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WOW REVIEW

READING ACROSS CULTURES
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of
Education

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 Open Theme

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Contributors to this Issue:

Seemi Aziz, Oklahoma State University Stillwater, OK
 Michele Ebersole, University of Hawaii at Hilo, Hilo, HI
 Jeanne Gilliam Fain, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN
 Roxanna Jaiswal, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN
 Holly Johnson, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH
 Avis Masuda, University of Hawaii at Hilo, Hilo, HI
 Judi Moreillon, School of Library and Information Studies, Texas Woman's University, Denton, TX
 Ann Parker, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ
 Kathy G. Short, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ
 Yoo Kyung Sung, The University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM
 Melissa Wilson, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX

Editor:

Janelle Mathis, University of North Texas, Denton, TX

Production Editor:

Richard Clift



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Introduction

The third issue of *WOW Review*, Volume II, is the result of an open call and might be considered an eclectic collection of significant titles with many potential connections. What I found most impressive about the titles in this issue is how they address the diverse roles that international books might assume for readers. At a time when life is both wonderful beyond words and frighteningly complex, readers can thrive on examples of young people dealing with situations in thoughtful, resilient ways. They can consider their lives with purpose—both the pleasurable and problematic—and realize that they are able to actively and positively deal with problems, even those that originated in situations beyond their control. These stories from around the world provide a sense of being able to intervene when life seems to just “happen” and can send a powerful message about one’s own potential to create paths in life journeys. Such lessons learned from enjoyable, intriguing, and authentic books are ones that become personal foundations for creative and critical thought.

The issue opens with a delightful collection of ghost tales that will appeal to readers with chilling story plots woven around the joys of food. Each tale in *A Banquet for Hungry Ghosts* (Compestine, 2009), however, is actually focused on a political, social or cultural issue that the author explains for the reader. Although the unique characters may provide non-traditional, and not always acceptable, approaches to problem solving, this collection can be used to show how the author addressed social issues with an inviting genre—a potentially empowering lesson in making one’s voice heard.

Typical adolescent themes of wanting to belong and negotiating personal identity among peer groups are explored by Grace Lin. *The Year of the Dog* (2005) and *Millicent Min, Girl Genius* (2003) provide a humorous contemporary look at young Chinese-American girls who are trying to fit in socially in American school contexts. Their situations are ones to which many can relate and the insights into Chinese-American culture challenge stereotypes. In more serious settings, *Real Time* (Koss, 2004) and *Surrender Tree* (Engel, 2008) focus on young protagonists, one in the midst of conflict within modern Israel and the other amidst Cuba’s struggle for freedom from Spain. In each, young people assume a critical role either by choice or circumstance, and the continuous action and energy in *Real Time* as contrasted with the peaceful role of a healer in *Surrender Tree* reflect the diverse ways that one might assume an active role in a time of national conflict. Add to these two titles *Bog Child* (Dowd, 2008), in which a young protagonist and his brothers in 1984 are in the midst of the Irish conflict between the Catholics and Protestants, and readers not only have 20th century challenges but the plot uniquely brings in a character from 2000 years prior to share the message of staying true to oneself.

From Somalia with Love (Robert, 2009) and *Sold* (McCormick, 2006) relate challenging personal situations of young girls due to cultural strife and socio-economics. In Robert’s story, a young Somalian Muslim girl settled in England is dealing with the change in family dynamics when her father returns home, but she is protected against conflicting social issues that might bring her physical harm. Lakshmi from Nepal in *Sold* is trying to problem-solve her family’s economic situation and is unknowingly traded into prostitution by her stepfather for a meager amount of money. Each story shares the mental journey these girls take as they deal with culture, relationships, and personal decisions.

Two pictures books provide further exploration of problem-solving by children. *Home of the Brave* (Say, 2002) invites readers to enter a surreal world that connects historical events to a reader's own sense of home, patriotism, and identity. The reader can enter the story and, as the different events unfold, be that character positioned within and between these two historical situations. *My Name is Sangoel* involves an eight-year-old boy and, while appropriate for young readers, has a strong message concerning the cultural heritage found within one's name—a message appropriate for all, especially since many refugees and immigrants are older students.

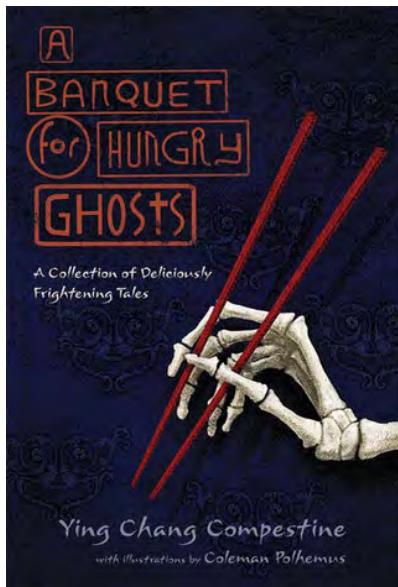
As you read these reviews, and hopefully are inspired to read the books as well, we would enjoy hearing about your responses, connections, and critique. Meanwhile, please consider submitting to Volume II, Issue 4, a themed issue focusing on picture and chapter books about the Middle East and South Asia. These reviews are due May 15, 2010. Guidelines are provided on this site.

Janelle Mathis

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A Banquet for Hungry Ghosts

Written by Ying Chang Compestine

Illustrated by Coleman Polhemus

Holt, 2009, 180 pp.

ISBN: 9780805082081

According to Chinese tradition, those who die hungry or are treated unjustly return as ghosts to haunt the living. Some are appeased by food and so families take a traditional Chinese banquet to the graveyard twice a year—but not all ghosts are successfully placated. Compestine serves up an eight course banquet of appetizers, main courses, and desserts in the form of ghost stories set in different time periods and parts of China. From the building of the Great Wall to the modern day, hungry ghosts torment those who have wronged them. The book is arranged in eight chilling stories, each named after the dish that is incorporated into the

story. Following each ghost story is a recipe and a note that describes the historical, cultural, and political context of the issue at the center of that story. The unique structure of the book and the multi-genre nature of the stories, recipes, and informational notes provide for an engaging—and unsettling—read. The occasional black-and-white illustrations create a spooky air through the contrast of beautiful and gruesome images depicting the ghosts and their victims.

Compestine (2010) states that she was asked to write a sequel to her award-winning book, *Revolution is Not a Dinner Party* (2007), but was not interested in writing more about the Cultural Revolution. She was struck by the inequality and corruption in modern China during one of her many trips back to visit family and decided that she wanted to write about these social problems. Her experiences as a child during the Cultural Revolution had taught her not to express her opinions openly. Instead of criticizing Chinese society and the government directly, she decided to use food as a metaphor to target modern social problems and ghosts as a weapon for justice to exact revenge and right wrongs. The disparity between rich and poor, the corruption of monks in Buddhist temples, the mistreatment of mental patients, organ harvesting from prisoners, bribery by officials and doctors, the killing of endangered species, and a rigged legal system all fed Compestine's imagination and storytelling. People get chopped up, buried alive, and grabbed by skeletons reaching up from their graves in these chilling and gory ghost stories that serve up both entertainment and subtle social commentary. Compestine even finds a way to comment on the harsh university exams that she remembers well from her own childhood and their use to determine who will have an opportunity for a good life or a life of hard labor.

