
Papers

Explorations into Children's Literature

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EDITORIAL

Building cultural citizenship: Multiculturalism and children's literature

In his influential book *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (1998), Ghassan Hage compares different versions of multiculturalism using an example from a children's book, *The Stew that Grew* by Michael and Rhonda Gray. The book presents an allegory of Australian cultural diversity: the 'Eureka stew' which features ingredients brought by all the ethnic groups that make up the Australian nation. According to Hage, it is an allegory fraught with ideological paradox: 'far from celebrating cultural diversity – or rather, in the process of so doing,' the book actually embodies 'a White nation fantasy in which White Australians... enact... their capacity to manage this diversity.' (p. 119) He explains that although the stew is presented as the palatable blend of all the cultural influences which went into its making, it is not a mix where all cultures are equal: The Anglo character Blue is in charge of the cooking throughout; the 'ethnics' are reduced to the function of adding flavour.

By means of this illustration, Hage called attention to the debates surrounding multiculturalism which gained momentum in the late 1990s when not only the concept, but the very term, were under pressure from various fronts: from the political right, as exemplified by Pauline Hanson as well as the Howard government, but also from the left, where writers like Hage questioned the commonly-held view of multiculturalism as a progressive social agenda. The limitations, complexities, and paradoxes of multiculturalism were also highlighted by the British critic Pnina Werbner, who in 1997 dubbed it 'an important rhetoric and an impossible practice.' (Werbner and Modood 1997, p. 22) Multiculturalism, these debates revealed, means different things to different people: it is an ideological/normative concept but also an empirical demographic and sociological fact. It functions very differently whether conceived as an official government-sponsored policy framework or, by contrast, as everyday lived reality (see Lopez 2000, Ang 2001, Stratton 1998, Hage 1998 and 2003, Gunew 2004).

The papers in this issue enter the debate surrounding cultural diversity and multiculturalism through the critical lens of children's fiction and a theoretical terrain sensitive to the ideological paradoxes informing not just the texts themselves but also their status and circulation as cultural artefacts. Children's literature is centrally concerned with the domain of everyday life: relationships within the family, with friends, at school, and in the wider community. The growing individual is gradually introduced to a wider world of social and cultural interaction, with potential for conflict as well as for personal growth. Books dealing specifically with multicultural issues examine the effects of migration, resettlement, and cultural negotiation on individuals and their

immediate environment; they also create imaginary realms nurtured by a diverse cultural repertoire.

Children's literature plays a crucial role in the development of (multi)cultural literacy, not only through the individual child's encounter with texts and images, but through the workings of institutional 'filters' (schools and educational bureaucracies, libraries, the publishing industry, wider diffusion through visual media) which determine social and cultural agendas. It thus has a major impact (greater, perhaps, than any other mode of cultural production) on the shaping of individual and group perceptions of their social environment and beyond that, on the future of social and cultural relations. It is this impact, or power of influence, which makes parents, educators, and even politicians acutely sensitive to the messages conveyed through the words and images of children's stories and inclined to take action if the texts are perceived to challenge their own agenda. As an example, one might mention the intervention of Amanda Vanstone, immigration minister in the Howard government from 2003-2007, who publicly decried what she saw as an attempt to 'politicise children's literature' in Morris Gleitzman's refugee novels *Boy Overboard* and *Girl Underground* (Bantick 2005, p.10). The equally strong anti-government stance on refugee issues advocated by numerous publications for adult readers at the same time went unnoticed by the minister.

Another way to situate Gleitzman's novels is within what Debra Dudek argues is a stage of 'critical multiculturalism' (Dudek 2006, p.2, 9, 18). Drawing upon and taking further arguments put forth by John Stephens and Sharyn Pearce (referenced in Pennell's paper in this issue), Dudek offers a fourth stage to Pearce's three stages of multicultural progression in Australian writing for children: 'In this fourth stage, texts can be read as scrutinizing and criticizing Australian multiculturalism [...]. Readers are positioned to see how characters that are marked as racially different are alienated because they are viewed by other characters as "not like me" and therefore not Australian' (Dudek 2006, p.9). Gleitzman's *Boy Overboard* and even more explicitly *Girl Underground* specifically criticise the Australian federal government's policy of mandatory detention and expose how discourses of assimilation compete with, and often override, discourses of difference within multicultural

rhetoric. As is evidenced in the essays in this special issue, this notion of critical multiculturalism might also be put to work as a reading and writing strategy more transnationally, in any piece or body of literature in which it 'is imperative to acknowledge how race anchors multiculturalism in order to shift discourses of multiculturalism from cultural difference to racial difference and therein to work against racism' (Dudek 2006, p.18).

