

How To Choose The Best Multicultural Books



By Luther B. Clegg , Etta Miller , Bill Vanderhoof , Gonzalo Ramirez and Peggy K. Ford

In this article you'll find leads to 50 great books, plus advice from top educators, writers, and illustrators on how to spot literature that transcends stereotypes.

How do you know if a children's book you're about to share with your students accurately portrays the culture of its characters? Are there warning signs to look for? Are there telltale things that mark an outstanding multicultural book? To answer these questions, *Instructor* invited five children's literature specialists to give us their candid advice on selecting books about or related to Native Americans, Latinos, African-Americans, Jews, and Asian-Americans.

Within each section of this article, you'll find:

- Reviews of ten great children's books suitable for grades K-8
- Essential advice from a children's author or illustrator
 - Joseph Bruchac
 - Gary Soto
 - Floyd Cooper
 - Patricia Polacco
 - Yumi Heo
- Key criteria to use when selecting books
- A list of notable authors

And more!

Our experts also helped us compile an extensive list of other multicultural resources for teachers and their classrooms.

Native Americans: Let Our Words Be Heard

Native American stories passed from mouth to ear to heart

By Peggy K. Ford

For centuries, Native Americans relied upon oral storytelling for entertainment and to keep alive information needed for survival and moral direction. Today, more Native Americans are preserving these legends, myths, and folktales in written form. Writers like Joseph Bruchac, Shonto Begay, and Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve bring new life to ancient tribal stories and depict past and present Native American life with accuracy and grace.

10 GREAT CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Gluskabe and the Four Wishes retold by Joseph Bruchac, illustrated by Christine Nyburg Shrader (Cobblehill, 1995). In this tale of the Wabanaki nations, four men each ask for a different wish from Gluskabe, the Great Spirit's helper, but only one learns that great gifts come to those who listen and take heed.

Ma'ii and Cousin Horned Toad by Shonto Begay (Scholastic, 1992). Cousin Horned Toad gives tricky Ma'ii the coyote a lesson to remember when Ma'ii tries to get something for nothing in this Navajo tale.

In a Circle Long Ago: A Treasury of Native Lore from North America by Nancy Van Laan, illustrated by Lisa Desimini (Apple Soup Books, 1995). This is an impressive collection of Native American tales, songs, and poetry from the Arctic North to the Florida Everglades.

Fire Race: A Karuk Coyote Tale About How Fire Came to the People, retold by Jonathan London, illustrated by Sylvia Long (Chronicle Books, 1993). How Coyote - with the help of Eagle, Cougar, Fox, Bear, Measuring Worm, Turtle, and Frog - captures fire is a dramatic tale of bravery and cooperation.

Beyond the Ridge by Paul Goble (Bradbury, 1989). With beauty and simplicity, Goble captures the spiritual journey of a Plains Indian grandmother.

Katie Henio: Navajo Shepherd by Peggy Thomson, photographs by Paul Conklin (Cobblehill, 1995). In this nonfiction book, you'll follow Katie as she moves between her traditional Navajo world and the modern world of her great-grandchildren.

Fox Song by Joseph Bruchac, illustrated by Paul Morin (Philomel, 1993). In this story, young Jamie learns that death is a natural part of life when she realizes that her grandmother, even in death, is still near her.

The White Deer and Other Stories Told by the Lenape, edited by John Bierhorst (Morrow, 1995). Open your students' hearts and minds with these 25 stories from the Lenape, or Delaware, culture.

The Nez Perce: A First Americans Book by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, illustrated by Ronald Himler (Holiday House, 1994). The author retells the creation myth of the Nez Perce Indians, who lived in what are now the states of Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and Montana.

Indian Winter by Russell Freeman, illustrated by Karl Bodmer (Holiday House, 1992). In 1833, German Prince Alexander Philipp Maximilian and Karl Bodmer, a Swiss painter, journeyed up the Missouri River and spent the winter among the Mandan Indians. Russell Freeman draws upon the prince's diary and Bodmer's detailed paintings to create an incredible account of their adventure.

Peboan and Seegwun retold and illustrated by Charles Larry (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993). Glorious illustrations enhance this Ojibwa story portraying the transition from winter to spring.

