DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 052 907 RE 003 743

AUTHOR McGuire, Alice Brooks
TITLE The Minority Image in Books for Youth: Evolution and Evaluation.
PUB DATE Apr 71
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the meeting of the International Reading Association, Atlantic City, N.J., Apr. 19-23, 1971

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Books, *Cultural Images, *Ethnic Groups, Ethnic Relations, Ethnic Stereotypes, Historical Reviews, *Literature Reviews, Minority Groups

ABSTRACT

The image of minorities, particularly blacks, in children's literature has been evolving since World War II when authors' sensitivities to the unjust treatment of such groups were aroused. The implications of this evolution for the critic of children's literature today are important. Passing through the "Age of Awareness" of the forties and fifties when "brotherhood" was the key word, through the "Age of Racism" of the sixties and seventies when ethnic identity achieves importance, into the "Age of Understanding" of the future when, hopefully, differentiation of minority groups will cease to mark a book as appropriate for one group only, we can now hopefully evaluate books for their literary quality rather than for the "messages" of their content and the ethnic qualities of their characters. By examining several outstanding books and their reviews from the past decades, we can trace the development of criteria for evaluation and can formulate criteria for judging books in the future. The key to such judgment is whether the book is considered good literature and whether it is appropriate and worthwhile for all children. Such evaluation and criticism of literature will help improve the overall quality of books for children in the future. References are included. (AL)

THE MINORITY IMAGE IN BOOKS FOR YOUTH: EVOLUTION AND EVALUATION

Alice Brooks McGuire

University of Texas at Austin

Four people representing varied relationships to children's literature have been asked to consider the current state of children's books in our pluristic society and to ponder what the future holds in store. Since I was cast in the role of a critic, I have decided to lay major emphasis on emerging problems in the objective evaluation of books about minorities.

Many years have passed and much has happened since the long, dark period when minority groups were subjected to cruel, blatant and thoughtless stereotyping in both the text and illustrations of children's books. Now out of our changing world new ideas have evolved; minorities are asking to be heard and recognized in their capacities as worthy citizens and as people. Books for children are assuming a strategic role in breaking down the barriers of misunderstanding and in reinforcing an acceptable identity for minority children. An increasing number of books are being written, especially about Black children, but it seems that we still have problems in this matter of portraying the texture of our variegated society in the books being written.

The Age of Awareness.- Following World War II in the forties some authors awoke to a realization that the area of minorities should have better treatment in children's literature. More sensitive interpretations, new images, and situations showing mutual respect were needed, predicated on a belief that books enjoyed by children help to shape their values, attitudes and understanding

While at the University of Chicago Children's Book Center, I became acutely aware of the restive stirrings in this area. I was publishing an immature version of the now widely used Children's Book Center Bulletin

and trying to do an honest evaluation of the current output of children's books. I was also working on a doctoral dissertation, - a study of the developmental values in children's fiction and the impact of books on the young reader. Part of my material consisted of many letters from current authors in answer to the query, "What did you wish to say to children over and beyond the writing of a good story?"

Quotations from the letters received show the philosophy that was motivating writers in the forties.

Florence Crannell Means has long been an author who champions the cause of minority groups. Great Day in the Morning (Houghton, Mifflin, 1946) was the book on which she commented:

> ...First the obvious and simple one. The concept that "folks are folks," all groups lovable, likeable, admirable, to all other groups, once they know each other. Then the fundamental that people should be considered as individuals and not in the mass;...that all of us should stand on our own merits with neither concessions nor handicaps because of race or creed; that we must command respect rather than demand it...Another value I hoped to implant was the conviction that we do our best only if we aim at the highest service and, with service to the world ahead of any self-aggrandizement.

Mrs. Means has been focusing on our pluristic society continuously over the years with sympathetic presentations of the groups that have suffered injustices from a too silent or thoughtless majority. And I think she has tried to speak to the group involved as well as to all children.

