SUPPORTING CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS IN CLASSROOMS

INTRODUCTION

Critical conversations are important because they highlight diversity and difference while calling attention to the nature and role of literacy in our society. We have found that some books are particularly useful for starting and sustaining critical conversations in classrooms. These books provide the framework for a new kind of "critical literacy" curriculum that focuses on building students' awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead. We are interested in studying the conversations that follow the reading of these books and observing how children become new literate beings as a result of having participated in these conversations.

According to the definition we developed, books that can help to build a critical literacy curriculum meet one or more of the following criteria:

- They don't make difference invisible, but rather explore what differences make a difference;
- They enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced or marginalized--we call them "the indignant ones;"
- They show how people can begin to take action on important social issues;
- They explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position people and groups of people;
- They help us question why certain groups are positioned as "others."

Some books in the critical category focus more on historical issues like slavery or the industrial revolution and show how large groups of people were marginalized and stripped of their human rights. Others are more contemporary in nature and encourage readers to interrogate current practices that are generally accepted as "what we have always done." For example, if a present-day high school uses the theme of "slave day" to raise money for student activities, is it OK because "it's traditional" or do we need to talk about how this practice might be seen as sustaining the degrading treatment of African Americans? Other critical literacy books focus on the issue of "otherness" and how our perceptions of "others" change after we get to know them better. "Others" can be people of different racial or social groups; they can be elderly or handicapped or sick. Engaging children in conversations about the pernicious effects of "otherness" can help them begin to see and understand the world in new ways.

In primary classrooms, we have introduced critical books by reading them aloud. We note the key conversations that are generated by each book and plan subsequent curricular invitations that will help to extend these conversations over time. To foreground children's thinking in regard to critical issues, we select related artifacts to post on the classroom wall. Artifacts might be something as simple as a copy of a page in the book and key conversational interchanges.
between class members written on 3 x 5 cards with arrows mapping the flow of conversation over time. The result is what we call an "audit trail" (Harste & Vasquez, 1998), but which the three and four-year-olds in Vivian Vasquez’ classroom called "the learning wall" (see Figure 1).

In upper elementary and middle school classrooms, we have used six copies of 4 or 5 critical adolescent novels to create text sets which students self-select to read and discuss in groups. Members of each group work together to identify themes, and after the whole class comes together to share findings, artifacts and insights, which are posted on a classroom wall.

Conceptually, this work is anchored in Freebody and Luke’s model of reading as social practice (1997). Arguing that literacy is never neutral, Freebody and Luke lay out a grid showing four different constructions or views of literacy. They argue that historically reading has been seen as decoding and the function of reading instruction was the development of children’s ability to break the code. During the 1970s and 80s, psycholinguistics and schema-theoretical notions of reading emphasized reader-text interactions and drew attention to “text-meaning practices,” or more specifically, the development of a reader who understood how to use textual and personal resources at hand to co-produce a meaningful reading. In the late 1980s and early 90s, sociolinguistic and socio-semiotic theory focused our attention on language in use. During this period, reading was viewed in terms of what it did, or could accomplish, pragmatically in the real world. More recently, Freebody and Luke suggest that reading should be seen as a non-neutral form of cultural practice, one that positions readers and obliterates as much as it illuminates. Readers for the 21st Century, they argue, need to be able to interrogate the assumptions that are embedded in text as well as the assumptions which they, as culturally indoctrinated beings, bring to the text. Questions such as “Whose story is this?” “Who benefits?” and “What voices are not being heard?” invite children to interrogate the systems of meaning that operate both consciously and unconsciously in text as well as in society.

While critical literacy involves critical thinking, it also entails more. Part of that "more" is social action built upon an understanding that literacy positions individuals and in so doing, serves some more than others. As literate beings, it behooves us not only to know how to decode and make meaning but also to understand how language works and to what ends, so that we can better see ourselves in light of the kind of world we wish to create and the kind of people we wish to become.

From several perspectives, then, the books we review in this chapter are of critical importance to educators. While they invite specific conversations around specific topics, they function as a whole to create a curriculum which honors diversity as well as invites a new kind of literacy curriculum—one built upon the premise that a model of difference is a model of learning for individuals as well as for society. One of the implicit arguments being tested by our use of these books in classrooms is that a diversity and difference model of education better serves a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society such as ours than the conformity and consensus model of learning that currently permeates the whole of our educational system.

Given such possibilities, the book reviews that follow are somewhat different from the reviews that are included in other sections of this volume. While we summarize the text, we also highlight potential conversations that the reading of these texts make possible. In this way, teachers who wish to invite students to engage in particular conversations, given events that have transpired in their community, can easily locate texts that fit the bill. Others, who have particular conversations started and who wish to have them continue, will find the thoroughness of our reviews useful as they identify themes as well as alternative perspectives on issues.

Arthur Applebee (1997) found that the best teachers thought about curriculum in terms of what conversations they wanted their students to be engaged in, not in terms of what concepts they wanted to introduce through reading or through direct instruction. Concepts, he argues, will come as learners engage in conversations that keep them at the forefront of the discipline they are studying and the world in which they are living. While many of the books we review can be seen as controversial, they reflect life in a way that most school curricula do not. It is this relevancy and the potential to explore new curricular possibilities that make this chapter, the books we review, and the topic of critical literacy, all conversations we simply can't afford not to have.

References

Our group thought that the following books had the most potential for generating the kinds of critical conversations that we want our students to experience. To expedite organization and planning for teachers, the titles are arranged according to the five criteria for critical books that we developed.

Understanding Differences that Make a Difference


When Carlos' mother says the family is going home to Mexico for Christmas, Carlos isn't sure what to think. What about the house they've lived in for five years, as long as they've worked the crops for Mr. Culloden? And if Mexico is home, why did his parents ever leave? His father's answer is always the same: "There is no work in La Perla. We are here for the opportunities." But Carlos knows what it's like to work in the hot strawberry fields and he sees his parents come home tired and sore every night. He wonders what those mysterious "opportunities" might be.

When they arrive in La Perla, his parents are more excited and lively than he's ever seen them. It's as if they've forgotten about their sore shoulders and bad knees. Welcoming relatives "don't feel like strangers," and Carlos begins to see why, as his sister tells him, their parents are working to save money to come back to Mexico, someday "after our opportunities." The brightly colored illustrations by David Diaz capture the warmth and festivity of homcoming and holiday celebration in a Mexican town. Framing the illustrations are photographs of colorful folk art, which, though lovely in themselves, detract from the beautiful illustrations. At the same time that this story dazzles and welcomes, it raises crucial questions of economic disparity, the hard working conditions of farm laborers in the U.S., differences in language and culture that can exist within families, and the painful choices and sacrifices families living in poverty face.


Radiance Descending is a novel about an older brother, Paul, learning to accept a younger sibling, Jacob, who was born with Down's Syndrome. The unfortunate thing is that readers learn very little about Jacob's condition but much about the egotism of Paul. Paul didn't want to take Jacob to the doctor's office. The real consequence of his taking Jacob to Dr. Brill for his appointments would be that he wouldn't be able to practice not thinking about him. Jacob would haunt him all day long. Paul was being drawn into the life of the family. It felt like the inside of the school bus when it was filled with kids--warm, crowded, humid (p. 69).

On the positive side, Radiance Descending (which echoes the grandfather's comment as Jacob comes downstairs dressed up in a golden cloak for his fifth birthday) is filled with food for thought:

There's something good about having a brother like Jacob, even though you won't understand it for a few years...when you're grown up. People don't like to think about trouble until it slams into them. You'll be more ready for it. It always comes--in one form or another (p. 68).

Jacob is an eerie child at times. He's irritating. You've explained him to yourself. It's the explanation you think you understand--not Jacob. That's true about other things as well. We're very familiar with our own explanations (p. 96).

Like Paul, we've all tried to avoid being drawn into the problems we face in life. Although there is no happy ending here, there is value in learning the importance of multiple perspectives. Paul seems to see Jacob as an "other." He'd be quite happy if Jacob didn't exist at all. Although Paul doesn't make much progress, there is hope that near the end of the novel; he is beginning to see the world through less egotistical eyes. That's progress, of a sort, and unfortunately a position from which we all must grow.
Creating opportunities to talk with children about issues of this sort is what makes this novel worthwhile. Radiance Descending is an easy read that invites children to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors towards others. From a critical perspective, once this story is on the floor, children can be invited to draw analogies between themselves and Paul. When handled in this way, we found children exploring their feelings and reactions to handicapped children, old people, and members of non-dominant minority groups in their community. Educators can use conversations like these to negotiate a critical literacy curriculum and make schooling more relevant to children.


Set within the context of the racially-torn 60s, this is the story of Anna Zabrocky and her first encounter with an African-American. Anna's new second grade teacher, Sister Anne, believes in story, the power of example, and hands-on learning. Anna never loved school so much nor were Sister Anne's lessons ever more meaningful than the day when a paper airplane crashed into the blackboard with a note that read:

Roses are Red
Violets are Blue
Don't let Sister Anne
Get any black on you!

Like good teachers everywhere, Sister Anne transformed this incident into a curricular invitation to learn about Black Americans and understand the systems of oppression and opposition in our society. Hands, both Sister Anne's and the multicolored ones that Anna Zabrocky drew, become the metaphor for what it is we can cross-racially both give and learn.

