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ABSTRACT

This paper stresses the importance of Appalachian children being exposed to literature that reflects their way of life and values. The author, who grew up in Appalachia, discusses her difficulties in learning to read because of a lack of literature that related to her way of life. The paper presents an overview of literature that accurately portrays characteristics of Appalachian people including strong religious beliefs; individualism, self-reliance, and pride; neighborliness and hospitality; a strong sense of family; personalism; love of place; modesty; sense of beauty; sense of humor; and a strong sense of patriotism. One method for introducing students to Appalachian literature is to invite regional writers into the classroom for talks or a reading. In addition, there are many resources available to teachers to help them appreciate and understand Appalachian culture and locate Appalachian materials. This paper suggests that appropriate literature can help Appalachian children identify with their culture and help dispel stereotypes of Appalachians among children outside the region. Includes a list of authors of Appalachian books appropriate for elementary and secondary students. (LP)

The Changing Image of Appalachian Children's Literature

by

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The Changing Image of Appalachian Children's Literature

Appalachian books for children and adolescents have been around since the 1930's and 1940's, but recently (1986 was an extraordinary year) there has been a vertible explosion of books set in and about Appalachia. What a welcome change! I remember a few years ago I was taking Dr. Grace Toney Edwards' Appalachian Folklore class at Radford and she was talking about beginning readers--we both grew up with Dick and Jane and Spot. She opened the way for my memories. What I hadn't realized in the first grade was that I had difficulty learning to read with Dick and Jane and that simpy Spot. Dr. Edwards pointed out that Dick and Jane's house had a sidewalk on a paved street. I could instantly remember those pictures and I realized that I couldn't relate to sidewalks, paved streets, white picket fences or patent leather shoes. The only patent leather shoes I ever wore were for Easter Sunday. I lived on a farm with pigs, chickens, and a cow. We had a garden for vegetables--a few flowers, but mostly vegetables--which we picked and cleaned and canned. Our driveway was hard-packed dirt, and my daddy drove a pickup truck and we rode in the back. I played in haystacks and cornfields and barns. I didn't wear spotlessly clean dresses with matching socks and patent leather shoes. I went barefoot at every

opportunity--not because I didn't have shoes, but rather because the grass and dirt felt so good to small bare toes. The following summer I finally learned to read when introduced to the public library where I found my own subjects--horse stories and dog stories mainly--which were an improvement over Dick and Jane!

For the next few years in English classes I read stories about France and Russia and England and New England and California and Spain and New York and all those "Foreign Countries"--that's what all those places were to me, "foreign." Southern literature was what I loved-- Old Yeller and Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward Angel and Bruce Catton's stories of the Civil War. What I didn't realize at the time is that these "Southern" writers weren't just southern--many were Appalachian. I could finally identify!

Many of today's Appalachian children need to find literature that will reflect their way of life and values. Today's Dick and Jane have become more sophisticated, and television has spread this sophistication, but our children need to see real ref'ections of their culture rather than the distortions of Beverly Hillbilly reruns. They need to see that their values are acceptable and often, in the case of regional books, to find their identity in their place. A sense and love of place is very important to Appalachians.

That doesn't mean that a teacher should choose only books set in rural areas from by-gone days. It's important

to keep current in order to appeal to all our students' interests and to show an updated view of Appalachia . Authors are now considering urban Appalachia too. Books about black Appalachians and even Oriental immigrants in Appalachia are being written. One good example is The Star Fisher by Yep. There are Jack Tales and folklore and tremendous opportunities to teach research and history by having students gather their own family stories and local history. The field has developed in multiple directions. It is as diverse as Appalachia is today.

Those from outside the region need to learn the diversity, characteristics, and values from different regions in order to prepare them for a multicultural world. They need to be able to recognize stereotypes for what they are and to accept differences in people. However, I believe they will also find the underlying values that this country was built on--those pioneer values that led to the shaping of the national character. Loyal Jones, in his essay, "Appalachian Values," which appears in Voices From the Hills, says,

> We mountain people are a product of our history and the beliefs of our forefathers. They came mostly from England, Scotland and Wales, some from Germany, France and Africa, and of course many married Indians who were already here . . . The Appalachian value system is different from that

> which is held by our fellow countrymen, although it seems clear that it is similar to the value system of an earlier America.(507-508).

He lists ten of these characteristics: 1. Mountain people are religious "in the sense that most of our values and the meaning we see in life spring from religious sources "(508). This religion is often non-conformist, but it sustained the mountaineer in hard times. 2. Indivdualism, self-reliance and pride. These were traits to be admired on the frontier--and necessary to survival. The pride mostly involves not wanting to be "beholden to other people" (510). 3. Neighborliness and hospitality--again another trait necessary to survival on the frontier. 4. A strong sense of family. "Appalachians are family centered . . . Blood is very thick in Appalachia" (511). Good examples of this are Cynthia Rylant's The Relatives Came, Jeff Daniel Marion's Hello Crow, and Virginia Hamiliton's Cousins. 5. Personalism. This is a desire to relate well with other people. Appalachians don't want to offend others. 6. Love of place. Jones says we are "oriented around places. We never forget our native places. and we go back as often as possible" (512). This can be seen in many books. but one example is Rylant's When I was Young in the Mountains. 7. Modesty. "We mountaineers believe that we are as good as anybody else, but no better" (513). 8. Sense of beauty.