Compestine grew up in Wuhan, central China, during the time of the Cultural Revolution and became interested in writing as a child with the encouragement of a teacher. Her father was a surgeon and she spent a great deal of time in a hospital compound, an experience that is integrated into this book. She left China to attend the University of Colorado as a graduate student and now lives in northern California with her husband and son. She states that she began writing as a way to stay close to the country she loves. Although she has now lived in the U.S. for over 20 years, she frequently returns to China to visit her family and to tour in different regions of the country in her quest to understand the

diversity of her own culture in greater depth. Many of these different areas of China have been used as the settings within the ghost stories. Compestine has also written cookbooks, hosted her own television cooking show, and worked as a food editor for magazines, and so draws from this knowledge base to provide the food metaphors within the stories. Her web site, <http://www.yingc.com>, provides articles and interviews in which she talks about her life and the experiences behind her books. Compestine begins this book with an Author's Note that introduces her motivation for writing this book and the role of ghosts and food within Chinese culture. The placement of this note at the beginning of the book establishes a strong cultural context for the stories and makes a more effective framing for the book than when these notes are hidden at the end of a book and overlooked by most readers. The integration of a short historical note after each ghost story gradually builds a deeper understanding of Chinese culture than if these notes were included in an afterward as is typical in children's books.

This book could be paired with Compestine's other books in which she explores Chinese culture, particularly *Revolution is Not a Dinner Party* (Holt, 2007), *Boy Dumplings* (Holiday House, 2009), and *The Runaway Rice Cake* (Simon & Schuster, 2001), along with her cookbooks, especially *Secrets from a Healthy Asian Kitchen* (Penguin, 2002). Another interesting pairing is other ghost stories that provide a social commentary, in particular *The Dark-Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural* (Patricia McKissack, 1992), which are rooted in African American history and preceded by a short introduction explaining the historical incident or custom in which each story is based, as well as *From Another World* (Ana Maria Machado, 2005), a Brazilian ghost story about slavery and mass murder. Finally, readers could explore other books that connect stories with recipes and culture, such as *Salsa Stories* (Lulu Delacre, 2000), *Everything on a Waffle* (Polly Horvath, 2001), *La fiesta de las tortillas/The Festival of the Tortillas* (Jorge Argueta, 2006), and *Saturday Sancocho* (Leyla Torres, 1995).

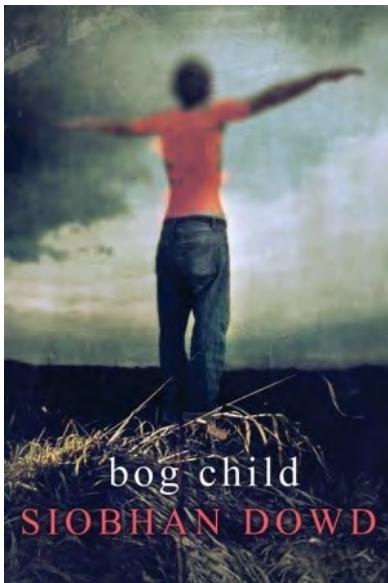
Reference

Compestine, Ying Chang (2010). Presentation at the University of Arizona, March 11, 2010.

Kathy G. Short, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona



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Bog Child

Written by Siobhan Dowd
 David Fickling, 2008, 336 pp.
 ISBN: 9780385751698

The year is 1984, the place is Ireland, and Fergus McCann, the 18 year-old protagonist of *Bog Child*, has a lot on his mind. The stress brought on by the Troubles, the three-decades long period of strife in Northern Ireland between the Roman Catholic and Protestant factions, has his parents in a constant state of bickering. Fergus is studying for his A-level exams so he can become a doctor. His brother, a member of the Irish Republican Army, is in prison in Long Kesh. A friend of his brother is blackmailing Fergus to run contraband for the IRA across the border. And to top it all off, when he and his uncle are pilfering peat in a bog they find the body of a young girl, apparently murdered.

The girl, whom Fergus calls Mel, turns out to be 2,000 years old. Fergus becomes acquainted with Felicity O'Brien, the archeologist who is brought in to excavate the site, and her teenage daughter Cora. As Mel's story unfolds, Fergus finds himself dreaming about her and falling in love with Cora. Meanwhile, when Joe, Fergus' imprisoned brother, joins the group of hunger strikers to protest the British government's refusal to treat them as political prisoners, it falls to Fergus to comfort his mother while trying to convince his brother to end his strike.

Siobhan Dowd's wonderful prose moves this story along quickly, and she brings together all of these events to a satisfying conclusion, one that isn't contrived or forced. The weaving in of Mel's story is particularly effective; Mel was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice, both of her life and her love for Rad, in order to unite her people, just as Fergus is willing to compromise his opportunity to go to medical school by running contraband because he believes it will help his brother in prison, and just as his brother Joe is willing to sacrifice himself in the name of protest. Ultimately, Fergus stays true to himself just as Mel did.

Siobhan Dowd tragically died at age 47 from cancer after publishing just two novels, both of which received widespread praise: *A Swift Pure Cry* (Random House, 2007), about a young girl in poverty who faces estrangement from her family and community when she becomes pregnant; and *The London Eye Mystery* (David Fickling, 2008), a mystery set in modern-day London that is narrated by a boy with Asperger's syndrome. *Bog Child* was published posthumously.

Bog Child introduces teens to the recent troubles in Northern Ireland as well as to Mel's world from 2,000 years ago. While Dowd includes a brief discussion of the hunger strike in her Authors' Note, it might be helpful to have students read about the Irish hunger strike as well as the Troubles to have a better understanding of Fergus' experiences and his world. This book could be paired with *The Braid* (2006) by Helen Frost, set in Scotland and Americas in the 1850's, about two sisters who are separated when their family is forced to flee the Scottish highlands. One ends up in America with her family, while the other stays with her grandmother in the Scottish Isles. Frost uses poems to bring alive the experiences of the two sisters while introducing students to another chapter in

Great Britain's history. It could also be used with *Nory Ryan's Song* (2002) by Patricia Reilly Giff, the story of a young girl struggling to survive the Irish potato famine in the mid 1800's. Finally, Dowd is such a wonderful writer that students would enjoy *The London Eye Mystery*, especially since the protagonist, a boy with Asperger's, is such a hilarious, refreshing narrator.

Ann Parker, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona

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The Day of the Pelican

Written by Katherine Paterson
 Clarion, 2009, 160 pp.
 ISBN: 9780547181882

This book focuses on the political and religious conflicts and struggles in the Eastern European regions of Serbia, Bosnia and Kosovo at the brink of the 21st century. It also includes the immigrant experiences of Muslims. The story revolves around a coming-of-age theme through portraying the struggles for survival of a young girl, Meli Lleshi, an eleven-year-old, who has to grow up fast due to unrest in her country of Kosovo. She is ethnically an Albanian Muslim who is living in Kosovo.

