ideas and make changes— all of which children can do, too. These writers also make learning about famous people accessible to children; their books are fun to read; language is simple and directly involves child-readers. Oftentimes, through her titles, Fritz initiates immediate child-reader involvement by beginning with a question whose answer the child must find. In *What's the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?*, the reader discovers, after reading about all Franklin's "little" ideas and inventions, that the big idea is the writing of the constitution. In subtle ways, Fritz also breaks the mythos surrounding Franklin: He is not some impersonal, enormously Big Man, not BENJAMIN FRANKLIN; rather, he is Ben. Monjo's *The One Bad Thing about Father*, while not an interrogatory title, still stimulates reader inquiry. What is the "One" bad thing? (The answer is that Father is the president of the United States.) Because this book is written from a child's point of view (supposedly the narrator is Theodore Roosevelt's son), the child-reader feels connected to the narrator. The book also is delightfully funny and is written in short chapters with easy language. It is a great text for a teacher to read to kindergartners or for second grade students to read themselves. Older students might also use it for initial fact gathering or to see what facts Monjo used to construct the story. They might pretend that they, too, are Roosevelt's son; they have their own story to tell. Or they can take on the *persona* of Roosevelt's daughter, a woman who is briefly mentioned by the son. What might the daughter's story be?

I have mentioned children's literature texts which enhance a multi-disciplinary approach to the teaching and learning of history. Michael James and James Zarillo also suggest five guidelines for choosing books for an elementary history unit: (a) have as many selections as possible; (b) use selections from the "perspectives held by participants during the period"; (c) choose literature fitting "the variety of student reading levels"; (d) offer a good mixture of several reading genres— i.e. historical fiction, nonfiction, songs, poems, speeches, etc.; and (e) aim for "a careful balance" between the use of literature "as data for social science analysis" and as an art form to be merely

enjoyed (154). These points are well worth considering during the selection process.

I began this essay by sharing with my readers my own unfortunate grade school encounters with history. I have suggested that for a child to see and feel history, he or she must imagine it as having a spirit as well as a body. With this in mind, I will describe an exercise which I did with my students. I borrowed it from Carol Heinze, who was looking for ways of helping her students, seen as reluctant reader and writers, to "express themselves" (493). During this activity, my young students draw their own maps— maps of their own soul countries. Events of their lives become the volcanoes or land masses or bodies of water. In my class we used a Michigan map— the upper peninsula became high points, the lower tended to represent emotional lows. Two of my own students brought this into a fourth grade classroom, where it became an exercise which combined personal history with geography. One of the children, seeming to understand how much historical change means soul change, wrote on his map words like "Bad got sick" or "Ruff" (for rough) or "Just because."

It is a small step from a child realizing personal history to seeing that historical movement of self is part of history's own soul changing. To understand history we must explore individual souls and realize that just as the soul is related to the body, and body and soul interact with the world, so, too, is history interactive. Isolated from other disciplines, shrouded in layers of fact, history often endures a fate worse than that of Lazarus: it forever waits to feel life again.

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*LANGUAGE ARTS JOURNAL OF MICHIGAN*

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