

Rachel Patzwaldt, 10.1, Multicultural Lit Reflection

In the beginning of my teaching career, I thought a book was just a book. A book was an avenue to take my students away, to give them a doorway to some new, forgotten or unimaginable place and to help them pretend that they were someone that they thought they were not. It was a story to be heard and enjoyed, but not much more than that. As my experience as a teacher of readers and writers began and continues to develop, I can see that a book is not just a book, yet a catalyst for explicit instruction while disguising it as a story. Lessons can be taught in all content areas and my students are engaged as I turn page after page exposing them to writing craft and comprehension strategies without them really even knowing it. I often feel I am tricking them into thinking and learning as I hypnotize them with characters, illustrations and descriptive language. As of late, I feel I may have the one that was “tricked” in a good way, as I worked my way through a unit on multicultural literature.

A sacred ritual in my class is read aloud. This time of day has no trickery involved. Read aloud is my favorite time of the day and I find myself protecting it so I am able to sit down and read a story to my students each and every school day. Obviously, my book selections have gotten better and more repetitious over my career as I work my own way through novels and holding on to the gems that I think all students should hear. When I think back to the conversations I have had over a good book read diligently chapter by chapter, I know I am fulfilling my duty as a teacher. I am exposing my students to literature that is quality and developing conversations that take us beyond the characters and plot that are typed on the page. It is here that I have learned to see how conversation about a book can be more powerful than the book itself.

After doing a careful analysis of multicultural literature and the use of it in the classroom, I can see that my initial devotion to books was strongly naïve. Although my philosophy and routine of class read alouds has developed on the right track, as a teacher I still have room to grow. I feel strongly that my role as a teacher is to create future citizens that will be productive members of society, but also ones that question why issues in society are the way they are. This is usually done through a book. My goal is to create and develop unique individuals who can co-exist with others no matter the qualities they hold on the inside or outside. Again, this is often done with the reading and discussing of a book. Now, I can see that my role as an educator is strengthened by the conversations, readings and reflections done as a part of this theme, and I still have much to learn.

My discovery started after I read Joseph Bruchac’s *Faithful Hunter* and *The Dark Pond* (Bruchac, 1988 and 2004). I was immediately drawn into each book. I was currently teaching a unit on mythology in my fourth grade classroom and thought about lessons I could support by reading some of the tales of Gluskabe and his adventures in creating the earth (Bruchac, 1988). Then, moving on to Bruchac’s adventure/mystery following a forlorn teenage boy on his quest to discover the mystery of the dark pond, I was engaged with the tone, characters and plot that Bruchac set up from the first page. I often read young adult novels instead of ones meant for “grown up” adults and flew through *The Dark Pond*. I immediately connected with Armie, the main character, and felt empathetic as he detailed his less than ideal school experiences.

It was not until pointed out later on that these were both connected to the overall theme of the class by the fact that they were categorized as multicultural texts. Rudine

Sims Bishop defines multicultural literature as “books that reflect the racial, ethnic, and social diversity that is characteristic of our pluralistic society and our world” (Bishop, p. 3). The ethnic group that Bruchac was writing about was Native American’s and more specifically, the Abenaki. As a reader, I was unaware. I was engaged with both texts, considered adding each to my classroom library or teacher resources, but did not feel the “multiculturalism” jumping out at me. I just thought they were two really good books. To me, they were examples of quality literature. I obviously noticed the connections between the two, never having heard of the Abenaki people before, but did not love them nor hate them nor feel more empowered by them because of the cultural undertones written inside of them.

I was then asked to read *The Darkness Under the Water* by Beth Kanell. This was a book that I struggled to get through. I was surprised because I am not a reader that often abandons books for lack of interest. Yet, with Kanell’s take on a girl’s tragic and tumultuous teenage year, I felt forced to finish it. This book was written with a different tone, with a very conflicted main character and I just didn’t and couldn’t connect. I did feel some emotion as Molly’s family went through the continued tragedy, this time with the loss of her newborn brother, yet struggled to have a positive feeling about the book at all (Kanell, 2008, p. 206). I saw the common ties with Bruchac’s novels in the location of the story and the reference to the Native American culture that should remain hidden, but it still did not move me as a reader or a teacher of readers and writers.

