

Book Review

Cultural Journeys: Multicultural Literature for Elementary and Middle School Students

Pamela Gates and Dianne Hall Mark.
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.

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I really do not like to admit it; however, I often decide whether I like a book by chapter 2. So it is always intriguing when I encounter a text that does not allow for a quick judgment, but rather forces me to change my mind several times through the reading of it. This was my experience with *Cultural Journeys: Multicultural Literature for Elementary and Middle School Students*.

I approached the book with excitement. Multicultural literature is my passion, so a new book that targets this topic is always exciting. The book begins clearly and concisely. Chapter 1 sets the stage by asking the question of *why*. Why use multicultural literature? This is a good place to start for preservice teachers or teachers new to the genre. Multiculturalism, diversity, anti-racism, and inclusiveness have all become strong words in the field of education, and many educators feel pressure to add these to their lexicon and curriculum. Yet without a clear understanding of the issues surrounding multiculturalism, incorporating it into a classroom is simply jumping on a bandwagon. Gates and Hall Mark counter this by immediately establishing a solid argument as to why multicultural literature should be an integral part of the curriculum. The *why* is further developed as the chapter continues with a definition of multicultural literature, reaching back to the words of the gurus and ground-breakers of this field.

However, this is where I began to get a little disengaged. Although the expertise and contributions of certain scholars cannot be denied, I was looking for something new as well. My question was, "What are today's emerging researchers and teachers saying?" But the answer was elusive. By the time I was halfway through chapter 2, I flipped to the bibliography (which, by the way, is very well organized) and looked at the dates of the "professional references." Only seven out of 22 were from the 21st century, and the most recent reference was from 2003.

Of course, no one can understate the value of the works of pioneers such as James Banks, Sonia Nieto, and Nancy Larrick. Gates and Hall Mark do an excellent job of explaining the contributions of the earlier scholars, and this information would be invaluable to someone new to the genre and issues. However, greater attention to new and emerging work would have added a freshness to the book that is somewhat lacking. This book had the taste of books that I read 10 years ago; very little of it is ground-breaking. If it is the case that there has been little significant recent activity in the field of multicultural literature, then the authors should have highlighted this as a theme and *raison d'être* for their book. Certainly a possible absence of recent work begs several questions about the interpreted value and attention given to the genre.

The lack of recognition for contemporary work also appears in other areas of the book. For example, in the chapter on Historical Fiction, the section on the treatment of Japanese-

Americans after Pearl Harbor could have made amazing connections with the lives of Arab-Americans and Muslims after 9/11. What is different? What is the same? Nothing brings history more alive to students than to connect it to something they know. Yet this golden opportunity to examine how history does and does not repeat itself is missed. In fact, nothing appears to be said about one of the most significant events to affect race relations in recent history. Gates and Hall Mark themselves state, “We must understand the history of racism and prejudice in our country if we are to change the practices that still permeate our society” (p. 93), yet they fail to make reference to those very practices.

As I admit above, by Chapter 2 I was a little disappointed with the book. However, once I put aside the issue of the dated bibliography, *Cultural Journeys* emerged as an interesting read with compelling explanation marks that would give even experienced teachers pause for thought. For me it was like taking a Sunday drive down a familiar road and someone brings your attention to a landmark that you had never noticed before. Suddenly the ride becomes a bit more interesting. For example, their assertion that it is more productive to begin the semester with historical fiction rather than a biography was food for thought. Their observation underlines the essence of literature of any kind; that is, a good story is always more illustrative than just the facts.

By Chapter 7 I really liked the book. This chapter in particular was my favorite and spoke to the real essence and complexity of multicultural literature. The authors’ use of works that challenge stereotypes and go beyond the common one-dimensional diversity theme make it worth purchasing the book. They list books that include White characters who are poor and middle-class Black characters and children who are happy living in a single-parent situation. The books mentioned are also multilayered in that they discuss other diversity issues in the lives of children of various ethnicities. So the book about the Black child is not just about being Black. It is also a book about homophobia or ageism. Books such as these elevate multicultural literature into the realm of complex literature, and it is a pleasure to read about them in Gates and Hall Mark’s work.

Cultural Journeys has other gems as well. For example, the layout of the book makes it a valuable resource. Readers can easily target one area of interest and gather enough information to begin a concentrated study. Even the bibliography is divided into subject areas, and given the large number of books cited, this is a good thing. A professor in a university could easily assign one chapter of the book as each chapter stands on its own. Moreover, a teacher could focus on one chapter to strengthen the ability to use multicultural literature in a particular genre. In any case, this is the type of book that can be regularly taken off the shelf.

Furthermore, the authors are a real team and have a great collective voice. Sometimes books with more than one author suffer from competitive voices, but this is not the case here. The book is approachable in voice and subject matter. As the authors themselves point out, the thinking about multicultural literature and anti-racist education diverges in several directions. These authors are excellent in examining these theories and then supporting their assertions with a strong conceptual framework.

The unit plans included in the book left me with mixed feelings. Certainly one can see the immediate value of them. They provide ideas, guidance, and a framework for an educator who wishes to weave multicultural literature into his or her curriculum. However, those presented here have been developed by highly experienced educators (experience that can be seen in the quality of the plans). These educators have the knowledge and sensitivity to include the complexity of teaching anti-racist education in their classrooms. Less experienced teachers may jump into using these unit plans without the asset of experience, and the attempt could backfire.

Those of us who have had an anti-racism lesson go wrong (and this can easily happen) know how hard it is to get back on track. A negative experience can frighten a new teacher into avoiding the topic altogether.

I was also disappointed that the unit plans and the book in general stay within the subjects of history and language arts, the safe harbors of multicultural literature. A discussion and example of how to use multicultural literature in another subject (science, math, physical education) would have enhanced the reach of the book and challenged educators to be more flexible in their use of literature. This absence also means that many interesting multicultural books about math, science, and other subjects are not included in the bibliography of suggested readings.

Overall, *Cultural Journeys* could be an informative tool for teachers wishing to incorporate multicultural literature into their teaching. The book is clear, easy to follow, well explained, and full of examples. However, there are many other books like this one. The book is an enjoyable read, and for a new teacher who has yet to acquire a text that provides a concise explanation of multicultural literature, this one is worth picking up.

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