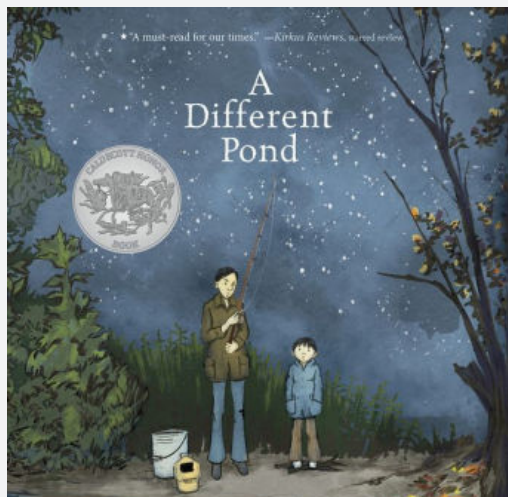


First Opinion: Different Pond, Same American Dream

Bao, Phi. *A Different Pond*. Illustrated by Thi Bui, Capstone Publishing, 2017.

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I read the story of *A Different Pond* while I was horrified by news of the separation of migrant families at the border. I keep thinking about what we could do to help our children understand what is happening and why it is important to teach them to consider immigration with empathy. While it is very important that we help our children understand who they are in the context of our own race, culture, beliefs, religion, language, and family history, it is also critical to help children develop an understanding toward those who are different. The story of *A Different Pond* is a wonderful resource to help parents or teachers to do so.

A Different Pond is a first-person narrative in which the author, Phi Bao, tells a story about fishing with his father before the sun came up. His note at the end of the book provides background information about the context of this book: Bao's family came to the US from Vietnam as refugees after the war in 1975. As his parents sometimes told him difficult stories about the war and violence with the intention to help him understand that "these traumas were a part of our lives," Bao wants to do the same thing and share his childhood stories with the audience of the book.

When reading the book with children, there are some moments that I would recommend parents and teachers consider stopping at and pondering with children. By prompting questions, you can offer children an opportunity to think critically and culturally. Below I list some of these instances.

For example, prior to reading the book, you may tell children this story is about an immigrant family—and immigrant families come to the US for a safer place to live, to find work, or to become US citizens, which some people call *the American Dream*. You may ask: Who gets to be a part of the American Dream?

The opening illustration of the father reminding the boy to keep quiet so the mom can keep sleeping is a great starting point where we can have a meaningful conversation with children: Why do you think the boy will wake up the mom? Why is the boy sharing a bed with his mom? This is an opportunity for children to imagine the close quarters some families must keep when they first move somewhere new, or to imagine some families might be living in small places where rooms need to be shared.

After packing sandwiches and bringing the tackle box, they head to the pond by car. While the father is telling the boy stories on the way, the boy thinks his dad’s English sounds like gentle rain, not like a thick, dirty river as a kid at his school said. Here is a good place where we could ask children questions regarding different English accents: Have you laughed at other people’s English accents? Should we judge people by their accents? If someone laughed at you, how would you feel about it? This is an opportunity to explain language differences and how it might feel to be teased about sounding different.

When the family arrives at the pond, the boy talks about the people he has met:

“Sometimes a Hmong man is at the pond. He speaks English like my dad and likes to tell funny jokes. Sometimes there is a black man there, too. He shows me his colorful lure collection.” (Bao unpagged)

We could use this instance to do research with children about the Hmong people, or ask children: Have your friends showed you anything special to their culture? What did you learn from them? This is an opportunity for children to explore and learn to appreciate different cultures.

In the middle of the story, when the family is eating sandwiches—cold bologna between two pieces of bread—as well as at the end of the story, when they have rice and fried fish with fish sauce and chili pepper and carrots floating on top, we could pause and ask children to share their experiences of eating foods from different countries. We could even create a list of foods that we really like and enjoy having but have never known are from other countries.

There are more instances that parents and teachers could find from the book to bring up interesting conversations or activities to share with children. The story of *A Different Pond* is a wistful and touching illustrated book that delivers a simple but powerful message to its readers as the book cover notes: Family. Tradition. Hope. Reading this beautiful book reminds me what Walter Myers, another children’s book author, said about why he writes children’s books:

“I realized that this was exactly what I wanted to do when I wrote about poor inner-city children—to make them human in the eyes of readers and, especially, in their own eyes. I need to make them feel as if they are part of America’s dream, that all the rhetoric is meant for them, and that they are wanted in this country.” (Myers unpagged)

Lastly, a fun activity I would encourage parents or teachers to do with children is to ask them to imagine what life would look like if they moved to another country. Children could do this by drawing pictures or even making a short video using an app. Through this activity, we create an opportunity for children to explore different cultures and contexts, which would also help them develop both affective and cognitive empathy.

Works Cited

Myers, Walter Dean. "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?" *New York Times*, 15 Mar. 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html>. Access 20 June 2018.

About the Author

Ya-Huei Lu is an assistant professor at East Carolina University. Her current work focuses on examining elementary teacher technology integration practices and the use of technology to support teaching and learning practices.