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Children as ethicists: Stories for thoughtful young citizens

Twice each year, I finalize a new list of picture books and intermediate-level chapter books for the methods of teaching children's literature course at Penn State Altoona as part of the K-6 certification in Pennsylvania. I am mindful in this book selection of the need for "coverage," that is, the need to select books that represent the great diversity of ethnicities, gender compositions, physical and emotional abilities, class and linguistic distinctions, religions and other traditions. Because the students are becoming public school teachers, I use the variety of literature to emphasize the point that serving the public good means serving all children, and that serving all children means that we select literature that highlights and represents children of families who may be under-represented in other aspects of the school curriculum or public parlance. Furthermore, and most importantly, I select books that feature self-reliant and ethical children who are able to negotiate difficult contexts by drawing on their inner resources. These young characters are abundant in children's literature, and it is a joy to discover and discuss their interests, motives, and strengths with aspiring teachers.

An emphasis on diversity is one of the greatest challenges in my teaching. Everyone, myself included, enters the course with a set of expectations for human behavior, and literature can be very disruptive of these expectations. International literature, for example, often disrupts the narrative expectations of readers who were trained by stories from Disney and Hollywood to expect neat, happy endings, as well as introducing themes in literature that can make many pre-service teachers quake as they consider what's "appropriate" for their future classrooms. The

resulting conversations surrounding the literature are both exciting and sometimes disturbing, but ultimately enriching for those of us engaged in an intense and exciting study of literature for children.

González, Rigoberto. *Antonio's Card / La Tarjeta de Antonio*. Illus. Cecilia Concepción Alvarez. San Francisco: Children's, 2005. The first book that we read together as a class is a bilingual book, *Antonio's Card / La Tarjeta de Antonio*. My intention for using this book first is that it is a very kind and gentle book that nonetheless shakes up expectations and prepares students to struggle with very difficult issues throughout the semester. The theme of this book is actually quite simple: the need for social acceptance is universally understood. Yet the book focuses on the child of a bi-racial lesbian couple, a couple that has formed fairly recently after the mother and father of the child have divorced. As Antonio adjusts to his new family, and the teacher fumbles in her role, the reader often becomes sympathetic toward all of the well-intentioned adult characters and hopeful about Antonio's adjustment both in school and at home. The fact that the book is presented in both Spanish and English also highlights the need for diverse languages in the classroom.

Barrett, Joyce Durham. *Willie's Not the Hugging Kind*. Illus. Pat Cummings. New York: HarperTrophy, 1991. Willie has decided that hugging is for sissies because that's what his friend Jo Jo always says. But his family likes to hug, and it's hard for Willie to stay hug-free. This book is a wonderful children's story about families who love each other and don't mind showing it. Willie's sadness about giving up hugs becomes apparent to the reader even before

Willie understands it himself. The sister who teases Willie adds elements of both sibling rivalry and unconditional love. As a teacher, I can see this book being useful in community development; while students like Jo Jo need to be allowed to keep their personal space, students like Willie should be able to freely to show their affection for their loved ones: at home and at school.

Kazumi Yumoto. *The Spring Tone*. New York: Laurel Leaf, 2001. For pre-service teachers who have fond memories from their adolescence of books by Judy Blume, I like to suggest other books that I consider more artistically rendered. *The Spring Tone*, for example, is a surreal reading experience that follows two children whose parents are going through a divorce. Many children will identify with Tetsu and Tomoki, who are both suffering a great deal because of the turmoil in their family. The close relationship of the siblings, who are typical in the way that they argue and yet defend each other, is a good example of a strong yet dynamic sibling relationship. Of particular interest is the narrator Tomoki, the older sibling, a 12-year-old girl whose physical changes due to puberty are accentuated by metaphysical experiences. She describes her many fears about her changing body and her ambivalence about growing into adulthood. An earnest yet unreliable narrator who moves disconcertingly from her dreams to her waking thoughts, Tomoki's first-person narrative often takes the reader by surprise.

Estes, Eleanor. *The Hundred Dresses*. Illus. Louis Slobodkin. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944. Eleanor Estes' classic Newbery Honor book, *The Hundred Dresses*, is certainly the oldest book on our list, having been published in

1944 with illustrations by Louis Slobodkin. I particularly appreciate that this book can help students debunk the “Golden Age” rhetoric that many of them subscribe to: that people were kinder and that children were happier in their grandparents’ days. In terms of class, Wanda is an obvious target of the class bully, Peggy, but more subtle is Maddie’s precarious condition. As the recipient of Peggy’s second hand clothing, she lives in fear of Peggy’s scorn, even as she worries about Wanda’s treatment. Peggy’s lack of conscience is disturbing and serves as a comment on the callousness and blindness of the upper classes in any class struggle.

