



**Writing Superheroes: Contemporary Childhood, Popular Culture, and Classroom Literacy.** Anne Haas Dyson. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997. 250 pp.

**JOELLEN FISHERKELLER**, *New York University*

The eight chapters in this book bring to vivid life a classroom of urban children in the western United States. The students use popular culture superheroes in their literacy activities and social play. Anne Dyson's ethnographic work examines how, over a two-year period, the diverse members of one second-through-third-grade classroom (seven to nine year olds) developed critical understandings about symbolic worlds while negotiating social relationships and identities.

With the help of "Kristin" (the classroom teacher), "Sammy," "Tina," and their peers engaged in role playing, story dictations, drawing, and writing that often incorporated characters inspired by television programs such as *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, *X-Men*, and the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Dyson notes that while the formulaic quality of such commercial fare leads many adults to ban them at home and school, children admire the power that superheroes possess (both physical and extraordinary) and enjoy sharing the familiar action of such programs in their play and story composition. Dyson shows how children can critique the limits of these "unofficial" texts along with those of "official" school texts, such as Greek myths--stories that also contain superheroes, stereotypes, and violent actions.

Through a focal classroom activity called "Author's Theater," in which child writers cast, direct, and discuss their written stories with peers serving as actors and audience, issues of social identity (gender, race, class, and so on) and of physical demeanor (size, attractiveness, agility, and so forth) were raised by the children as well as the teacher. Can girls be superheroes? Who qualifies to be "a good guy," a romantic lead, or a victim in need of saving? What is the nature of power besides muscular strength? While playing out and discussing such dilemmas, Dyson argues, the children experienced how different ways of symbolizing (written texts, visual representations, spoken words, and staged actions) constructed their relationships to cultural discourses and to various local communities.

This work investigates questions pertinent to education, such as, How do educators nurture a diverse group of children's literacy development so that differences in background, interest, and abilities are acknowledged and expressed? How are inequities of race, class, and gender addressed in the classroom? What does it mean to



be literate in a contemporary culture saturated with many forms of commercial media that compete with the media valued by school culture? Dyson embeds these questions in a solid theoretical framework, drawing on Bakhtin's and Vygotsky's sociocultural theories of language development and Geertz's theories of symbols, self, and culture. Thus readers come to see how these children learned to use spoken and written symbols to participate in different kinds of social communities, learning that was itself fostered by social interactions, especially dialogue. And the symbols the youngsters used to participate are seen to be imbued with cultural meanings, many of which point to the underlying values and ideas a group of people hold about being someone in relation to others and about what constitutes culture.

So when Sammy, Tina, and others appropriate particular cultural symbols to participate in their school and peer communities, readers can see how they defined themselves as members and, in turn, defined others and the world. For example, they composed stories about Greek myth "superheroes" getting married, thus putting to paper their own imaginations about a commonplace ritual represented in many texts and on TV and occurring in real adult lives that they knew. And when they acted out such texts, speaking words and staging actions to demonstrate romantic involvements had profound implications for their peer relationships and identities. They confronted issues such as who can show affection in public and what kinds of people can portray a couple.

Dyson points out that economic and political inequities mean that not all children have access to the same sets of symbols, so many different senses of self and other are constructed. Yet, because of the ubiquity of commercialism in the United States, almost all children come into contact with popular culture symbols and use them in their social play. As shown in Dyson's study, the common nature of these symbols allows many children with differences in cultural resources to come together, to create a community of play with these symbols. Dyson provides many examples of how teachers like Kristin can encourage children to explore the worth of these symbols as means of communication (community building) and as ideological messages about self and other. As Dyson suggests, including popular culture in literary activities in a critical manner can help children imagine and know how they might wield power in any community. And they might help change communities for the better--a democratic principle of "superhero" proportions.

Dyson consistently turns to the voices and experiences of the children to support her claims, an element missing in much of the discourse on young people and popular media. Because of the length of the study, the reader can see children's ideas develop over time in rich, yet accessible, detail. And in the final chapter, readers hear the



# Anthropology & Education QUARTERLY

diverse voices of teachers in a support group (created by Dyson and including Kristin) discuss how they tackled the problems in their classrooms that arise from living in a multicultural, media-saturated culture. In this way the book presents practical strategies for teachers. Overall, Dyson's thorough approach provides both researchers and teachers with solid ideas for linking theories on language and cultural identity development to everyday practices.

©1998 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited in the December 1998 issue (29:4) of *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*.