

PASAA
Volume 36
April 2005

REVIEW: STORIES MATTER: THE COMPLEXITY OF
CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY IN CHILDREN'S
LITERATURE

Suriyan Panlay
Chulalongkorn University Language Institute

Stories Matter is an edited collection offering differing voices, viewpoints, and perspectives of respected authors, illustrators, editors, publishers, educators, librarians, and scholars on the contentious issue of cultural authenticity in children's literature. It explores the complexity of this issue by highlighting important historical events, current debates, and new questions and critiques. Readers will find a discussion on the topic truly passionate and richly diverse.

The cover illustration by Susan Guevara, taken from Ana Castillo's known book *My Daughter, My Son, the Eagle, the Dove*, nicely conveys the primary theme of the book—children's needs for stories that authentically articulate their own and others' cultures. In the picture, the (Hispanic) grandmother is sharing a story with her granddaughter, reflecting the importance of stories being passed on from one generation to another through personal interactions with those who matter in a child's life. As nicely put by its editors, Fox and Short, "the combination of ancient traditions and contemporary images reflects the ways in which stories continue to weave particular cultural traditions and values from one generation to the next and the importance of those stories in authentically reflecting both the past and present of those cultures."

The book is divided into five separate parts, each addressing the concerned issue with passionate and earnest voices. In its first part, *The Sociopolitical Contexts of Cultural Authenticity*, Short and Fox explain in great length how this edited collection is uniquely organized and summarize the major points offered by each chapter author. Their final words fittingly encapsulate the essence of having the debates on cultural authenticity in children's literature—the debates foster the dialogue that is essential to democracy and to the struggle for social justice (p. 23). Bishop then offers the historical context of the debates on cultural authenticity, with the focus on African American children's literature. Her thought on writers writing outside their own cultural domains or crossing cultural gaps is of great value. Although she is not against writing outside one's own experience, she does suggest that those who wish to do so must find a way to deal effectively with the limitations of their experience and knowledge.

Parts two and three delve into an even more passionate debate as authors, illustrators, and editors take turn expressing their 'fierce' stands on cultural authenticity and political correctness. Jacqueline Woodson kicks off the debate by stating that there is room in the world for all stories, and that everyone has one. However, she hopes that "those who write about the tears and the laughter and the language in her grandmother's house have first sat down at the table with them and dipped the bread of their own experiences into their stew" (p. 45). Susan Guevara poses some of the most interesting questions concerning cultural authenticity: Are early memories of creating an altar in one's home more authentic than an adult experience of living with a Mexican family and helping them to create their altar in celebration of Dia de los Muertos? Are there clear-cut authentic experiences of culture? In creating art, does intuition have any culturally authentic value? For as an illustrator, the very first question she asks herself is—Does this story move me? *not*—Is this an authentic story?

Marc Aronson encourages writing both inside and outside of one's own cultural experience, as long as authors "trust their passions, while still demanding the highest standards of artistry,

honesty, and understanding” (p. 82). Kathryn Lasky asks, “if authors can write only about their own culture, would not the corollary be that editors must follow suit and not edit material outside their own ethnic or cultural experience?” (p. 88). The author with the most ‘passionate’ tongue is perhaps Thelma Seto, an Asian American writer. She feels strongly that it is morally wrong for Euro-American writers to “steal” from other cultures in order to jump on the multicultural bandwagon. She urges Euro-American writers to look again at the issue of “cultural thievery” (p. 96).

Parts four and five offer the educators’ perspectives on cultural authenticity in relation to the classroom practice. Teachers wishing to incorporate children’s literature into the curriculum will find the debates in these two sections extremely of great use. Elizabeth Noll (pp. 182-197) provides criteria related to recognizing culturally offensive images and raises the issue of historical literature where there is a necessity to provide accurate perspectives without perpetuating negative images. Laura Smolkin and Joseph Suina (pp. 213-230) argue that accuracies alone are not enough to determine authenticity. Cultural sensitivity should be observed as well. Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen (pp. 198-212) explain further that accuracy focuses on cultural facts while authenticity focuses on cultural values. Curt Dudley-Marling (pp. 304-318) points out that the teacher’s role is to make available authentic texts reflecting diverse cultural and ethnic images and to create a space where students can represent themselves and find themselves represented within books. Each author also cites specific children’s books from a variety of cultural groups that can help teachers who wish to utilize children’s literature in their classrooms gain a better understanding of the issue of multiculturalism and cultural authenticity.

Readers of the book will not only find a rich overview and background, but they will also be invited to consider new directions for the field as they reflect on topics such as the social responsibility of authors, the role of imagination and experience in writing for young people, cultural sensitivity and values, authenticity of contents and images, authorial freedom, and the role of literature in an education that is multicultural.

Importantly, in exploring cultural authenticity in children's literature, each chapter author cites specific children's books from a wide variety of cultural groups, including, among others, African American, American Indian, Asian American, Canadian, Chinese, Latino/Latina, and West African Cultures.

Another unique feature of this book is the continual interaction between authors, as writers refer across their pieces and positions to the texts, ideas, and stances of others in the volume. Thus, the book itself becomes one whole, seamless experience for readers rather than a collection of discrete essays or chapters. Although edited collections are often approached by reading individual chapters separately from others, this volume is indeed a complex conversation about cultural authenticity, and thus the conversation is much more powerful if the book is read as a whole.

What seems lacking or a bit biased in this book perhaps is the balance of the debates or discussions on various cultural groups. The focal point seems to be solely on African American children's literature, consequently making others less important or secondary. Although, as suggested by Bishop, African American story is a vital component of the American story, others do also deserve the same amount of attention, particularly in a book that deals primarily with multicultural literature like this one.

All things considered, *Stories Matter* is a pivotal edited book methodically investigating and addressing the issue of cultural authenticity through a collection of differing voices and perspectives. Anyone interested in children's literature will find this comprehensive collection extremely useful. Undeniably, children's literature has what it takes to transform this multicultural global village into a better, more understanding place. It can certainly help young readers empathize with others, shape their moral attitudes, and understand the consequences of their actions. After all, as eloquently articulated by Cai and Bishop, literature is simply like "voices from the heart" that, "once heard, can change other hearts."

The Author

Suriyan Panlay is currently an assistant professor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI). He obtained his MA in Linguistics from Michigan State University. His research interests are mainly in SLA and Children's and Young Adults' Literature.

