

CHILDREN AND MINORITY LITERATURE IN THE UNITED STATES[†]

*Nicholas J. Karolldes**

Introduction

The world of children is naturally a narrow one. They know first their parents and family, next their immediate neighborhood and school. They move from a relatively enclosed culture to one of an increasingly broadened perspective. At school they learn all manner of facts and figures, knowledge and skills. Here, too, they are exposed to a "new world." They learn about a larger world of places near at hand and far away, of people both those familiar and strangers, of past times as well as present and future. This is a marvelous achievement. To accomplish this task what is needed is books, the engagement of the child's imagination and the development of insight.

As every librarian knows, selection is the key. The achievement of this larger world depends, then, upon the selection of a variety of books to represent the peoples and cultures of the world. Clearly, to achieve the most meaningful expression of this world, the available books need to have breadth in the range of cultures represented and need to be varied and complete in that representation. Additionally, these books should be well

[†] Speech given at the Workshop on Children's Libraries, National Taiwan Normal University, Republic of China. April 2, 1983.

* Dr. Karolldes is Professor of English, University of Wisconsin-River Falls, U.S.A.

written so as to engage the children's interest and imagination and stimulate their intellect.

In the United States, the multi-racial, multi-ethnic society provides an important parallel. The function of minority children's literature, so called because it portrays the people of minority groups in the United States, is to represent realistically the experiences of these individuals, thus allowing children's literature to more honestly express the total culture of the United States. It also gives the children who are members of these groups access to books about themselves, allowing the process of identification to occur, which is certainly a valuable factor. These books amplify the immediate world of our children, readying them, I believe for the larger international context. It is this function of literature that I will discuss today.

Historical Background

When I was a youngster, growing up and going to school in a medium-sized city in the eastern United States — a city with mixed national and racial population, the ideal of education — indeed of the national culture — was to achieve an American identity. It was important for all — I was a first generation American — to be assimilated into American life, to adopt the language and culture of the majority. In school, the reading materials available reflected this national concern, featuring essentially an Anglo-Saxon identity. The “melting pot” theory brought about a general unification of the nation, but caused a parallel decline in the specific customs and traditions of individual groups.

The “melting pot” theory is now historically passe. It fell victim to two interlocking concepts, the prevailing idea of individualism and the rising consciousness of cultural diversity. During the early 1940's at the time of the second world war, supported by the new internationalism and the “One World” doctrine, it

became increasingly apparent that the fragments of American life representing each of the many immigrant populations were unique and special. It came to be seen that American life is the sum of all of these; in this case the whole is equal to more than the sum of the parts. Each has enriched the nation and its people. With this major shift in attitudes came efforts to retain and enhance our awareness of the distinct cultures. Changes in the subject matter of children's literature reflect this change.

But there is another historical period that must also be brought into focus. I refer to the momentous events of the 1950's and 1960's in the United States which focused the national consciousness on racial attitudes. The effects of these events — in the courts, in the schools, in the theater, in the streets — were to challenge social patterns that had been established in many American minds. They asserted a more vital humanism.

It is in this general context of social and humanistic challenge to social patterns and attitudes that minority literature for children must be reviewed - both as to its content and its potential impact. Now admittedly, impact is difficult to assess. It is recognized that the responses of readers — interaction with characters, identification of thematic ideas and values — are individualistic and relatively unpredictable. However, it is possible to establish the patterns of available materials, analyze their content and suggest, if not predict, the potential learning about minority peoples.

Let us look first at some historical quantitative data with regard to availability. In 1965, Nancy Larrick, a prominent children's literature specialist, wrote in a national periodical, *Saturday Review*, that one of the most critical issues in American education was the almost complete omission of minorities from books for children.¹ Citing extensive evidence about the "all-white world of children's books," Ms. Larrick called for national attention to this problem. Some progress had been made since the demise of the "melting pot" theory, but it had been limited

in both number of stories and range of minority groups represented.