Sister Anne's Hands is a gentle story and a gentle way to invite conversations about difference which teachers in both public and private school settings will find uplifting. K. Wendy Popp's illustrations are "tonal" both in terms of the period in which the story is set as well as in terms of the mood which the story evokes. When I asked Robert, a second-grader, what he thought of the story, he said, "It's important. You learn to be fair and get along with people."


Winner of the 1996 National Book Award for Young People's Literature, Parrot in the oven: Mi vida is a powerfully written account of a Mexican-American boy's coming-of-age and how hard it is for members of underrepresented groups to outgrow the circumstances of their birth. In Mexico there is a saying about a parrot who complains how hot it is in the shade, while all along he is sitting in an oven. In this novel, the protagonist is known as Perico ("parrot" in Spanish), and the more one reads, the more one comes to appreciate the appropriateness of the book's title. Perico is growing up in an oven where his sister dates one of the roughest characters in the barrio, where gang membership is assumed ("He didn't have a brother....When you are like Albert, and you don't have protection, any day of the week, on any street corner, a guy like Lencho can kick in your rib cage and nobody would give a damn" [p. 116]), and where participation in what the gang does, even if it involves robbery, is considered common practice.

Fourteen-year-old Manny Hernandez wants to make something of his life, but it's not easy when you have an abusive father, your brother is a member of a gang and can't hold a job, and your mother faces reality by scrubbing the house, physically and metaphorically trying to scrub her troubles away. "Start on the bottom and work your way up," his father tells him. Drop out of school and become a dishwasher. From dishwasher you can become bus boy and finally waiter. Perico thinks otherwise. Here is his philosophical aside: "Only most of the people he knew started on the bottom and worked their way sideways" (p.38).

Parrot in the oven: Mi vida is an excellent book for literature study. No one can walk away from this book without having a better understanding of home culture--both as a negative and positive tie that binds--as well as a better understanding of the systems of meaning that operate in the larger society to maintain the status quo, ensuring that the poor stay poor and the vast inequities never get examined. The chapters entitled "Boxing Match," "Going Home" and "Dying of Love" are particularly excellent in demonstrating the yin and yang of cultures, cruelties, and clashes.

Each of us knows or has known a juvenile who is out of control. It seems like these young people not only reject the dominant social values, but are also destructive and dangerous both to themselves and to society. Told from the perspective of Sura, a juvenile who is doing six months in the Hartford Juvenile Home for "clipping" hood ornaments, The Buffalo Tree is a haunting tale of how the residents of this detention center--juveniles and adults as well--seem to be doing all that they can to make their collective experience there a living hell. Author Adam Rapp uses "juve talk" to give readers a glimpse of how these troubled adolescents think and the heavy burdens they carry.

While this book may not be for everyone, both because of its focus and its language, it is eye-opening and does invite conversations about young people who most adults dismiss as "anchorless." Although there is no happy ending for this tale of institutional child abuse, readers are encouraged to reflect, as Sura did, on how society positions some of its young people, and who in all of this benefits. Left unanswered is the question of what we should do. This is, of course, a much-needed conversation as clearly there should be better alternatives than the one portrayed in the book. While, then, a disturbing tale, this also is its virtue.

Charles is surprised to learn that Hector, the new kid, is Puerto Rican. After all, both boys have the same brown skin and the same black hair, though Hector's is straight and Charlie's is curly. What separates them is their language. In exploring these issues, Charlie begins to see difference as "creative" rather than problematic. Although the book focuses on surface issues such as having the "right" shoes and tee-shirt to fit into the group, bigger issues await discussion: how different languages can camouflage a common culture; how pop-cultures are created to sell merchandise and define who is "in" and who is "out"; how language and issues of multiculturalism are related to power in our society.

Watercolor pictures by E.B. Lewis capture the kind of transparent role that color in our society should play, but in many ways seem prosaic given the importance that difference and culture make in a book entitled Creativity.

In 1942, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor; two months later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 decreeing that all people of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast of the United States must be relocated to internment camps. Many of those interned were American citizens.

Set in 1972, So Far From the Sea is a story of the Iwaskaki family and their visit to the internment camp in California where their father was interned for three and a half years. The story raises important issues about the segregation of the Japanese during the war, and offers a demonstration of how easily people can be 'othered.' Questions regarding citizenry and who decides what a good citizen is and who qualifies to be one can be raised. The story allows space for conversations regarding segregation that exists today and the systems that maintain its existence.

The illustrations by Soentpiet alternate between black and white and color, effectively supporting Bunting's description of the sensitive journey.

When the little girl in white socks started walking to town to see if she could fry an egg on a sidewalk, she had no idea of the role she would play in re-writing history. Inspired by childhood memories of places she could not go and things she could not do because of her skin color, Evelyn Coleman presents a thought-provoking story that can provide much needed conversations about segregation, marginalization, the inequitable distribution of power and control as well as finding ways to take social action in what can appear to be the least likely places. This is a story of a young African American girl who goes to town to find out if it's possible to fry an egg on the sidewalk, and decides to take a drink from a water fountain in segregated Mississippi. Thinking that she understands the "Whites Only" sign on the fountain, she sits down in the grass, takes off her patent leather shoes and climbs up on the stool to take a drink with only her clean white socks on her feet. When some of the town's white residents
attempt to chastise and humiliate the child, her fellow African Americans who witnessed the event decide to take action.

The story ends with "And from then on, the 'Whites Only' sign was gone from that water fountain forever." The signs may be gone from water fountains, but issues of inequity continue to be played out across the nation. White Socks Only by Coleman is a powerful source to generate conversations for interrogating such inequities.


Life was not easy for newly-freed slaves at the end of the Civil War. Caught between the ruined economy and overt racism of the south, former slaves were often homeless and without means. Maddie Henry's family is better off than most since they have the money that her Papa earned working as a soldier for the Union Army. But he ended up giving his life to the war, and now the family is on the road, looking for a place to settle down. Along the way, Maddie befriends Tibby, the child of a master and slave who has neither home nor family. Tibby is a victim who has been so silenced that she literally cannot speak. This is a story about voice--how Tibby, Maddie, and other family members began to gain new voices that refuse to be drowned out by the waves of hatred around them.

This book raises questions about the meaning of freedom and how racist beliefs cause some groups to deny real freedom to others. It invites conversations about racist attitudes that still exist today and continue to silence people of color.


A teacher for 22 years in New York City, Hansen describes her combined message of self-empowerment and community service in this way: "By reaching their goals, these women helped someone else." Hansen's page-length, inspiring biographies depict the lives of 13 African-American women, arranged chronologically. We meet celebrity authors Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison. We also meet lesser-known women like Ida Wells-Barnet, a teacher and journalist at the turn of the century who exposed inequities in education for black students and the brutality of lynching in the South, and Dr. Mae C. Jemison, who was not only the first African-American woman astronaut but also worked as a physician in West Africa.

These artists, educators, health care providers, and activists provide role models and inspiration on so many levels—in the integrity, passion and struggle of their life work as well as in their own words. Critical questions could explore the obstacles each of these women faced, the resources they called upon to overcome them, and the ways they redefined cultural notions of courage, strength and heroism. What is perhaps most important is how these stories invite exploration of the unique and individual journeys each of us makes toward finding meaning in our lives. For the upper elementary school level, this book would work beautifully as a read-aloud; perhaps one biography a day or one a week. The striking black and white photographs were drawn from the Bread and Roses Cultural Project poster series, "Women of Hope."


Although this is a non-fiction text about the Native American tribes that populate the Northwest region of the United States, it is told like a story that invites the reader into these cultures to learn about their history and traditions. The text traces the history of the tribes of the Northwest, such as the Suquamish, S'Klallam, and Lummi, and realistically accounts their stories since the Western culture invaded their land. According to this account, it was feared at the end of the 1800s that this culture and its traditions would not survive. Thankfully, these dire predictions proved untrue and the author goes on to describe how today "the People" continue to abide with their cultural philosophies and "live in harmony with the earth."

The author confronts the critical issue of conservation and exposes the abuses of the land and water in the Northwest region. He contends that more and more "modern" society is coming to realize the ancient Native American wisdom of replenishing natural resources and taking care not to overuse the land or the rivers. This text provides the reader with the opportunity to reflect on the repercussions of being careless with consumable resources. At the same time, the books offers ways that this wasteful attitude can be reversed by observing the traditions and practices of an earlier culture. This perspective on conservation would naturally lead to conversations regarding the significant concerns surrounding this topic on both the local and global level.
In addition to its thought-provoking and informative text, this book is peppered with beautifully drawn pictures that coincide with the story. In contrast to the colored drawings that reflect an earlier culture, a number of black and white photos are included to show a "modern" view of this region. The combination of drawings and photos in the book presents the reader with visual images of the conflicts in this region that hopefully will be resolved for the next generation.


In this powerful example of historical non-fiction, William Kaplan shares the story of the struggle experienced by his father's family as they escaped war-torn Europe during the late 1930s to avoid persecution for being Jewish. Through the story of the Kaplan family's escape, the reader learns about the oppression and marginalization of the Jews during the war. Inclusion of authentic artifacts such as photographs, maps and the visa that allowed Bernard, Igor and Nomi Kaplan to leave Europe provide a sense of realism.