Meli is portrayed as a quiet thoughtful child who does what is required of her in taking care of her three younger siblings and doing her housework and schoolwork. Her father is presented as a person who wants to live peacefully, rather than wasting time in hating fellow human beings, including Serbs. The story unfolds through the thoughts of the protagonist, who struggles to make sense of her life as she goes through the tumultuous events triggered when she is caught drawing a caricature of her teacher in school. The family of seven, consisting of parents and five siblings, are a Muslim family from rural upbringing. They are targeted by Kosovars and Serbians alike because of their humble background and their alliance to the freedom fighters struggling for the rights of the Albanian Kosovars against Serbian oppressors known as the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army). The major role in this story seems to be shared by Meli and her brother, thirteen-year-old Mehmet.

Their peaceful, albeit oppressed, existence is shattered when Mehmet is taken away (as are other Muslims) by the Serb police and is tortured and left to die. The KLA saves him and he comes back home full of hatred for Serbs, who are no longer an abstract enemy but a real one because of his experience. The family is forced to flee their home and take refuge in the mountains; camping with other Kosovars trying to escape the tyranny of Serbians. There they have the KLA keeping an eye on their welfare, but their position is given away and they are forced to move to their family home on the farm, along with their extensive extended family. A group of Serbs burn their home and take away everything of value, forcing them to cross the border into Macedonia, where they live within the confines of a refugee camp. Their father finds what he sees as the only way out of their present condition, due to his concern about his son's constant admiration and connection to the KLA, by applying for asylum in the U.S. After they move to the U.S. they are grateful to the Christian groups that sponsor them and appreciate their own hybrid existence as free citizens. In the willingness to assimilate they try to learn English and celebrate Christmas. The mother is shown as influencing the family's decisions and as busy taking care of the home and the younger children. The events of September 11th 2001 put the family again in the position of being labeled and profiled.

Family and family unity are of the utmost importance in this book as are the themes of kindness and forgiveness of oppressors even when the family goes through so much negativity in relation to ethnic prejudice and cleansing within Kosovo as well as in their new adopted country. This is one of the few

refugee books that show the negative as well as positive aspects of their immigrant experiences in the U.S. The U.S. is not portrayed as a golden land of opportunity without critique, as found in most books.

The dialogue and bantering exchanges between the characters emphasize the struggles of this ethnic group and their hatred of Christians and Serbs. On the second page of the novel, Meli's questioning and discerning thoughts are articulated by the words, "Why do Serbs hate us so?" and she counters with, "though to be honest, most Albanians hated Serbs just as fiercely...she could never understand hate like that" (p. 2). The family members experience hate firsthand in this book. Meli recognizes that all people involved have to take responsibility for their feelings and interpretations of other groups in order to work towards peace. Hate and mistrust are part of life and something we each have to recognize as being within us and to take responsibility for instead of just blaming others. The story is not dated but very much portrays the present through the existence of amenities, such as television, cars, and airplanes.

The Albanians in Kosovo are portrayed as if living only for the immediate present. As long as their family is all right and their day passes without any negative incident, all is well in their lives, a common characteristic of people in crisis and at great danger. They do not question or try to find out the reason behind anything, even a range of Alps being named; "the Cursed Mountains" (p. 2). They are presented as people who mind their own business. When Christians sponsor them in the U.S., they are confused by the contrast in Christian behavior. The father allays their fears by saying that, "at one time all of us were Christians...until the Turks came, we Albanians were Christians" (p. 95). His comments show the difference in world-views; not to judge one or the other but to make readers aware of the difference in those views.

One concern is that the story comes through more as a representation of the many faces of Christians than as representative of diversity in Muslims living in Eastern European countries who underwent ethnic and religious cleansing because of their religious beliefs. Christians as oppressors and then as saviors again seems to cancel out the discourse that represents them as a negative religious group, through the events within those regions. The story underplays Islam as a religion and the Muslim experiences by choosing to represent a family who are non-practicing and thus disconnected from their religion. Meli after 9/11 repeats twice as if in her defense, "I am not a religious person...but if I have to choose Christian or Muslim, then okay, I am Muslim" (p.127). The story makes light of Muslims eating pork by portraying it as acceptable. "The welcomers came with gifts: warm socks, gloves...and a ham for their Christmas dinner...they hadn't eaten pork in Kosovo—it was against Muslim custom—but somehow in this land of strangeness it felt fitting" (p. 114). It is forbidden to eat pork in Islam. The behavior of this Christian group seems dubious as to their intention, although the presentation of the incident can be viewed as a critique of Americans who don't bother to educate themselves and understand a world-view beyond their own.

I had a strong connection to this story as it dealt with the forced fleeing of a family. My own experiences with just such an incident when I was a young girl in the Eastern part of Pakistan in 1971 (presently Bangladesh), made it come alive through this story. I further appreciated some of the significant points brought forth in this story; for example, issues of immigration for religious

groups; the role of the U.S. in stopping, albeit late, the ethnic and religious genocide in the regions; the helplessness of the Kosovars to defend themselves due to a lack of unity, training, and funds; the oppression of the Muslims by the Serbs; and ethnic prejudice and labeling of Muslims by Americans in the aftermath of 9/11.

Katherine Patterson was inspired to write this story through her contact with the Haxhiu family, who came to the U.S. through the sponsorship of a church in Vermont as well as Mark Orfila who lived in Kosovo during the troubling period of their history. She herself has not visited Kosovo. The book also contains extensive historical notes. She provides an almost dispassionate and calm account of the horrendous events which may have been due to her deep research on the subject so much so that the spontaneous storytelling that she excels in is minimized. She does not address the extent of the actual brutality that occurred by portraying that the family was allowed to leave without being beaten, raped, and/or mutilated by Serbs.

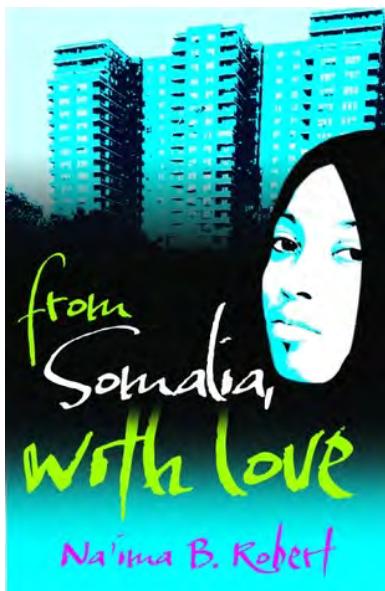
The story touches on aspects of Albanian/Kosovar culture that might be true in some instances but cannot be taken as representative of the whole of the society. Variations of some of the same thematic threads can be found in another novel: *The Story of My Life: An Afghan Girl on the Other Side of the Sky* (2005) by Farah Ahmed. *Ask Me No Questions* (2007) by Marina Budhos portrays Muslim experiences in the U.S. after 9/11. Other novels that focus on and portray the religion of Islam as an integral part of the characters living in the Western countries are: *From Somalia with Love* (2009) by Na’ima B. Robert set in England, *Ten Things I Hate about Me*, (2009) and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2008) by Randa Abdul Fatah, both set in Australia.

Seemi Aziz, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma

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From Somalia with Love

Written by Na'ima Bint Robert
 Frances Lincoln, 2009, 160 pp.
 ISBN: 9781845078324

This novel is based on a Somalian Muslim family who is part of a settler society in England. The protagonist is a teenager, Safia, who has lived her entire life in East London with her mother and two brothers. The story begins when the family of four gets news that the father, who has survived the war in Somalia, is coming back into their lives after being entirely absent. The ensuing stresses and struggles of this Muslim family to adjust to another authority figure during their teenage years form an interesting tale. It frames life in London and portrays the struggles of many Muslim families who emigrate to Western societies and still want to stay connected to their customs and traditions.