About ten years later in 1974, an article in a national newspaper, *The Christian Science Monitor*² included a survey of the place given to blacks in school textbooks. The conclusions are instructive: "Blacks today are taking their place besides whites in American textbooks but in some texts they still are relegated to the back of the chapter." An important quantitative accomplishment is evidenced: the all-white textbook barrier had been broken. However, the inclusion of such materials in segregated sections was only a half-way measure, though, to be fair, it has been argued that this was necessary in the beginning to make them more noticeable. Additionally, the article also points out that even this much had not been accomplished for other minority groups.

This last estimate of the situation is borne out by several other studies of textbooks, notably *Textbooks and the American Indian* by the American Indian Historical Society and *Searching for America*, a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English. The former, which contains evaluations of over 300 textbooks, found "not one that could be approved as a dependable source of knowledge about the history and culture of the Indian people in America."³ The second study, an analysis of college textbooks with regard to their inclusion of ethnic and racial groups, notably blacks, Chinese Americans, Indian Americans and Puerto Ricans, stated that their review had "disclosed irrational inclusions and culturally damaging omission."⁴ A parallel study of high school texts by the Committee on Minority Literature of the National Council of Teachers of English, of which I was a member, revealed comparable patterns of omission or limited image. What was evident was that only a sprinkling of stories or minority authors represented these people; further, there was inconsistency in both numbers and range.

However, the situation is not altogether bleak. There are

substitutes for the unreliable textbooks and anthologies which can be used to express the minority experience. The substitutes – fictional stories about minorities – have become increasingly available especially since 1965 with those about blacks and Indians being most numerous. The situation is not entirely satisfactory in terms of number or range, but children and adolescents have some exciting and valuable titles to choose from. These titles represent, I believe, genuine attempts on the part of authors to reflect an honest and positive view of these groups and their life experiences in the United States. As such they recreate characters and situations with which their readers may identify, establishing a channel for understanding and empathy.

Discussion of Books

This brings us to the stories. What is their focus? What is emphasized? How have they changed over the years? I will cite the general pattern for the two larger racial groups, the blacks and indians, and then detail that of the Chinese experience in children's books.

For purposes of organization I have divided the books⁵ into two broad categories, those for the 5–11 year old age group, referred to hereafter as children and those for the 12–16 year old group, referred to as adolescents.

It is not surprising that a major focus of books about blacks in the mid-century period is integration, getting the races together. Nor is it unexpected that the earlier books – from 1945–1960 – should be muted in their tone and message. The simplest books for young children illustrate such “natural” things as quarreling between two friends, one white and one black, who learn to work together to have the most fun; also introduced are school integration stories and other racial situations. These reflect a protected tone.

For the adolescent reader the integration story is frequent.

However, in each case the hero or heroine is taken out of their home environment to a white situation, usually a school. There they undergo some racial tension but with help of white friends the situations move toward resolution. The general themes are of growing toward mutual understanding of people of different races along with the blacks gaining dignity and acceptance in a white world. A parallel theme of maturation and self understanding is also projected.

These integration stories parallel the events in the local and national scene of this period; thus they are realistic. Valuable to the understanding of both black and white readers was the revelation of the thoughts and concerns of black characters. As such they serve in part as historical references. Unfortunate was the omission of alternate settings, the black community.

Books that were published for children from about 1960 to about 1970 take on a definitely personal, home-oriented cast. The trend was to depict children in home environments in black communities, representing the nature and concerns of childhood. We see black children simply as children. Situations include — playing in the snow, being jealous of a new baby sister, helping a grandmother, playing in the park. Each of the stories is “color blind” in the sense that the feelings these children experience are universal in these situations we could easily substitute any other children.

Books for adolescents of this period — 1960—1970 — reveal both stronger characters and stronger emotions than earlier books, they also express more dynamic — often tense — situations. Black communities, particularly urban, predominate and focus is on the black experience from a black perspective. Racial hostilities are both subtle and overt, including a Ku Klux Klan confrontation, police killings of blacks, corrupt city government mistreatment of blacks, and the like. These negative views of life are balanced by the over-coming of such pressures through personal perseverance of the major characters. They often achieve dignity,

self-esteem and a sense of direction.

