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From the Editor

By Lyn Miller-Lachmann



The year 2008 promises historic changes for the United States. In this election year, the leading Democratic candidates for president include a woman and an African-American man. Barack Obama's background, in particular, reflects the nation's growing diversity. He was born in Hawaii. His father was a graduate student from Kenya, who later returned to his country. His mother was White, from the Midwest. After divorcing Obama's father, she married an Indonesian man, and Obama lived in Indonesia for several years before graduating from high school in Hawaii. In the decade before his successful run for the U.S. Senate from Illinois, he wrote a memoir about his childhood and adolescence and his relationship with his parents and maternal grandparents, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1997). It is a beautifully written narrative of dealing with change and loss, and coming to terms with one's multiracial, multicultural identity. Whatever one thinks of Obama's presidential aspirations, the book is worth reading.

This year also marks the expiration of the monumental 2001 education reform known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Passed with very little opposition, NCLB faces major obstacles to its renewal. Never allocated the money promised for full implementation, NCLB has become a giant unfunded mandate for states and local school districts, which have had to forgo the purchase of trade books for classrooms and libraries in favor of testing and test-prep materials. Teachers and students (including the seventh graders I teach on Sundays) report that the emphasis on testing and "teaching to the test" has robbed classes of the creativity, excitement, and joy that should be a part of learning. The program has become rife with corruption, as instructional materials from politically favored publishers are forced on needy districts regardless of their efficacy, while other materials that may have been more successful are frozen out.

There is little evidence that NCLB has appreciably closed the achievement gap between rich and poor students, and between White students and students of color. Nor has the reform raised the achievement of U.S. students relative to students in other industrialized countries. Three articles in this issue of *MultiCultural Review* point to some possible causes of these failures. Both Jonda McNair's "Innocent Though They May Seem . . . A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Firefly and Seesaw Scholastic Book Club Order Forms" and Jane M. Gangi's "The Unbearable Whiteness of Literacy Instruction: Realizing the Implications of the Proficient Reader Research" address the needs of children, classrooms, and families at the critical stage of early literacy, from preschool to the second grade.

McNair looks at the offerings of Scholastic book clubs for the youngest readers, book clubs that for generations have provided a wide range of titles to families at a very low cost while raising money for school library materials. Yet the selections offered by these otherwise worthwhile book clubs underrepresent children's books by and about people of color, in this way denying families of color opportunities to see themselves in the books they buy, and denying White children the opportunity to learn about people who look different from them.

Gangi's article explains further why the omission is significant. When books "normalize 'whiteness' and marginalize 'color,'" children of color, who like all children learn to read by recognizing what is familiar in the text and illustrations—in essence, activating prior knowledge—are denied this opportunity and placed at a disadvantage. Along with book clubs and awards sponsored by the American Library Association, Gangi examines literacy textbooks assigned to pre-service teachers and the picture book titles they recommend, because the textbook-recommended titles will most likely be the "classics" prospective teachers use when they enter the profession. Because they have been written or updated in the last four years,

these textbooks address the requirements of NCLB but lack a full understanding of what is needed to close the achievement gap.

The “Parting Words” column by Mary Ann Reilly, critiques NCLB from a different perspective, looking at the purportedly “scientific” basis of literacy research. She argues that the single research method used by the Department of Education is too narrow and strips learning from its social context. From her perspective, the omission of quality children’s literature by and about people of color in early literacy classrooms is a logical result of a research agenda that divorces learning from broader social, economic, and political issues. Furthermore, “[b]y positing the endorsed materials and methods”—which underrepresent people of color—“as ‘proven,’ the blame for failure is shifted to children, their families, and teachers.”

Among the concerns Gangi expresses about current literacy textbooks is their recommendation of books, especially about Native Americans, that are written by outsiders and contain misleading or incorrect information. Beverly Slapin, the executive director of Oyate—an organization dedicated to identifying authentic children’s books about Native Americans and making them available to schools—offers a satire, “How to Turn a Traditional Indian Story into a Children’s Picture Book (for fun and profit),” that also reveals what’s wrong with many “classic” folktales for young readers.

While the 2008 presidential election in the United States promises new leaders and perhaps a new direction, changes are taking place in other areas of the world as well. Fidel Castro’s persistent health problems and retirement in February have fueled speculation about what will happen this year to Cuba’s longstanding Communist regime. Thus, Danilo H. Figueredo’s interview with scholar Frank Argote-Freyre is especially timely. Argote-Freyre, who used to serve as press secretary to then-U.S. Congressman (now Senator) Robert Menendez, has written *Fulgencio Batista: From Revolutionary to Strongman*, a detailed two-part political biography of Castro’s predecessor, assessing his policies, good and bad, and the conditions that led to his overthrow in the 1959 revolution. Those wondering about the process of replacing Castro and the form a new government (and possibly a post-Communist economy) might take should read this insightful interview.

Frank Alan Bruno, who has been serving this year as a librarian at the Central Library, Prince Sultan University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, returns to *MultiCultural Review* with a “Bridges on the I-Way” column that draws on his experience of working abroad. For young people looking to teach English in the developing world, or older people seeking adventure and a career change, Bruno describes web sites that can help match potential teachers with jobs and then guide them to resources that will make them more effective instructors.

I am pleased to announce that one of the articles that appeared in *MultiCultural Review* in 2006, “Deaf Culture Values Through Children’s Fiction,” by Jean F. Andrews, was selected to receive the 2007 Virginia Hamilton Essay Award. Since 1991, this award has been given annually to the best essay or article, published in a national magazine, that depicts multicultural children’s experiences. At a time when so many languages are being lost, Andrews’s

article highlights a new language that has emerged over the past few generations—American Sign Language (ASL). ASL has become more than a way to help deaf people communicate more easily; today it occupies the center of a rich and proud Deaf culture with its unique art, poetry, and history of activism. Andrews, who teaches at Lamar University (a center of Deaf education) is the author of middle grade books about the Deaf experience, a perspective she shares with readers. Many of her novels are set in Deaf boarding schools, which, in contrast to the infamous Indian boarding schools of the past century, have become incubators for the development and expression of Deaf culture in general and ASL in particular. I congratulate Dr. Andrews and applaud the Virginia Hamilton Essay Award committee both for its broad interpretation of what is considered multicultural experience and for recognizing the importance of language in the preservation and transmission of culture. 🌐



Lyn's Blog and Web Site

Editor-in-Chief Lyn Miller-Lachmann has a new web site and blog! Please stop by for a visit at <http://web.mac.com/lynml>.

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