Safia is a character who is connected to her religion and uses it as a lens to view the world in which she lives. She functions with ease at school, traversing successfully between both spaces. She is deeply linked to the strong female and male family relationships: her mother, her aunt, and brothers at home and her friends at school. She has an extensive extended family that also helps in keeping the Somali culture alive. The story provides an array of diverse Muslim-Somali characters that provide a holistic view of positive and negative people and make the representation more authentic. Her younger brother and her cousin provide the much needed contrast to Safia's overall pious Muslim existence. Both of those characters come through as rebellious against the religious and cultural norms and get in trouble throughout the story's passage. The hybridity of British-Somali characters is interwoven with the reality of their existence outside of Somalia itself.

Safia is a poet just like her father. The trouble is that her mother never talks about her husband, which is a tension in this story. Even though the parents are in love the mother has avoided informing the younger children of the relationship or the truth about their life in Somalia with their father. The oldest child remembers as he was old enough to be able to recall memories of their life in Somalia.

As Safia tries to accept sharing her mother's diverted attention due to her father's presence, her life seems to be unlike what she was used to before he came back into their life. She reacts to his heavy-handed attitude towards her. He is initially represented as a typical Muslim male who does not understand how to deal with his two younger children, while he is able to slip into the role of a husband and a father to his oldest son with ease. In her resistance to his authority she decides to get close to her rebellious cousin and go out with boys. Throughout this process she knows that she is doing something wrong and her conscience seems to be reprimanding her. The story's climax occurs when she goes to the movies and realizes that the boy her cousin has hooked her up with wants something more than just an outing. She walks out on him as she comes to term with the realization that what she is doing is wrong. The boy follows her and insists that he can drop her at her house. She sees a family member and does not want to be discovered by him. She gets into the car to avoid being caught, where the boy tries to rape her, but miraculously her father appears out of nowhere and saves

her. It is only after this incident that the mother tells her about her father and their life in Somalia. She begins to understand and accept her father after he mellows and approaches her as an individual rather than a bothersome child. They become a happy family after the resolution of this conflict.

The author, Na'ima Bint Robert (Bint meaning: daughter in Arabic), was born in Leeds and was raised in Zimbabwe. On her father's side she is Scottish and on her mother's side a Zulu. She has studied at the University of London. The inspiration to write this story came from her being at a Somali youth retreat and meeting immigrant Somali students. She has had multiple professions, including marketing, performing arts, teaching, and travel. The book jacket states that she has written other children's books but internet searches for her biography did not produce results. The glossary contains words that are a mix of Arabic and Somali languages and provides further proof of how Arabic religious terminology is used by Muslim cultures in their everyday lives.

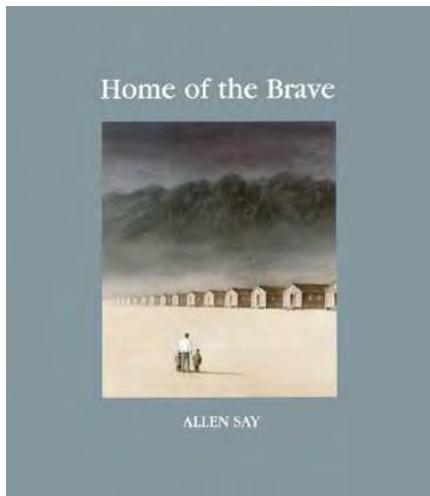
The thematic threads found in this story can be found in other books, for example, *Ask Me No Questions* (2007) by Marina Budhos portrays Muslim experiences in the U.S. after 9/11. Other novels that focus on and portray the religion of Islam as an integral part of the characters living in Western countries are: *Ten Things I Hate about Me*, (2009) and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2008) by Randa Abdul Fatah, both set in Australia.

Seemi Aziz, Oklahoma State University Stillwater, Oklahoma

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Home of the Brave
Written by Allen Say
Houghton Mifflin, 2002
ISBN: 9780618212231

"More than 120,000 Japanese Americans interned in ten camps in six western states- but now the statistics took on a human face and voice. I stared and listened. And what I saw and heard turned into yet another personal journey. This is that story." Allen Say.

A man falls into the rapids while he is kayaking and finds a ladder in an underground water tunnel that takes him to a desert. On the desert, he sees ruins of old buildings that he thinks must be on an Indian reservation. He sees two children sitting against the old building, who claim that they are from the "camp." Each child wears a name tag, but the man cannot understand what is written on them. Allen Say seems to indicate that this must be a Japanese internment camp through the language on the nametags. The man thinks that the children are lost and starts walking into the desert holding their hands. Suddenly a dusty wind blows, and, when the air clears, the man sees a row of buildings. He looks inside searching for help, but nothing welcomes him in the empty camp room except a nametag on the floor. What is more surprising is that his name is written on that nametag. A noise from the outside of the room draws his attention and he sees a group of children who chant, "Take us home." A sudden beam of light from the watchtowers shines on the children, ordering them to go inside. The children disappear and leave him alone at a round pit, where he finds a nametag with his mother's name—also his last name. Hearing another voice from the hole of the pit, he enters the pit and falls asleep. When he wakes up, he meets a different group of children who are Native American and who claim to be from 'the camp.' This time he sees his lost kayak and himself lying by a river, where he finds more nametags on the ground. The man grabs the two nametags he had brought with him from the camp along with the other nametags and throws them to the sky saying, "they went home."

Allen Say was born in Yokohama, Japan and came to the U.S. when he was sixteen. He won a Caldecott honor and a medal for two of his books, *The Boy of the Three-Year Nap* and *Grandfather's Journey*. This story seems to illustrate a form of time travel in that the protagonist travels to the Japanese internment camp in the past and comes back to the present where the Native American children claim "camp." The camp connections question whether it makes a difference to be in the present or the past. His experiences of two groups, Japanese-American children in the past and Native American in the present, are signaled through the use of color in the clothing and depictions of the characters. The red kayak from the beginning of the story gives a clue for whether he is in the past or present. The uniforms of the Japanese-American children are portrayed in a black and white "documentary film" tone signaling the past while the man's blue jeans and a white shirt are from the present. The plastic red kayak seems to symbolize the present. The Native American children on the

reservation also have color in their clothing and do not wear uniforms. Different types of lights and noises play a role in transitioning between times when the main character travels. Bradford (2007) says that Say explores the 'processes of national myth' that the U.S. is "home" while children within the nation are wrenched away from homes and families. Native American children were sent to Indian schools from 1879 until the 1960s. From 1941 to 1944, 120,000 Japanese Americans were relocated in internment camps in remote sites across the U.S. Home of the Brave invites readers to consider the connections between past and present. When the man sees his name reflected in the names of his mother and her father on the nametags, his relationship to previous generations of Japanese-Americans and to the contemporary groups of Native American children in the 'camp' make a powerful connection. The interesting match between the historical context and the contemporary realistic story creates quite a surreal experience.