All papers in this special issue deal with multiculturalism and children's literature, but they do so from different perspectives, bringing to bear on the subject the insights of a rich and diverse field of theoretical enquiry: post-Marxist dependency theory; postcolonial and diaspora studies; theories of globalisation, citizenship and cultural citizenship; whiteness studies; Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital; and contemporary scholarship on life writing. Some adopt a wide-angle perspective (Ming Cherng Duh on the effects of cultural imperialism on children's literature in Taiwan, Johnston et al's survey of Canadian pre-service teachers' understanding of cultural difference); some zoom in on a single text (Dudek, Pennell, McNally); some offer a combination of both, by moving from the general to the particular or, as in Pennell's examination of the novel *Have Courage, Hazel Green*, showing how the particular (the Moodey Building) serves as a microcosm for the general (the multicultural nation). Other papers approach the subject through a thematic reading of a body of texts (cross-generational negotiation in Bradford, portrayal of refugees in life writing in Helff). Close readings of particular texts, verbal and visual, are accompanied by reflections on the publishing, marketing, teaching, and scholarly contexts within which characters, texts, and authors are produced as mainstream or 'multicultural', dominant or different.

The collection opens with two papers outlining the dilemmas facing Taiwanese children's literature, in which 'the obstinate island's identity crisis' (Hui-Ling Huang) is played out according to cultural imperialist constructions of value and knowledge. Ming Cherng Duh argues that the very taxonomies available for classifying children's texts are based on Western literary traditions and are unable to accommodate Chinese texts and genres. Hui-Ling Huang examines the triangular tension between

multiculturalism, globalisation, and national identity which in Taiwan produces a literature, and a culture, constantly looking over their shoulder to a Western readership and to Western models for cultural difference. In the third paper, Helen Kilpatrick reads an older Japanese text, Miyazawa Kenji's 'Snow Crossing', as interpreted by two different visual artists. Postcolonial theories of the 'third space' serve to deconstruct animal/human binaries as symbolic constructions of cultural difference.

Five papers address Australian multiculturalism: its origins and historical mutations, its 'pathologies' in the face of ongoing cultural and racial tensions, its promise of future constructions more in tune with the entanglements and possibilities of cultural co-habitations in contemporary Australia. Clare Bradford examines recent picture books featuring Asian-Australian children and their grandparents as examples of cross-cultural negotiation and education. Debra Dudek reads Hoa Pham's young adult novel *No One Like Me* as an illustration of Ien Ang's 'togetherness in difference', a concept aimed at 'rescuing' multiculturalism from the homogenising effects of its official manifestations. Beverley Pennell uses Bourdieu's construction of the relationship between nation and citizen to expose the limitations of the rhetoric of toleration. Odo Hirsch's novel *Have Courage, Hazel Green*, in which the residents of the Moody Building figure as a trope for the nation, is read as an illustration of the disjuncture between national mythologies and lived experience, and as a warning against a complacency which masks not only indifference but also the survival of unequal power relations and racism. Kate McNally uses whiteness theory to critique constructions of ethnicity and gender in the popular young adult novel *Looking for Alibrandi*, arguing that the novel's veneer of multiculturalism is in fact recuperated for a much more conservative cultural agenda of dominant whiteness and patriarchy. Sissy Helff reads a collection of refugee narratives written by Australian school children as examples of life writing which challenge dominant historical narratives, opening up spaces for alternative and plural versions of national and cultural destinies. The final paper in this issue moves the discussion to Canadian models for multiculturalism, contrasting the 'lovely knowledge' of national harmony

with the 'difficult knowledge' of cross-cultural cohabitation as unresolved conflict and ongoing change. Reporting on an empirical research project involving pre-service teachers, Ingrid Johnston, Joyce Bainbridge, and Farha Shariff observe the persistence of myths and stereotypes among their students, but also opportunities for a more complex and dialogic understanding of cultural difference.

Multiculturalism does not emerge unscathed from the critical examination to which it is subjected in these papers, but neither is it abandoned as a lost cause or failed experiment. Our contributors all appear to endorse Pnina Werbner's view that multiculturalism is as important as it is impossible: a formidable challenge but one that culturally-diverse nations can ill afford to turn their backs on. Resurfacing as critical multiculturalism, or as cultural citizenship (see Bradford and Dudek) it occupies an increasingly large space in the consciousness of the social, cultural, and educational institutions which in turn shape the outlook of future generations. Children's literature reflects, shapes, and projects debates about cultural difference through its various dimensions – aesthetic, commercial, educational, ideological. To study these texts with a view to their social function is to observe cross-cultural dialogue in the making.

Debra Dudek and Wenche Ommundsen



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