The story reveals the social repositioning of the Kaplan family from living in comfort and luxury to being penniless. It is thought-provoking in raising issues regarding how some systems of meaning oppress certain groups or individuals. Questions that can be raised include: Who stands to gain from the oppression of others? What do they gain? What are some ways of interrogating persecution in order to take social action and effect change? When partnered with Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story, this text set offers a rich demonstration of how people taking social action can make a difference in the lives of the oppressed. Through the support of others, the Kaplans were able to rewrite their lives into existence and readers are offered a glimpse of their new home in Cornwall, Ontario, Canada. But not all Jewish families who experienced persecution were able to start anew as the Kaplans did. Thus, the book can generate further inquiries into what happened to those who were not able to escape. Further, the book can offer space for conversations regarding the different ways that some groups and individuals continue to be persecuted and oppressed.


It is impossible to read this book on the exploitation of children throughout the world and not feel the need to act on their behalf. Although the subject matter is difficult to read about, it is important to be aware of the injustices of child exploitation and labor. The book immediately draws the reader into this timely topic by opening with the story of one exploited child who had the courage to raise his voice against the industry that was oppressing him and many others like him. While his individual struggle is only one small piece of this pervasive problem, it serves to emphasize how much more needs to be done on behalf of all mistreated children. Subsequent chapters describe how some children end up in this situation and what happens to them as a result. There is also a very important chapter with ideas for helping exploited children in the fight for establishing their human rights. The final pages of the book are devoted to poignant letters and genuine questions from children speaking out eloquently against the exploitation of their peers.

Throughout the book, stunning and disturbing black and white photographs of exploited children reveal their suffering and despair. The pictures speak volumes about these children and greatly add to the power of the text.


Helene-Angel, an African American preschooler, walks home from school with her brother, who doesn't particularly enjoy the task of walking his little sister home. One day, a gang of white kids surrounds them, blackening Mauricio's eye and painting Helene-Angel's face white as they show her how to be a "true American" and "how to be white." Helene-Angel is, of course, traumatized; she hides in her room until her mother forces her to come out. As she emerges from the house, her classmates greet her and promise to stick together so that events like this won't happen again.

Based on a series of true incidents, White Wash is a powerful story written in narrative style by the poet Ntozaki Shange, with illustrations from a Carnegie Medal-winning video. Overall, it gives voice to a little-known racial incident that became a lesson in tolerance and a child's triumph. Children need to understand why stories such as this one should never be forgotten. They should also be encouraged to begin to explore how they might transform the bad things in their own lives into triumphs. We found it easy to extend conversations to the topics of diversity and difference and the role that each must play in a multilingual and multicultural society that seeks to be democratic.
As the book jacket advertises, Listen to Us explores, in a complex and multifaceted fashion, "the difficult questions that surround child labor, including globalization, consumerism, and attitudes toward girls and women." Springer takes seriously the working children who are her subjects, as well as those who live in her intended audience. She justly describes children as resisters and activists. Some, like Iqbal Masih, are even shapers of history. This Pakistani child worker was killed at the age of 12 as a result of his international efforts to raise consciousness and free children from forced labor. Child activists and workers also speak for themselves in this volume: 10 year-old Nirmala, a Nepalese carpet weaver; 18 year-old Christine, a Canadian sex worker; and 18 year-old Naftal, kidnapped to be a soldier in the Mozambique National Resistance when he was 12 years old.

This book leaves readers with critical questions about the economic and social systems that support the exploitation of children and what might be done to help them. Springer discusses the potential harm poorly planned boycotts can inflict on working children, who may lose their livelihood and end up working in even worse conditions or on the street. She also describes well-organized, sustained campaigns that are helping to reduce child labor and to provide schooling and basic necessities for former child workers. These include the "Foul Ball" soccer ball campaign and "Free the Children," started by 12 year-old Craig Kielburger.

The only drawbacks to the volume are that the organization is rather fragmented, due to the inclusion of too many charts and boxed sections that interrupt the text, and that Springer glosses over the poverty and struggle for survival of children within industrialized countries. Overall, however, this is a truly outstanding book, with color and black and white photos that take a compassionate look into the difficult, varied lives of working children worldwide.


Every year, Tillage tells the story of his life to the children in the Baltimore school where he works as custodian. We're lucky to have his amazing story in print. Remembering his childhood as the son of a sharecropper in North Carolina, Tillage describes his personal experiences of--and profound insights into--segregation, racial violence and the economic disenfranchisement of blacks in the south as he was growing up. He tells of joining marches for civil rights as a high school student:

Our parents would say to us, "We don't understand. Don't you know you're going to get killed for listening to those people? You're going to get beat up. What's wrong with you?" Then we would say to them, "We're getting beat up now. We're getting killed now. So I'd rather get beat up for doing something or trying to change things. I mean, why get beat up for nothing?"

When he was fifteen, Tillage witnessed the violent murder of his father by some white boys who were drunk and never faced any consequences for their crime. And yet his voice, as he shares his story, is often spirited and gentle, rich with wisdom, humor, anger, and pain.

The book covers so much personal, political and historical ground that critical questions abound. This is truly a book for all ages. Readers can explore American slavery's legacy of racism, racial violence, and economic injustice, as it was when Tillage was growing up and as it persists today. The book also generates discussion about the power of literacy and storytelling. Roth's collage art, though evocative, is an odd choice for the book. Tillage's story is so powerful that Roth's feeling "that even one picture would be too many for Leon Walter Tillage's words" seems wholly unfounded. One returns again and again to the single photo of young Tillage on the cover, wishing for more.

Taking Social Action


This story is told from the point of view of a young Vietnamese girl whose life is changed by the encroaching war that surrounds her. What starts out as a distant threat gradually comes to encompass her family and her life. A major figure in the book is Ong Noi, the girl's grandfather, a "revered elder" who has been the herb doctor in his village for many years. When his son becomes a soldier, he comes to help look after his two grandchildren. With him Ong Noi brings baskets of medicinal herbs and sweet dried apples to cover their bitter taste. When their grandfather leaves to tend wounded soldiers in a distant area, the children...
continue to gather herbs as he taught them to do. In the end, Ong Noi uses his position as the herb doctor to sacrifice his own life so that others can have relief from pain and suffering. He gives all of his medicines to others and saves nothing to heal his own wounds. This book invites conversations about the different forms that social action can take and how this action affects people's lives.


This historical account of the events leading up to a massive women's factory strike almost a century ago shows how taking social action and working together can help to improve conditions for those who lack power. In this case, there was social action on the part of three groups. First, the "shirtwaist" factory workers themselves, mostly poor young women between the ages of 16 and 18, had between the ages of 16 and 18, had the courage to stand up to the powerful factory owners and demand better pay and better working conditions. Starving and without warm clothing, they picketed in the cold and continued their strike for months. When they were terrorized and brutally beaten by hired guerillas and hauled off to jail by corrupt police, two other groups of women became involved. Both "the mink brigade," (wealthy women) and "the college girls" had power and were ready to use it to fight for their progressive beliefs. When the strike ended, conditions for the factory workers had improved only slightly, but other gains had been made in terms of raising the public consciousness and the acceptance of a labor union that would ultimately protect the workers who followed.

This book would be appropriate in a historical text set focusing on civil rights and suffrage issues as well as in one dealing with current and past labor practices that reward some workers while abusing others. It could provide a starting point for conversations about domestic and foreign "sweatshops" that still exist to make cheap garments at the expense of the workers who make them.


The premise of this book is deceptively simple. The thoughtless act of an unhappy teenager has tragic results that set in motion a series of surprising events. Certainly this theme is a staple of young adult chapter books. Here, however, Fleischman has cleverly added concurrent story layers to this conventional format. This ingenious literary device offers a wider vision of the effect one individual can have on the larger society and describes the consequences that a single thoughtless action can have as it ripples over time.

As the story opens, the main character, Brent, is charged with the task of designing, constructing and placing four memorial whirligigs at various locations throughout the U.S. We then follow Brent on his journey to various regions of the country in search of appropriate locales for the colorful, wind-driven whirligigs. This journey supports the familiar theme of this genre; that is, Brent's growth from a self-centered, careless teenager to a thoughtful young man. Although Brent's story is engaging in its own right, it is here that Fleischman subtly and without warning inserts four completely independent narratives about other characters with varying backgrounds and social positions. The single connector between these stories and lives is the whirligigs Brent places throughout the country. In each of these parallel stories, a character has a unique encounter with one of the whirligigs, in some cases years after they were created. As a result of their encounter, each character has to rethink his or her own life. These concurrent story layers provide the reader with a broader perspective of the impact Brent and the whirligigs have on very different individuals. Just as the wind sets the whirligigs in motion, so Fleischman sets in motion a superb collection of stories with a single common thread. This compilation of stories enlightens the reader's understanding of the impact one individual can have on many others regardless of time or space.


The class makes a beautiful new flag, which they want to share with all the earth! The principal asks, "Why try?" But one child insists, "Why not try?" So the principal tells them to ask the mayor, since she might know. This exchange goes through several permutations as the children keep asking, and keep hearing from weary adults all the reasons for giving up on their plan: it involves too much work, it's too expensive, and on and on, until finally, at a meeting of all the nations, they unveil their flag, and the people of earth finally see--WHY NOT!

In this story, children keep asking their good questions, cooperating, and insisting on a unity among all people until the whole world is awed and healed.