Jesse Jackson in the forties wrote Call Me Charley (Harper, 1945), in which he injected notes of realism and reproach. Commenting on Call Me Charley, he said:

> I was trying to tell a story about some boys and one of them happened to be a Negro...I very much wanted boys who might read the story to understand the struggle of the colored boy to find his place in their world. This is the underlying reason for the story.

Three books from responding authors used similar approaches to develop

the "people are people" theme. Georgene Faulkner's Melindy's Medal (Messner, 1945) was written to help youngsters in school understand and appreciate one another regardless of racial differences. Melindy established herself with her classmates by her heroism during a school fire.

Skid, according to Florence Hayes (Houghton, 1948), "tried to show how little skin color had to do with personality, innate kindness and refinement; to show that boys are boys, no matter what their ethnic origin. They have the same basic needs, - to be accepted by their fellow beings." Skid, like Melindy, found his place in the sun through resourcefulness in a crisis.

In Bright April (Doubleday, 1946), Mrs. DeAngeli wanted very much to add an honest presentation of a little Negro girl to her list of stories about the peoples of America. Quoting from her letter:

> I hoped that in writing this story of a little Negro girl, living a normal life in a nice home like any other child, I could show how alike we all are essentially. I hoped they would love April and remember her as a friend and through her, they would see all people whose skin might be different from their own, as people like themselves. This friendship might serve as a sort of insurance against thoughtless acts and careless words and, perhaps, as a bulwark against cruelty and bitterness in later life.

Mrs. DeAngeli's recent autobiography, Butter at the Old Price (Doubleday, 1971) devotes several pages to her struggle to find an effective approach to Negro life in writing Bright April; and of her desire to include nothing that would be offensive to anyone in the characters she produced. She concludes, "From the time I thought of doing the book until it was finished, nearly six years had passed."(2)

All of these authors of the forties wrote from their inner convictions that a great wrong existed and should be righted; that possibly through the drama of a story for children they might sow seeds of understanding in childhood which would come to fruition in adulthood. Perhaps they seem to speak too exclusively to children of the majority and the

grim realism of some of today's literature was lacking; maybe the pictures were too glossy and did not tell the true story of the bitter plight of our minorities which comes through loud and clear in some of the current books, but at least they were trying.

Before we leave the "brotherhood" movement of the forties, it would not be amiss to pay tribute to those writers who early felt the injustices; wished to contribute to better human relations; and who hoped that the power of their pens would play some small part in effecting change.

The Age of Racism.- The late sixties and the turn of the present decade has broadened, strengthened, and complicated the body of literature concerned with human relations. By its very complexity these books raise problems in evaluation. Not only are books "with a purpose" being written, preaching their messages, developing too pat solutions, but books with a more original approach and varying themes have appeared. Stark realism is being used to "tell it as it is." Fine Black writers are making a significant contribution. Although the purposes of the authors may be sincere, it is in the evaluations that the going becomes tough. We find that opinions expressed in written reviews can be in complete conflict in their interpretations and assessments. What is one man's truth may be another man's deception or distortion. The presence of racism in some books, unconscious or deliberate, is becoming a moot question in reviewing.

Two books have recently received awards for their literary merit and their worthwhile messages. Sounder by William Armstrong (Harper, 1969) was awarded the 1970 Newbery Medal; Theodore Taylor's The Cay (Doubleday, 1969) received the Jane Addams Award. Reviews of these books have been generally favorable, even glowing, and have not side-stepped the messages inherent in the stories, but reviewing seems to be divided into two camps.

Of Sounder we find such contrasting statements as these:

> There is an epic quality in the deeply moving, long ago story of cruelty, loneliness, and silent suffering. The power of the writing lies in its combination of subtlety and strength. Four characters are unforgettable: the mother with her inscrutable fortitude and dignity; the crushed and beaten father; the indomitable boy; and the "human animal," Sounder. (Ethel L. Heins, Horn Book 45 [December, 1969])

On the other hand Rae Alexander expresses this opinion:

> The white author of Sounder renders the father and boy impotent, much as William Styron, the character of Nat Turner. The mother's character pales against the strong Black women history tells us about - Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth. When you study the Black actors in Sounder, you wonder how Black people could have survived social genicide since 1619. (1)