An overview of this set of books reveals that the characters respond with personal integrity despite threatening and thwarting situations, creating a sense of self and cultural presence. Readers will certainly become engaged in the frustrations these characters experience and will develop empathy for their privations and efforts to establish dignity.

More current books – those since 1970 – reflect a tendency to individualize experience within a black community and to focus on human development problems rather than racial strife. Poverty and racial bias are reflected in the situations of these books, but often they only indirectly affect the central action. The focus is on the maturation of the characters, their survival and development despite psychological and socio-economic setbacks.

We can see from this summary that the books focusing on black Americans written during the last forty years have changed in their focus and perspective, offering a more rounded portrait of blacks in the United States. We now have available books featuring different types of individuals in many life situations at various historical times and locales. Additionally, it can be said that the books have matured in their literary quality. Thus, while the representation of this group in children's books is not altogether satisfactory, it is vastly improved.

Fiction of the American Indian is less widespread in setting and fewer in number. For discussion purposes these are more readily divided into four categories – legends, historical fiction taking place before contact with whites, historical fiction which encompasses conflict with whites, fiction which depicts relatively recent time periods – since 1900.

Legends in representing the world view of these Indian nations of the past hold universal application; they express a creation mythology as well as other folk tale concepts. Curiously, they tend to be published in picture book format for younger readers. They're often written expressively and glowingly illu-

strated, of particular merit being *The Ring on the Prairie*, a Shawnee Indian legend retold by John Blerhorst, which explains how animals and birds achieved spiritual natures. Others, dramatically illustrated are *The Fire Bringer*, a Paiute Indian legend which explains how the people were given fire, and *Arrow to the Sun*, a Pueblo Indian legend.

The prewhite historical fiction tends to be written for younger children. These stories reflect everyday life experiences of adventure and accomplishment. The books for slightly older readers go beyond everyday life to invoke strategies needed to achieve adulthood as well as to survive; courage, endurance, responsibility and thoughtfulness are frequently expressed values. For mature adolescents the books expand these themes, incorporate more complex social and personal tensions, taking their heroes from flawed adolescence to tribal and personal achievement.

The third category, those describing the conflict period, includes the most novels, generally for the adolescent reader. In the years before 1960, with occasional exceptions, these projected the white settler's point of view: the Indians were the enemy. Gradually, however, the reverse attitude, the Indian point of view has been stated. Among these are some effective "captives" books in which white children captured by Indians are adopted by them. The readers along with the characters are introduced to Indian customs and values, these being represented quite favorably. Some recent books with this topic are quite deliberate in relating hostilities, generally favoring the Indians. They depict the disaster and less. Other books in this category relate comparable situations with the focus on Indian characters; they also reflect destruction and loss.

Contemporary time settings from about 1910 to the present depict the Indian in modern life situations. They vary, however, in the degree and type of tensions they project. For the younger readers, the concentration is on personal concerns — the response

of a child to the death of a grandparent or the accomplishment of a young boy in a crisis situation. Books for somewhat older readers introduce a muted culture conflict, the characters have difficulty in adjusting to the modern world, having been brought up in a traditional Indian environment. Usually, the possibility of compromise, of adjustment, is suggested. However, for adolescent and mature readers, this culture conflict is more dramatic, more urgent. The constraints and demands of modern society create acute stress for the Indian protagonists, they feel caught between two worlds. Often they become bitter and frustrated, facing psychological and social deterioration; some become immobilized, succumbing to alcoholism. Standing apart in the enduring strength of both the character and the naturalness of the Indian mind and values is *Laughing Boy* by Oliver Lafarge. Perhaps this is because it was written in 1929.

All together the books about Indians convey a strong impression of the Indian culture, its unique philosophies, its life style attuned to nature, its valiant people burdened with loss and displacement. Certainly, understanding these ideas and responding to these emotions will generate the humanity of the readers.

The expression of the Chinese experience in America has unique features though there are patterns that parallel those of the two other groups. There are fewer books in this category, as has been previously noted, but they are quite telling. It is most efficient to organize these books by audience, those for children (5 to 11) and those for adolescents (12 and up).