Little Joe lives with her grandparents on a farm in segregated Mississippi. One day when she misses the school bus, Granddaddy drives her all the way to school, insisting that she go and learn as much as she can, even though "they're not teaching you everything they should." Little Joe begins to understand this better when her grandfather tries to register to vote. Granddaddy bravely persists in defending his rights even after the town clerk tries to dissuade him, the owner of the town co-op refuses to do business with him anymore, and an arsonist sets fire to the church he attends. On her eighteenth birthday, Little Joe is able to register to vote herself, simply by filling out a voter registration card. She does this while remembering her granddaddy's gift--his example of standing up for things he believed in and being proud, even when he was afraid.

This book celebrates the gift given to us by preceding generations who made a difference in the struggle for human dignity and civil rights for all. It honors their achievements and reminds us of the importance of education, pride, and vigilance in the ongoing struggle for social justice. Granddaddy's Gift invites students to experience the complex social milieu of segregated Mississippi and to witness the racism and violence that was encountered by black citizens who had the courage to stand up for their rights.


In July 1940, young Hiroki Sugihara, son of the Japanese consul to Lithuania, saw hundreds of Jewish refugees from Poland gathered at the gate of his family's house. These people wanted the Consul to give them travel visas so that they could escape from imminent persecution. After Consul Sugihara was denied his government's permission to give out visas to the refugees, he asked his family whether he should help the refugees anyway by writing visas to allow them to travel through the Soviet Union to Japan, and from there on to safety, insisting that they could escape from imminent persecution. After Consul Sugihara was denied his government's permission to give out visas to the refugees, he asked his family whether he should help the refugees anyway by writing visas to allow them to travel through the Soviet Union to Japan, and from there on to safety, and risk the consequences from both the Nazis and the Japanese governments. The family's collective decision to help the refugees set the wheels in motion for the next month, when Consul Sugihara hand wrote thousands of visas while Hiroki played with the refugee children in the park. Finally, when the Soviets took over Lithuania, they ordered Consul Sugihara to leave, just as the Japanese government reassigned him to Germany. But as the fascinating afterward notes, thousands of people were saved.

Dom Lee's sepia-toned illustrations beautifully convey the intense emotion of the Sugihara and refugee families, while they are also reminiscent of stark, black-and-white holocaust photos. The tone seems just right for this story, which raises important conversations about human rights; the diphoneships between compassion, courage, and sacrifice; non-violent resistance; and the power of the pen as an instrument of social justice.

Follow the Leader.
Integration; Intergenerational Relationships.

Set in 1971 in North Carolina, this is the story of a family that's trying to make a difference. Mrs. Adams remembers segregation laws from her childhood and now votes only for "people who want to make things better for everybody." Mr. Adams hires subcontractors according to their bids and not who they are and refuses to join a segregated country club, even though it would help him with business contacts and he sees it as "the most beautiful golf course this side of Myrtle Beach." Both Mr. and Mrs. Adams support desegregation of the local schools, even though this means that their daughter Amanda will be bused out of their neighborhood to a downtown school. Resistant at first, Amanda eventually comes to appreciate the teachers and students in her new school and realizes that the friend she missed so much at first was not the kind of friend she wanted to keep.

Follow the Leader invites conversations about racist attitudes that continue to lurk at or just below the surface in contemporary life. The book encourages adolescents to interrogate their often tacit acceptance of questionable peer group ethics and to rethink their own beliefs. Another important conversation that might come out of this book relates to how the burden of carrying out policy decisions often falls on people who did not make the decisions in the first place. In this case, adult citizens made the decision to desegregate the public schools, but the onus of working through all the problems that came with the implementation of this order fell on the children and teachers. Since one group elected to "think globally" in voting for integration, another group had to "act locally" in terms of figuring out how to make integration work.

Understanding how systems of meaning in society position us


James is ten and his six year-old brother Isaac likes to do whatever he does. One evening, after their mother goes to work, James sneaks out to meet the K-Bones, bringing Isaac with him because he can’t exactly leave his little brother home alone. The K-Bones, lead by Kris and Bones, aren’t a gang or a crew, they say, just guys who hang out together. James thinks he wants to join them. So they’re giving him a task: to spray paint the K-Bones’ name way up on a sign over the highway, over the Snakes’ name. "You mean tagging?" James asks. But Bones replies, "Crews tag. We write." James is nervous and scared, wishing he could leave. But how can he? He’s there just "to prove I’m tough enough to be in K-Bones."

When he’s back on the ground, mission accomplished, James feels "suddenly so cool." But the feeling is short-lived. As they flee the scene, James pulls Isaac by the hand and thinks:

I’m not feeling too great about getting him mixed up in this. I should have known the kind of stuff the K-Bones do. I’m not that dumb. Maybe I did know. But I wanted to be in with them.

And that’s when they run into the Snakes, who have a gun. The K-Bones take off, way ahead. James hears a shot, and little Isaac drops to his knees.

In the end, Isaac ends up with just two skinned knees, but Your Move does much more than scratch the surface of the issues it raises. Bunting explores the reasons why James and even six year-old Isaac are attracted to the K-Bones—both seek not only to connect with peers, but also to find older males to look up to, especially since their Dad left. The reasons why they both decide not to join the K-Bones, when Kris offers them the chance, are even more compelling. Critical discussion could begin with the choices James and Isaac make. What attracts them to the K-Bones? Why do they each decide to turn down the offer to join? Are there differences between the way ten year-old James and six year-old Isaac make their decisions? Exploring with kids what they think is at stake and how they have faced or would face similar decisions is crucial, especially because—as the book reminds us—even very young kids may need to make such difficult and important decisions.

Your Move also encourages discussion of the challenges single mothers face, particularly in finding safe and affordable childcare, and the way families and communities try to deal with violence. Ransome’s fine oil paintings dramatize the complex relationships between characters and the boys’ excitement and fear on the street.


Told from the perspective of different students in Mr. Fabiano's sixth grade class, this is the story of what happens when a substitute teacher doesn’t show up and the class decides they’ll run things by themselves for the day. No one
discovering their secret as they more or less maintain the usual routine, bringing the attendance sheet to the office, filing to music class in straight rows. But there's a lot else going on, even as they stick to most of Mr. Fab's lesson plan. Rachel, who hasn't spoken since the death of their classmate Tommy six months ago, confronts Bastian about his cruelty to Tommy while he was alive. The conflict and emotions that ensue make Karen, who masterminded a few lies to keep their day of self-governance secret, wish that Mr. Fab were there after all.

But at the same time, the class talks and writes about things they probably wouldn't have with him there. It's only at the end of the day, at the school assembly, that the principal discovers the deception.

When Mr. Fab does appear at the end, it's easy to see why the class loves him and his structured routines. Like the other adults, he's concerned and dead serious when he brings up what the class did. But he also wants to know what each of them thinks, and asks each student to write to him with his or her version of what happened that day. The varying responses allow for great discussions on taking responsibility versus being irresponsible, and on how school practices can both inhibit and empower kids.


This multi-layered story is told from the point of view of nine year-old Juice Faulstich, a chronically truant child who is happier at home with her unsuccessful father and pregnant mother than at school where she is constantly reminded of her inability to read. As the story unfolds, Juice comes to realize that her father is also a non-reader and that his lack of reading proficiency has brought the family to the brink of disaster in the form of eviction from their home. Juice begins to understand that although both she and her father are skilled in many ways, their acceptance by society and even by other family members is greatly affected by their status as illiterates. The book ends on a hopeful note as the family finds a way to avert the eviction and makes literacy a goal for all of them.

The critical issues embedded in this story begin to surface as the reader considers how learning and literacy position individuals as successes or failures both personally and socially, in school and in everyday life. The story of the Faulstich family shows how other ways of knowing are seldom valued as highly as literacy skills. In addition, the story illustrates how the efforts of well-meaning social service professionals can impact negatively on the people they are attempting to help if the voices of those individuals are not being heard. When extended to these critical levels, the story of Juice and the Faulstich family invites readers to consider how some people are marginalized not only by their poverty, but also by their illiteracy.


In this powerful collection of short stories that weave together like a novel, Francisco Jimenez presents a brilliant, up-close view into the lives of the Mexican immigrant farm workers who harvest produce in the fields of California. We see the humanity of this usually faceless group that brings to our attention continually being the subject of various types of political and media degradation. The book begins with Jimenez' parents risking all to come across la frontera to the promised land of California to escape the poverty of their lives in Mexico. What they find instead of good jobs and a better life is the back-breaking life of migrant workers. As they continually move from place to place following the ripening of the crops on "the circuit," they live in tents and shacks with no electricity or running water, don't earn enough money to feed their eight children or provide them with medical care, and constantly worry about being deported to Mexico. The twelve stories in this book are told from the perspective of young Panchito, whose authentic voice lets us feel both the joy and despair of migrant life. Jimenez' memoirs of school experiences and the frustration his father feels when he is unable to feed or protect his family are especially poignant.

This book would be a marvelous way to begin class discussions on a variety of critical issues including poverty in the United States, the working conditions of farm laborers, labor-management issues, how schools position students whose primary language is not English, health care and who's entitled to it, and transient life styles. The book is also an inspirational tale of personal courage and growth, despite the last scene of the book where Panchito is being taken out of school by an immigration officer and led into a border patrol car. The book is the winner of the 1997 John and Patricia Beatty Award from the California Library Association and winner of the 1997 Americas Award.
From the first stanza of this story poem, the reader is drawn into the urban tale of two boys trying to cope with the violence that hand guns bring into their lives. The boys know well enough the dangers of hand guns and can articulate the reasons to avoid using these weapons. Yet, when one of the boys feels threatened by an older peer, he decides to ignore what good sense tells him and brings his father's gun to school. In the end, the hand gun discharges accidentally wounding the boy and his friend. Although it is a hard lesson, the boy comes to see the folly of carrying a loaded hand gun for "protection" and vows to rely on his friends and his own intellect to solve his problems in the future. Life in an urban setting is closely scrutinized in this story. The issues of handguns, personal responsibility, handling conflicts, and making choices can all be interrogated using the context of this story.

