

# Multicultural Books in Family Literacy Programs

by Patricia L. Bloem

Part of the fun of using picture books in family literacy programs is that the right book makes so many connections possible: for the parent (“They sure didn’t have books like this when I was young”); for the child (“Will you read it again?”); and for the teacher (“There is so much we can talk about with this book!”). It is especially exciting when readers—one or many of them—identify with the characters and take the book to heart. That is why multicultural literature is so important—so that everyone can find stories that are meaningful.

Parents of color are absolutely right to say that they did not have the chance to read books with African American characters or Latino characters when they were children, because there were not many such books around even 10 years ago. Good multicultural books, which we define as literature that speaks from various cultures or that reflects a particular group’s language and ways, are still a new commodity, but are, thank goodness, no longer scarce. The purpose of this Teacher to Teacher is to focus on multicultural picture books from two groups that are well represented in Ohio: African Americans and Appalachians.

## **African-American Books and Family Literacy:**

During the Multicultural Literature session at the Family Literacy Academy sponsored by the OLRC in the summer of 1994, we talked about some of the more recent titles that celebrate family and neighborhood life. Some of us ‘oohed’ and ‘aahed’ at the illustrations in Janice Spivey Gilchrist’s mother and daughter book, *Indigo and Moonlight Gold*. We laughed through Vera B. Williams’ *More, More, More, Said the Baby*, a book that makes you want to find a baby to hug. We read a few pages from Patricia Polacco’s *Chicken Sunday*, the story of three resourceful children who want to earn money to buy Miss Eula an Easter bonnet.

Another book that celebrates community is *Miss Tizzy* by Libba Moore Gray, a story where the kids help take care of their elderly neighbor when she falls sick. Gloria Jean Pinkney’s *Back Home* (illustrated by her husband Jerry Pinkney) is a nostalgic look at a loving family and times past. Perhaps this book will encourage the parents in your program to talk about their own childhood experiences. As I mentioned in August, publishers are beginning to offer picture books that incorporate both narrative techniques of story-telling and African American history. Since many of us grew up with history textbooks that were not inclusive of a broad range of people, this new trend is filling in holes in our understanding. Notice that the following books would probably be most appreciated by children older than second grade:

*Jumping the Broom*, by Courtni C. Wright, depicts old marriage customs in the slave quarters of Southern plantations. The 8-year-old sister of bride Tillie tells the story.

Also set on a plantation, Deborah Hopkinson’s *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, illustrated by James Ransome, is an award-winner based on a true story. A young slave girl who is handy with a needle sews a map to freedom on a patchwork quilt.

These two books would complement each other since they deal with the same time in history.

Neighborhood children learn about Marian Anderson and Duke Ellington when they sit on Miss Ida's porch on Church Street in the evening and hear the story-telling. Sandra Belton's *From Miss Ida's Porch*, illustrated by Floyd Cooper, tells the human side of history, the I-was-there-when stories that give events real meaning. It may be fun to read this book as a group and then ask the parents to tell their stories about which heroes and leaders they learned about as children, asking them to share those stories with each other.

The illustrator of *Miss Ida's Porch*, Floyd Cooper, has many illustrated books to his credit, but the picture book *Coming Home* is the first one he has also authored. In *Coming Home*, Cooper tells the story of the famous African American poet Langston Hughes, especially of Hughes' lonely childhood and of his moving about from one family member to another. Cooper's note at the end of the book amplifies Hughes' life and the history he lived through.

Jacob Lawrence is an acclaimed painter with works hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. Two of his books are well worth perusing: *Harriett* and *the Promised Land*, an illustrated poem about Harriet Tubman, and *The Great Migration*, a depiction of the African American movement from the South to the North industrial cities during World War II. Walter Dean Myers, a popular author of African American young adult fiction, wrote a fine poem, "Migration," which concludes the book.

*Drylongso*, written by Virginia Hamilton and illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, is a bit longer picture book than most. The story of an African American farm family living through a recent drought, *Drylongso* evokes old legends and folk heroes and makes history feel like a living, breathing part of our beings. If you have not read any books by Virginia Hamilton, considered by some to be our country's best children's author, this would be a wonderful place to start. Young girls especially will like the winsome character of Lindy.

Another book illustrated by Pinkney, and a book that you must not miss, is Julius Lester's *John Henry*. Lavishly rendered in Pinkney's distinctive style, this book is the kind of legend that lots of children love, the classic story of the strongest man to ever wield a sledge hammer, the man who outraced a steam drill. A book to look at again and again, *John Henry* is clearly the work of an experienced, mature artist.

