

## Beyond Good Intentions: Selecting Multicultural Literature

By Joy Shiohita

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In today's ethnically diverse classrooms, it's "essential that books reflect students' cultural backgrounds," says Mary-Louise Newling, curriculum specialist for Alameda County's Multilingual/Multicultural Children's Literature Center. "It makes all the difference to have positive images of children's heritage. Sometimes teachers will say, 'We're doing a unit on slavery now, and my African American students aren't interested.' If that's the only image of African American people used in the classroom, children feel singled out and upset," says Newling. "You need to reflect the realities of the children in your class and expose them to other people's experiences. It has to be done respectfully."

Recently, more materials have become available to "speak to the multiplicity of experience," says Newling. "It's more important to have many choices representing a group's experiences. There is no generic Mexican American or African American..."

Newling suggests that people choose children's books based on guidelines from *Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism*, from The Council on Interracial Books for Children, and *How to Tell the Difference*, by Beverly Slapin and Doris Searle. Important points include:

### **General Accuracy**

Books should contain current, correct information. Consider how old the photos and pictures are. Modern stories should acknowledge recent events. For example, a book about South Africa should reflect changes in the apartheid system. While considering students' ages, stories should not force artificially happy endings.

### **Stereotypes**

Beware of reinforcing stereotypes. Books should reflect individual people's lives, rather than assigning general personality traits or behaviors to an entire group of people. Writers should weave information about a culture into the flow of a story. A misleading book might discuss "the Mexican American experience" without considering the variety of experiences within a group. Workbooks particularly present a danger of caricaturing members of a culture, Newling says. Also, consider who holds powerful positions. Who has problems? Who solves problems? Men and people of European descent should not provide all the solutions. What types of roles do girls, women, and people of color have?

### **Setting**

Books should include accurate settings. Again, watch out for stereotypes. A stereotyped image might represent all Native American peoples in tepees, but Native Americans historically have lived in various types of homes and Native Americans are part of present society.

### **Language**

Be careful of books that separate characters into two groups: those who speak Standard English and those who don't. This division can reinforce stereotypes that all people in a group speak in a particular way. If a book includes the language of a specific culture, the actual language should appear, not nonsense words or an invented language that mimics the authentic one. Translated works should convey the original content and not sound like awkward, word-by-word interpretations.

### **Epithets**

Some books may contain epithets insulting people of a particular race or ethnicity. "There's a thin line between censorship and protecting children from what is really going to hurt them," Newling says. "I would tend to err on the side of protecting children."

### **Illustrations**

Illustrations should convey the reality that members of any ethnic group look different from one another. The pictures in a common version of *The Five Chinese Brothers* are "downright insulting," says Newling. "They're caricatures—all depicted to look alike. It's demeaning to Chinese people." With photographs, captions should indicate a specific location and situation, not a general statement like, "In Africa..."

### **Author's Perspective**

Newling describes this as a controversial point. Some people believe that writers should belong to the cultures they describe; others believe that it's enough if writers empathize with members of a culture even though writing from an outsider's point of view. Writers should avoid treating cultural practices as exotic.

### **Appealing Stories**

To receive feedback, Newling lends books to teachers and asks for students' reactions. Themes like friendship, family, and school appeal to children within and outside of a given culture, she says.

### **Tough Issues**

In handling difficult topics, authors should present the complexity of issues and offer multiple perspectives. Michael Lacapa's picture book, *Less Than Half, More Than Whole*, does a good job portraying biracial issues, Newling says. "The book deals with a child's real confusion about being neither all white nor all Native American. There's no 'pie in the sky' resolution."

**Joy Shiohita** is the author of this article, which originally appeared in the September-October 1997 *Children's Advocate* news magazine published by Action Alliance for Children.