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8.7 Multicultural Lit Reflection

When I think about children's literature I think of why it is here. Two main reasons come to mind and stick out as being why authors take the time to create stories. The first reason is for pure enjoyment. I believe that authors tell stories so that their readers can spend some time and enjoy a good book that takes their mind to different places. The second reason to write a story is to teach. I feel that authors write their stories to teach their reader something. Now that something doesn't always have to be this big idea or thought but it just has to give new ideas or shed new light to the reader.

In this section of the class we are taking the idea of children's literature and we are taking it one step further; we are looking at multicultural children's literature. We have been giving articles to review and study that set the frame work for this big idea and what falls under it's umbrella. We have also been assigned books from two separate authors that show us a representation of authors and their attempts to create this form of literature.

The first big idea that comes up when thinking about multicultural children's literature is; what is it and what does it consist of? That is a huge loaded question and from our reading is not truly defined and actually has many different definitions depending on whom you talk to and who is defining it. One article that we focused on in this section was written by Rudine Sims Bishop and it defines multicultural children's literature as: "books created by or about people of color....not middle class white males". Well that is very simple definition that simply tells you that anyone who writes a book that is of color or a book that has main characters that are of color fit the mold. In another

article it also “tries” to define this form of literature and it gives us three main definitions that are widely used. The Mingshui Cai article defines this literature in these three ways.

1. Works that focus on people of color
2. Literature about racial or ethnic minority groups
3. Books that feature people of color, elderly, gays and lesbians, religious minorities, language minorities, people with disabilities, gender issues and concerns about class

Cai gives us a broader perspective of what is considered to be “multicultural” Even though these two articles have the same concept of a focus on color, the true question comes in with what Cai says, “What is the true definition of MULTI?” That is the huge question here. Who falls under that umbrella? Who gets left off the ballot? Who is too white? Who is considered someone who is misrepresented? These questions all have relevance because who is to say what multicultural truly means.

I think the debate really can go on forever when it comes to the “true” meaning but there are more problems with multicultural literature than just what defines it. You see people of color or those who have misrepresented have not been truly given a voice when it comes to stories. The Harris article that we read talks about more of those problems. It talks about how books that are about different cultures do not sell well and publishers do not want them because they are out to making money. Yes, this is a problem but the biggest problem does not stem from who will or will not publish a book it is about who is writing or not writing these books. Bishop gives us five functions for multicultural literature. They are:

1. Provided knowledge and information

2. Changes the way students see the world
3. Promotes and develops an appreciation for diversity
4. Rise to critical inquiry
5. Provides enjoyment

These functions are very important when it comes to successful story telling of cultures. In order for these five functions to be met there is a higher trump that is played. It is a huge problem and one that is starting debates across the globe; debates and arguments between teachers, readers, editors, critics and authors. This is in the area of authenticity. In the Debbie Reese article she speaks of that authenticity is being thrown out the window and authors are writing stories about other cultures based upon information that have gained from Hollywood. She spoke of that authors in this day and age are writing more and more about Native Americans, but the problem is that they are creating the story by making the Native American people into “barbarians” as Hollywood has portrayed them. Debbie Reese is a huge advocate for making sure that Native Americans are truly represented in literature. She said in her book reviewing article is that the sad thing about author who are not Native American who are writing about Native American usually portray them in three specific ways. The says that the three greatest stereotypes of Native Americans are that they are aggressive savages, they are romantic nobles who are on with nature and finally they are dressed in “Indian attire” including feathers and war paint. She said that these stereotypes have to be fixed because when authors tell stories using them, they are causing more harm to the children of that culture then they even realize. She states that when children cannot find text about them or read a text that uses stereotypes about them that the get a “negative message about themselves”. I am sure that

authors are not writing with that intention in mind but authors do need to keep in mind that the writing that they do need to be authentic and true to the culture.

