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RACIALLY INCLUSIVE READING FOR CHILDREN

MARION J. LAWIE*

> Books form opinions and attitudes, (and) have a major influence on children's relationships with each other and society (Bolkus in Hanzl, 1994:162)

If we recognise the truth in this statement, we acknowledge the importance of providing all children with access to literature which broadens their knowledge and perceptions of society.

Hanzl (1994) states two basic assumptions of the Australian Multicultural Children's Literature Awards: 'All Australian children should see themselves reflected in the stories they read...it is essential that the books children read reflect the multicultural nature of society'(p.162/3).

As a teacher in an Aboriginal community, I see the above in direct application to Aboriginal children, and Aboriginal characters in Children's literature. Self-image, self-esteem and literacy skills contribute to stumbling blocks in the education and growth of Aboriginal children, both in school and out of it. Stereotyped Aboriginal characters result in a flaw in the education of non-Aboriginal readers, whilst for Aboriginal readers 'there is the aspect of self-concept development modelling, and pride in and identity with his/her own people' (Veidt,1985).

What sort of books are there to reinforce positive Aboriginal models for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers alike? How might one categorise an ideologically sound book with regard to racism? Dunkle (1982) suggests that Aboriginal characters should be described as individuals, without reference to such stereotypes as flashing white teeth, and low dark brows. She also commends those books which present Aboriginal characters without comment, simply as ordinary people, which, manifestly, they are. A good example of this would be Diana Kidd's *Fat and Juicy Place* (see below).

I suggest that any book which presents Aboriginal characters at all is a start. As Walter McVitty said; 'One of the greatest hurts administered to the Aborigine today, as in the past, is the pretence that he does not exist, that he is somehow invisible'(1982:9). The many non-Aboriginal children who have no contact with Aborigines must be given access to literature with Aboriginal characters in order to prevent an 'out of sight, out of mind' mentality. I think of the Year Three child who declared there were no Aborigines any more; certainly he had seen none to match the pictures in his history book.

As Bill Scott pointed out, preconceptions are the result of a composite of ideas gathered from a number of sources (Scott, 1982). Parents and the home environment are paramount in the formation of children's concepts. Whether positive or negative, children bring these perceptions to school and into the classroom. Teachers then have an opportunity, I suggest a responsibility, to provide children with alternative sources of ideas which they may draw upon when forming

ideas and concepts. Books are one such source of ideas, and a powerful one. It is hoped that children's literature can provide readers with a range of Aboriginal characters as diverse as the people.

It is, of course, preferable that children's literature not only be free of prejudicial confirmations, but also well written. That a book contains racial references is no reason to discard it. For example in *Hughie* (Martin, 1971), the Aboriginal boy of the title is grossly discriminated against by fellow characters, and is described with the usual flash of white teeth. However, the unfolding story makes clear the hurtful consequences of, and lack of basis for racism. This is a story line that non-Aboriginal children can learn from: what not to do. Aboriginal readers can identify with the discriminated against character: there are not so many figures in children's books that an Aboriginal child can readily relate to.

A lack of any tension in a book which has protagonists of differing cultures makes the story somewhat simplistic. Any person who has lived as a member of a racial minority experiences such tension as a daily fact of life, even where it is not overt. This is what keeps *The Fat and Juicy Place*, by Diana Kidd, realistic: there is no gross discrimination but a quiet awareness of cultural differences and realities. This is also where Poppy Boon's *The Dark Crystal* takes on another dimension of fantasy: there is a lack of realism in the absolute trust and absence of discussion or even self-questioning in the meeting of the two cultures, even in the interracial romance.

For a thorough treatment of children's books containing Aboriginal characters, written prior to 1981, I would like to recommend Margaret Dunkle, 1982. Of these books, I suggest the best reads are Bill Scott's *Boori*, the *Wirrun* series by Patricia Wrightson, and *Manganinnie* by Beth Roberts. Two books that are a little older but still worth the read are Nan Chauncy's *Tangara*, and *The Rocks of Honey*, again by Patricia Wrightson.

The books I have chosen to briefly review below have been gathered from a number of sources. Most are in the Subject Guide to Australian Children books in Print(1993), some I found in catalogues and some in my own school library. I realise this is not a comprehensive list, and I look forward to reading more as a I find them.

I hesitate to recommend reading age appropriateness; but some of these books do include the harshest realities of life. I therefore suggest that teachers and/or parents pre-read the books as they make them available to students.

The books are discussed below in order of decreasing centrality of the Aboriginal character in the storyline. For example, *My Place* is the autobiography of Aboriginal author and artist Sally Morgan, whereas *Beyond the Labyritnth* has no actual Aboriginal characters but is included as it is eloquent on the issue of racism.

CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN'S BOOKS FEATURING ABORIGINAL CHARACTERS.

SALLY MORGAN, 1990 *MY PLACE*. FREEMANTLE: FREEMANTLE ARTS.

