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Exploring Tough Subjects with Michigan Authors

BY HANNAH FURROW AND ROSE CASEMENT

Over the years, trade books have found their way more and more frequently into curricula outside of reading and language arts. Reading across the curriculum has become recognized as an important element in the understanding of content (Codispoti and Hickey, 2007; Cruz, 2007; McCarty, 2007). Excellent children's literature brings events and people to life, and nowhere is that more true than in social studies. But social studies, particularly in the study of history of challenging times, can be complex by its very nature: humans making difficult decisions in difficult situations. The five books that we share are but the tip of the iceberg of great works of children's literature that recognize that complexity. By placing historical events in the context of a story with well-developed characters and well-researched accurate settings and circumstances, the authors provide the reader with not only a good story but also an understanding of a time and place in which facts come to life.

In addition, these stories often allow us to ask our students to consider the big questions that surround us. Generally, most of us find it important to teach using here-and-now examples to ensure a concept's relevance to our students. Sometimes though, great children's literature can provide examples and descriptions that allow us to step outside the here-and-now and take another look. This can be particularly helpful when we consider social, moral, or ethical concerns that have existed across time and place. William Ayers (2004), distinguished professor of education at the University of Illinois, writes, "Looking for ways to animate the moral head of teaching, I turn not so much to research or the social sciences, but again and again to imaginative literature" (p. ix). He elucidates: "Novels, poems, stories pose the large questions: What is meaning? What is our fate? How shall we live?" (p. viii).

The benefits of using children's literature to teach students at all grade levels about the complexity of the human experience through reading, reflection, and dialogue are twofold. First, we provide an example that demonstrates the global nature of social, ethical, and moral concerns. We are not the first people to face issues of oppression and privilege, of difference and understanding, or of scarcity and

sharing. When students read about such issues set in other places or times, they come to realize their lasting and timeless nature. Second, such literary works help students contextualize their own experiences. As they read about characters who face issues of racism, for example, they can reflect on their own experiences with racism within a broader context. Students can use great works of children's literature to come to a greater understanding of those whose lives are very different from their own and of others who share their experiences. In this way, young readers develop empathy for others as well as a greater context for their own experiences.

And one need look no further than our own Michigan authors to find books that can do just this for our students. It is not too much to say that Michigan can be proud of the number of outstanding authors of children's literature who have provided a wonderful range of award-winning books. These books provide children with quality stories that engage the reader and create the foundation for lifelong readers. The four authors we highlight were either born in Michigan or have chosen to live in Michigan: Christopher Paul Curtis, Patricia Polacco, Gary Schmidt, and Gloria Whelan. Each of these award-winning authors has contributed serious literary works to children's

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literature as well as books that can be integrated into the curriculum in multiple ways. All provide the reader with thought-provoking and complex lives of well-developed characters around which important literary discussions can take place. Each of the books described here is quite recent and commonly used in classrooms, so these discussions can grow naturally out of established curricula. Teachers may want to research the times, places, and issues of a particular book before sharing it with the class so that they can help students avoid stereotypes of time or place based on the students' prior reading of a single aspect of a culture.

Curtis, Whelan, and Schmidt write chapter books of historical fiction and contemporary realistic fiction. Polacco writes historical fiction in a picture book format, which can provide an interesting venue for even young students to consider serious topics such as racism. Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997), president of Spelman College, notes the role of picture books in considering issues of race:

While I think it is necessary to be honest about the racism of our past and present, it is also necessary to empower children (and adults) with the vision that change is possible. Concrete examples are critical. For young children these examples can sometimes be found in children's books. (p. 42)

Patricia Polacco: War and Racism

Patricia Polacco, who lives in Union City, Michigan, has published more than 45 well-loved books. Memories of childhood and the many stories told to her by four loving grandparents when she was a little girl growing up in California during the school year and on a southern Michigan farm in the summer are often the essential topics of her work.

"I had never seen a man like him so close before. His skin was the color of polished mahogany. He was flyin' Union colors like me. My age, maybe." (Polacco, 1994, n.p.) Fifteen-year-old Sheldon Curtis, known as Say to family and friends, has found himself lying injured in a field during the Civil War and Pinkus Aylee, known as Pink, has come to his rescue, both from the injury and from marauders who are pillaging and killing in the war-torn area. Pink, who became separated from his unit, the Forty-eighth

Colored Regiment, helps Say drag and crawl to the plantation where he and his parents were slaves until he left to fight in the war. Slave owners and slaves have abandoned the house, leaving only Pink's mother, Moe Moe Bay, who lovingly nurses Say back to health. Knowing that their presence places Moe Moe Bay in greater risk of marauders, the two young men prepare to return to their units, but tragedy soon strikes.