What is authenticity and how does a story teller get to a point in their writing that they know that what they are writing is true to the people that it is written about? The big idea that popped up a lot this week is this question that Harris also asked in his article: Can another person write about another person's culture? This question I have looked at over and over again and through my research I feel that I can answer that question in this way. A person can write about another culture if they have done their homework and talked to the people that they are going to write about to ensure that what they are writing is true to who the people really are. The reason why I answer this question in that way is because this week we looked at Native American literature. We were given the task of reading five different books. An author named, Joseph Bruchac; who was raised in the Native American culture, wrote four of the five books. He grew up with his grandparents who shared their culture with him and he has also spent a huge part of his life learning from Native American storytellers. The other author is Beth Kanell who was not raised in the Native American culture and wrote a book about Native Americans without truly spending the time and learning from their culture. We saw first hand what stories written by people of the same culture compared to stories written by people of a different culture look like.

The first author that I am going to talk about is Beth Kanell. When I first read this book I read it without the knowledge that the author was not Native American. I read the book just for enjoyment and to see if the book represented Native Americans in a true light. As I read the book I did not think that Kanell portrayed Native Americans in the

three main ways that Reese spoke of in her article. I did not think that she showed them as savages, or a romantic noble and never once spoke of “Indian attire”. I was shocked and taken back when after I read the book that there was so much commotion about the book and how it was an insult to the Native American culture. There was an essay that was written by Seale and Dow that showed how the story and the characters of the book truly put a negative cloud over their culture. They spoke of how the main character in the story acted in a way that no Native American girl would act. They said the story should Native Americans having no respect for their families. They also talked about how the character in the book Henry was written in a way that he was every, “white women’s fantasy” of a good Native American.

I was truly shocked when I read this essay. I guess as a reader I was ignorant to the norm of Native American culture. For instance, the whole piece of how the mother and daughter had no respect for each other I totally did not see as stereotypical. I feel that I didn’t think this way because in this day in age I see mothers and daughters arguing all the time on television and just saw that as normal. Seale and Dow on the other hand did not see this my way. I guess that Hollywood has corrupted me and made me think that Native American children would act in the same way as children that I see in the movies. One argument that they had really struck a chord with me though and I was truly put back by it. I see where they are coming from when they said that Henry really falls into the second stereotype that Reese talked about. He is one with nature, goes and looks at the animals and such. The problem I had was not that they thought that it was stereotypical but how they use a stereotype to discuss how a stereotype upset them. The passage of every white women’s fantasy really upset me and made me think of how can someone

who is defending their culture say something about someone else's and say that all white women would love a noble Native American man. It is in my mind hypocritical and wrong for them to have that statement.

The question is should Kanell have written this book and did she do a good job of representing a culture that she is not a part of. The first answer is yes, she should have written this book because it was well written and truly it does not do much to harm the culture of Native Americans. On the other hand did she do a good job of representing the culture? That answer is no! She totally shot her self in the foot because after she wrote the book she came up with questions to talk about after reading her book and in those questions she compares Native Americans being sterilized to them being weak animals who are killed and made to leave by a stronger animal. This statement I feel came across in the wrong way and because of that she was really criticized by individuals of the Native American culture and of other Multicultural groups. Slapin wrote her a letter to her and explained that her questions are a form of racism and that they need to be taken down and she was wrong for doing them. This letter and the essay sparked more and more and a battle between Kanell and these critics arose.

That is the problem with a person from a different culture writing stories about a different culture. You are never going to get everything write as an author no matter who you are and when who you are is someone not of the culture you are writing about you are going to have to defend yourself for your stereotypes in your work, that you might not even think are wrong. On the other hand, what about an author of the same culture; if they use stereotypes are they going to be looked down on in the same way as an author from a different culture?