In an interview, Say said that he uses his camera as a research tool and then sketches from the photographs. He happened to come across a Dorothea Lange photo of a Japanese family, the Mochida family, at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, and created the images of the children from these photographs. The older girl in the book is based on Mikki Mochida from this family. Three generations of the Mochida family came to the museum to celebrate the launching of the book, and Say was struck by their lack of bitterness about their internment camp experiences. See the entire interview by Marilyn Marjorie Coughlan at http://www.papertigers.org/interviews/archived_interviews/asay.html

Japanese internment camp stories such as *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow* (Amy Lei-Tai, 2006), *Weedflower* (Cynthia Kadahotra, 2009), *Journey to Topaz* (Yoshiko Uchido, 1971), and *Remembering Manzanar* (Michael L. Cooper, 2002) can be read with stories about Native American children's journeys of leaving their reservations and joining a new school such as *Sweetgrass Basket* (Marlene Carvell, 2005) and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Sherman Alexie, 2009).

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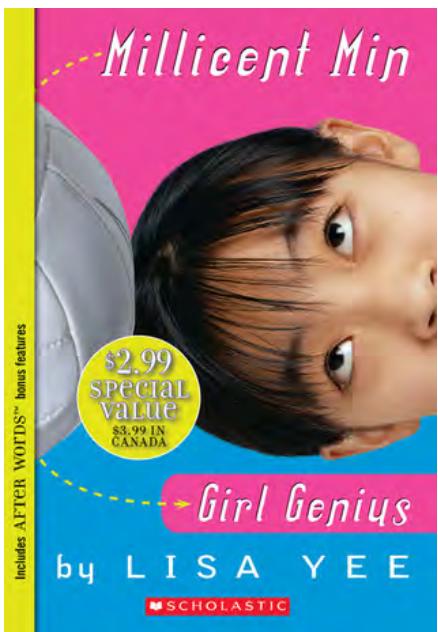
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Yoo Kyung Sung, The University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

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Millicent Min, Girl Genius

Written by Lisa Yee

Scholastic, 2003, 248 pp.

ISBN: 9780439425209

Millicent Min is an eleven year old whose immediate objective is “to become JFK High School Valedictorian.” She says that others accuse her of being anal retentive, an overachiever, and a compulsive perfectionist, all of which she attributes to being a genius. Socially awkward, Millicent’s only and best friend is her hip grandmother whom she calls Maddie. Her concerned parents attempt to help Millicent live the life of a “normal” eleven year old by signing her up to play volleyball over the summer. They also force her to tutor Stanford Wong, who Millicent considers to be “the poster boy for Chinese geekdom.” Millicent is convinced that her parents will ruin “Millicent’s List of Splendid Summer Activities” that includes

attending her first college poetry course and spending time with Maddie. Unfortunately, Maddie is dealing with the loss of her husband and leaves to attend a feng shui academy. While playing volleyball Millicent meets a new girl, Emily Ebers, who actually thinks Millicent is cool. Millicent is afraid that Emily won’t want to continue being her friend if Emily finds out how smart she really is. Millicent spends her summer trying to hold together her friendship with Emily. In order to do this she must enlist the help of Stanford who, much to Millicent’s disgust, Emily finds attractive. Together with Stanford and Emily, Millicent learns about friendship and about real life beyond being a genius.

Yee does an excellent job of playing on readers’ expectations of Asian stereotypes and challenging these images through her Chinese American protagonists, Millicent Min and Stanford Wong. Millicent is academically advanced, perpetuating the model minority myth (Asian American youth are passive, studious over-achievers), and Stanford is the antithesis of the model minority myth, preferring basketball to school. When read along with Yee’s *Stanford Wong Flunks Big Time* (2005), teachers and students can explore the complexities of Asian American culture and youth identities. Yee skillfully uses the model minority stereotype as somewhat of a social liability for both Millicent and Stanford, who are both 4th generation Chinese Americans.

While Yee does not play the explicit Asian card, there are references to Chinese cultural stereotypes of eating dim sum, practicing feng shui, and learning kung fu, along with nuances of traditional values. Family plays an important role in both Millicent and Stanford’s lives, with their 2nd generation grandmothers utilizing the oral tradition of storytelling to share insights about their past. Both Millicent and Stanford try to separate themselves from their “Chinese-ness,” yet both appreciate their Chinese-American grandmothers who help them cope with preteen anxieties. Yee juxtaposes the Min and Wong families and portrays them as diverse Asian American families whose lives are complicated by their social stances. The book both contradicts and perpetuates stereotypes; Yee provides readers with a forum to explore complex issues surrounding Asian American representation in YA literature.

Students can read Yee's trilogy books that tell parallel stories from the each of the three characters' perspectives and engage in literature discussion circles around the concept of stereotypes: *Millicent Min, Girl Genius; Stanford Wong Flunks Big-Time; Totally Emily Ebers*. They can also analyze characters' perspectives toward each other and their different accounts of the same events. Another possibility is to create additional text sets around common stereotypes (ethnic, gender, social class, etc.) for students to explore. The power of Yee's books is enhanced by the use of universal themes. Readers can engage with very different Asian American characters who encounter struggles both unique to Asian Americans, yet universal to all American preteens.

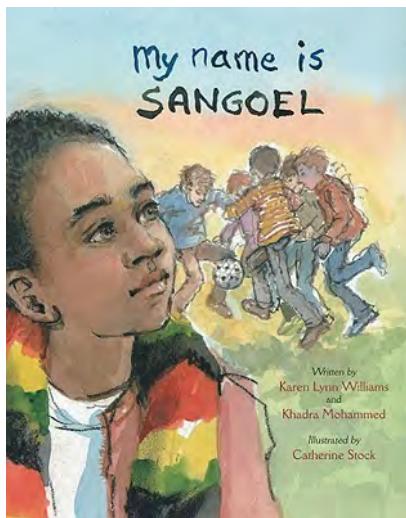
Michele Ebersole, University of Hawaii at Hilo, Hilo, HI

Avis Masuda, University of Hawaii at Hilo, Hilo, HI

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My Name is Sangoel

Written by Karen Lynn Williams & Khadra Mohammed

Illustrated by Catherine Stock

Eerdmans, 2009

ISBN: 9780802853073

Sangoel is an eight-year-old Sudanese refugee whose father has been killed in the war. When he leaves his natal country, the Wise One tells him, "You carry a Dinka name. It is the name of your father and your ancestors before him." For Sangoel, a first-born son, his name carries his family history and connects him to his heritage.

Homeless in Sudan, Sangoel, his mother and sister are resettled in the

United States. Upon arriving, Sangoel, as translator and the man in the family, takes the lead as the family learns to negotiate a fast-paced English-speaking, urban environment. In this new country where no one can pronounce Sangoel's name correctly, the family must adjust to new customs and conveniences, such as a telephone and a TV. When he arrives at school, Sangoel is greeted by a teacher who mispronounces his name and classmates who tease him about his name or are too shy to practice it until they can say it in the Dinka way. The boy feels he has lost his identity. Even his mother suggests he might need an American name.

Sangoel clings to the significance of his name and is determined that others say it properly. He draws his name on a t-shirt using rebus symbols for "sun" and "goal," as in a soccer goal. When his classmates finally pronounce his name correctly, Sangoel smiles; he feels respected. Then, his classmates follow his lead by creating rebus pictures of their own names. And when the teacher praises his good idea and his name, Sangoel announces just as the Wise Man told him, "My name is Sangoel. Even in America."