The young children's books fall loosely into three categories, those which depict Chinese-American life, those which convey information of life in China, and those which tell folk tales of the Chinese.

The stories of Chinese American life express a child's view of the world and, usually, evoke a sense of Chinese customs. *Mister Chu* by Norma Keating, for example, introduces the reader to Chinese food, Chinese music, a Chinese festival and other aspects

of Chinese life. This is done through the friendship of an old man and a little boy, which illustrates another important element of Chinese relationships. *Moy Moy* by Leo Politi similarly illustrates the life and customs of a Chinese American family. Two other books illustrate a slightly different aspect, introducing elements of culture tension. *Yellow Silk for May Lee* by Shirlee Newman presents the customs of the older generation in contrast with the life style of more Americanized members of the same family. May Lee is confronted with both of these as she is growing up. In *Soo Ling Finds a Way* the main character is faced with this conflict but in an external way. She must find a way to help her grandfather whose laundry business is faced with competition from a modern laundromat. A new book *Chinese Eyes* by Marjorie Waybill deals head on with racial differences. A little girl is upset when she is called a name – Chinese eyes, not knowing what it means, her adopted mother reassures her. Another new book *The Happy Funeral* by Eve Bunting reflects a trend in children's literature in the United States to depict problem situations like death. This one portrays the death of a beloved grandfather, expresses the reactions of his family, and introduces several Chinese traditions; it also expresses the attitude expressed in the title, representing a Chinese concept.

In addition to these stories, others depict Chinese traditions more directly but the range of cultural activities is limited. I am afraid that American children will get a very dragon-oriented view and that the New Year's celebration is the only one. Listen to these titles: *The Useful Dragon of Sam Ling Toy*, *A Sky Full of Dragons*, and *Charley Yee's New Year*. (There are others in the next categories.) They are not the same, of course: the first is semi-fantasy about a dragon that grows up in Sam Ling Toy's laundry, creating much confusion, but is redeemed when chosen to be the dragon for the New Year's celebration; the second is about kite flying in the spring which is represented as a custom. In the last one Charley searches for a chance to earn money to

repay a debt before the New Year's festival, another custom.

Information about life in China tends to be limited to early China in these books for young children. I found no fiction of present day China. *The Story About Ping* by Marjorie Flack, which is actually about a wandering duck, and *The Dragon Liked Smoked Fish* by Jerry Laskowski, a family story, illustrate these. The settings are usually rural or small villages and express a standard olden times view of the world.

Probably the largest group of books for this age group is the folk tales which also express a sense of early China. These are both anthologies of tales and single ones like Clair Bishop's *Five Chinese Brothers* (retold recently by Cheng How-tien), Peter Hazard's *Monkey and the Three Wizards* and Hisako Kimishima's *Ma Lien and the Magic Brush*. The illustrations of these books convey much information about China along with the text.

For older children there are fewer stories but they fall roughly into the same categories with one important addition; historical fiction. Lois Lenski's *San Francisco Bay* is perhaps the most well known and quite authentic portrait of life in San Francisco's Chinatown; she is known for her detailed settings. There are two Taiwan stories in this group, both by Joy Anderson: *The Pai-Pai Pig* and *Hai-Yin, The Dragon Girl*. Both depict everyday activities and goals of children. Similarly, Mabel Watts' *Yin Sun and the Lucky Dragon* focuses on the aspiration of a young Hong Kong boy to be a kite maker. Quite significant for this age group is C.Y. Lee's *The Land of the Golden Mountain*; it presents a Chinese family's immigration to America quite authentically.

For adolescent readers, I will briefly identify two older books and then concentrate on several recent ones. *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, an autobiography by Jade Snow Wong may be dated in that perhaps Chinese families in the United States today may not be so restrictive, may not be so steeped in the culture of

the past. But this is what gives this book its special charm and value for Ms. Wong relates not only the details of daily living but also the nature of the Chinese family structure and traditions of her childhood. A valuable book indeed.