The answer to that question based upon the work that we have done this week would have to be, no. The other author that we researched this week was Joseph Bruchac. We read four books by this author including his autobiography, two fictional books and a book that retold Native American stories that he had heard from elders and professional storytellers in the tribes he had visited. When looking at his books, I have to say that I had seen some of the same stereotypes that were in the Kanell book, *Darkness Under the Water*.

In the collection of Native American stories, Bruchac uses the stereotypical approach of telling a story of a Native American husband who dies but still does his duties and battles nature to make sure his family makes it through the winter. This sounds like the Noble Indian the Reese spoke of. In *The Dark Pond* as well as *Hidden Roots* you see the Native American in the story having foxes crawl on him and also being one with the deer where he can drive up in his car and get out and walk around them without them spooking and even have them come to him so he can kill them. Again, this sounds like a Noble Indian. In the Kanell book she was ripped on so bad for how the young girl Molly didn't share her troubles with her parents when her sister was haunting her. The articles said that Native American children would share their problems with their parents but if you look at the *Hidden Roots* story Howard never shared that he didn't fit in and that he was being picked on. Also in *The Dark Pond*, Arnie never shared with his parents that he was being picked on either. If that is the case that Kanell and Bruchac both had stereotypical pictures of Native American children then why did Kanell take the heat? Let's look deeper in the Bruchac books and compare them with Kanell. Another thing that

Kanell got criticized for was the use of Henry and how he was looked like every white woman's fantasy. In Hidden Roots Uncle Louis even though older took the same approach when he was this man who stood in and stopped violence and helped others and new about nature. Again are they not the same. In Hidden Roots as well Bruchac depicts a Native American man as an abuser who beats on his wife and his young son. I am pretty sure that if in Kanell's book there was that same profile of a Native American man that there would have been red flags everywhere. So what is the difference? How come Kanell was looked at in a negative way and the Beverly Slapin Blog labeled Bruchac's books "spot on, honest and truth telling"? The answer is clear to me; Bruchac is telling of his culture and Kanell is not.

Based upon what I have read I can say that if you are writing about your culture you are allowed to use stereotypes but others are not. How is that fair though? Like I showed in the previous paragraphs I pulled out very similar stereotypes and even harsher ones from Bruchac but his works are not looked at as ones that show Native Americans in a negative way. I think that it all goes back to authenticity. Bruchac; which I discovered through his autobiography and his website has lived the life and has been taught the ways of his people. His writing is labeled authentic because it comes from within and from previous experiences that he has gone through. In the articles we read there was a passage that asked a writer why they have not written a book about Native Americans and his response was that he had not held their babies. I totally get where he is coming from when he says this. How can something be authentic when it has never seen that which it needs to be? It is like going to a restaurant for dinner. You are starving and you would love to eat some Mexican food. You are looking for the best place to go that will serve

you authentic food. Would you go to Taco Bell or would you go to Mexican Town in Detroit and eat there? The answer is going to be the authentic food in Mexican Town. When you want something, you want the best it can be. When looking at Multicultural Literature there is no difference. You want to read a book that is going to paint to you the best picture of what that culture, race, religion or other sub-category looks like.

You get that better representation from Bruchac then from Kanell because he is authentic. I think that is why his stereotypes are not looked at as negative. He has lived the life and seen the stereotypes first hand so he can address them. When speaking of Bruchac you know that his writing is authentic because you can pick little pieces of his life out of the stories that he tells. The first example is that of him being represented in the Dark Pond and Hidden Roots. Both boys in those stories were looked at as different and got picked on and that is what happened to him in his life. In the Hidden Roots story the main character Howard is called, "Sonny" by his parents and that is the name that Bruchac's grandparents called him when they raised him. Speaking of grandparents, his grandparents raised Bruchac and we see an important role of grandparents in both of these books, especially in Hidden Roots. In Hidden Roots we are introduced to this character named Uncle Louis. He is Howard's grandfather and we find that out later in the story. When Bruchac describes Howard's grandfather he uses some of the same descriptions that he uses when he talks about his own grandfather in the Bowman's Store. One great example is when he describes the hands of both of the men. He uses the description that both men have leathery hands. You see through all of these details that Bruchac is not just telling stories about his culture that he is sharing his life and

memorize to the readers of his books. That is the huge difference when it comes to why one author can write about their culture in a way that others cannot.