The use of street language and rhyme gives the story the feel of a rap song. The author's choice to write this story in the form of a poem using urban dialect is both appropriate and intriguing. The illustrations are a combination of vivid background abstract drawings and individually framed pictures of the characters. The abstract background drawings look somewhat like graffiti, while the framed pictures are like snapshots that record the action as the story progresses. The use of bold colors in the art work adds to the intense feelings and drama inherent in this all too realistic narrative.


Run for Your Life is based on a true story about the recreation director of a community center in a drug-infested housing project in Oakland, California and how he positively impacts the lives of a group of teenage girls. Darren, the new center director, enlists the help of thirteen year old Kisha and her friend Natonia in convincing other girls in the project to join a newly organized track club. This is not just the story of the rocky and often traumatic road to success for the track club, but also the story of the remarkable growth that takes place in the lives of some of the club's members. The girls spend hours a day working out in the Walt Whitman project, surrounded by crime, drugs, and domestic violence. There is so much unrest in the neighborhood that Kisha's younger brother is afraid to leave the house unless he's with his parents.

This book provides an opportunity for students to see the harmful effects of poverty and unemployment, and how hopelessness can lead to domestic violence. Both teen pregnancy and sexual abuse are briefly dealt with in the book in non-graphic ways.


Based on the life of Tomas Rivera, a migrant farm worker who became a national education leader and University of California chancellor, this story shows how literacy and access to good books can work together to given voice to people who historically have been marginalized. With the help of a caring librarian and lots of books, Tomas is able to forge a new identity as the next-generation storyteller in his family. This book shows how libraries and literacy have the power to help all of us escape the mundane and explore new worlds. The seemingly textured illustrations add an almost surrealistic quality to the story.

On another level, Tomas and the Library Lady can be seen as a story that can help raise children's consciousness about migrant workers and what they and their families endure to survive. This book would be a good addition to a text set dealing with inequities and harsh working conditions in the workplace.


Brad Gold steps into a quagmire when he agrees to provide student input into the "Code of Student Conduct" at Roblin High School. After being humiliated by administrators and parents at a parent meeting, he becomes committed to reforming not only the language of the Code, but the way students, teachers and administrators interact at Roblin High. The fact that Brad is after nothing less than mutual respect so threatens the status quo that he is beaten up by school bullies Mandy and Candy, threatened by a midnight caller, and lambasted by teachers for his efforts. In the process, Brad discovers that power in the school resides in some surprising places, that his teachers are humans with heartbreaking problems, and that everything is more bewildering than he ever thought possible. And even though the School Board adopts his rewrite of the Code, maybe nothing has changed except Brad, who muses:

If this were a TV show or a movie, I'd know exactly what happened and why it
happened and I’d do something about it . . . But it isn’t a TV show. It’s life. Stuff like that happens to you, or to other people, and you don’t know why exactly, or even what did happen, exactly, and it may or may not have a happy ending and it may or may not even be over yet and your best friend won’t even tell you about it. It’s just plain bewildering (pp. 228-9).

Nodelman’s satirical look at high school life raises some important issues for discussion. Brad’s explorations prompt questions of how the social systems in schools position students, teachers and administrators. A real strength of the book is how Brad’s perceptions of people at Roblin change as a result of his growing understanding of the social and institutional dynamics that connect them. Although his depictions of classmates start out as rather cartoon-like, they become increasingly complex. The book also invites discussions on dissent and the process of working toward social change.


If you grow up as a boy in our society, you are expected to take, unflinchingly, “The Treatment” on your birthday, participate in hunting at a particular age, and be moderately ugly to girls even if they were, a year earlier, your best friends. While these behaviors might delight your peer group, amuse your father, puzzle your mother, annoy your female friends, and emotionally traumatize you, they are “what men do.”

Palmer LaRue is going to be ten and is going through his own rite of passage in a town that annually holds a pigeon shoot. In this town it is the ten-year-olds who get to wring the necks of all the pigeons who are wounded but do not die outright. Not only does Palmer ask why he should be expected to do this, but as luck would have it, a pigeon he calls Nipper, befriends him and becomes a pet. The inner turmoil, the social pressure, and the inevitability of an approaching birthday drive the story forward.

As a male reviewing this book, my memory was triggered. I remember those painful black and blue marks caused by people slamming their knuckles into my upper arms on my birthday-- We called them "Nookies," while here they are called "The Treatment"-- smoking behind the barn, having to drink beer to be part of the gang, learning to hunt, and any number of other growing up rituals that boys somehow manage to live through. What was not clear to any of us growing up at the time when all these things were happening was how these rituals positioned us to be certain kinds of human beings. Understanding that "common sense is always just cultural sense," Jerry Spinelli spins a tale that merits unpacking. Boys may just be boys, but that is not accidental.

Wringer invites the kinds of conversations that we cannot afford to miss having with children. It invites them to explore the forces that operate in society to position them in certain ways and make them into certain kinds of people. Perhaps even more important, the book might help them to become more consciously aware of their alternatives. In the end, even Palmer, a.k.a. “Snots,” learns to stop being afraid and to stand up for what he believes. And then comes a particularly hopeful scene: as Snots rushes out of the shooting arena with his wounded bird Nipper, a little boy in the audience asks his father if he can have a pigeon too. A brilliant, must-read, Newbery Honor Book from the author of the Newbery Award book, Maniac Magee.


This book explores how dominant systems of meaning position people and groups in certain ways. Through short, first-person narratives, the reader is able to follow the thoughts and actions of seven students and a teacher as they live through "Slave Day," an annual tradition at Robert E. Lee High School. Although the official purpose for the activity is to raise money for student activities, it is challenged by Keene, an African-American student who sees it as racist and demeaning. He writes in the school paper that this event is "not perceived as racist simply because it has always existed without comment from those it should chiefly offend--African-American students" (p. 1). Keene calls for social action in the form of a boycott of school on Slave Day by all of the black students. This suggestion is rejected by Shawn, basketball star and first African-American President of the Student Council. For Shawn, "the civil rights movement ended twenty years ago" (p. 61), and has nothing to do with him. When the boycott fails to materialize, Keene decides to "buy" Shawn and raise his-- and others'--awareness of racial issues. This plays out while other characters interrogate systemic systems of meaning relating to gender, social status, and institutional power. The book encourages readers to rethink the kinds of roles they choose for themselves and assign to others.

Just after WWII, everyone in the Oregon towns of Barlow and Bear Creek is gearing up for the yearly "Bat 6," the annual softball game between sixth grade girls from each town. Both teams have great new players: Shazam, whose father was killed at Pearl Harbor and who has just come to live with her grandmother; and Aki, a Japanese-American girl who has just returned home with her family after years in an internment camp. From the perspectives of 21 different characters, we hear first of the excitement and preparation leading up to the game, then how the game is cut short after a terrible incident of racial violence: Shazam knocks Aki in the head forcefully and intentionally, causing serious injury.

What follows is the town's struggle to make sense of what happened that day—a search that brings many to question their acceptance of the war's racism and violence, and their own complicity and silence. Critical conversations might focus on how social systems of meaning position various characters including Shazam, Aki, their families, the returned soldier and the conscientious objector. The 21-voice format also provides fertile ground for discussion of diversity, difference and dissent, especially in the context of this war, which is so often portrayed as uniting all Americans in moral consensus.

Examining distance, difference, and "otherness"


That Ancona chose the title Mayeros—the name Yucatec Maya call themselves—sets the tone for his respectful and lively photodocumentary of the daily life of a Yucatec Maya family. We meet two young brothers, Armando and Gaspar, as well as their parents, sisters, grandparents and extended family as they prepare and eat meals, build a ring for a bullfight, and dance to celebrate the feast of saints. Ancona, himself a descendent of the Yucatec Maya, masterfully juxtaposes ancient Mayan carvings and paintings with his photos—as we see a carving of a stone house from the ruins at Uxmal that mirrors the family's house and a painting of a woman grinding corn just as Dona Satulina does today. Throughout, Ancona explores the mix of Mayan and Spanish life ways that have come to shape how the family lives today.

Though there is room to ask questions about history and economic disparity—how Spanish colonization affected the Yucatec Maya or how the grandmother might benefit from modern medical care after she hurts her wrist—this is not primarily a story of poverty or oppression. Rather, Ancona's lens portrays the life of the family as rich with tradition, laughter, connectedness to people and land, and resilient adaptability to change.


An overprotective wealthy mother, her lonely son, an unemployed father, his outgoing daughter—these are the four character voices in Anthony Browne's extraordinary picture book Voices in the Park. When these four gorilla characters go to the park, we see their experiences from four very diverse perspectives. Browne uses a different font for each character to tell his or her story—a font that visually represents the personality of the voice. He does a masterful job of...
letting us see how the same incident is lived and understood in four completely
different ways. For example, we see Albert the dog portrayed as an unruly,
scruffy mongrel who is bothering a pedigreed Labrador; as the energetic pet of a
depressed man who wishes he had half his dog's energy; as a friendly dog who is
having a great time (the kind of experience the boy wishes he was having at the
park); and as a loving pet who is always in a hurry to be let off of his leash and
have fun.