This is very obvious in the many art forms (which are often tied to functional necessities) such as quilting, carving, weaving, and music, but this can also be seen in the appreciation of the beauty around them in the misty, ever changing mountains and shadow filled valleys and hollows. This can be seen more and more often in the artwork of the new picture books coming out. 9. Sense of humor. Appalachians have a good sense of humor, often "poking fun at themselves". This is very evident in Richard Chase's Jack Tales and Grandfather Tales. 10. A strong sense of patriotism. Appalachians, Jones notes, "have turned out with enthusiasm for all our national wars, except the Vietnam Conflict" and they have "an abiding interest in politics" (515). This can be seen in Lou Kassem's Listen for Rachel, a story set during the Civil War. These values have been preserved and maintained in Appalachia and they can all be found in Wilma Dykeman's The Tall Woman.

As a first step to understanding and appreciation of the Appalachian culture before teaching the literature in class, I recommend reading about the background and values of the Appalachians. Jim Wayne Miller, Loyal Jones, and Cratis Williams are excellent sources for background material. As Gloria Houston, noted children's author, says in "Setting as a Multidimensional Influence on the Characters in Multicultural Literature,"

> Negative cultural stereotyping continues to be acceptable in a world in which we have worked to raise our collective consciousness about negative stereotyping based on race, gender, and physical disabilities. It is still acceptable to make certain negative assumptions about other humans and about characters in books based on their cultural and geographical backgrounds. (1)

This has to change, she says, and it is necessary if we are to guide children toward a "global" mindset and give them the skills to accept people "where they are." (12).

As to application in the classroom, one excellent method to introduce both elementary and older students to Appalachian literature is to use regional writers. A teacher should find out who they are and ask them in for talks or a reading to classes. Projects of various sorts can easily grow from these visits and many authors enjoy interacting with young people.

In my American literature classes I use Marilou Awiakta, a Cherokee/Appalachian poet, and Wilma Dykeman. Awiakta's Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet is a mixture of prose and poetry that attempts to reconcile old values with new developments. In October, Awiakta visited Radford's campus and found time to talk with my classes on our role in preserving our environment. Dykeman's The Tall Woman catches the attention of all types of

readers--it contains love and war and family and adventure. Both sexes enjoy it--even my "non-readers." A number of research papers and group projects are generated by these two books.

An excellent source on books is George Brosi, an Appalachian bookdealer from Berea, Kentucky. Several of his publications which a teacher may find helpful are: A Teacher's Guide To Appalachian Literature, Children's Picture Books of the Southern Mountains, and A Teacher's Guide To Junior And Senior High School. It is evident that Appalachian materials are available in a great variety of subjects, time frames, and age levels.

No longer must an Appalachian child struggle to find literature he or she can identify with, nor should a child from outside the region mistakenly believe all Appalachians are hillbillies who live in log cabins without running water. As Houston says,

> Only through changing our individual arrogant perceptions can we rid ourselves of negative biases and help our children to live in this country of many cultures . . . and to extend those accurate perceptions into a global view, a view which acknowledges the worth of each individual. (13)

We can prepare our children for a multicultural world through the universal nature of Appalachian literature.

That universality, as well as its versatility and adaptability, make Appalachian literature a worthwhile and necessary addition to today's classroom.

Works Cited

Edwards, Grace Toney. Lecture. Radford: Radford University, 1983.

Houston, Gloria. "Setting as a Multidimensional Influence on the Characters in Multicultural Literature." ALCA-Lines. IV . 1 Nov. 1994: 1, 10-13.

Jones, Loyal. "Appalachian Values." Voices From the Hills." Ed. Robert J. Higgs and Ambrose N. Manning. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975. 507-517.

Additional Authors of Appalachian Books You May Want to Check Out

William H. Armstrong (Sounder)

Harriet Arnow (The Dollmaker)

Marilou Awiakta Abiding Appalchia: Where Mountain & Atom Meet

Corydon Bell

Robert Burch (Queenie Peevie)

Ruth Latrate Carroll

Bill & Vera Cleaver

Ellis Credle

Wilma Dykeman (The Tall Woman)

John Ehle (The Landbreakers)

Earl Hamner (Spencer's Mountain)

Christine Govan

May Justus

Jeff Daniel Marion (Hello Crow)

Jim Wayne Miller (Newfound, The Mountains Have Come Closer)

Mary Q. Steele

William O. Steele (The Man with the Silver Eyes)

Jesse Stuart (Old Ben, A Penny's Worth of Character)

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