Morgan has edited her original single-volume autobiography, to produce three separate books suitable for younger readers. *Sally's story* details Morgan's childhood, her family and school relationships and sets the scene for the revelations and discoveries that are made in the subsequent *Arthur Corunna's Story* and *Mother and Daughter*.

It is with growing amazement and sympathy that the reader learns with Sally her true family his-

tory. Her grandmother had learned early that being Aboriginal was a disadvantage, and had impressed upon Sally's mother that the most unusual foreigner was more respected than the indigenous. As such Sally grew up not knowing her true race, alienated from her grandmother's people and culture, unaware of her place. Upon catching a hint of the truth, Sally, now a mother herself, is unstinting in her search for the whole truth.

In her writing Morgan conveys the human need for a personal history, for a place, she invokes the reader's anger with the injustice of being denied that place by social circumstances, and she evinces, through her own evident love and respect, the reader's empathy for the pain experienced by her ancestors of not so long ago.

JOHN WILSON, 1992 *LORI*. BROOME: MAGABALA BOOKS.

This is an Aboriginal woman's recollection of her childhood. along with memories of games, school, and rare birthday parties, are accounts of abuse all the more shocking for their calm biographical description.

The prejudice of white people, the victimising 'bully-men', are a small, factual part of the fabric of Lori's life. Far bigger and menacing are those people with whom she lives, the skein of neglect and violence from which the threads of herself are inseparable. Above of this is the tragedy of her, and her family's, disconnection from their people and their culture. Lori has no solace in even the vestige of tribal lore. Her family is part of that soiled fringe on the hem of white society, removed from all that is proud and has knowledge in her own race.

In spite of the despair and degradation of Lori's life, strength did exist in it and evolve from it. She bore the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings, and throughout all they stuck together, strengthening each other in their unity through the worst blows of a violent life.

The reader comes away from this book with this sense, that there is strength in unity, no matter how small such a union may be. Lori lives through all this with dignity, providing an example of strength and perseverance through pain and humiliation.

DIANA KIDD, 1991 *THE FAT AND JUICY PLACE*. SYDNEY: ANGUS AND ROBERTSON

(short listed for Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award, Australian Multicultural Children's Literature Award winner for young readers, 1993).

Written from the perspective of a young Aboriginal boy living in town, Fat and Juicy is about his coming to terms with the absence of his father. He has a big family, but his best friend is a lizard.

He meets an old man and from him learns some about life when people went hunting, and honey collecting. He wishes he could live like that, and practices sneaking up on things, but he's a modern kid too, his other big fantasy is to go off in a spaceship to the Purple Planet.

> We all sat around of the floor with Gran. she told us some real scary stories about the Hairy Man who lives in the bush...and just as the Hairy Man's going to grab hold of him with his long hairy fingers, Susie grabs the curtains so hard that the whole lot crashes down on top of her. *The Fat and Juicy Place*,p.13.

While this story recognises the differences between people, and the difficulties Aboriginal children can have in a predominantly white


world (at school for example), it is a simple natural account of one boy growing up.

JAMES PORTER, 1991 *PIYA*. SYDNEY: HODDER AND STOUGHTON

(Shortlisted for Australian Multicultural Children's Literature Award 1992).

When Piya is seven, her family and home are blown away in a cyclone. This leaves the matter of her disposal to relatives whose traditional lives have already been blown away by European occupation and Christian conversion. She does not accept this fate however, and this book is the story of her fight against physical and spiritual imprisonment. Her allies are her land, the sea, and two school teachers who reject mainstream society as vigorously as she does.

Piya's story is set in the second decade of this century in the Mission Beach region of far North Queensland. Porter blends history and fiction in this well-researched account of early contact between two cultures. The story brings to life the helplessness of Aboriginal people in the white system, but also the power that even a small child may claim when she refuses to give in. Also highlighted is the confusing futility of a society based upon money and hypocrisy, especially when viewed from the perspective of a child who wants nothing more than to live in, to live with and live off her own country.

> "And land," said Len. "Oh yes-white people sell the very earth from under their feet, for money." *Piya*, p73.

DREAM TIME, EDITED BY TOSS GASCOIGNE, JO GOODMAN AND MARGOT TYRELL, 1989 MELBOURNE: PUFFIN

(An anthology of short stories commissioned by the Children's Book Council of Australia from award winning authors).

Christobel Mattingley's *Initiation* relates a young Aboriginal man's frustrated desire to return to his people's traditional land, compounded by the lack of meaningful employment available to him. This story emphasises the effects of dispossession on Aboriginal people.

In *Up Taree Way*, by Libby Hathorn, an Aboriginal school girl must deal with problems of family, racial identity and self-esteem. She comes to appreciate the strength of kinship and the hard won relief of pride.

A non-Aboriginal teenager is confronted with the consequences of his misuse and abuse of the land and its creatures in Victor Kelleher's *River Serpent*. He ignores the advice of a mysterious Aboriginal figure, and retribution in the form of the Rainbow Serpent is his lot.