On the surface this is the story of a simple trip to the park, but readers are soon
confronted with issues of class, gender, unemployment, first impressions,
prejudice, and cultural stereotypes. One of the ways that Browne is able to
accomplish so much complexity in such a short book is through his stunning
illustrations that help to convey the four perspectives. On one page we hear the
rich mother describing how she sees her child Charles talking to "a very rough
looking" girl. From the illustration, however, we see that there is no way the
mother can actually see how the girl looks because the girl and Charles are
standing too far away to be seen in detail. This type of interplay between text
and illustrations adds wonderful layers of meaning to the story. This unique
picture book is appropriate for all age groups.

Content), Primary Topics: Gay and Lesbian Relationships; Family Relationships;
Coming-of-Age; Divorce; Teenage Rebellion.

"Truth is I came here with an agenda . . .
Lose my virginity
Become an intellectual
Define my future" (p. 59).

And so begins "Lesboy's" trip to Paris. Wus-- a.k.a. "Lesboy" because he lives
with his mother and her partner-- needs to find himself psychologically as well as
sexually. Like his mother and her partner, Wus, too, has to escape from
Woodberry Country and the Puritanical attitudes that prevail. In Paris he falls in
love, learns to talk openly about his home situation, and begins to take an active
role in defining what kind of life he wants to live and what kind of person he
wants to be. This is just one of several powerful short stories making up Talk to
Me. The volume is extremely well-written, and each story pushes us to confront
our own beliefs, values and stereotypes.

In "Pillow Talk," another short story, Kate finds herself in love with Matthews, a
boy just coming to grips with his own homosexuality. Like other stories in this
"must read" volume, what Carol Dines does-- and does so well-- is explore
relationships, not just between couples but between others, given the first
relationship. The worlds in Carol Dines' short stories are socially constructed and
as such readers are invited to think beyond themselves and about how what they
do, say, and believe affects others.

Not all of the stories focus on gay and lesbian relationships. In Listening to My
Father's Silence, a teenage boy has to come to grips with his mother's cancer
and his feeling of not wanting to be sucked into the morass and new realities of
his family life. Like his father before him, who joined the Marines to avoid
arguing with his father, he goes to camp to avoid situations too hard to face.

In "Boy Crazy," a teenage girl is just that. "You have the face of an angel, the
hair of Bonnie Wright, the body of Madonna, but you are the daughter from hell"
(p. 85), her mother tells her. Predictably, their relationship goes downhill from
there. Like real life, things don't turn out happily ever after, though there is a
maturing:

Mom . . . says if I wait for love to cure me, I'll waste half my life waiting. She
says boy craziness is normal. But I'll be a lot happier, she thinks, if I learn how
to make myself happy. Like bubble baths . . . Dad says, once I get my life
focused, everything will fall in place. I just need some goals, he thinks, some
career plans to keep me motivated. For once I tell them the only truth I know.
Inside their words is more love than I can handle" (p.108).

In "At the Edge of the Pool," Leah finally gets a summer job teaching water
aerobics at a senior center. When Dorey, one of the senior citizens, befriends
her, everyone gets concerned about this "unnatural" relationship. Alison, her
sister, is blunt: "Let me put it this way, if Dorey were a guy, you'd call it sexual
harassment--" (p. 125).

In "Payback Time," Jess has to decide who will be his permanent guardian. He
loves his mother, he loves his stepfather and he loves his biological father.
He can't decide and neither will you once you learn what qualities all four characters
in this short, poignant story hold near and dear. Caught up in a divorce, a
remarriage and the legal system, "Payback Time" is a poignant story of the
human complexities which impact our lives yet make life worth living.
In "Locker-Room Talk," the novella, Pete, Naylor, and other members of the football team start a campaign to get Mary Fortuna elected homecoming queen. Pete's mother declares the prank "conscious cruelty" in that Mary is overly endowed and the favorite subject of locker-room jokes. When Mr. Rickover, the principal charges the boys with having violated the school's sexual harassment policy and consequently ineligible to play in the homecoming game, things come to a head, including some thoughtful rethinking and repositioning by Pete in light of the effects of his behavior on Mary, her family, and himself.

Carol Dines' stories are meant to start much-needed conversations among teenagers at the exact age when they should be taking place. While the theme that runs through the volume is coming-of-age, the stories invite readers to begin to have conversations often to be too sensitive to have in school. But, lest teachers reading this review become skittish too, the question remains: if these issues can't be discussed in the safety of school, where can they be discussed?


This amazingly complex short novel is told from the perspectives of thirteen different residents of an ethnically-polarized inner city neighborhood in Cleveland. Fleischman does a masterful job of intertwining the narratives and lives of each of the characters. Kim, a nine year old Vietnamese girl, plants dried lima beans in a trash-filled "vacant" lot in an attempt to spiritually connect with her father, a farmer who died soon after her birth. While Kim plants the seeds, she is watched by Ana, an elderly neighbor who lives across the street from the lot. Ana's suspicion of Kim hiding drugs leads to a series of human interactions that transform an ugly trash heap into a community garden, where people who had previously been distrustful of each other come together with a common purpose. In the course of this book we hear the believable voices of residents who are ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse. We hear the pain of their lives and we hear their triumph as they slowly and tentatively make connections and become part of a community. Each chapter is titled with the name of the character who tells his or her story and a simple, but effective black-line portrait by illustrator Judy Pedersen.

Many important social issues arise from the individual and collective stories of the thirteen characters. Stimulating and provocative classroom discussions can center around the topics of ageism, the social toll of economically-depressed inner cities, the immigrant experience, the problems and ways of getting action from "city hall," victims of violence, pregnant teens, racial prejudice, vandalism, and how to get beyond cultural stereotypes. This inspirational book can serve as a compelling demonstration of what a community action project might look like in students' own communities.


In this remarkable book, Virginia Walter weaves together popular culture, ethnic tensions, youth violence, and strained interpersonal relationships into an extremely disturbing, realistic, and well-crafted tale. On his thirteenth birthday, Robbie Jones walks into Mr. Koh's convenience store, pulls out his father's gun, then shoots and kills the elderly Korean proprietor. The story is presented from the voices of community members as they try to figure out why this horrible killing happened. We hear his disbeliefing mother, a glib TV news reporter, Robbie's disapproving father, a Vietnam vet, the local barber, his classmates, the girl he had a crush on, Robbie's teacher, his best friend, a correctional officer, and many more. This book reads like a TV drama and because of the disturbing content and treatment, it is probably best used as a read aloud followed by a class discussion.

As readers, Walter brings us face-to-face with real world issues, some that we read about regularly in newspaper headlines--issues that have no easy answers: teen violence, the proliferation of guns, the plight of victims of violence, adult responsibilities, callous classmates, small town prejudice, lonely children. We are also confronted head-on with how the perceptions of "others" position us and how powerful this positioning can be.

Some might say that it is a weakness of this novel that Robbie's character is not well-developed and we don't learn about the motivation that led to the killing; but by presenting Robbie as a construction of others, Walter places readers in the realistic situation of community members who have been confronted with "senseless" teen violence, are struggling to understand why, and don't have a lot of information. Although not a traditional novel, this book is a very convincing post-modern tale. Katrina Roeckelein's striking graphics are powerful, aptly reflect pop media images, and add to the cultural impact and tone of the book.

Wilson, Nancy Hope (1997) Old People, Frogs, and Albert. Illus. Marcy D.
Albert is a fourth grader with more than just a reading problem—he's also very uncomfortable about walking by Pine Manor, a nursing home that he passes on his way to and from school each day. The people who sit on the porch and call out to him are not only old and wrinkled, but not in the best of health either. When Mr. Spear, his reading tutor and friend, has a stroke and ends up at Pine Manor it's almost too much for Albert to bear. But when he surprises himself by reading a whole book without help and without focusing on the terrifying fact that he is reading, Albert gets the courage to overcome his fear and share his success with the residents of Pine Manor. He learns that the people he has been avoiding are different, yet have much to offer as friends.

This book makes the point very poignantly that being old or sick has nothing to do with being interesting and fun, and that negative feelings about others often disappear when we get to know them. Many children and adolescents share Albert's initial distaste for dealing with incapacitated or elderly people; this book encourages them to rethink their beliefs.

SECONDARY REVIEWS

Books in this section are worthy of consideration but not as outstanding as those in the Primary Review section. Some of the books in this section were not as obviously "critical" to us. Although the critical issues and possibilities were present, there was too much left unsaid and too much that had to be dug out before the critical implications of the book could be examined. In other cases, the books were found to be more valuable as references or resource materials for supporting critical conversations, rather than as vehicles for beginning them. And finally, some of the books in this section were deemed to be too sophisticated for most elementary and middle school readers.

Understanding Differences that Make a Difference


In school, nine year-old America Soliz passes some teachers in the hallway and hears her teacher, Miss Gable, whisper:

"She's an illegal." How can that be? How can anyone be illegal? She is Mixteco, from an ancient tribe that was here before the Spanish, before the blue-eyed, even before this government that now calls her "illegal." How can a girl called America not belong in America?

