



Reading Is
Fundamental

MULTICULTURAL LITERACY:

Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors

Johannes Gutenberg invented the moveable-type printing press in the mid-1400s.

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.

For many years, nonwhite readers have too frequently found the search futile. This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication, in the Saturday Review, of Nancy Larrick's landmark article, "The All-White World of Children's Books." "Across the country," she stated in that piece, "6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them." A quarter of a century later, census data indicate that about 30% of the school population are members of so-called minority groups—Latinos, Afro-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native Americans—and where will they find their mirrors?

A former colleague at the University of Massachusetts, Sonia Nieto, found that in the decade between 1972 and 1982, an average of only five and half books a year were published about Puerto Ricans. Perusal of my shelves of review books and new and recent publishers' catalogs indicate that if we were to examine the past eight years, the numbers are likely to be the same—if not lower. Stories about contemporary Mexican-Americans are few and far between. Isabel Schon's recent bibliography in the Journal of Youth Services (Winter, 1989) lists a total of nineteen books about Hispanics, fifteen nonfiction and four books of folk stories and legends. Contemporary Asians and contemporary Native Americans do not fare much better. The largest number of books about so-called minority groups is about Afro-Americans. In the quarter century since the Larrick article, the numbers of books about Afro-Americans has increased considerably, despite a major decrease of such books in the early and mid-1980s.

When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. Our classrooms need to be places where all the children from all the cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors.

Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows onto reality, not just on imaginary worlds. They need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans. In this country, where racism is still one of the major unresolved social problems, books may be one of the few places where children who are socially isolated and insulated from the larger world may meet people unlike themselves. If they see only reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world—a dangerous ethnocentrism.

Consider some of the possibilities. From reading, for example, children can become aware of some of the many variations in the way English is spoken in this country, and the richness those variations add to the language. Take Belva Jean Copenhagen, who tells us in Sandra Dutton's *Tales of Belva Jean Copenhagen* (Atheneum, 1989): "I thought I would put one of these (a preface) onto my books because I seen one in a couple of other books of stories. It's where the author tells the reader what to look out for and where she got the ideas for she's written up." Belva Jean tells her own stories in her own voice, which echoes the rhythms, the grammar, and the color of many of the people who inhabit the Appalachian Mountain region. In her afterword, Belva Jean states: "Now I could have told you these stories in Standard English, but I'm not on TV, and this ain't a formal occasion. This was just me rambling on about times I've had and people I've knowed, and things we've did together..."

In one of my old favorites, Lucille Clifton's *My Brother Fine With Me* (Holt, 1975; now out of print, but available in many libraries), Johnetta's narration reflects an informal Black vernacular: "Me and Baggy the only child. I was the only child till he come being born. Everything was all right, me and Mama and Daddy doing fine till Mama come spreading out like a pancake and Aunt Winnie who don't even like children come to watch me for a while and Mama go off and come back here with Baggy. I was mad for a long time and I ain't all that glad now, but I don't let on."

Both those voices are authentic, and their authenticity makes the characters believable and identifies them as members of a particular social group. Changing their voices to Standard English would take away a large part of their distinctiveness.

Books can also introduce readers to the history and traditions that are important to any one cultural group, and which invite comparisons to their own. One of the 1989 Caldecott Honor Books, Patricia McKissack's *Mirandy and Brother Wind*, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney (Knopf, 1988), is the fictionalized story of how her grandparents got together as teenagers, by dancing a cakewalk as if they were "dancing with the Wind!" It also introduces readers to a bit of history of the cakewalk, a dance introduced by slaves and rooted in Afro-American culture.

Folk tales, too, help to keep alive the traditions and values that are important to social groups. Laurence Yep's *The Rainbow People* (Harper & Row, 1989) is a collection of stories told by Chinese immigrants, starting with those who arrived in the middle of the nineteenth century who were unable to bring their families to America, and lived their lives as bachelors. In his introduction, Yep states that the stories express the "loneliness, anger, fear, and love that were part of the Chinese-American experience."

Recently, a spate of Afro-American stories have been published, beginning with Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly* (Knopf, 1985), and followed by the retellings of the Brer Rabbit stories illustrated by Barry Moser and published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: *Jump!* (1986), *Jump Again!* (1987), and *Jump on Over!* (1989). Julius Lester has also published two collections of his retellings of the Brer Rabbit stories in *The Tales of Uncle Remus* (Dial, 1987) and *More Tales of Uncle Remus* (Dial, 1988). Many of the animal stories reflect the hopes and dreams, and some of the reality of the lives of people who were in many ways powerless over the plantation owners who thought of them as so much property. It is easy to understand how Brer Rabbit, the trickster figure who, small though he was, managed to outsmart animals much larger and more powerful than he, became a favorite of people who saw in him something of themselves. The stories have appeal to all children, for what child has not felt small and powerless in an adult world?

Those of us who are children's literature enthusiasts tend to be somewhat idealistic, believing that some book, some story, some poem can speak to each individual child, and that if we have the time and resources, we can find that book and help to change that child's life, if only for a brief time, and only for a tiny bit. On the other hand, we are realistic enough to know that literature, no matter how powerful, has its limits. It won't take the homeless off our streets; it won't feed the starving of the world; it won't stop people from attacking each other because of our racial differences; it won't stamp out the scourge of drugs. It could, however, help us to understand each other better by helping to change our attitudes towards difference. When there are enough books available that can act as both mirrors and windows for all our children, they will see that we can celebrate both our differences and our similarities, because together they are what make us all human.

Source: By Rudine Sims Bishop, The Ohio State University. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" originally appeared in *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*. Vo. 6, no. 3. Summer 1990.