### **Appalachian Books and Family Literacy:**

Recent books about Appalachia depict a world where people observe special customs, speak with a colorful and unique vocabulary, and have a clear relation to the land. It is a region that is becoming as rich in literature as it is rich in traditions. One of our country's most prolific and best children's writers is from Appalachia and has written about it with love. Cynthia Ryland's autobiographical *When I Was Young in the Mountains* may show Appalachian parents and children how their land has developed and how ways have or have not changed. Parents with older readers (Grades 4 and up) will enjoy Ryland's short chapter book, *Missing May*, the story of a lonesome 12-year-old girl's coming to terms with the death of her beloved aunt. Set in the West Virginia part of Appalachia, *Missing May* has won lots of awards, and rightfully so, since its 89 pages hold laughter and sadness and wisdom. The Ryland book I wish every Appalachian family literacy program would own and read is *Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds*, a visually stunning book illustrated by another native Appalachian, Barry Moser. This book celebrates the land

and remembers the people, the customs, and most of all, the dogs.

Gloria Houston's *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree* is a reminiscence from the years of the first World War. The Appalachian custom in those days was for each family to take its turn at providing the Christmas tree for the community's celebration. Will Ruth and her mother be able to fetch their balsam tree when Ruth's father is gone to war?

Houston's *Littlejim's Gift* is also a Christmas story, set in a wartime era when 11-year-old boys logged alongside their fathers on Saturdays, doing men's work, or had jobs as dust-doodlers in sawmills, but still wished for Christmas presents like other children. Children had to take on adult roles and grow up quickly in the world depicted in Houston's books, but their pleasures, like visiting the general store or anticipating the Christmas party, were keenly felt.

*Up the Tracks to Grandma's* is another Appalachian reminiscence. Author Judith Hendershot, a native Ohioan, remembers her childhood visits with her Grandma, an emigrant and a widow. Grandma shoos snakes out of the chicken coop, kills and plucks clean her own stewing chickens, shovels her own coal, but, without any embarrassment or apologies, asks her granddaughter to read her mail to her.

Hendershot's *In Coal Country* is also set in southern Ohio. Her father was a coal miner, and thus her book depicts her childhood and a way of life that is vanishing, a time when her "Papa dug coal from deep in the earth to earn a living" and "he was proud to do it." A good contrasting book is *Mama is a Miner*, written by George Ella Lyon, and wonderfully illustrated by Peter Catalanotto. Although one of the dedications is "in memory of my ancestors . . . who mined the coal from the Appalachian Mountains," the daughter's description of her mother's work is clearly set in the 1990s. One follow-up activity that teachers may want to pursue would be to compare the differences between the mining life described by Hendershot and that described by Lyon. Or, since several of the pages in *Mama is a Miner* include four-line stanzas that sound like children's chants or jump rope songs, it might be fun to perform this book, with the teacher or a parent reading the regular text aloud and the children together chanting the poems.

Finally, *Come a Tide*, another book by George Ella Lyon, shows a rural world afloat in water. The spring rains have drenched everybody, and the water is rising. But Lyon's words and Stephen Gammell's zany illustrations depict country folk who are far from feeling sorry for themselves and, by the time the downpour has stopped, are "making friends with a shovel."

### **Connecting Readers with Books:**

How can these books be used and enjoyed? A good place to begin is by reading the books aloud. Practice first, so you feel comfortable and can draw your listeners in. Then ask for their reactions. What parts did they like best and why? Did any parts make them think about similar events from their own lives? If you find people hesitant to talk, you may want to break them into smaller groups. One aspect of illustrated picture books that adults and children rarely consider is why the author chose to tell the story in a particular way, and why an illustrator decided to create certain images and not others. It can be especially fun to talk about the language of carefully crafted books, like *Mama is a Miner* and *Drylongso*, mentioned above. If the families seem to enjoy a specific book, be sure to encourage them to take it home and reread it

together.

Some books lend themselves to thoughtful reflection and written responses. Especially with a longer book, like *Missing May* or *Drylongso*, parents or children may want to keep a journal, alone or together, where they record their reactions and discuss the characters or the story. Parents may want to write their own versions of similar experiences. Children may want to write a poem in response to a story. Remember, people react to different stories in different ways. Rather than making an artificial assignment, let your families take the lead by deciding which book they might want to spend more time with and how they might like to respond. There are wonderful books out there, books that can make reading fun, books that parents and children can enjoy and learn from together, books that connect to lives and to families. It is our job as educators—a very important job—to hand them to families and let those connections happen.

1. How did this piece affect you? (write and share)

2. Why did the piece affect you in this way? Consider reader-based and text-based reasons. (write and share)

3. What's the most important [word, words, idea, paragraph, etc.] in this piece? Why do you think so? (write and share)

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\*You will need these ISBN numbers to order the books. These, or any other children's or young adult's book can be ordered at 40% list price from Book Wholesalers, Inc. Call or e-mail the OLRC for details.