For teachers and older students, the Civil War provides a rather predictable setting in which to discuss issues of our country's racial and racist history. This predictability may also lend our students a degree of safety because discussing race in the context of slavery and the Civil War is more familiar to many than discussing it in today's context. From Say's realization that this young boy who looks unlike himself is actually quite a bit like himself, (a realization he further considers as he looks at the similarities between their homes and the foods they eat), to his noting, "Everybody in my family calls me Say, not Sheldon. I 'spect you're my family now" (n.p.), the reader gets a sense of the growing closeness between the two young soldiers. But the societal differences remain, as Pink elaborates: "Boy, when you owned, you ain't got no name of your own" (n.p.).

One interesting twist is that, while Say has not been educated, Pink's owner did teach him to read, which has allowed him a small corner of freedom. He notes, "After Aylee taught me to read, even though he owned my person, I knew that nobody, ever, could really own me" (n.p.). The striking contrast between the basic conditions of the two boys despite their similarities, both in growing up and in war, provides rich context for discussion.

The reality of war, both the specifics of the Civil War and the general nature of war, is made clear. It is important for students to realize that African Americans fought in the Civil War, although on the Confederate side they were most often assigned to service positions and expected to remain slaves after the war's end. Free Blacks and escaped slaves fought in segregated units with the Union forces. Pink describes not being trusted with a rifle and that, even when African Americans were given arms, they were old and often didn't work. Through the descriptions of their roles in the war, one can also see that their experiences reflect their race, especially when after their capture, the boys go to Andersonville, the Con-

federate prison for Union soldiers. A description in the endnotes describes the severe conditions at the prison. Pink's execution soon after entering Andersonville shows the anger at an escaped slave fighting with the Union forces and the disregard for the value of his life.

The horrors of war are made clear as well. Both boys have had frightening experiences. Say eventually confides to Pink's mother that he ran away from a battle and deserted. In this moment, as occurs in other works by Polacco, an elder is able to support a child's fears and self-doubt. The reader also sees that war is not confined to the battlefield when Moe Moe Bay is murdered by marauders and the violence of war takes the life of an innocent civilian.

Despite the fact that this is a picture book, it is appropriate for classroom reading from third grade through middle school. I (Rose) must admit that every time I read it aloud to my children's literature students, I cry when I read about Pink not having any wife or children or grandchildren to remember him. Every time.

Gloria Whelan: Global Gender Issues and Oppression

Gloria Whelan was born in Michigan and continues to live near Lake St. Clair. Most of this prolific author's books contain sensitive topics within the context of historical and contemporary fiction. *Homeless Bird* (2000) won the 2000 National Book Award. This contemporary international novel tells of a young girl named Koly in India who faces gender oppression in very serious ways. On the first page, the young narrator realizes that her mother goes without rice so that she and the rest of the family can eat. She then realizes that she must marry to reduce the burden on her family and soon finds herself in an arranged marriage to a boy in ill health. Thus, the reader is immediately faced with a demonstration of how both the older and younger generations of females in India are subject to the gender roles and oppression of their society.

When Koly becomes a 13-year-old widow, she is cheated and ill-treated by her husband's mother, who sees her as a burden: "Your dowry did not save Hari, and now we are burdened with one more mouth to feed.... You are no better than the bandicoot that burrows under our house and eats our food" (pp. 51-52). By then, the reader begins to see just how deeply gender roles are woven into the institutions of her

country. Although the terrible misfortunes that have befallen her are in no way her own fault, she must work to survive on her own. She eventually finds herself homeless in an unfamiliar city. She cannot return to her family of birth as there would no longer be room for her and to attempt to do so would greatly dishonor her family. Once she has married, her fate is hers alone.

Throughout the book, we see that many others like herself share Koly's circumstances. No women in her family have attended school. Although Koly notes that she would like to attend with her brothers, her mother tells her, "The money for books and school fees is better put toward your dowry, so that we may find you a suitable husband" (p. 3). When her husband's mother abandons her in Vrindavan, she finds herself "surrounded by thousands of widows to remind me that my life, like theirs, was over" (p. 99). Lest it seem that we have painted a very grim description of this book, let us note that by the end, young Koly has new possibilities for her future.