Though many books have been published with similar themes regarding bullying and class divisions, I have yet to find another book with such a careful, compact, and concise treatment of the child who moves between multiple perspectives and who finds herself residing uncomfortably, without easy resolution. In the course of this short story, Maddie is a bully, a helpless and guilty witness, and finally, though too late to make a difference, a willing agent of change. Estes shows the child, Maddie, going through an ethical conflict and coming to an uneasy resolution with surprisingly little adult assistance or intervention.

Fletcher, Ralph. *Uncle Daddy*. New York: Holt, 2001. *Uncle Daddy*, by Ralph Fletcher, is a fabulous choice for showing off Fletcher’s writing skills as the class also studies his theories of writing pedagogy in such textbooks as *Boy Writers*, *Craft Lessons*, or *What a Writer Needs*. The young protagonist of *Uncle Daddy*, Rivers, a very likeable character, had been abandoned by his father six years

prior to the start of the book and lives happily enough with his mother and her uncle, a man he calls, affectionately, Uncle Daddy. Uncle Daddy is the perfect the ideal father figure: interested in Rivers' development, a friend he can talk to, a kind person who is also well loved by the children at the elementary school where he is principal. Rivers is surprised one day by the return of his father, and the relationship he must now forge between the father and the father figure who disapproves so strongly of the father's choices. Rivers negotiates the jealousy, the anger, the hurt feelings, and the questions that an abandoned child feels. The story moves along swiftly, with breathtaking tension and suspense, as engaged readers wonder how this family will evolve.

Lowry, Lois. *Number the Stars*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989. It's difficult to choose the best book to include from Lowry because an entire semester could be devoted to her work. *Number the Stars* is my choice, though, because of its sensitive treatment of the victims of the Holocaust, its multi-faceted and stark vision of heroism, its view of human perseverance in the midst of struggle, and its powerful portrayal of the child and her agency as she grows toward adulthood. While the plight of the Jewish family is not highlighted in the story, neither is their suffering diminished.

Lowry has been criticized for her choice to focus on the Christian heroes of Denmark and give their characters more active roles in the book, and I agree that this is a difficulty in the book; yet Lowry's choice was to tell this particular story, of the Danish Christians who helped the Danish Jews

escape from the Nazis and preserved their homes throughout their absence, and there is nothing wrong with writing a particular story with a particular focus. As the person who selects literature for pre-service teachers, however, I have a responsibility to highlight this criticism and bring companion novels with Jewish protagonists to the attention of my students. The need to tell the Holocaust story and many other stories of mass human suffering and depravity is a troubling part of teaching in elementary schools, as many teachers don't know how to best address the idea of human cruelty. *Number the Stars*, then, is an aid to teachers because the violence is kept off-stage yet ever-present; the story is told with consideration for the sensitivities of children, and it gives children several remarkable heroes to admire, even as they sympathize with the sufferings of others.

Cormier, Robert. *Tunes for Bears to Dance to*. Topeka: Tandem, 1994. Cormier is truly an artist of great literature for children. While his work has been praised in critical reviews, it has also been the victim of many censorship attempts: I'm not sure which of the two is the more certain sign of genius. Cormier's heart-wrenching story of Henry, a child from a life of extreme poverty and extreme grief after the death of his brother, feels he can change everything if he follows the dictates of his employer. He often feels trapped and helpless, much like the girl, Doris, who hides in the shadows nearby. When the employer offers Henry a chance to save his family economically and honor his brother's grave, Henry is caught in an ethical dilemma: by engaging in an act of violence against his community, Henry can save himself.

Henry acts first out of desperation and then out of an inner strength he doesn't know he has. The result is a story of human integrity in the midst of impossible circumstances. Henry is never offered a positive solution to his question, and every step is fraught with risks, but alone he decides to act in a way that honors his integrity as a human being, and he learns that pain cannot be avoided in this life. *Tunes for Bears to Dance to* is a story that adults must read if they are engaged with the lives of children. While much of our current emphasis on character education centers around the idea that a child cannot make an ethical choice without adult intervention, Cormier instead celebrates the ethics of every human spirit while also exposing some of the dangers that children must confront in maintaining their personal integrity.

Munsch, Robert. *The Paper Bag Princess*. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Toronto: Annick, 1992. This seems silly looking back, but one semester I decided not to use this book because my students loved it too much. This book became the default example for every discussion. Discussing plot and structure? Someone mentions repetitions and disruptions in *Paper Bag Princess*... Discussing coming of age stories? Someone mentions the way Elizabeth grows from child to hero to independent woman... Discussing gender roles? Well, certainly Elizabeth and Ronald come to mind immediately... Discussing sensory imagery? What about the dragon's breath and the smell of burnt forests...