Meindert DeJong's historical fiction book of the second world war *The House of Sixty Fathers* illustrates life in China during the Japanese occupation. It is also the story of Tien Pao who is swept downstream in a flood, lives for a time with an American military force – the sixty fathers of the title – before setting off alone to relocate his family. A story of determination and courage.

Of the recent books, two are historical fiction, depicting the early Chinese immigrant's life in the United States. Inspired by the "vast contribution of the Chinese people to the creation of the railroads," Alida Young has written an absorbing story, *Land of the Iron Dragon*, describing the efforts and problems of these workers. A teenage boy Lin Yansung is left alone by the death of his father at the hands of hoodlums; he escapes their threats and hunger by joining a railroad crew. The plot follows him and the progress of the tracks. We witness the hazards and trials of laying the tracks, the fears and aspirations of the Chinese laborers, as well as their rivalries. We also become aware of the prejudice and overt hostility directed toward them. During the course of the work, Lim matures considerably. He develops strengths and understanding of himself and his people. He also gains some understanding of the Americans, sorting out the good from the evil. The details of history and event, the representation of these Chinese pioneers make this book recommendable.

Laurence Yep, the most prolific Chinese-American writer of adolescent novels in the U.S. today, tells two stories in his historical novel *Dragon Wings*: the first is of Moon Shadow who immigrates from China to live with his father in San Francisco in 1903; the second is of Windrider, the father, who dreams of building an airplane and flying. The author tells us in a postscript

that the father's story is based on a real Chinese man who in 1909 did build and fly an airplane. However, the central story reveals the experience of Moon Shadow living in Chinatown among his relatives, feeling safe and familiar, and then his experiences living among the whites, the "demons." This provides immediate contrast for the reader as well as historical differences. Moon Shadow is encouraged and taught by their white landlady; he learns to break his stereotype of the whites. He faces the torment of the neighborhood's white youths, achieving self-respect and dignity and, thus, breaking their stereotypes of the Chinese. Most of the events are day-by-day situations, the exceptions being the San Francisco earthquake and Windrider's flight. This book is an especially strong introduction to the experiences and attitudes of immigrant Chinese, to the setting and culture of that time and place.

Two other books by Laurence Yep are set in the present. *Child of the Owl* and *Sea Glass* tell quite different stories but arrive at essentially the same place. Both reflect culture conflict reminiscent of that experience in the Indians' books but must less volatile. Both provide three sets of characters — the grandparent generation which represents all the traditional values and customs, the middle generation of parents who have been affected directly by American life styles, sometimes but not always negatively, and the young generation which is seeking to establish a life pattern. In both books the tensions are resolved with increased understanding and communication among generations. We learn respect for the older generations and to value both what they believe and what they have gone through.

These books about the Chinese on the whole reflect a kindness of spirit, a dignity and generosity that seem admirable. Their struggle to maintain these characteristics and the customs, the culture out of which they have developed in the face of both the sharp differences in way of life in America and the inevitable onslaught of modernization is also admirable. By reading and

living through the reenactment of the immigrant experience — at once unique for its Chinese qualities and universal for its similarity with others — enhances our lives.

Conclusion

As you no doubt have interpreted from my comments, my concerns in the “use” of literature beyond its enjoyment is essentially humanistic. And this humane impulse matches the humanistic concerns of literature: a focus on people, their nature, development and interrelationships, their interaction with social-cultural forces. Human values, universal themes and consequences of behavior are central to this framework.

How does this translate into goals for minority literature? There are two general concerns, the minority individual and his white counterpart. In the first case, we want the minority youngsters to see themselves in books. Through such identification, they will see themselves as having a recognized place, a world in which they belong. It is said that if their existence is recognized in books, a threshold of receptivity is established. At least, a door to interaction with the world is opened. This process of racial identification in terms of the development of ego structure cannot be overemphasized. (Parenthetically, research in reading tells us that such interaction is of major if not primary importance in the development and encouragement of reading skills.)

