

Examining Cultural Authenticity within International Literature

Cultural authenticity is an analysis of the extent to which a book reflects the worldview of beliefs and values and depicts the accurate details of everyday life and language for a specific cultural group. Given the diversity within any cultural group, however, there is never one image of life within a group, which means that themes and underlying ideologies are often more significant for analysis. Readers from the culture of a book need to be able to identify with and feel affirmed by what they are reading. It must ring true to their lives, while readers from another culture need to be able to identify with and learn something of value about cultural similarities and differences. Evaluating authenticity involves considering complex issues, not making a simple yes or no decision about the cultural authenticity of a book.

Book review authors for *WOW Review* have found the following issues and questions useful in thinking about the complexity of cultural authenticity. More in-depth discussions of these issues can be found in *Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature*, edited by Dana Fox and Kathy G. Short (NCTE, 2003).

- **Literary Qualities**
How well does the author tell the story? Is it quality literature?
- **Origin of Book**
What is the origin of the book? Who was the original publisher and in what country? Who is the author? illustrator? translator? What are their backgrounds?
- **Authorship**
How do the author's experiences connect to the setting and characters in this book? What are the experiences and/or research on which the book is based? Why might the author have chosen this story to tell?
- **Believability**
Is this story believable? Could it happen? In what ways does it feel real/authentic? Are the characters larger than stereotypes but less than "perfect" heroes?
- **Accuracy of details and authenticity of values**
What are the inaccuracies within the details of the book? What values are at the heart of the book? How do these values connect to the actual lives of people within the culture? Does this book reflect a specific cultural experience or could it happen anywhere?
- **Perspectives**
Whose perspectives and experiences are portrayed? Who tells the story? What is the range of insider perspectives?
- **Power Relationships**

Which characters are in roles of power or significance within the book? Who takes action? How is the story resolved? Where does the story go and how does it get there? Who takes it there? Why?

- **Audience**
Who is the intended audience? Is the book written for children from that country or to inform children in other parts of the world about that country or culture?
- **Relationship to other books**
How does this book connect with other books about this cultural experience? Do the available books about this culture reflect a range of perspectives and experiences within that culture?
- **Response by insiders**
How have insiders responded to this book?
- **Connections for your readers**
What are the possible connections for students? Is the book accessible?

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