

Diversity Around the Corner and Around the World

Michelle H. Martin

In June of 2014, the University of South Carolina (USC) hosted the annual conference of the Children's Literature Association, an organization dedicated to "encouraging high standards of criticism, scholarship, research and teaching in children's literature" (www.childlitassn.org). As scholars committed to literature about all children, the USC planning committee wanted to help bring more visibility to issues of diversity in children's and YA literature not just among readers and teachers, but among academicians as well. This well-attended international conference featured essays on books about LGBTQ texts, African, Asian, and Native Americans, (dis)abilities, international fairy tales, and much more. And as those scholarly conference presentations now turn into published articles, the critical conversations about diverse books percolate. While Lee Merrill Byrd (Cinco Puntos Press), Andrea Davis-Pinkney (Disney Hyperion & Scholastic Press), Jason Low (Lee & Low), and Jonathan Haupt (University of SC Press) shared the stage for a panel that highlighted just how badly we still "need diverse books" and diverse editors, publishers, literary agents, librarians, and teachers, these conversations themselves gave me hope that change can happen. Hence, this issue of *First Opinions, Second Reactions* makes a small contribution to that ongoing conversation about the importance of getting books that reflect the changing demographics of America's children into the hands of young people.

The paired picture books reviewed in this issue, Claire Rudolf Murphy's *My Country 'Tis of Thee: How One Song Reveals the History of Civil Rights*, illustrated by Bryan Collier, and Pat Mora and Libby Martinez's *I Pledge Allegiance*, illustrated by Patrice Barton, approach patriotism from antithetical perspectives. Mora and Martinez's picture book offers an uncritical look at the process by which an older Latina, protagonist Libby's great-aunt Lobo, eagerly becomes a United States citizen. Children from an array of backgrounds populate Libby's class, taught by an African American teacher, and when the family arrives for the pledge ceremony, a female judge presides. Visual diversity abounds, and Lobo describes America's embrace of her and her childhood family as a blanket wrapping her up in comfort. Murphy's text, accompanied by Collier's distinctive collage images, reveals the pliable underbelly of a song so revered that Americans stand at attention to sing it. Child readers familiar with postmodern picture books like Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* might just recognize parody as it surfaces in some of these revealing, historically situated versions of *My Country 'Tis of Thee*.

Studies of "diversity," broadly defined, often include differently abled individuals; hence, I've included Allen Rabinowitz's *A Boy and a Jaguar*, illustrated by Catia Chien, which focuses on

how debilitating stuttering can be. One boy found singing and his connections with animals the key to unlocking his frozen words. Like too many children, Alan was labeled “broken” and funneled into a class for disturbed children, but found that he felt completely at home with animals—especially big cats—both caged and free. Now a zoologist and wildlife conservationist, Rabinowitz has learned to speak fluently in many high-profile situations because the survival of big cats depends on his ability to do so. Central America established the world’s first and only jaguar preserve because of his efforts.

In another story of an unlikely hero, Gene Yang and Sonny Liew tell the tale of the Shadow Hero in their graphic novel that harkens back to the World War II-era superhero, the Green Turtle, the first Asian American superhero. In an effort to be the courageous son his demanding mother longs for him to be, an Asian American boy, Hank, works alongside his father in their family-owned grocery store. The supernatural protection that Hank receives from a spirit Tortoise that inhabits his father until he is murdered helps Hank to confront and defeat the mafia-styled thugs who harass and subsequently kill his father when he fails to deliver money they expect from him. Like Yang’s *American Born Chinese*, this story of a boy’s pained search for identity draws a fine line between reality and the spirit world, honing in on the importance of the boy’s learning to straddle those worlds successfully.

Aleksander Khederian, protagonist of *One Man Guy*, must also learn to straddle two worlds: that of his Armenian family and the one inhabited by “those Americans” (Barakiva unpagged). This task is further complicated by his recent discovery that he is gay and falling for an outgoing D.O. (Drop Out) in summer school. Problematic for its in-your-face stereotypes of Armenians, this novel tries perhaps too hard to teach readers about all things Armenian: their history, hatred of the Turks, food (including recipes in the back matter), insistence on procreation with other Armenians, and the high value they place on education. As annoying as I found the repeated references to Alek’s beat-up, green JanSport backpack—emblem of his geek status and his mother’s control of everything in his life—I did learn much about Armenians that I didn’t know. And readers will, too.

Readers will absorb even more about Tanzania and its traditions from *Golden Boy*. Protagonist Habo runs for his life from an elephant poacher who initially helps his family cross the Savannah, but then comes back for Habo’s hands and feet—trophies prized in Tanzania as good luck talismans. The tensions between the members of Habo’s family persist both because of his father’s untimely abandonment of the family and because of Habo’s albinism and all that comes with being both abject and hunted. This compelling novel will hold readers rapt until the end and will give them a riveting introduction to a culture about which most Americans know very little.

I once had a narrow-minded student tell me that she resented having to read so many multicultural books on my syllabus because she already had a teaching job in a Texas town where she would only teach white children (a town friends had told me to avoid because of

its blatant racism). I told her, “Well you need these books even more than your classmates because books can take you and your students where you might never be able to go.” Such is the mind-expanding power of books.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Michelle H. Martin is the inaugural Augusta Baker Chair in Childhood Literacy in the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina. She is the author of *Brown Gold: Milestones of African-American Children’s Picture Books, 1845–2002* (Routledge, 2004). For the past six summers, Martin (a Gold Award Girl Scout) has codirected with Dr. Rachelle D. Washington Camp Read-a-Rama, a day camp for children ages 4 to 11 and teens ages 12 to 17 that uses children’s and young adult literature as the springboard for all other camp activities. Read-a-Rama is now a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping children learn to “live books.”