Miss Gable finds America's Spanish-speaking class "difficult," but when Mr.Aponte, a Puerto Rican poet comes to visit, America gets to recite Spanish poetry and the whole class listens and applauds. Encouraged, America begins to write poetry, remembering the strong and open voice she had in Oaxaca, the mountainous area in Mexico where she was born. Her father says writing is a waste of time because it won't pay the bills or clean the house. But America continues to write—despite the disheartening "gray world" of the Chicago ghetto, the violence she sees on the street, and the loss of her father's job. Her stories and poems evoke the mountains in Oaxaca and even encourage her mother and siblings to write as well. America creates an imaginative and expressive space where she belongs, regaining her own strong and open voice.

Although the ending is rather neat and America often seems more like a grown woman than a nine year old girl, this book raises complex and important issues for discussion: urban poverty and lack of opportunity; inequities in education; how schools position students whose primary language is not English; and how the U.S. economy relies on the labor of low-paid workers declared "illegal" by immigration policy. The illustrations are bright and beautiful and vividly depict the characters' imaginations.


In the author's note to this book, the reader is informed that the idea for this story sprang from an event in Sharon Wyeth's own childhood as she searched for the beauty in her world. This book offers an opportunity to take a critical look at the places people inhabit, as well as initiate discussions around the multiple meanings of the word "beautiful."

The young girl in this book pursues a quest for beauty in her inner city neighborhood. She initially is discouraged by the blighted areas around her, including the letters "DIE" on her own front door and the trash that is strewn
around the yard. But she soon discovers that beauty can be found in a beautiful
tasting fish sandwich or the beautiful sound of a baby’s laugh or simply the
beauty inside each individual. In the end, the girl takes her own positive action
to enhance the beauty of her neighborhood. For her efforts, she receives
the approval and appreciation of her mother, who reminds the girl of her own beauty
and self worth.

The book itself is made beautiful by the illustrations that reflect both the joy and
despair of living in an inner city neighborhood. The realistically painted pictures
are drawn with serious attention to the details that distinguish the characters and
the community. This detailed art work, along with the well-crafted text, enables
the reader to clearly visualize the people who inhabit this cityscape and
appreciate the beauty that does exist here.

Giving Voice to the Indignant Ones

Putnam's Sons. 96 pgs. ISBN: 0-399-23048-3. Chapter Book. Primary Topics:
African-American Culture; Slavery; Emancipation; Language as Power.

In these 12 stories selected from "Slave Narratives," the 1930s Works Progress
Administration interviewing project, we hear the voices and stories of
African-American men and women who lived under slavery. These are voices
which have been largely erased or ignored by American history and culture. The stories range from nostalgic recollections of childhood games and plantation
cuisine to painful memories of deprivation and abuse.

This book truly invites interdisciplinary conversation. While the brief introduction
makes passing reference to the historical and social context, one disappointing aspect of the book is that some of the stories and photos deserve or require
immediate comment, rather than simply leaving it to chance that these conversations will take place. Consequently, Slavery Time may best be read by
students in a group setting, where discussions can explore the crucial and often
troubling questions that arise. How can we make sense of the way a former slave recalls the days of slavery as a better time? What did freedom in 1865
mean? What does freedom mean today? Finally, these narratives are a profound testament to the power of literacy and self-expression, which so threatened the structures of slavery that slave owners strove at all costs— and often by violent means— to keep slaves from reading, writing, and speaking for themselves, as these men and women do so eloquently here.

Stanley, Jerry (1997) Digger: The Tragic Fate of the California Indians from the
0-517-70951-1. Chapter Book. Primary Topics: California History; Native
American Culture; Missions; Marginalization; Mexican-American War; Westward
Movement.

Stanley has created a well-researched, highly readable portrait of the destruction
of many of the Native American "tribelets" that inhabited what is now California
at the time of the first Spanish, and then American, occupation. Because the
Indians gathered their food and used sticks to dig vegetables, the forty-niners
called them "Diggers," and saw them as uncivilized creatures that were to be
shot on sight" (p. 85).

Stanley organizes his account chronologically, first telling readers about what life
was like for the Indians prior to the coming of the Spanish and Americans, and
then what life was like during the period of the missions and the Gold Rush.
Although many events are glossed, the text is full of historical facts and quotes. Here are just a few:

"A nation which is barbarous requires more frequent punishment than a nation
which is cultured." (Father Lasuen, a priest at one of the missions, p. 42).

"It will be absolutely necessary to exterminate the savages." (an editorial in an
April 1849 issue of the newspaper Alta California, p. 66).

"When Europeans arrived in North America, 10 million people were living there.
By 1910, only 230,000 Native Americans were left" (p. 73).

Although at times Digger reads like a social studies text, few readers will walk
away not having learned several interesting facts or having their romanticized
notions of the missions and the Gold Rush shattered. Stanley begins to give
voice to a people who have been marginalized by current accounts of history
and political policy. Sprinkled throughout the volume are maps, original
photographs, drawings and quotes from an interview with Ishi, a Yahi man
believed to the last Californian Indian to live according to the customs of his
people. The author provides an extensive index so that students studying this
period can locate information.

Anyone studying California history or Native American culture at the upper
elementary level and beyond should consider using this book as a read-aloud or
as part of a text set for literature discussion. Who gets to write history, and to
Taking Social Action


Rebecca Putney is a 10-year-old bobbin girl in 19th century Lowell, Massachusetts, who works 13 hour days under unhealthy working conditions in order to help support her family. The story, however, is not as much about Rebecca as it is about the social and industrial milieu of the times. More specifically, the story provides much needed space in which to encourage conversation about issues of child labor and child abuse as well as issues of labor control, enslavement and the marginalization of women. In the story, Rebecca befriends Judith, another mill worker who puts up with the conditions at the mill in order to finance her studies. It is Judith who rises to the occasion, standing up for the rights of the female factory workers when the mill owner decides to reduce already low wages. At first it appears as though the group of female workers may stand united against management. But in the end, many of them abandon the protest and return to work, driven by the illusion that working in the mill represents their independence.

The Bobbin Girl does not explicitly present itself as a story of triumph for women. However, it does raise a number of questions regarding the difficulties involved in any struggle for equity and social justice. It also points to the need for ongoing social action. With regard to gender issues, the book easily lends itself to discussions of what happens when women break the crust of convention and move into positions that challenge the ingrained gender biases in our society.

McCully's use of a dark palette and shadows convey the feeling of the poor conditions in the mill quite effectively.


This story of the historic 1994 election in South Africa is told through the eyes of young Thembi. Thembi's grandmother, Gogo, is determined to cast a ballot in the first election in which native people are allowed to vote. Even though she has not been out of the family's yard for years, the elderly Gogo makes the long journey to the balloting place, accompanied by her granddaughter and assisted by numerous community members. Thembi sees how much voting means to Gogo, the oldest voter in the township. Reading aloud Gogo and Thembi's story would provoke interesting discussion about the importance of democracy during political campaign and election times. While the issue of apartheid is not directly discussed in this book, its effects are demonstrated by Gogo's determination to create her own destiny by voting. Paired with Granddaddy's Gift by Mitchell Margaree King, this book raises parallel issues about worldwide struggles for black suffrage and social justice and the important contribution our elders have played and continue to play in this struggle.

Understanding How Systems of Meaning in Society Position Us

Perhaps no moment in time better dramatizes the institutional weight, violence, and injustice of segregated, inequitable education than when young Elizabeth Eckhart tried to pass through the line of armed National Guardsmen called out by Governor Orval Faubus to prevent black students from entering Central High in 1957. Haskins moves from this starting point to examine the history of black schooling in America, from violence against slaves who learned to read to the issues behind landmark legal decisions, most notably the stand for equality in education that the Warren Court took in 1954, with Brown v. the Board of Education. Haskins interrogates subsequent rulings which undermine this stand, including the 1973 Supreme Court ruling which upheld the funding of public schools through property taxes. We hear about black writers' and intellectuals' great and often unsung contributions to the struggle, from Phillis Wheatley to W.E.B. DuBois. Simple statistics on the disparity in school expenditures for white and black students speak volumes about the ongoing inequities in education.

Critical questions include how issues of segregation and funding are being played out in schools today. Students might explore funding in their own districts as compared to a nearby district serving another community. Can a public education system paid for by local property taxes be called "public" when it so plainly discriminates against poor communities? What does integration mean and what relationship does it bear to social justice and equality? Haskins includes a helpful chronology of events impacting civil rights and education, from the Civil War and Emancipation to a 1995 federal district court ruling that released the Denver, CO public schools from court-ordered busing. Black and white photographs give faces to the people who have dreamed of, and struggled for, equal education for African-Americans.


As Tyler's family prepares for Christmas, he discovers that the angel which tops their tree has broken. Wondering why all the representations of angels he has seen are female, pale and blond, Tyler sets out to find a black boy angel who looks more like him. Through his search, Tyler questions dominant cultural and Christian representations of the angelic and the divine. How can Jesus be blond if he was Jewish and born in the Middle East? Tyler's mother informs him that it is possible to be both Jewish and blond, but Tyler still wonders why Jesus isn't depicted with dark skin and hair and eyes. The story ends with the appearance of an angel just like Tyler, but his questions remain salient for discussion. Why couldn't Tyler find an image of a black boy angel to identify with in his family's Christian tradition? Why couldn't he find one for sale in any store? With a light touch, this story makes room for us to question how racism and gender stereotypes have shaped not only consumer culture and institutionalized religion, but even individual family traditions and conceptions of spirituality. Tyler challenges the dominant social systems that not only exclude him and deny history, but also stereotype black males as anything but angelic. Wright and Hu’s luminous watercolor illustrations make Tyler and his family come to life.


