



Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature.

Dana L. Fox and Kathy G. Short, eds. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2003, 340 pp. ISBN 0814147445

NIKKI MERCHANT

Slippery Rock University

nikki.merchant@sru.edu

As children's literature assumes more and more of the cultural diversity burden to provide the needed background for and stories of those who are different, one must ask, "How culturally authentic must the stories be?" and "Who should write these stories?" In *Stories Matter*, Dana Fox and Kathy Short courageously join the fray surrounding the debate these questions generate. Through the voices of a diverse assemblage of educators, scholars, authors, and illustrators, the authors seek to provide as many definitions as possible, shape the intricacy of the debate, and provide points for reflection. How well they accomplish their task is itself a matter for debate.

Before Fox and Short address the myriad problems associated with cultural authenticity, they contend with the issue of text organization. Although they acknowledge edited texts, such as their own *Stories Matter*, often are less coherent and appealing to publishers and readers, Fox and Short justify the need for the multiple voices by saying, "We believe cultural authenticity needed to be addressed through a collection of differing voices and perspectives" (p. 3). In fact, the book is exactly that--a collection of differing voices. Unfortunately, the organization of the chapters does not always connect the themes in ways that allow the authors to debate each other. *Stories Matter* is divided into five sections addressing five major themes.

Section 1 addresses the theme of sociopolitical contexts of cultural authenticity. In the first chapter, Short and Fox provide the milieu that frames the often contentious debate cultural authenticity raises in various circumstances. They present the debate through a series of questions to which they extract answers taken from subsequent authors' chapters. They begin the discussion with a key dilemma--how one defines cultural authenticity. Here and throughout the rest of the book, Fox and Short provide space for educators, scholars, authors, illustrators, and others involved with children's literature to present their definitions. These disparate definitions come from Rudine Sims Bishop, Jacqueline Woodson, and Kathryn Lasky, to name a few.

Short and Fox are knowledgeable enough about the problem of cultural authenticity to realize that definitions are not enough. They heat up the debate in the section, "Can Outsiders Write Authentically About Another Culture?" (p. 11). This first chapter



presents the debate clearly enough that the subsequent chapters are almost unnecessary. The chapters that follow allow individual authors to justify the debate through their own words.

The second section, “The Perspectives of Authors, Illustrators, and Editors on Cultural Authenticity,” in my mind, is the most contentious. In presenting the problem about who can and should write about different cultural groups, there is no easy answer. The issue of who can and/or should write stories about cultures different than their own does not get resolved. Instead, those who support the view that outsiders can write about other cultures seemingly falls along racial and cultural lines. For example, Woodson argues that she is the best person to write her story. Seto notes that when others write her story, they often co-opt her story and do not necessarily get it right. Nikola-Lisa, an author from a European American background, argues that authors must use personal experiences to write and present cultural groups authentically. I appreciate Nikola-Lisa’s belief that authors must be clear about their motivations for writing particular stories. His view complements Seto’s position in that authors cannot assume other cultures’ stories if the authors rely on their own experiences, which may not represent the culture’s experiences accurately. Just as powerful is Nikola-Lisa’s argument that writing from one’s experiences exposes one’s prejudices. On the other hand, Lasky argues gifted authors can and should write any story from any culture because it is an author’s imagination and skill that allows him or her to write stories, and that is what is important.

Rochman agrees. In section three, “Political Correctness and Cultural Authenticity,” Rochman argues that knowledge of a culture and its people are often enough to craft a story that everyone can read and with which anyone can connect. What she does not say is how much authors really need to know about a culture. In fact, it seems that this kind of cultural knowledge is unnecessary because the story is much more important. Both Lasky and Rochman seem to take umbrage at the thought that they could not represent another culture’s story well. What they appear to miss is Seto’s other point that if they, as European Americans, write all the stories, there may not be space for authors of the culture to get their stories written. In addition, Rochman views the criticism as lacking judgment, even suggesting that such criticisms perpetuated by “politically correct bullies” (p. 101). The choice to use the words “politically correct” reminds me of how loaded those words are and how often they are used to silence those who disagree. In fact, I believe that it is Rochman who bullies those who take an opposite stance than she does. She uses the argument that focusing on who can write other’s stories ignores the “real issues of prejudice and hatred” (p. 101). I wonder whether Rochman can entertain a view that those who want more authentic voices to represent a wider group of people are in fact focusing on issues of prejudice and hatred. After all, there are more and more books written and a variety of topics for children, yet the number of published books written by authors of color remain low.

Section four, “The Perspectives of Educators on Cultural Authenticity,” presents two chapters that might counteract Rochman’s contentious view of political correctness as



bullying. “Images of West Africa in Children’s Books: Replacing Old Stereotypes with New Ones?” (Yenika-Agbaw) and “The Use of Spanish in Latino Children’s Literature in English: What makes for Cultural Authenticity?” (Barrera and Quiroa) make a convincing argument for authors to do more than just tell a good story. They argue that the deeper knowledge of a culture that comes from an insider’s perspective helps readers detect and analyze the important cultural markers presented in stories.

In retrospect, Fox and Short collect several prominent voices but none appear to speak to the other. Thus, the debate rages on without the possibility of abating. Many authors present views that conceptualize the debate surrounding cultural authenticity in children’s literature more broadly and suggest that society’s role be examined. They do not simply argue for story for story’s sake. Neither do they expect that all stories need to be the exemplary model of a culture. Many see these arguments as too simplistic. What they do argue is that authors cannot and should not ignore the messages of the world. In addition, when I read these authors, I felt as though they remind authors that they do represent a particular culture whether they like it or not. And in so doing, they need to accept the criticism of those they represent, especially if the representation is inaccurate.

The continuing debate may not serve pre- or in-service teachers very well. Although the goal of this book may be to continue the debate and cause reflective behavior, preservice teachers do not often reflect on the issues of authenticity. In fact, many of them have little experience with culturally different people and/or multicultural children’s literature. Therefore, they are often not ready to deal with many of the issues that are raised. In fact, they are often concerned that individual authors are reading too much into the debate. Of course, that means that they need to read this book in conjunction with some culture awareness activities.

Each side of the debate continues in separate camps. On one side are the authors who think anyone should be allowed to write about any culture’s stories if they want. Accuracy and authenticity may have to take a back seat to tell a good story. On the other side are those who believe only authors who are from a particular culture can write about the culture authentically. They look at the issue as one in which the selection of one author may quell the voices of the authors from the culture, especially when the business of publishing controls what and who gets published. Certainly, Fox and Short provided a venue for the debate.

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