And in the review of Albert V. Schwartz, in which he finds "flaws in the Newbery Award Winner obscured by innate white bias," he makes this statement, "In Sounder, only the dog expresses reaction and bitterness. The author actually calls the dog a "human animal." (4)

June Meyer Jordon, author of Who Look at Me (Crowell, 1969), concludes her review of Sounder in the New York Times Book Review (October 26, 1969, 42) as follows:

> We engage a history frozen around loving people who never scream, who never cry: they search, they continue any way they can, and they wait. It seems that Sounder is worth reading - by young, and not so young adults.
>
> The deliberate cool of its telling follows McLuhan's rule. We are urged into participation, a moral questioning and a moral wonder. When we stop reading, we want to hear the living voice, the distinctly human sound of this black family.

Rae Alexander, however,

> ...found Sounder offensive and demeaning to the Black people...What the white author...has done to the Black characters is to diminish their role as instruments in effecting change. More important, the author has denied Black youth the privilege of having role models with which they can identify and find fulfillment... (1)

It makes one wonder if these people could have read the same book.

Two other brief quotations from reviews express my feelings towards this powerful and moving tale, "Although a tragic story of man's inhumanity to man, this is also an uplifting tale of courage, human dignity, and love ..." (Commonweal 91 [November 21, 1969] 257) and "The human characters have no names; they are a symbol of all the poor, black or white, who face indignity with courage." (Saturday Review 52 [December 20,1969] 30). "Man's inhumanity to man" is the clear theme of the story and timelessness the keynote. If William Armstrong had given his book the setting of Egypt before Moses led the Children of Israel out of their inhuman bondage, or if he had made it a story of starving serfs in the middle ages, who poached to eat, the message would have been the same and might not have been challenged. That it is a page of infamy out of our own history makes it more painful to us. It is as a part of history that we must accept it and when we mistakenly see it as a picture of all Black people today, or, for that matter, all white people, we are guilty of an erroneous interpretation. The injustices portrayed in the story did exist and should cut deeply into our social conscience.

Concerning Theodore Taylor's The Cay, I feel a very personal responsibility, for I was on the committee that gave it the Jane Addams Award. Seldom have I selected a book with more conviction. Here, also, opinions are in conflict. Polly Goodwin writes in The Children's Book World, May 4, 1969 36:

> Theodore Taylor dedicated this story "To Dr. King's dream, which can only come true if the very young know and understand." Written with eloquent understatement, this immensely moving novel should do much to help a reader "know and understand."

Charles Dorsey, reviewing The Cay (New York Times Book Review, June 29, 1969 26), reflects what I believe to be its allegorical significance:

> He (Phillip) soon realizes that racial consciousness is merely a product of sight: to him Timothy feels "neither white nor black"...The idea that all humanity would benefit from this special form of color blindness permeates the whole book - though it is never overtly discussed. The result is a story with high ethical purpose but no sermon.

Binnie Tate, writing of authenticity and the black experience in children's books, contradicts these evaluations:

> ...Mr. Taylor fully depicts Phillip's revulsion toward Timothy, describing him as "old and ugly" ...This very real white reaction on Phillip's part remains throughout the story as truth. Thus the author fails to show Phillip's growth in human understanding. Phillip's image of Timothy remains unchanged, though supposedly he grieves for the man who gave his life for him. The author's point of view posits complete acceptance of Timothy's servitude and Phillip's condescension. Upon returning to his community and regaining his eyesight, Phillip spends a lot of time talking to the black people...this is the extent of his racial appreciation. This is typical of the books which supposedly show racial understanding. (5)