What was even more surprising to me was that I was the only member of my discussion group to not like the novel. All my other group members posted about getting very emotional during the book and stating that it had the feeling of authenticity. Everyone was respectful of my position, as I was theirs, and our conversations did bring up some good points that did sway my initial feelings toward the book. I had a hard time responding due to the fact that I did not connect with the book, but did my best to carry on the conversations that centered around broadening awareness of social issues and the way it would be used in the classroom (except mine).

But then, I read the essay by Seale and Dow, a response by Kanell and a further comment by Bruchac whom Kanell had had reviewed her book before publication. That peaked my interest. I looked back on Kanell’s novel with a fresh set of eyes and was engaged in it even more, but not because of literary quality. I was scouring it for the examples that Seale and Dow picked out as “neither historically accurate nor culturally authentic” (Seale and Dow). I did feel really bad for Kanell as she took a literary beating for her lack of authenticity that Seale and Dow picked apart piece by piece. Seale and Dow pointed out misconception after misconception in Kanell’s novel and questioned her authority and ability to write a novel that centered on the Abenaki culture. I don’t believe they were saying she could not write a well-written novel, but it was clear from the essay that Seale and Dow thought Kanell had no place writing a novel about a cultural group she had no connection to.

"As it stands, *Darkness Under the Water* is a travesty, a melodrama marketed specifically to young people in Vermont—including Abenaki young people—who will probably be told this is how it was. Since young adult historical fiction is often used to supplement textbook versions of history, *Darkness Under the Water* will probably turn up on Vermont reading lists, and will probably win awards. And our Abenaki mothers will probably continue to cut their daughters’ hair so

they will be safe. And our Abenaki people will probably continue to “hide in plain sight.” And the cycle of hatred and denial will continue” (Seale and Dow).

As an educator, this brought up many questions for me that were discussed in my groups’ postings. We debated about the amount of research that has to be done to accurately depict a cultural group that one does not belong to, what an author’s purpose, specifically Kanell, is in writing books with strong cultural ties and the level of authenticity in books that are not written with first hand experience and perspective in a certain culture. The main question that kept coming up though, was what all those issues meant in regards to the responsibilities of educators and the use of multicultural literature in the classroom. An answer was hard pressed to be found, as all the members of my group, me included, could not articulate or at that point in time synthesize what that meant for us as educators.

This question had obviously raised awareness to the fact that although we may find a “good read” that we would like to share with our students, doing background information on the book would be necessary. I stated in our group discussions that I needed to go back and analyze the books that I have in my classroom library to see what travesties laid there. I was surprised to Debbie Reese break down the children’s book *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1994). It is a book I currently have in my teacher resource collection, and thought it was honored for having an African American main character, Grace, that was fighting prejudice based on the color of her skin. Then, Reese analyzed the book from a Native American perspective and detailed the part of *Amazing Grace* in which Grace dresses up like “Hiawatha, sitting cross-legged by the shining Big-Sea-Water” (Reese, p. 161). This again brought another responsibility to the forefront of my educator’s mind. I need to read each book I let my students read or hear critically. This is not so that I can throw it away and have a very thin library, but to be aware of the stereotypes within each book and make a point to discuss said stereotypes with my students.

Another question that was raised that we continued to discuss through our class postings was who has the right to write a multicultural text, who is the judge of who that is and finally, if one does not belong to the culture that is being written about, just how much exposure and research will qualify that writer to do right in the eyes of the judges? Even Violet Harris sees the controversy and continued debate in answering that question. In her piece *Continuing Dilemmas, Debates, and Delights in Multicultural Literature*, she states,

“I question the need to eliminate the essence of feelings, experiences, and aspects of culture that shape who a people are. How many authors are likely to have an understanding of the “Other” that does not stem from media stereotypes, pseudo-science, or well-intentioned, paternalistic writers? Still, questions about authenticity, insider/outsider views and authorial freedom remain unresolved” (Harris, 1996, p. 116).

In reading Debbie Reese’s response to Kanell’s book, it became clear that critics of multicultural literature do appreciate research, yet it has to be the right kind. In my opinion, Kanell wanted to write about the Vermont Eugenics Survey but got caught up in weaving a story about Molly, the main character. I feel as an author, she lost sight of

what her purpose was. The setting and Abenaki ties to Molly's family became a side story and as that happened; the respect for authenticity in regards for what really happened to the Abenaki fell to the wayside.