This personal empowerment story is a continuation of a partnership between Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed who co-authored *Four Feet, Two Sandals* (Eerdmans, 2007), which is reviewed in *WOW Review*, Volume 1, Issue 2. Khadra Mohammed, who is the director of the Pittsburgh Refugee Center, has worked with refugees in the U. S. and abroad for more than twenty years. Karen Lynn Williams served in the Peace Corps in Malawi; she currently volunteers at the Pittsburgh Refugee Center.

In their authors' note for *My Name is Sangoel*, Williams and Mohammed suggest that keeping one's name is a way for immigrants to remain connected to their heritage. They describe the plight of refugees, including those from Sudan like Sangoel. They also share the naming practices of the Dinka, a southern Sudanese tribe. Catherine Stock's watercolor and collage illustrations depict the changing geography of the refugee experience from the refugee camp, to the bustle of the big city, and to a classroom where classmates from diverse backgrounds learn about the larger world through interacting with one another.

Readers, children and adults, can show respect for the richness of difference through honoring the significance of our names. Each year when school begins or a new student enters a classroom, children's names become important markers for personal and cultural identification. With increasingly diverse school populations, educators and classmates alike are asked to open their hearts and increase their knowledge of others' cultural heritages as represented in the meanings and significance that are part and parcel of our names.

A selected annotated bibliography of children's picture books in which names matter:

I Call My Grandpa Papa by Ashley Wolff (Tricycle Press, 2009)

When the teacher brings Ye-Ye, her grandfather from China to meet her class, the children share what they call their grandfathers and what they enjoy doing with them through words and drawings. In *I Call My Grandma Nana*, the teacher introduces her grandmother to her multiethnic class and learns their names for their grandmothers.

My Name is Jorge On Both Sides of the River: Poems in English and in Spanish by Jane Medina, illustrated by Fabricio Vanden Broeck (Boyd's Mills Press, 1999)

In this bilingual collection of poems, Jorge shares how the teacher's decision to change his name to "George" affects a boy who is trying to find his place in a new culture without losing his first culture. Jorge struggles but manages to retain his dignity as he suffers teasing from his classmates, learns new school routines, and a new language. He retains his self-respect as he insists on being called "Jorge" on both sides of the river that separates Mexico and the United States.

The Name Jar by Yangsook Choi, illustrated by (Knopf, 2001)

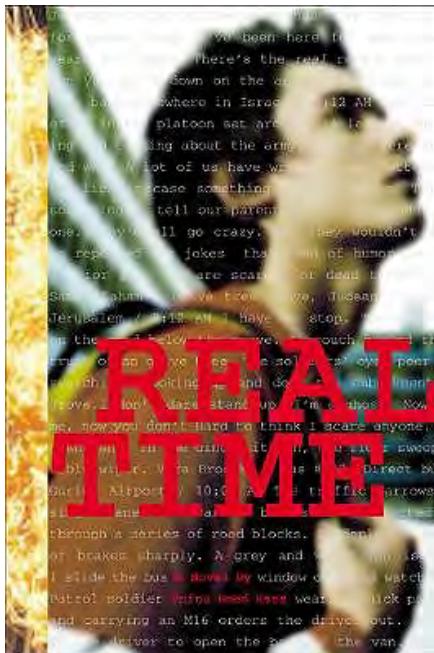
When the teacher and students cannot pronounce Unhei's name, the new girl is, at first, embarrassed to be different. She is happy when her classmates add name suggestions to a glass jar placed on her desk. But Unhei changes her mind after reading a letter from Korea from her grandmother and experiencing the friendship of a classmate who makes a special effort to learn her name. Unhei proudly presents herself to the class by writing her name in English and in Korean and tells her classmates her name means "Grace."

Judi Moreillon, School of Library and Information Studies, Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas

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Real Time

Written by Pnina Moed Kass

Graphia, 2004, 186 pp.

ISBN: 9780618691746

It is Sunday, April 9th in modern-day Israel and within four days no one's life will ever be the same again. Narrated in "real time," the novel takes the reader on an hour-by-hour journey through the characters' minds as they connect through love and violence. The winner of the Sydney Taylor award given by the Association of Jewish Libraries, this novel tackles the most Jewish of literary themes, how to go on living with the specter of the Holocaust still looming sixty years after the fact.

In this young adult novel, themes of fate and suffering infuse the plot, which follows a teenage German volunteer kibbutz worker through his flight from Germany and his anti-Semitic girlfriend, to a bus that is blown up by a suicide bomber, and finally to an Israeli hospital where he heals from his trauma, thanks, in great part, to a kindly Holocaust survivor. While there are other main characters, it is interesting that most of the story revolves around a gentile and his suffering. Told from multiple perspectives, the reader follows the trajectory of the bombing, from the police's botched investigation of the wrong terrorist through the horror of the bombing to the healing of the victims.

Real Time's plot is crowded with stock Jewish novel characters: the Holocaust survivor, the German boy attempting to alleviate Holocaust guilt, the idealistic Zionists who have escaped persecution in their "home" lands, and, especially, the two teenage suicide bombers (one to vilify and one to empathize with). *Real Time* is a gripping time bomb of a novel with an ending that is as predictable as it is satisfying.

This novel is satisfying, because it doesn't challenge children's literature discourse about Jews wherein the only option is to be a victim. I write this based on recent experiences researching children's books available in the United States that feature Jewish characters. In the majority of the books, including Sydney Taylor winners, the Holocaust is almost the main character. If the text isn't set around the Holocaust, then it includes Holocaust survivors. There are novels that almost deviate from this formula such as *Confessions of a Closet Catholic* (Sarah Littman, 2006), a story of an average Jewish girl who is grappling with her faith. I write "almost" because what ultimately sways her back towards Judaism is her guilt towards her Holocaust survivor grandmother. The protagonist realizes that turning away from Judaism is akin to trivializing her Grandmother's suffering. It seems that Jews cannot be written about without the background of genocide. This is analogous to almost all texts featuring African Americans being about slavery. It isn't that history isn't important, it is. However, the issue is the need to contextualize Jews in a range of settings, which includes but goes beyond the Holocaust. The Holocaust is not the story of all Jews either. For the most part Jews living in Arab countries remained untouched by genocide. It is also important to note that the impetus for the creation of Israel was Zionism, not the Holocaust.

The true main character of this novel is Israel itself. To set the novel in and around a kibbutz close to Jerusalem, Kass writes a modern story that is mired in the past. For Israelis, Tel Aviv is the epitome of modern Israel and kibbutzim are relics of the Zionist fervor of the mid 20th century (only 5% of Israelis live on Kibbutzim today). While the action presumably takes place in 2004, there is little in the novel to give a modern feel to the story. Israel is portrayed, once again in children's literature, as a land of aging survivors, fresh-faced Zionists, and young Arabs who cannot wait to martyr themselves for Islam. Clearly, Real Time does not reflect the diversity of people who live in Israel, but plays into the stereotypes many people hold about the "Holy Land." This is problematic as Israel and Israelis, like all nations, are not a monolith and what it means to be an Israeli is as nuanced as what it means to be an American. Israelis can be Orthodox Jews or secular, liberals or conservatives, pro-Palestinian or rabid nationalists. Some Israeli youth spend their days studying the Torah while others spend their nights looking for the hottest nightclubs. To tell the reader that all people who come to Israel have a secret reason, a reason that is intimately related to religion or a continuing Diaspora, Kass paints a very narrow, black and white picture of a modern nation.