Apparently two standards of evaluation are emerging today, - on one hand, the traditional attempt to appraise a book's worth as children's literature, taking into consideration the author's success in writing a good story, the worthiness of its theme, and a hopeful surmise of what its total effect will be on the young reader. But in other cases evaluation seems to have a narrower, more personalized focus, - how the reviewer sees its portrayal of an ethnic people, or its effect on the minority reader. Which approach is acceptable? Or do we need both? Certainly both aspects should be evaluated, but the broader consideration of its worth as literature should include the elements of the more focussed viewpoint. If the portrayal of the minority is offensive, biased, or inaccurate, then the story lacks universality of purpose and appeal and it fails as a piece of children's literature. However, we do need the minority reviewers just as we need good authorship from among these people, but with a more objective approach. It worries me when

Rae Alexander summarizes her criteria for selecting and rejecting titles for a list entitled Books for Children: Black and White: A Selected Bibliography (NAACP, December, 1970) as follows:

> In evaluating Black and biracial books for preschool through sixth grade level, a major criterion was that no book would be listed if it was considered likely to communicate to either a Black or white child a racist concept or cliche about Blacks; or failed to provide some strong characters to serve as race models. Even one such stereotype would be enough to eliminate an otherwise good book...Even such an imaginative and exciting story as L.M. Boston's Treasure of Green Knowe (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958) I excluded because of a derogatory description of a Black boy's hair... (1)

Such strict guidelines of selection and rejection are guilty of too narrow a viewpoint that imposes an injustice on many fine stories. When a children's book is evaluated, the reviewer must maintain objectivity and focus on the total effect of the work. Elizabeth Nesbitt discussed this point at the University of Chicago Conference on "The Critical Approach to Children's Literature" in 1966:

> ...Webster's reasoned opinion and Arnold's "disinterested endeavor" by inference say that the exclusively personal response, the uninformed, unsubstantiated, impulsive opinion, the preconceived idea, the biased attitude do not result in valid criticism. (3)

Objective reviewing of books written for children about our pluralistic society should protect them from unfair appraisal that emphasizes a too white or too black viewpoint.

Is it possible to set up guidelines for evaluating such books that are acceptable to both schools of reviewers? Once more I should like to return to the past in considering this point. In the early fifties my late husband, Dr. Carson McGuire, used to conduct a workshop on intercultural relations. I was usually invited to talk to the group about children's books as one vehicle for promoting understanding. While in the throes of moving a short time ago, I found the outline that I had used for my talk. It was interesting

to review the criteria which I had suggested twenty years ago in the light of my present assignment and to consider their pertinence today. The points I stressed were these:

I. Evaluate as children's literature: well-written, good plot, good characterization, readable.

A. The book should be judged for its overall value or effect.

B. Children must find the book acceptable in terms of readability.

II. Characters must not be stereotyped.

A. Must be people in their own right and not manipulated to prove a point.

B. Readers should be led to think of the characters as individuals rather than as Jews, Negroes, Mexican-Americans, etc.

III. Situations must be natural and be a balanced sample of what might occur.

IV. Solutions of problems must be fair and possible.

V. Books must contribute to understanding and must not highlight or aggravate a problem needlessly.

VI. Illustrations must be acceptable and true both artistically and to the group represented.

VII. Remember, one side can err just as much as the other.

When I asked a class to evaluate these criteria in terms of today they felt that the points were still generally sound, although one member did feel that we need books that would stir and aggravate in order to make people think and react. Perhaps some of these books are necessary but I am reluctant to see all books written in this vein. Julius Laster's To Be a Slave (Dial, 1968) is a strong dose but it is a real contribution to literature. As to his Black Folktales (Baron, 1969) I have reservations, - particularly as literature for children. Mr. Lester's bitterness and personal bias have colored the fabric of the tales and make him guilty towards white people as we ourselves have been guilty towards the

Blacks. Understanding cannot result from retaliation.

But, for the most part, the variety, quantity and quality of minority literature today is healthy and offers us hope that young readers will absorb the understanding they need to respond fairly as citizens tomorrow. Books with patent messages are still very prevalent, but the number of good stories that are original, exciting, and readable regardless of ethnic group involvement is encouraging. I refer to such books as Virginia Hamilton's Zeely (Macmillan, 1967) and The House of Dies Drear (Macmillan, 1968). I hope this is a promise of better things to come. The increasing number of Negro authors who are speaking for themselves rather than letting white writers speak for them is a trend that I wish to see more of among other ethnic groups.