In contrast, Bruchac seems to have his purpose tattooed on the front of every book that he publishes. Through the use of stereotypes and utilizing his own life story, Bruchac's purpose is to bring recognition of the travesties against the Abenaki, but leave the reader with a feeling of wanting to know; with a notion that doing more research and discovering the truth is necessary. Kanell does not have that power. Kanell even stated in her response that she had "written of an inner circle for which there is no ground in my personal heritage" (Kanell, p. 5). She was aware of the lack of personal connection and then went on to state what research she did to become part of the story. My question back to her would still be, *is it your story to tell?* As an educator who encourages students to write what they know because only they can tell the story best, what does that mean for me in the class? Is this another example of an opportunity to read a book critically and help my students investigate the truth, or is it my responsibility to not even let that story be told?

Judy Dow's response to Kanell helped to answer that for me. In her response titled *It's About Power*, she counters that the author aka, storyteller, has the power in how a tale will be received and carried on by its audience. She states,

"Storytellers have awesome responsibility for the stories they tell: a responsibility for the history, for the people, for the language, for the culture. For the effects of the story, once it's told. An elder once told me that once words have been spoken, they cannot be taken back; they're out in the universe forever. This is a responsibility that Kanell, for all she has written about *The Darkness Under the Water*, for all the excuses she has made, does not seem to understand" (Dow, p. 2).

For me, this channeled the root of authenticity and power in a tale told from a multicultural perspective. If one is up for the challenge to live a life that is not their own, that author must be ready for the legacy of respect or embarrassment to be left for as long as those words live. As Dow points out, Kanell's words are out there, and they can never be taken back. This gave me an answer to one of the overarching questions brought up through the analysis of multicultural literature. Who has the right to write multicultural literature? Anyone. Yet, with that intent comes awesome responsibility. One can not just write a multicultural tale for the sake of writing it. Like Kanell, one can not choose to incorporate a culture into a book and then let that culture become a backdrop for other events. Authors have to be ready to defend his/her crafts because as readers and educators, we should be on the lookout for authenticity. In Bruchac's novels, his stories occur because of the Abenaki culture, not the other way around.

My multicultural journey continued as I read *Hidden Roots* by Bruchac (Bruchac, 2004). Again, I found myself drawn in by the way Bruchac crafted his story and not necessarily the element of Abenaki culture interwoven inside of it. I knew from the previous discussions and assignments that I should be reading with a critical viewpoint, but that did not sway the fact that I was drawn to the text more than Kanell's story. In my first analysis, I felt that *Hidden Roots* was a novel written in response to Kanell's take on the Vermont Eugenics Survey, but discovered that Bruchac's novel was published four years earlier.

There were several parallel elements to the stories. Both had mothers in the tale that had lost children, the ever present force of water influencing life for the main characters in both real events and symbolism and the relatives that were involved in the main characters lives that shed light on some confusing events. Yet, the similarities ended there. Bruchac brought in a primary resource in the end of his story to inform Howie that he was in fact Abenaki and that the uncle he idolized was actually his grandfather. By putting the turn of events at the end of the book, I felt the reader was compelled to research more in order to discover the truths that Bruchac had laid out. Again, as a writer, Bruchac seems to develop awareness in the reader of the Abenaki instead of using the Abenaki as an element to build his story from.

Bowman's Store, Bruchac's memoir of his life and upbringing continued that pattern (Bruchac, 2001). I could see the characters and events that Bruchac wrote about in the pages of his life, and could see how living a certain life, even if it was a secret, creates a passion in a writer. I often asked my group why Kanell had chosen to write about the Abenaki when she had cultural ties to another cultural group that faced elimination as well. It was clear to see that Bruchac wrote about what he knew and didn't try to write about a life that wasn't his. Quite honestly, that seems to be the Abenaki way; living life with respect and honor and only passing on stories that tell the truth. Bruchac owned his story. And yet, my group struggled with the continuing debate of who owns a story that is not one of their own.

This came to a head for me when we shared favorite read aloud books that we had often used in our classrooms. One of the books I shared was *The Liberation of Gabriel King* by K. L. Going (Going, 2007). A group member responded that she also used that book on a regular basis in the class and a part of her school Battle of the Book competition. She then went on to tell me that the author was not African American and now she was questioning the authenticity of the book. I felt the same way and also felt kind of deflated. Had I being doing a disservice to all the classes I had read the book to by not pointing out misconceptions and stereotypes written between the lines? Had I openly been professing my love for the story that could have been doing more damage than good?