Aboriginal spirituality is a comfort to young non-Aboriginal girl in *Dolphin Dreaming*. Lizzie can't accept her father's death until she and her sister share a mystical experience on the beach. The story suggests that Aboriginal spirituality and affiliation with the land are things non-Aborigines may also benefit from.

The Mimics by Thurley Fowler demonstrates the consequences of well-meaning high-handedness and those of cruel ignorance. Young Joey's spirits and self-esteem are raised by the interest of one classmate after derision by the rest of the class and teacher.

COLIN THIELE, 1985 *COORONG CAPTIVE*. BRISBANE: RIGBY PUBLISHERS.

Young Fitzie has planned a holiday of boating on the lower Murray River. Although Fitzie does spend his time on the water, nothing goes to plan. Instead of a standard camping trip with a school mate, Fitzie finds himself in the company of Goondalee, an Aboriginal man who makes his home on the river. Fitzie is grateful for, and re-

spectful of Goondalee's companionship. He makes the best of it, learning fishing secrets, and how to conduct himself in the bush. The pair provide a seemingly pathetic but eventually successful opposition to dangerous bird poachers.

> 'Fitzie was glad Goondalee was coming. He felt safe with him. Especially in strange places.' *Coorong Captive* p 41.

This book brings out the spiritually and self-sufficiency of a man living alone in his traditional lands, making his personal protest against the mainstream by quietly opting out of it. He's glad of Fitzie's tea and sugar but can live without them. He acts as a mentor for the boy, encouraging him to relate to the land and work with it in his endeavours. Fitzie also learns some local area history that wasn't in his school curriculum, and experiences firsthand some of the power of traditional spiritual belief.

Victor Kelleher, 1988 *Taronga*. Puffin: Victoria

(Children's Book Award, Honour Book for older readers, 1987).

Ben is the only member of his family to survive 'last days', a cataclysmic time of which no-one speaks. In Taronga he meets Ellie. Ellie's philosophy is different: this isn't the first time her people have experienced disaster. Ben learns from Ellie and they become a team.

There are no examples of racism in this book. Ellie is simply another person, valued for her usefulness by most, and as a friend by Ben. When the pair discuss their different perspectives the reader may see that they have different backgrounds, but throughout, it is apparent that emotions and actions are more significant than race and colour.

Poppy Boon, 1993 *The Black Crystal*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

This fantasy story sees Emma, a 14 year old non-Aborigine, finding out that she is a reincarnated Ancient One, whose task is to restore the balance of the world. Within a few short weeks, she is discovered, is initiated, falls in love, and fulfils her destiny.

Her family has no qualms about her going off with strangers, and these traditional people accept her immediately; but then she is an Ancient One.

This book is totally non-racist, although it does make the point that white settlers have ruined the Earth and broken up Aboriginal families. All concerned in the current story, however, are totally accepting of one another, with no racial tension whatsoever.

Gary Crew, 1991 *Strange Objects*. William Heinemann: Melbourne

(Children's Book Council Book of the Year for older readers, 1992).

Unlike most protagonists, Steven Messenger, the main character of this book, is not a figure the reader can identify with or even like. As such the reader can reject Messenger's actions and opinions. From the meditated killing of a small animal to the accidental killing of an old man, including habits of lying and stealing and racist attitudes.

Gradually, the reader sees as more acceptable the one contemporary Messenger least favours, Kratz. In fact, Messenger is sure he has convinced us of 'what kind of person' Kratz is, but by the end of the book it is apparent that Kratz's antithesis is a positive one. Through reading the interplay between the two characters, one is pres-

sured to examine one's feelings and take a side. Throughout the book the reader is also exposed to continual refocussing of historical processes, examining the formation of prejudice and almost casually exposing the injustice of it.

GILLIAN RUBINSTEIN, 1988 *BEYOND THE LABYRINTH.* MELBOURNE: HYLAND HOUSE

(Children's Book Council Book of the Year for Older readers, 1989).

This is classic science fiction set in modern day Australia. The twist is that the alien is not only female, but black (brown actually). The children in the story gain perspective on their own civilisation by seeing it in terms of another so advanced they can barely grasp it. Vicky and Brenton realise that although their lifestyles might be seen as primitive, they are not themselves without worth.

They can then translate this revelation to their feelings regarding Aboriginal Australia before the First Fleet and their own prejudices regarding the inferiority of Aboriginal society. All things, indeed are relative, a point, Vicky and Brenton come to appreciate.

Brenton's brother Mick, however, can't even come to terms with Cal's E.T. origins and sees her only as a vagrant 'Abo'. This provides some example as to how not to treat other people, reinforcing a theme of treating others as one wishes to be treated.

> I saw the little girl leaving the beach with the black kid and I just wanted to check she got home all right. *Beyond the Labyrith*, p 85.

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* Doomadgee State School
via MT ISA Qld 4825