Although the book is set in the present, the circumstances presented in *Homeless Bird* are far removed from those of our own students and present fascinating possibilities for classroom discussion related to gender, including the opportunity to consider global issues of gender oppression and gender differences in the ways children throughout the world, including American children, are raised. Clearly, the book sets the stage for a discussion about the possible reasons for the oppression of women and girls in India, including customs, privilege, population size, and poverty.

And, though the setting is far removed from the family life of the vast majority of our own students, it can open dialogue about gender oppression in our own society, both historical and current. Comparisons of age at marriage, arranged versus chosen marriages, expectations of dowry, need for a new bride to leave her family, beliefs regarding death and widows, and expectations of women's sacrifice all present fascinating possibilities for discussing varying requirements of gender roles. Children of middle-school age are also likely to be drawn in by the fact that the protagonist is their age. What does this say about varying expectations of children? Of course, the wide range of possibilities in both Indian cultures and our own cultures also provide material for discussion and helps to avoid inadvertent stereotyping.

Gary D. Schmidt: Intergenerational Racism and Social Justice

Gary D. Schmidt, professor of English at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, has published a number of books for both young adults and adults. His recent Newbery Honor- and Printz Honor-winning novel, *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* (2004), is a powerful story of love and respect in the midst of prejudice and injustice in a small New England town. Here Mr. Newton, one of the deacons of Turner Buckminster's father's new congregation, describes the themes of intergenerational conflict and social justice along the lines of race and poverty at the heart of *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*:

They [the primarily Black island inhabitants] all could have lived there another hundred and twenty-five years without bothering a single soul, but we [the town residents] wanted them gone And that boy there saw someone who had no roof over her head, and he set about doing something about it, and I'm ashamed because I didn't stand with him. I'm ashamed that not a single deacon on this board stood with him. (p. 187)

In 1912, when young Turner and his parents move from Boston to Phippsburg, Maine, where Turner's father is the new minister, they quickly find themselves embroiled in the local conflict: Mr. Stonecrop, whose boating industry has begun to fail, wants to establish coastal Phippsburg as a tourist center, but he believes that the race and poverty of the inhabitants of nearby Malaga Island, descendants of former slaves, will keep tourists away. Thirteen-year-old Turner befriends a girl his own age from the island, and he alone fights for the survival of the island community and its people. While most of the characters of the story are fictional, the location is real and the history, one that remained largely unknown (even by locals) until the publication and award winning of Schmidt's book, is all too true.

Although our Midwestern students might not relate immediately to the coastal setting of this text, the compelling story, the age and personality of the protagonist, and the sense of humor with which Schmidt imbues his young characters will quickly draw them in. Discussing the factual background of

the book and the fact that this history was hidden for well more than 80 years may also intrigue young readers.

The themes of insider/outsider are well worth discussing, as both Lizzie from Malaga Island and Turner from Boston are outsiders to the town of Phippsburg in a way that anyone who has ever moved to a tightly knit community will understand. The racism in the book is strong and sometimes painfully described: the sheriff holds his hand on his gun and notes that shooting young Lizzie would be easy: "one less colored in the world" (p. 19). The ending of the book is sad and powerful, but allows much room for discussion.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this book is that almost all of the adults, the churchgoers of the town, are led to do what is wrong, and Turner, the child, is the one who must uphold what is right. This leaves the possibility for students to consider what younger generations have to offer in the context of what has come before them. It also leads one to consider justice and injustice: what the townspeople are able to do legally is outrageous and demonstrates the legal injustices that characterized the Jim Crow years throughout this country.

Family and roles in one's family form an important theme in this book. Turner finds himself in a not uncommon situation with a father who is disappointed in how he performs. This relationship unfolds as the story reveals that Turner's values are uncommonly fair and just in spite of the violence that surrounds him. Lizzie's relationship with her grandfather is one of caring and support. The reader also sees the way that generations follow generations in terms of beliefs and worldviews. This can easily lead to a consideration of friendship and how the relationships one develops may or may not follow in the footsteps of previous generations. Turner and Lizzie find friendship in spite of the prejudice of the community. They also find friendship with an eccentric character in the story who is one of the only ones to understand.

