

Mini Research Assignment # 1: Observations in a Bookstore

Politics and Prose
Connecticut Ave., NW
Washington, DC

I walk downstairs to the children's section of the bookstore, a very unique bookstore, I soon discover. The first books I see are:

Mama Panya's Pancakes: A Village Tale from Kenya by Mary and Rich Chamberlin

Punk Farm by Jarrett J. Krosoczka

Terrific by Jon Agee

Goha, the Wise Fool by Denys Johnson-Davies

Kibitzers and Fools: Tales My Zayda Told Me by Simms Taback

The Girl From Menchu by Rigoberta Menchu

The cultural variety of these books surprise me since my experience the week before in the American University's bookstore left me frustrated and surprised by the lack of diverse perspectives represented in its children's section. I was happy to discover that that my search for rich critical literacy books would an easier task this time around.

Of the initial books I discovered within my first few minutes in the store, I saw a Kenyan story, a Middle Eastern story written by a Middle Eastern author and a Jewish story written by a Jewish author. This observation is important in critical literacy because those who are underrepresented must gain a voice and accurate representations must exist in the place of harmful stereotypes.

I walked to the right and spotted a table with children's books about food from all over the world, something I was surely not exposed to as a child! These short, delightful books acknowledge that we all eat different food, and it's fun to try it all. I noticed the small, cardboard books:

Let's Nosh by Amy Wilson Sanger

First Book of Sushi by Amy Wilson Sanger

Mangia! Mangia! by Amy Wilson Sanger

Dim Sum for Everyone by Grace Lin

There were simply too many great and important books about racism (Let's Talk About Race by Julius Lester and Bang by Sharon J. Plake), sexism (Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard), and so many other issues that I did not have time to explore. The issue of classism was one, however, that I had trouble finding. Perhaps, my trouble may be because this issue is so intertwined with every other social issue; it becomes invisible because of the other more apparent issues.

The most positive aspect of my afternoon at Politics and Prose was my discovery that important children's books from so many types of authors about hard, controversial, vital topics are out there. You simply need to know where to find them!

Mini Research Assignment # 2: Research in a Local Library

Cleveland Park Public Library
Connecticut Ave, NW
Washington, DC

The Cleveland Park Public Library has a large and, seemingly, rich children's section. Since October is Hispanic Heritage Month, tens of books featuring Latino authors, characters or themes were displayed in the front of the children's section. I'm troubled, however, as to where all of these great books will return next month. Anyway, I discovered a couple culturally rich and appropriate books in this section:

I Love Saturdays y domingos by Alma Flor Ada

This book is a wonderful critical literacy book because it includes both English and Spanish, the acknowledgement of difference, a multicultural and multiethnic, happy family, and a voice who are all too often left voiceless.

A Gift for Abuelita: Celebrating the Day of the Dead/Un regalo para Abuelita: En celebracion del Dia de los Muertos by Nancy Luenn

This book describes the Day of the Dead holiday in a Mexican American community, focusing on the loving relationship between a grandmother and her granddaughter. Along with describing a culture's traditions accurately, it also deals critically with the death of the grandmother. This is a positive critical literacy book because it discusses an underrepresented culture and death, both topics that children need to discuss.

As I continued to observe the library, I wandered to the fiction section. In this section, many books sat on top of the shelves, so I decided to take notice of the books that were prominently displayed. Of course, I found the old classics like Dr. Seuss, but I was happy to discover other excellent critical literacy children's books:

Through My Eyes by Ruby Bridges (racism, educational inequality)

Dirt on Their Skirts by Doreen Rappaport (sexism, gender)

Hannah is My Name by Belle Yang (immigration, assimilation, xenophobia)

Let's Talk About Race by Julius Lester (racism)

The books in the library were not as diverse as the books at Politics and Prose, and there were many dated books that displayed stereotypes; however, the Cleveland Park Library had a great deal to offer its residents, including its multi-lingual section.

Mini Research Assignment # 3:
On-line Research to find Children's Literature Web sites

1.) www.dawcl.com

The Database of Award-Winning Children's Literature is useful tool to search for children's books. One may search by appropriate age, setting of the story, ethnicity or nationality of the protagonist, languages included in the story, awards, format, genre, gender of the protagonist, and the multicultural component of the story. This web site is useful in finding critical literacy books, but does not include much commentary regarding critical literacy components beyond descriptions of the stories' plots.