When bringing this entire idea full circle we go back to the two main reasons that authors write books. We have seen that authors write books to bring enjoyment and to take you other places such as in the books by Kanell and Bruchac. On the other side I said that authors write to teach, but how can Multicultural books really teach all children? That is a good question because as teachers you want to make sure that every child has a chance to read books about themselves and discover their cultures especially if they are not represented. In the Cai article that I spoke of earlier we are shown that teaching using books of color are very important and even will help students who are white. Cai gave these two main ideas:

Books of color:

1. Do not exclude whites from the discussion of multicultural literature
2. Do not directly reflect the lives of white teachers and students but bring them awareness

So how do you teach using these types of books so that every student will get something from it? According to my findings there is no way to sit there and teach about every sub group from color to sexual preferences in your classroom. The best thing to do is teach History as you are suppose to but when you get to a point in your teaching where a group is being unrepresented talk about it, pull out a picture book or a section of a chapter book and read it to your class and have an open discussion. Like Cai said, these books of multiculturalism do not exclude students who are not of that culture. They can be brought

into the light and made aware that there are others in the world who may be different from them and that they need to respect them for who they are. They are great teaching tools! Cai speaks of when teaching the civil war to talk about African Slaves and Women who could not vote. That is one example and I have been trying to come up with more ways to do the same. When speaking of presidents such as Franklin Roosevelt you can speak of individuals with disabilities. You can speak of Asian Americans and Jewish culture during World War teachings. You see if you take the approach of teaching the curriculum that you are mandated to teach but also focus on the unrepresented groups then you can have an easier and more productive way of making sure that you talk about the groups and people that make up the definition of, “MULTI”.

Let’s revisit the question that I posed earlier that was asked in multiple articles in this weeks reading. Can a person from a different culture write stories about a different culture? Through my readings and discussion I have shown you that it is a very hard thing to do. Kanell went into this book with a challenge and Bruchac even stated that she might have bitten off more then she could chew. It is a very fine line, a line that I do not know that I would even want to try to cross. That is what I think a lot of authors are struggling with right now. It stated in the Bishop article that one of the main problems in Multicultural Children’s Literature is that there is not enough books. I believe that authors out there would love to write more and more books about different cultures. How can this happen though if they are not emerged in those cultures. I feel that in order for cultures to be represented in text, that they need to make themselves known and show who they are to these authors. Bruchac didn’t become a great writer of Native Americans because he researched the Internet and other books, he meet with the people and listened

to their stories. I feel in order for children are their uniqueness's to be represented in text that maybe leaders, elders and storytellers or different subgroups need to sit down with great writers so that they can be represented. Kanell is a good writer the problem is that she did not have the face time with the people she was writing about. If groups such as: color, elderly, gays and lesbians, religious minorities, language minorities, people with disabilities, gender issues and concerns about class; met with authors like her then they can have more text created to share who they are and their culture with the world and in return the children of those, "MULTI" groups will feel a feeling of pride for who they are and students will "recognize diversity that defines this society; learn to respect it and get it in a positive light", like Bishop stated in the article.

Moving forward as a teacher of reading I am going to make a huge effort to bring into my teaching those groups who are misrepresented and show my students that they are equal to each other and that their culture, their way of life, their color is important to not only me but also to everyone in the class. I will be doing this with great effort as well to ensure that the text that I use do not backfire on me and hurt my students by being full of stereotypes that can harm and crush their spirits. I will also do this by being like Buchac and talking to my families so I can have a clear picture of what the families that I teach look like so I can ensure a positive experience where my students can be who they are without fear of being made fun of or hurt.