One's relationship to the natural environment is an interesting consideration raised by the profound connection between the protagonists and the natural surroundings they find themselves in. Lizzie helps Turner make some of those connections. As one considers the relationship between the inhabitants of Malaga Island and their deep connection to that

space, one sees a very different relationship than that of the townspeople to their town.

Finally, there are issues raised by the fate of individuals in the story. Two significant characters die within its plot. One family leaves to avoid being removed forcefully. Some individuals are removed to an asylum, where they die almost immediately. Others find themselves impoverished, financially and emotionally. As readers, we find ourselves faced with the death of characters we have grown to have hope for and, in some cases, of characters we have grown to love. One cannot help but consider issues of justice and injustice as one considers the outcomes of the various populations in the book.

Christopher Paul Curtis: Family, Poverty, and Racism

Christopher Paul Curtis was born and grew up in Flint, Michigan, and now lives in Windsor, Ontario. As he entered adulthood he took a job in one of Flint's factories. At his wife's urging, he took time off to pursue his interest in writing. His first book, *The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963* (1995) was recognized with the Newbery Honor and the Coretta Scott King Award, and his next book, *Bud, Not Buddy* (1999) also received both of these prestigious awards. Both books combine humor with the serious themes of the times that they represent, and both books have the backdrop of Flint in their stories.

The protagonist of *Bud, Not Buddy* (1999) is always able to reflect wisely on his circumstances: "Six is real tough. That's how old I was when I came to live here in the Home. That's how old I was when Momma died" (p. 6). We meet 10-year-old Bud 4 years later, in 1937, as he is being moved from a Flint orphanage to a foster home. When he immediately faces conflict in the foster home, he runs away and begins to look for his father, whom he has never met. With only a beaten-up suitcase containing his few belongings and clues to his father's identity—a blanket, some rocks with pencil inscriptions, a picture of his mother, and a few paper flyers—he sets off on a 120-mile walk to seek the bandleader he believes is his father. Aided by "Lefty" Lewis, he makes his way to Grand Rapids; meets the famed, and ornery, Herman E. Calloway; and finally, finds his past.

Poverty, both individual and societal; the nature of family and home; the difficulties of childhood; dealing with parents who have passed away or are other-

wise missing; the subtle and not so subtle impacts of racism—all of these issues are raised in this book in ways that could lead to interesting classroom discussion and reflection. As we see Bud being kicked out of the breakfast line at the mission, we see a hungry young boy, but the monitor sees only another face: "Look in the line, there's lots of folks look just like you, you ain't the worst" (p. 46). As Bud finds his way to a Hooverville, we again see the poverty surrounding those who live during the Depression: "You might think or you might hear that things are better just down the line, but they're singing the same sad song all over this country" (p. 68).

As he searches for family, Bud struggles in many ways with what it means to be a child who must live as an adult. He knows that there is really no room in the orphanage for him, and he has suffered enough bad experiences in foster homes to recognize that his chance of finding a family that way is unlikely. Although there are many wonderful foster homes, there are, sadly, foster homes where adults take children into their homes for income and which are inappropriate for the care of the child in their charge. Unfortunately, Bud finds just such a situation. He decides to seek his father and sets out with pieces of information he tried to put together from the artifacts he kept from his life with his mother. This journey is a major theme in Bud's story. He becomes responsible for his own future, never letting go of his memories of his mother—"I couldn't think about her any more if there were a hundred hours in every day and a thousand days in every week" (p. 234)—or his dreams of finding his father.

Issues of race and racism are woven throughout the book in significant ways, as this book takes place during the Jim Crow era. Lefty Lewis warns Bud about the grave dangers of being Black in Owosso. The Calloway band must retain a white member to own property and to get some bookings, and Mr. Calloway speaks of the way he tried to raise his daughter to be prepared for racism: "This is a hard world, especially for a Negro woman, there's a hundred million folks out there of every shade and hue, both male and female, who are just dying to be harder on her than I ever could be" (pp. 222-223). At one point, police stop and search the car driven by Lefty Lewis. They note that they are stopping all unfamiliar cars in their desire to keep outside labor organizers away, but one also wonders if Lefty's race doesn't play a role in this interaction.

Much history of the time and location also provides relevant information for discussion. We learn about the Great Depression and its impact, about Hoovervilles and people jumping on trains hoping to find work in other locales, about unions and Flint's sit-down strike, about Pullman porters and limited job opportunities for African Americans. In his afterword, Curtis tells us that he drew on his own grandfathers in writing the story, and he talks about the importance of learning one's history.