The story is about a ten year old Georgia boy named Gabe, who was laden with fears about going to the fifth grade. His best friend, an African American girl named Frita, helps Gabe face and conquer his fears before they enter fifth grade in the fall. Taking place in Georgia the year of the nation's bicentennial, the story also chronicles Frita conquering fears of the Ku Klux Klan that are still active in the area. Written from Gabe's perspective, it is a story that makes me laugh out loud on one page and cry the next. Every year I read it my students love it and create fear lists of their own. Now I have the fear of reading it again with a fresh multicultural perspective and not being able to read it because of the misconceptions it may be portraying?

Then again, that is not the point of multicultural literature and this analysis. It is my responsibility to read that book to my students, but maybe for a different purpose. With the help of Bishop's suggestions, maybe my reasoning for reading *King* is not to just read a good book, but to enlighten and provoke my students to look past the writing craft and read between the lines like I am now. Bishop suggestion of having readers "make thoughtful responses to their reading" could be the way I elevate this favorite book

title to one that not only engages my students but makes them aware of the social issues inside it (Bishop, p. 6).

This understanding all came to a head for me after reading Mingshui Cai's piece, *Multiple Definitions of Multicultural Literature: Is the Debate Really Ivory Tower Bickering?* (Cai, 1998). This piece cleared up a lot of confusion for me by helping me to infer questions that I had been asking over and over and not coming up with any answer to. I have a duty to look at multicultural literature (and all literature, really) from a multicultural perspective (Cai, 1998, p. 316). In order to do this, I need to read books that deal with cultural issues. The fear I had about throwing out books because they may not reflect a culture in the most accurate or favorable light is gone because it is my role as an educator to point those misconceptions out. I need to not label every book with a culture other than the majority as multicultural literature, because by doing so I am perpetuating the stereotype that legitimate multicultural literature is trying to break down (Bishop, p. 3 and Cai, 1998, p. 317). I feel empowered to address social issues through multicultural literature and help to empower my students to do something about it as well (Cai, 1998, p. 317). In the smallest form, this could be just to read from a multicultural perspective as well.

What I have discovered about multicultural literature is that there are many layers that go into the development of an authentic and accurate portrayal of contemporary children's literature focused on multiculturalism. Even my own personal definition of multicultural literature has changed. In the beginning of this unit, I my definition would have included any book that empowers one to learn about a culture; the culture would be the main focus. Now, I can see that books can be used as a proponent of change, awareness and societal change. By using Harris and Cai as my literary guides (with a little Bruchac thrown in for good measure), I feel that I am better equipped to define multicultural literature. I now see multicultural literature as any book that uses a culture that has been in the minority in regards to societal power, and uses the book as a way of informing students about misconceptions and stereotypes of a culture. Another major part of my revised definition is that the same books can be used as a beginning of conversations that will grow to further understanding and acceptance of different cultures. This in essence is not just my definition of multicultural literature, but the goal of it as well.

My responsibility as a teacher is to be well versed and knowledgeable in a variety of cultures and corresponding texts. I need to control the exposure of multicultural texts and how they are used in my classroom. But this control does not necessarily mean censorship. As Cai stated, it would be extremely difficult to be able to understand various cultures and stereotypes of a culture if there are no texts available to read (Cai, 1998, p. 317). It is my duty to facilitate discussion about multicultural texts in the classroom in such a way that the text and social issues inside will be learned from and not be repeated. In my experience, the conversations that result from quality literature are more important than the texts themselves.

I also need to understand that my role and understanding of multicultural literature is an ever evolving being. As new definitions of multicultural literature come about and as new (and old) authors bring new titles to the table, I have a duty to be open minded to the growth that can occur as an educator, but critical as well so that the stereotypes and misconceptions that have ridden even current titles (think *Darkness*) do

not have a silent place on the book shelf. I need to have an awareness of who is writing the books I am using in my classroom and pursuing their purpose and intent as a writer. Even if this means looking at favorite titles that I have kept close to my heart with a different set of eyes, it is my responsibility. It is also the responsibility of all teachers to have a professional dialogue of what titles are out there, what's best for kids and how to access that material. As Seale and Dow stated, "*Darkness Under the Water* will probably turn up on Vermont reading lists, and will probably win awards" (Seale and Dow, p. 6). It is up to educators like me to not choose a book based on the award stickers on the cover, but the words, stereotypes and possible misconceptions in between each cover.