Breaking Boxes is a well-crafted tale about sixteen year old Charlie who is living in a poor neighborhood with his very responsible older brother since their mother died of alcoholism six years ago. Charlie is a loner who is befriended by one of the rich kids in town, Brandon, after an incident where Brandon ridicules Charlie for not wearing the "in" shoes. We see their friendship grow and eventually Charlie feels comfortable enough to tell his friend Brandon that Charlie's older brother is gay. Brandon is shocked, feels betrayed, gets incredibly angry, and tells everyone at school about Charlie’s brother. The book ends with the story of the eventual reconciliation between Brandon and Charlie. The issues of homosexuality and homophobia are handled in realistic and appropriate ways for middle school students. This book invites discussions about friendship, class differences, teen problems, and homophobia. The publisher suggests Breaking Boxes is written for ages 14 and up. There is a liberal sprinkling of profanity throughout the book, which adds to the believability of dialogue, but which may not be appropriate in certain school settings. There are also scenes that depict teen drinking and semi-explicit sex. Despite these potential problems, A. M. Jenkins does a masterful job of depicting homophobia in a way that makes the issue accessible for classroom discussions.


"Chairman Mao, our beloved leader, smiled down at us from his place above the
blackboard." Thus begins the true story of Ji-Li Jiang and her family from 1966 to 1969 during the cultural revolution in China. Twelve year-old Jiang was an excellent student with the potential of assuming an important role in the communist party when Mao Ze-Dong announced the cultural revolution. He commanded everyone to find and destroy the "four-olds"—old ideas, old customs, old habits, and old culture. Because of her family's "class status" of being former landlords, they lived with terror, powerlessness and confusion as they were publicly humiliated and threatened. Told from Jiang's memories, this compelling story has an honesty, intensity and integrity that brings to life this frightening period of history. Critical conversations on this book can begin by examining how the cultural revolution positioned the Jiang family in China. Given some historical background on the McCarthy era, class issues could also talk about the social, political and economic forces that positioned American citizens at that time and today. An epilogue and glossary are included.


Nunez and Marx provide a valuable presentation of the legal rights of minors in the United States today, explaining when children do or do not have specific rights. Beginning with a brief sketch of the history of children's rights in America, they describe the triad who hold a legal interest: the state, parents, and children themselves. What's changing recently in the balance between these three is that more frequently, and often for the first time, children's voices are being heard within the legal system.

Each chapter focuses on a different issue, from children's rights to safety and protection, to first amendment protections for minors, to child labor laws. Fascinating, specific cases illustrate the struggle between minors who demand their own rights, parents who insist on their rights to decide what's best for their kids, and the state which attempts to insure the safety of children. The strength and spirit of some children who have challenged not only their families but the entire legal system to provide them with safety and justice is truly astounding. Issues are presented in a complex, challenging manner, and provide much material for discussion, on subjects as diverse as student privacy rights in schools to child protection laws. In the words of Martin Guggenheim, Professor of Law at NYU, "the book challenges the reader to question the law as it applies to young people, ultimately leaving it to the reader to decide whether the law has gone too far, or not far enough."


The adults in Precious Jones' life either brutalize or ignore her. Her mother beats her, her father rapes her, health care workers blame her for two resulting pregnancies, and teachers pass her through school even though she can't read. But after she seeks help at the alternative school where Ms. Rain is her teacher, Precious struggles to rewrite the devastating story of her life in her own new words.

This is partly a story of what happens when the adults responsible for nurturing and supporting a child act in brutalizing and neglectful ways. Larger questions interrogate the systems of meaning in society that neglect or do violence to Precious because she is young, black, and female. This novel shouldn't be left on shelves for students to read on their own--it raises too many issues that would be overwhelming for kids to deal with alone. Rather, this novel pushes us, along with Precious, to ask each other questions about racism, sex, abuse, poverty, and inequities in education. These are important questions that impact kids' lives and often aren't addressed in school settings. One of the most crucial questions raised is where kids can turn, and what social and personal resources they can call upon, when adults hurt them. Precious Jones' story, told partly in the language of a sixteen-year-old just learning to read and write, is also moving testament to the power of literacy and of courageous teachers. This book passionately reminds us that a prerequisite for learning--for entering into multivalent, literate conversation--is for children to believe that their voices will be heard.

Examining Distance, Difference, and "Otherness"


Six 12 and 13 year-olds speak in their own words about their perceptions and experiences of race in America. They describe their own ethnic traditions, their experiences of racism and prejudice, and their ideas and hopes for race relations in America. One of the kids we meet is Janell, a Native American
dancer from Oregon, who tells us that her school friends are curious about life on the reservation. Another is Jason, an African-American who offers incisive perspective on continuing social and economic inequities. The title the book comes from Jason's observation that "It's not what color the skin is, but what's under our skin that counts."

Crum's photographs of each kid in different settings--with friends, with family, at church, cooking traditional foods, at a school dance--complement the multi-faceted individual portraits that emerge in the text. This focus on kids' individual voices provides a great starting point for discussion of how students experience the impact of race and ethnicity in their own lives--including the differences that make each of us distinct, the problems of racism and prejudice, and possibilities for social change.


Julie and her big sister Tara are on their way to the park to feed the ducks, but now their brother Ian wants to come. Through simple language and Ritz' luminous watercolor illustrations, this book explores not only the range of emotions Julie feels as sibling to an autistic child, but also the ways in which Ian himself experiences and senses the world "differently." On the journey to the park, Ian wants to smell bricks, not flowers, and once there, he lies with his cheek on the concrete instead of feeding the ducks. The illustrations capture the immense range of Julie's feelings--understanding, annoyance, anger, embarrassment, protectiveness, guilt, love, and affection. After Ian becomes lost in the park, Julie tries hard to enter his world and figure out where Ian would go. In so doing, she not only finds her brother, but also finds a way to connect with him and share experiences together.

Lears manages to validate all of Julie's feelings and to convey both the responsibility and opportunity Julie has to reach outside of herself and into her brother's world. This book could spark great discussions with kids about the way we feel toward people we perceive as somehow "different," and what changes when we open ourselves up to trying to understand our differences and connect with each other.


This documentary-like book offers a look at "special kids" and "special classes" through the eyes of Cindy, who is a regular education student. Because she really does not know any special needs kids, Cindy makes a hurtful comment to a child in the special needs class. To help her better understand the special needs of some learners, Cindy is asked to join their class for a half hour each day over the course of two weeks. Every day the teacher describes the needs of one of the special kids to Cindy. The teacher offers readily understandable information on learning disabilities ranging from autism to dyslexia to epilepsy. She explains the difference between physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. The teacher answers all of Cindy's questions about this class and encourages her to interact with the students. Through Cindy, the reader comes to know and appreciate the nine learners in this special needs classroom.

Each page of this book is highlighted with photographs taken in an actual special needs classroom, which the author acknowledges in her preface. These photographs give faces to the children as they are described by the teacher. The pictures enhance the text and allow the reader to see the individuals behind the special needs labels.

This book offers both clear and concise information regarding the special needs of some learners as well as a sensitive account of the feelings of the children who carry the labels of special education. It offers an entry point into discussions surrounding these sensitive issues.
take place regarding stereotypes, ethnic differences, bi-racial issues, language and power, animal rights and cultural perspectives.

His search for responses to his questions appears to be playful serving as a gentle reminder that critical issues can arise or be teased out of what appears to be conversations that are not primarily centered on such issues. George Littlechild offers bold and bright illustrations that encourage curiosity therefore supporting the generation of other inquiries.

OTHER IDEAS FOR TEXT SETS

In addition to the five Critical Literacy categories that our group used to organize books in this section, we identified three other "cuts" that teachers might find helpful for putting together additional text sets. One of these focuses on "Child Labor and Children's Rights," and includes books that address these issues from both historical and contemporary perspectives. This text set provides a wide lens for seeing how working children in a variety of national and international settings have been--and continue to be--marginalized and exploited. A second cut, "Literacy as Power," pulls together books that demonstrate the power of literacy in allowing new voices to be heard. Characters in these books discover how their acquisition or use of literacy allows them to write a new identity or to interact with others in powerful new ways. Finally, a third text set that we found intriguing involves the use of "Multiple Perspectives." Books in this group all rely on the use of a number of different characters to tell the story. Seen through the eyes of all these different people, the same events look very different and far more complex than they did at first glance. By highlighting these discrepancies in perception, teachers might find this text set useful for beginning philosophical conversations about the nature of reality and how our backgrounds and beliefs influence what we "see."

Child Labor/Children's Rights
 Dash, Joan. We Shall Not Be Moved: The Women's Factory Strike of 1909.
 Jimenez, Francisco. The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child.
 Martinez, Victor. Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida.
 McCully, Emily. The Bobbin Girl.
 Parker, David L. Stolen Dreams: Portraits of Working Children.

Literacy as Power
 Mora, Pat. Tomas and the Library Lady.
 Rodriguez, Luis. America is Her Name.
 Sapphire. Push.
 Thomas, Rob. Slave Day.
 Hesse, Karen. just Juice [sic].

Multiple Perspectives
 Birdseye, Debbie & Tom. Under Our Skin: Kids Talk about Race.
 Browne, Anthony, Voices in the Park.
 Fleischman, Paul, Seedfolks.
 Fletcher, Ralph, Flying Solo.
 Thomas, Rob. Slave Day.
 Walter, Virginia. Making Up Megaboy.