In *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, (1995) Curtis details the life of a family during the civil rights era. "Grandma Sands says it's quiet down where they are, but we think it's time Byron got an idea of the kind of place the world can be, and maybe spending some time down South will help open his eyes" (p. 123). It's 1963, and 13-year-old Byron has gotten into just about as much trouble as a boy can get into in Flint. His parents have decided he needs to spend some time with his grandmother in Birmingham, Alabama, so the whole family (Mom, Dad, Byron, 10-year-old Kenny, and younger sister Joetta) sets out in their car, the Brown Bomber, to deliver him there. As Kenny narrates the story, we learn a great deal about the "Weird Watsons" and life in Flint and Birmingham during this summer of civil rights conflict. Indeed, the Watsons find themselves in Birmingham at the time of the historic church bombing that killed four young girls and they must deal with its emotional toll on their family. Curtis manages to balance both an uproariously funny approach and an all-too-tragic historical event in a very powerful manner.

The strongest theme here is that of family: sibling rivalry, disagreements, and bullying, along with a deep bonding that holds the family together. We watch as family members struggle to get along with one another and as parents work to do what is right for their children. At the same time, we see the strength of the family and enjoy their generally good-natured teasing. We also see the power of strong sibling relationships as Byron saves Kenny from drowning and Joetta believes Kenny has called her out of the church before the bombing.

The theme of what it means to be Black in a racist society is also strong. When Joetta's neighbor friend Mrs. Nelson gives her an angel figurine and says it looks just like her, she is puzzled because the angel is white and does not resemble her at all. When

they plan their trip, they must time their meal and overnight stops in areas that are likely to serve African Americans. And clearly, they must come to terms with the violence that occurs during their time in Birmingham. Joetta narrowly misses being in the church when it is bombed, but it is Kenny, who enters the church searching for his sister, and who sees the little girls being removed, who is most impacted by the horror. When Kenny tries to come to terms with the fact that little sisters from other families have been killed—girls loved just as much by their parents and siblings as the Watsons love Joetta—Byron's answer is very much no-nonsense:

Kenny, things ain't ever going to be fair. How's it fair that two grown men could hate Negroes so much that they'd kill some kids just to stop them from going to school? How's it fair that even though the cops down there might know who did it nothing will probably ever happen to those men? It ain't. But you just gotta understand that that's the way it is and keep on stepping. (pp. 202-203)

Certainly, this response and the concerns that precipitate it provide much fodder for the classroom. How do we come to terms with those things around us that are unfair? How do people come to hate one another? How do we deal with a justice system that doesn't always ensure equity? To what degree do we just need to accept what is and to what degree can we work toward change? How much has changed since the activities of this book took place? What civil rights issues remain? With older students, one might want to follow the legal case against the men only recently convicted of the Birmingham church bombing. In an epilogue, Curtis describes the true events that occur in this book and challenges the reader to continue to work toward change.

Each of the books we describe has its own personality, but all are connected with themes of personal and social struggle, family, prejudice, injustice, and hope. Alone or in combination, they provide opportunities for discussion of such issues. They also provide the possibility for discussing the process and craft of writing. Whelan (2001) has stated that, other than attending an Indian quilt exhibit in New York City, she completed the rest of her research for *Homeless Bird* "in northern Michigan, just reading" (p. 55). Might her work have been different had she actually

traveled to India for research? Curtis, Polacco, and Schmidt all write historical fiction. Polacco writes *Pink and Say* as a story passed down in her family; Curtis explains in endnotes that he uses both family history and paper research to write his novels; and Schmidt writes of his on-site and paper research about Malaga Island. Yet, all three of these authors are writing about periods that have passed. What challenges does this present a writer?

“Art challenges and transports us; it offers an invitation to transformation and an opportunity to see things anew” (Ayers, p. xiii). Certainly, many great works of children’s literature can be used to bring historical events and sensitive topics to life, but one may wish to begin with books that originate close to home—those written by our own Michigan authors. The Michigan authors described here are just a few of those who have tackled the difficult issues of war and peace, life and death, and justice and injustice. With protagonists of approximately the same age as their readers, they invite those readers into another world and safely bring them the complexity of historical events in the pages of a book. By teaching our students that writers live among us and that they write about topics important to us, we teach that they, too, can write and that they have important stories to share.

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