Of course, specific racial self-identification is only an entry response. Beyond this, these readers will recognize and reflect on the variety of life situations and the people who live them; they will be in contact with their cultural heritage, their history. Through all of this they may come to understand themselves and gain that measure of pride and dignity that gives them humanity.

But the need to read about minority peoples, past and present, is no less significant for their white counterparts. The

metaphor of blindness found in mature literature from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to Ellison's *Invisible Man* is, unfortunately, effected in the reader's typical confrontation with a white world of books. As such, the minorities are neatly eradicated. The white readers need to perceive and comprehend the multi-raciality and multi-ethnicity of their society and their world.

Such racial identification is, again, only a first level reaction. The potential for human exchange — experiencing the life and culture of others, recognizing the differences in region and culture and people, identifying the basic universal qualities within, perhaps despite, the differences — is the heart of the matter. This exchange is not merely a matter of seeing how the other half lives; it is participation in developmental situations, in values crises often in the context of a theme of maturation and coming to terms with the demands of society. Through the realization of common hazards and universal human experiences will come the gradual diminishing of the cultural limitations of all.

My focus and examples have concentrated on minority literature and its application within the United States. It is a natural and obvious next-step to reflect on an international exchange. That which creates a greater humanity inside a border will act in parallel fashion outside it. (Indeed, these books about the Chinese American experience seem natural to the interest and development of your young readers.) Contact with peoples and cultures of various types throughout the world will effect greater familiarity, understanding and unanimity. A sense of the people inside the geographical boundaries, the political systems, the economic conditions will emerge. I do believe that this will lead, at last, to the one world dream.

References

1. Larrick Nancy, "The All White World of Children's Books," *Saturday Review* (September 11, 1965), pp. 65–66 ff.
2. Florence Mouckley, "Black-History Instruction Varies Across U.S.," *The Christian Science Monitor* (January 3, 1974) pp. 1–2.
3. American Indian Historical Society, *Textbooks and the American Indian*, San Francisco: Indian Historical Press, Inc., 1970, p. 11.
4. Ernice B. Kelly, *Searching for America*, Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1972, 1, xiii.
5. The selection of books discussed here is based upon the frequency of their being recommended in bibliographies of the period.

Chinese Fiction Titles Referred to in the Text

- Anderson, Joy – *Hai Yin, The Dragon Girl* (1970)
 Anderson, Joy – *The Pai-Pai Pig* (1967)
 Anderson, Juanita – *Charley Yee's New Year* (1970)
 Behrens, June – *Soo Ling Finds a Way* (1965)
 Bishop, Claire – *Five Chinese Brothers* (1938)
 Bunting, Eve – *The Happy Funeral*
 Cheng, Hou-tien – *Five Chinese Brothers* (1979)
 DeJong, Mundert – *The House of Sixty Fathers* (1956)
 Dines, Glen – *The Useful Dragon of Sam Ling Toy* (1956)
 Flack, Marjorie – *The Story of Ping* (1933)
 Hazard, Peter – *Monkey and the Three Wizards* (1977)
 Keating, Norma – *Mister Chu* (1965)
 Kimishima, Hisako – *Ma Lien and the Magic Brush* (1968)
 Laskowski, Jerry – *The Dragon Liked Smoked Fish* (1967)
 Lee, C.Y. – *The Land of the Golden Mountain*
 Lenski, Lois – *San Francisco Bay* (1955)
 Newman, Shirlee P. – *Yellow Silk for May Lee* (1961)
 Politi, Leo – *Moy Moy* (1960)
 Watts, Marie – *Yin Sun and The Lucky Dragon* (1969)
 Waybill, Marjorie Ann – *Chinese Eyes* (1974)
 Wong, Jade Snow – *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950)
 Wright, M.W. – *A Sky Full of Dragons* (1969)
 Yep, Laurence – *A Child of the Owl* (1977)
 Yep, Laurence – *Sea Glass* (1979)
 Yep, Laurence – *Dragonwings* (1975)
 Yep, Laurence – *Dragon of the Lost Sea* (1982)
 Young, Alida – *Land of the Iron Dragon* (1978)