Pnina Moed Kass is a Belgian woman who has spent her adult life in America and Israel. This is her first Y.A. book. While not an Israeli citizen, during her 35 years living there, Ms. Kass has taught school as well as published books in Hebrew. Ms. Kass is, for all intents and purposes, an Israeli author who has written a book in English, published in the United States whose intended audience is American young adults. The book may also be specifically intended for Jewish youth as there is specific Jewish content (prayers in Hebrew, Jewish customs, and assumed historical knowledge about the Holocaust and the birth of Israel) that are inserted seamlessly into the story with no accompanying explanations.

The 2004 winner of the Sydney Taylor Award, an award given by Jewish librarians to celebrate Jewish literature, Real Time was lauded by the chair of the committee as, "A stunning portrait of modern Israeli life. It is both frightening and hopeful, drawing readers into the complexity of life in the Middle East without offering easy answers." Booklist, on the other hand, took exception to Kass's portrayal of Arabs in their review. "The brief, first-person Palestinian perspectives are flat and distant, with little sense of the Palestinian experience: the Arab doctor is perfect, and the teenage suicide bomber and his mentor are ignorant, poor, filled with hate, and trying to be martyrs." In an interview about Real Time, Ms. Kass states, "This is not a novel that suggests or implies solutions or deals with ideology, politics, or right and wrong. My overwhelming desire was to tell the story behind the headlines and sound bites. Its theme is the universality of the dreams and ambitions of ordinary people, wherever they are from and whatever age" (<http://www.answers.com/topic/pnina-moed-kass>).

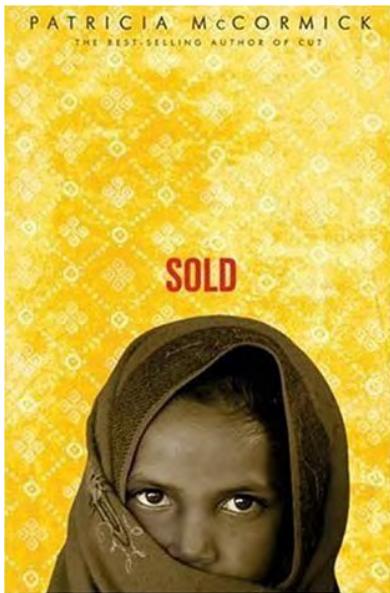
Real Time is a text that is rich with Jewish history and culture. The text could be used with older readers in a Social Studies class or Modern History course where the content would need to be scaffolded with primary source materials and with other books about Palestinian youth such as Tasting the Sky (Ibtisam Barakat, 2007) or Habibi (Naomi Shihab Nye, 1999) as a way to counteract Kass' stereotypical portrayal of Palestinians. The Book Thief (Marcus Zuzak, 2007) would add a different perspective to Germans during World Two. I am still looking for a book about a "typical" Jewish young person to add to the textset.

Melissa Wilson, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX

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Sold

Written by Patricia McCormick
Hyperion, 2006, 263 pp.
ISBN: 9780786851720

"You are safe here only if you do not show how frightened you are."

Lakshmi finds that she has embarked upon the most frightening journey of her young life. Believing she is traveling to the large city to become a maid to help her with family expenses, she discovers that she has, in fact, been sold into a life of prostitution. At age 13, Lakshmi was living in a remote village in Nepal, going to school, playing with her goat, and dreaming of time when her family might

have a tin roof to protect them from the rain. Her family's deep poverty, however, will not allow this dream to come true without her help. Her Ama (mother) is respectful of Lakshmi's stepfather and does not question his gambling activities, his drinking, or his abuse of the family resources. So when he takes Lakshmi to the local market to trade her for 800 rupees, Lakshmi is not surprised but thinks the adults around her are creating a way for her to help the family income. Receiving 400 rupees from the beautiful stranger in the yellow dress—the "new auntie who smells of amber and jasmine and possibility"—Lakshmi's stepfather leaves her with the promise that he will receive the other 400 rupees when she has proven her worth. And with this transaction, Lakshmi has been passed to the hands of strangers who take her to India with the real possibility that she is lost forever.

Told over approximately one year and in short vignettes, *Sold* is an upper middle/secondary grade novel that allows readers to experience how child labor across the world includes work that is sexually abusive and heart-wrenching. Lakshmi brings readers to a world where each one of her reactions is not only understandable, but realistic and courageous. With just enough detail to explain Lakshmi's pain and suffering, *Sold* is a sensitive novel that gives readers the distance they may need to accommodate the reality that the world is both good and bad, and its people are both kind and cruel. The author's note at the end gives more information about how the story reflects the vast number of youngsters sold by their families into the sex trade throughout the world. For middle school students, *Sold* would make a great companion to texts such as *Iqbal* (Francesco D'Adamo, 2005); *The Breadwinner* (Deborah Ellis, 2001); and, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (Ishmael Beah, 2008) to address themes about child labor and oppression. Texts for older students addressing the theme of the sex trade include *The Road of Lost Innocence* (Somaly Mam, 2008); *Slave: My True Story* (Mende Nazer & Damien Lewis, 2005), and the movie, "Born into Brothels."

What is often missing in the texts written about child labor is the presence of nations in North America and Western Europe. This is a dearth that teachers may wish to address with students, as the practices occur; they are just not yet documented through texts specifically for young people's consumption. This was part of the reason why the author, Patricia McCormick decided to write *Sold* and to tell it for young people through a first person perspective.

Patricia McCormick is a writer and journalist who lives in New York. She has written *Cut* (Perfection Learning, 2002) and *My Brother's Keeper* (Hyperion, 2005) and teaches creative writing at the New School University. Researching for *Sold*, McCormick traveled to Nepal and India, where she interviewed women and girls who were part of the sex trade or had been rescued from it. She traced the steps presented in the book by starting in a small village in Nepal and journeying to Calcutta's Red Light district. She also interviewed a man who sold his girlfriend for a motorcycle. Winner of a number of book awards, more information about McCormick can be found on her website: <http://www.pattymccormick.com/>

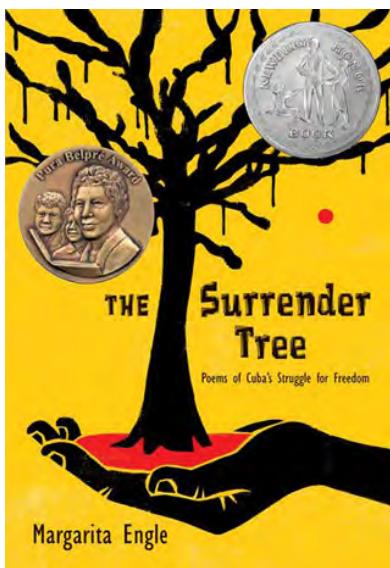
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Holly Johnson, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH

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Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba's Struggle for Freedom

Written by Margarita Engle

Holt, 2008, 176 pp.