Although the body of literature dealing with our pluralistic society is becoming richer, how to evaluate it fairly remains a "puzzlement". As things stand now, two bodies of literature may develop. There would be lists of books recommended for most children to read, but others, edited to exclude books that are taboo to certain groups of children because they have been judged to be offensive, to perpetuate an unwelcome image, or to defer to white superiority. While this may sometimes be true, I deplore the possibility of banning books as unacceptable for certain readers, especially if they have been subjected to biased criticism. Isn't this a new form of segregation? Here is a problem that we have yet to solve and in the present state of our society, its solution must belong to the future. One the whole, I should say that the literature is better than the condition of its evaluation.

The Age of Understanding.- This panel has been asked to use the crystal ball and to predict the state of things to come. Largely my prognostications must be wishful thinking and again will deal particularly with re-

viewing. I ask again, "What are the ways to achieve objective, fair, unbiased evaluation of books about minorities?" Well, there are a number of possibilities, - and probably not all are feasible. Ultimately the books might be fed into a computer, permitting this monster to evaluate them. That would surely produce objectivity! Or we might have the reviewing done by paired reviewers in the interests of fairness. Both would be experienced reviewers but one would represent the minority involved. Teamwork and face-to-face discussion might produce evaluations acceptable to all. Perhaps we should give more attention to children's actual responses to these books. After all, this is the audience to which the author is speaking; how well they get the message, how it affects their thinking, their attitudes and self-image are among our major concerns. Could a group of children of varied backgrounds do a good job of evaluation? Possibly continuous workshops for reviewers (like umpire schools) might iron out the knotty problems of evaluation and develop sound criteria. Would this be one feasible solution?

In the last analysis, I think, I hope, I even pray that in the not too distant future there will be equal acceptance for all. Just as the Irish, the Poles, and other European emigrants have been assimilated into the American populace, so these people, struggling for their rightful place, will be absorbed into the mainstream of our society. Then there will be no literature ear-marked as dealing with <u>minority</u> groups and no difficulties in evaluation. Readers, adult and young, will not say, "This is a book about a Chicano, an Indian, a Black child," but rather, "This is a book about a child," or, "Here is a book for children to read, - not certain children, but all children. Let us evaluate it and see if it is a good book."

In my favorite book, when Amos Fortune came to make his will, he said that two things stood out in his life, church and school. He wished to leave a sum of money to each. After designating a hundred dollars for the

church, he laid the rest on the table and Deacon Spofford, noting the amount, wrote "for the school" after it.

> "And will you say what should be done with it?" he asked.
> Amos answered, "The town shall use the money in any way it sees fit to educate its sons and daughters.
> "I have heard that those in your care have not always fared well at the school," Deacon Spofford said..
> "That is why I give the money to the school," Amos replied as he rose to leave...
> Amos Fortune walked slowly home, thinking of the disposition of the last money he would ever earn. Humbly he prayed that as boys and girls learned more they would know what they did and so would do only what was worthy of men and women. He was happy...
> "You can come any time now," he said, looking skyward, "for I'm ready." (6)

Amos Fortune made no discrimination among children. His philosophy is my hope and conviction for the future: That we shall have good books for children, - not good for some, but good and acceptable for childhood unlimited!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Alexander, Rae. "What Is a Racist Book?" Interracial Books for Children, 3 (Autumn, 1970), 1, 5, 7.

2. DeAngeli, Marguerite. Butter at the Old Price. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971, 171.

3. Nesbitt, Elizabeth. "The Critic and Children's Literature," Library Quarterly, 37 (January, 1967), 119.

4. Schwartz, Albert V. "Sounder: a Black or a White Tale?" Interracial Books for Children, 3 (Autumn, 1970), 3.

5. Tate, Binnie. "In House and Out House," School Library Journal, 17 (October, 1970), 97.

6. Yates, Elizabeth. Amos Fortune, Free Man. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1950, 178-180.