So I dropped the book from the required reading list one semester, until I found myself reading it aloud to the class for a study of Propp's



morphology of the folktale. Once I realized how essential this book is, it quickly returned to the list. My compromise now is to schedule the book toward the end of the semester so that other wonderful picture books have a chance to be recognized. Elizabeth is among the many clever young women we study throughout the semester, and she is especially fun to study next to a similarly spunky young character, Flossie Finley, of McKissack's *Flossie and the Fox*. Like Flossie, Elizabeth has the vivacity to capture a reader's imagination; her ability to outwit the powerful dragon, and her stunning refusal to Ronald are moments of delight and surprise.

Bruchac, Joseph. *Between Earth and Sky*. Illus. Thomas Locker. Orlando: Harcourt, 1996. This collection of stories by Joseph Bruchac is a special study of sacred places in the United States that combines cultural, historical, and geographical lessons for pre-service teachers as they consider how they will teach about various religious principals, how they will introduce concepts of social studies, and how they will encourage children to care for the earth and its creatures. Bruchac's volume, beautifully illustrated by Thomas Locker, is a stunning set of tributes to the sacred places of the United States, testimonies to the power of the land and its history.

Taylor, Mildred. *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry*. New York: Dial, 1976. I can't imagine a semester of children's literature without this book as the backbone. I don't know of another book that reaches into the hearts of children and adult readers in a way that evokes a strong empathy for children who suffered through the racism of the Great Depression. When we study the historical

context of this book, I emphasize that the Great Depression was especially devastating to African American families, and this book really demonstrates that historical moment.

A recent class discussion centered on this book and the problem of derogatory language. The white students were split about their ability to use this book in classrooms, and they offered many interesting insights about how they intended to use the book as teachers. Because Mildred Taylor uses the word “nigger” occasionally, white students wonder whether they could read the book aloud in class, and they worried about the impact of introducing this word to a classroom of children. They considered the idea of editing the book for read-aloud, but quickly dismissed that idea in favor of honoring Taylor’s virtually perfect masterpiece of fiction. We discussed the idea of using Lynne Thigpen’s marvelous audio version of the book as a support for the teacher. Reading the history of suffering and pain is difficult for pre-service teachers to imagine, so I’m glad to hear the pre-service teachers engage in the discussion. While they realize the importance and necessity of the book in classrooms, they wonder about how best to deliver it.

Some of the salient features of the book, for me, are the agency of the children, especially as they react to adult situations and resist their parents’ attempts to censor the amount of information that they gain. The family’s need to hold onto the land is pitted against the family’s desire to contribute to the community, even as they know that the community is powerless in the

face of the white supremacists who control the political power of the community. The final scene, as David sets fire to the crops, is absolutely devastating, and as Cassie cries for TJ and the land, it is a shared emotion between reader, narrator, and author.

Yang, Gene Luen. *American Born Chinese*. New York: First Second, 2006. Gene Yang's brilliant graphic novel combines three stories, spanning time and space to provide both ancient and modern images from China to Chinese-Americans and Chinese immigrants to the United States. The three stories, seemingly independent of one another, come crashing together toward a stunning conclusion. The book is a brilliant study of human relationships, of class distinctions, of the immigrant experience in the United States, of stereotypes directed toward Asians in the United States. Pre-service teachers discuss many themes, including the need for acceptance in a new environment, the desire for meaningful friendships, the betrayal and rejection that all students feel sometimes, and the hope that teachers will be sympathetic to the children under their care.

Khan, Noor Inayat. *Twenty Jataka Tales*. Illus. H. Willebeek Le Mair. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1985. While most character education programs are based on rotting out the evil in school children with pithy quotations and big-name heroes, I believe that a more subtle study of character, using literature especially, can be more fruitful for classrooms. Toward that end, I like to promote Princess Noor Inayat Khan's Jataka tales as stories of peaceful resolution, of conflicts solved by selflessness, of demonstrated concern for

others, of humility and harmonious goals. This study of the Buddha's many incarnations is potentially controversial in public schools, but I think worthy of defending. Princess Khan's life is of genuine interest to students of history. A member of India's royal family during World War II, the princess recognized that the rule of the monarchy would soon come to an end in India, and so she wrote the stories of the Buddha in order to preserve them as a gift to her people. Later she became one of the only women to operate a radio for the French Resistance, for which she was arrested and killed in a concentration camp. Like her characters, the princess was a selfless person whose life was dedicated to saving the culture and the lives of her people. Her heroic story mirrors the stories that she captured in her book, stories of selflessness and sacrifice for the good of others. Taught as a companion to Gene Yang's *American-born Chinese*, the stories of the Buddha illuminate the monkey king that Gene Yang gives life to in his graphic novel and provide a basis for understanding the lively characters in a contemporary setting.