ISBN: 9780805086744

"I think of all the others who went before me in all three wars, curing the wounded, healing the sick, nameless women, forgotten now, their voices and hands just part of the forest, whispering like pale yagruma leaves in a dream. On hot days, even the shade from a yagruma leaf offers soothing medicine, the magic of one quiet moment of peace" (p.116).

This quote offers a glimpse into the powerful voices situated within the historical adolescent novel, *The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba's Struggle for Freedom*. This novel is written by Margarita Engle and vividly depicts a personal picture of Cuba's three decade long struggle for independence from Spain. Poetic verse and sporadic Spanish prose frames the characters, who serve as the narrators of the story. The author begins the story with a brief personal note, explaining that the author's grandparents were refugees from this time period.

The author uses her personal knowledge and research to create strong and believable characters by providing them with compelling voices. These historical voices portray the lives of people struggling to survive during a period of three wars and corruption. Rosa is the courageous heroine, who uses her gift of healing with plants to restore the health of her people and even her enemies. Lieutenant Death, soldier and slave catcher spends his life tracking and hunting Rosa. He is dedicated to destroying Rosa and her influence. He is continually perplexed by Rosa's willingness to heal everyone regardless of the person's nationalism and status. Lieutenant Death is fueled by hatred instilled by his father and becomes consumed in defeating her persistence.

The trees represent the end of violent wars and the beginning of freedom in the story. The obstacles of life will come to an end; the hard work will grow into something beautiful. If one looks close enough in the trees, one will see Lieutenant Death, patiently waiting on Rosa.

Margarita Engle is the 2009 winner of the Pura Belpré Author Award and Newberry Honor. She has written *Summer Birds: The Butterflies of Merian* (2010), *The Firefly Letters: A Suffragette's Journey to Cuba* (2010), *Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba* (2009), and *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano* (2006). All are published by Holt.

Additional novels that complement the themes of identity and overcoming adversity include: *The Day of the Pelican* (Katherine Patterson, 2009), *The Color of My Words* (Lynn Joseph, 2001), *Call Me Maria* (Judith Ortiz Cofer, 2006), and *City Boy* (Jan Michael, 2009). Picture books include *Silent Music* (James Rumford, 2009), *The Composition* (Antonio Skarmeta & Alfonso Ruano, 2003), and *The Lost Thing* (Shaun Tan, 2008).

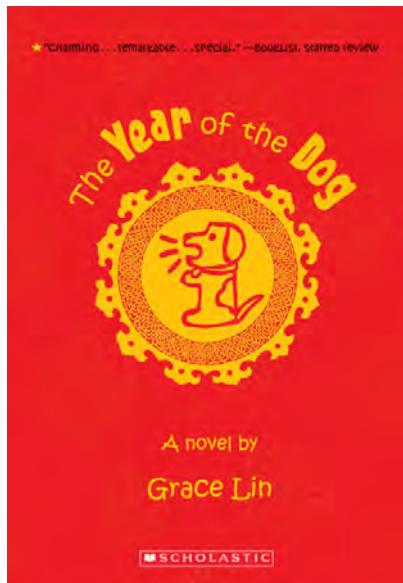
Jeanne Gilliam Fain, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN

Roxanna Jaiswal, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN

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Year of the Dog

Written by Grace Lin

Little, Brown & Company, 2005, 124 pp.

ISBN: 9780316060028

Year of the Dog is Grace Lin's memoir of growing up as a Chinese American whose parents wanted her to fit in with other American youth. To her family, she is known as Pacy, but to her American friends, Grace. Lin tells the story of her struggle to find her identity in a bicultural world. What name should she go by? What should she tell her friends? Pacy/Grace thinks about whether she is Chinese, Taiwanese or American. Her mother tells her to say she is American. The reader learns of the richness behind Pacy's heritage as Lin skillfully weaves a tapestry of her identity through her mother's stories of growing up in Taiwan and then immigrating to America.

Strong cultural traditions permeate the family's lifestyle and readers are treated to the importance of celebrations, food, significance of color, and oral story-telling in Pacy's life. As the story opens, we sense the family's excitement at the arrival of Chinese New Year through the hustle and bustle of greetings from Taiwanese relatives, food preparation for the special Chinese New Year dinner, and the tradition of putting out sweet candies. Here, the reader gets a glimpse of Pacy's attempt to blend East and West as she and her sister fill the tray with sticky taffy melon Chinese candy and M & Ms, to reconcile being both Chinese and American.

Lin's clever chapter vignettes take readers into Pacy's world in the Year of the Dog, according to the Chinese calendar. As the family looks forward to the Year of the Dog, Pacy's Mom explains that it is a good year in Chinese culture for family and friends, but also for thinking and finding herself. Pacy yearns to find her special talent, striving to win at the school Science Fair, Halloween costume contest, and school play. Pacy wants to try out for the part of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Her friend Becky, who is White, explains the impossibility of her being Dorothy because "Dorothy's not Chinese." Readers are drawn to the pain in Pacy's heart, "Like a melting icicle, my dream of being Dorothy fell shattered on the ground. I felt like a dirty puddle after the rain."

Pacy's school and home life engage the reader as she continues to struggle in finding herself. She is delighted to find another Chinese American student, Melody, who becomes her new friend. But, even the lunch lady mistakes Pacy for Melody. At Taiwanese American Camp, the Taiwanese and Chinese children make fun of her because she doesn't speak either language and call her an "Americanized Twinkie"—yellow on the outside, white on the inside. She is appalled that there are no books about real Chinese people, other than *The Five Chinese Brothers*, in the school library.

The opportunity to reconcile her dual identity and her unique talents emerges when she is encouraged to enter a writing contest about being Chinese American. This was the beginning of Lin's book, *The Ugly Vegetables*. As the Year of the Dog draws to a close, Pacy eventually finds ways to appreciate being both Taiwanese and American, but more importantly, an acceptance of not having to be one more than the other.

Year of the Dog is a good book to use as a mentor text for young writers who struggle with coming up with an idea. The richest stories come from real life experiences. The book serves as a model for helping students from diverse backgrounds share their unique traditions and their own treasured cultural stories. Children may also appreciate the addition of their own artwork to use as supportive illustrations, as Lin incorporated her childlike drawings into each chapter.

Year of the Dog presents teachers with an opportunity to enhance their classroom library with a book that speaks to accurate representation, cultural authenticity and appeal to wide audiences. It provides students with an opportunity to discuss lives of people who may be different from them, or on a more significant note, what they share and have in common. *Year of the Dog* can appeal to many middle grade students of all backgrounds as it deals with childhood concerns of wanting to belong, making friends, and being proud of who you are.

Further, pairing *Year of the Dog* with selected images from Gene Yang's graphic novel, *American Born Chinese* (2006) can be used to highlight racial stereotypes. To help students reconstruct positive images that depict contemporary Chinese Americans, they can create a collage of images downloaded from Google Images, and compare images of real people to the characters and ask students to discuss how these collages refute stereotypes. Helping students to develop sensitivity to stereotyping and raise awareness of inequity works towards building empathy and a more equitable society of compassion and respect for all humanity.

Avis Masuda, University of Hawaii at Hilo, Hilo, HI

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