2.) www.africaaccessreview.org

Africa Access is a web site dedicated to helping schools, libraries and parents improve the quality of their children's book collections on Africa and accurate knowledge of Africa. It includes an on-line database of more than 1,000 reviews, a section with research project ideas, an Africana Book Buddies Club with children's reviews, and a Children's Africana Book Awards (CABA) section, which encourages the publications of accurate children's literature on Africa. This site is dedicated to the critical literacy approach to literature in that its main purpose is to give a voice to those who are often not represented in children's literature and to promote positive dialogue among all children about Africa.

3.) www.bookhive.org

The Book Hive claims to be "Your Guide to Children's Literature and Books." It includes children's own stories, adult and children reviews of children's books, organized by grade level, on-line activities, and a children's book search tool. In the book search section, books are categorized by such headings as multicultural, African American, Folklore, Non-fiction, Classics, and the like. The web site does not seem to shy away from critical literacy books since the site features many books that make difference visible and discuss controversial topics, such as Sweet Smell of Roses by Angela Johnson about the Civil Rights March and Defiance by Valerie Hobbs about Cancer.

4.) www.childrenslit.com

This children's literature web site, aimed at adults, educators, librarians and universities, reviews more than 4,000 children's books annually. It houses more than 240,000 reviews in its database; however, a membership is necessary to access all of these reviews. Individuals without memberships may browse the sections on featured essay contests, news, and updates, though. They may also search the book reviews organized in themed categories, such as Fishing, Dinosaurs, African American, Middle East, and International

Day of Peace books. This web site does not directly seem to take a critical literacy approach since it isn't available to everyone, but it is very easy to find important critical literacy books on the site, as well as critical literacy discussions in its news and essay contest announcements. The main unfortunate piece to this web site is that it's not a child-friendly site.

5.) www.multiculturalchildrenslit.com

This web site claims to "Celebrate Cultural Diversity Through Children's Literature." The web site's author states that multicultural literature highlights the "multitude of perspectives about the lives, cultures and contributions each cultural group to American society." The site is organized into seven categories: African American, Chinese American, Japanese American, Jewish American, Korean American, Latino, and Native American. Each category contains reviews of children's books and other relevant web sites. The main focus of this site is one of critical literacy because it discusses and celebrates the differences that make up the United States, making that difference known. The idea is that children's books aren't simply nice, entertaining stories; they are tools to educate our children on the wonderful and complicated diversity of our country.

6.) www.childrensliteraturenetwork.org

The Children's Literature Network is "for adults who are passionate about encouraging kids to read." It's nicely organized and includes sections on advice for parents, advice for teachers, new books, featured books, reading quotes and author/illustrator features. The currently featured book is *Bridge to America* by Linda Glaser about a Polish boy growing up in the early 1900s who immigrates to America. It seems to be a decent critical literacy book that discusses important issues, such as immigration and socioeconomic status. Its Reading Lists section is organized in diverse topics, including adoption, Latino characters, Hannakha favorites, Reading with Dad books and Native American stories. The most troubling portion of the web site is its Books for Boys section, which include stereotypical boy-themed books, like *The Hardy Boys* series and *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*. From a critical literacy perspective, the web site is weakened by its inclusion of this Books for Boys section.

Mini Research Assignment # 4: Media Research

I read and examined a Washington Post article from July 16, 2005, *Kids' stories aren't afraid of the dark: Harry Potter, Peter Pan: Why are childhood classics so scary?* by Neely Tucker. Tucker's article is located on-line at <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/8589731/>. In his article, he begins with a lurid, graphic rendering of children's literature, where he depicts so many stories for children as far too scary, dark and...realistic for children. Tucker believes that stories about dying parents, murder, abandonment, and violence should not be the stuff of children's literature. According to Tucker, children are too vulnerable, impressionable and naïve to be exposed to such tales; instead, our children should be protected from these topics.

Many children's books are dark and, sometimes, scary. This is true. These types of books, however, may be some of the best critical literacy books available because they give children a safe space to discuss the hard and complicated topics that Tucker alludes to in Bambi and Harry Potter. Just as in the fictional worlds of Bambi and Harry Potter, children experience and witness death and violence; they do not need to be protected from these realities as readers. Moreover, they need that space, where they know that it's only fantasy, to talk about and make sense of the realities around them.

Tucker, in the end, seems to be more concerned about delaying the inevitable for children rather than criticizing children's literature. He concludes by stating that the scariest thing of all is leaving those childhood stories and entering adulthood, where he thinks so many of those fantasy stories become reality.