Shadow Catcher: The Life and Work of Edward S. Curtis by Laurie Lawlor (Walker, 1994). This biography for older readers is filled with Curtis's majestic photographs of North American Indians.

MEET JOSEPH BRUCHAC

Q: What do you suggest teachers look for when selecting Native American literature?

A: Seek out books that depict characters from a well-defined individual native nation-as opposed to generic Indians. I say this because there are popular books that were written without understanding these specific differences. For example, in *Annie and the Old One* by Miska Miles - which is a story of a little girl dealing with the death of her grandmother - descriptions and illustrations are totally incorrect for the Navajo culture. And no one in any Native American culture would call his or her grandmother "old one." Books like this are insensitive due to ignorance, not through intention -- but it hurts just as much.

KEEP IN MIND

- Make available books that reveal today's Native American cultures.
- Be prepared to talk about the ways in which Native American cultures have influenced world culture.
- Talk about values Native American cultures share, such as respect, sharing, and reverence for living things.
- Avoid books that suffer from what Joseph Bruchac refers to as "The Dances with Wolves Syndrome" -- books in which all Indians are noble and all white people are bad. Any children's book that builds up one culture at the expense of another ultimately keeps racial tension alive.

OTHER AUTHORS

Michael Lacapa, Michael Dorris, Gayle Ross, Simon Ortiz, Vee Browne

Latinos: A Fiesta of Stories

Books that portray the history, customs, and family traditions of Latinos

By Gonzalo Ramirez

Growing up in a Spanish-speaking community in Texas, I remember reading stories such as Hans Reys's *Curious George*, E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, and Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. Although I loved these books, they did not speak to me -- they did not celebrate the uniqueness of my culture.

In my first years as a teacher, I discovered children's books that gave a true portrayal of the Mexican-American culture, as well as books that revealed the diversity among Americans of Latino ancestry (Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban-Americans, and others). Here are the books that I think do a good job of reflecting the lifestyles, values, and customs of Latinos.

10 Great Children's Books

Too Many Tamales by Gary Soto, illustrated by Ed Martinez (Putnam, 1993). Mexican-American Maria tries her mother's wedding ring on while she is making tamales for Christmas dinner. When the ring is missing, Maria is sure it is in one of the tamales, and she and her cousins try to eat their way out of trouble.

All for the Better: The Story of El Barrio by Nicholasa Mohr (Steck-Vaughn, 1993). Renowned Puerto Rican writer Mohr tells the true story of a young girl, Evelina Lopez Antonetty (1984-1992), who made a difference in her community.

Green Corn Tamales/Tamales De Elote by Gina M. Rodríguez, illustrated by Gary Shepard (Hispanic Book Distributors, Tucson, AZ, 1994). Come join the tamale-making at a Latino family reunion at grandmother's house-the warmth of this family leaps off the page.

Hairs/Pelitos by Sandra Cisneros (Apple Soup/Knopf, 1994). This picture book conveys the diversity within Latino cultures through the simple story of a young girl talking about the different kinds of hair her family members have.

The Desert Is My Mother/El Desierto Es Mi Madre by Pat Mora, illustrated by Daniel Lechon (Piñata Books, 1995). With English and Spanish text, Mora captures the wondrous beauty of Mother Earth through vivid pictures and descriptions of the desert.

Rabbit Wishes by Linda Shute (Lothrop, 1995). Your students will love the story of tío Conejo (Uncle Rabbit) and his wish that Papa Dios make him bigger. This African-Cuban folktale is one of many tales about tío Conejo.

Friends from the Other Side/Amigos Del Otro Lado by Gloria Anzaldúa (Children's Book Press, 1993). Combat immigrant-bashing with this story of a young, undocumented Mexican worker who struggles against hardship and misunderstanding to endure.

Borreguita and the Coyote: Tale from Ayutia, Mexico by Verna Aardema (Knopf, 1991). Borreguita, whose name means little lamb, uses her wits to keep Coyote from eating her. This folktale - which uses five Spanish words in the English text - will delight children.

Three Kings Day by Beatriz Zapater (Modern Curriculum Press, 1992). Come meet two young Puerto Rican children living in the United States as they prepare for the celebration of Three Kings Day on January 6.

¡Viva México!: The Story of Benito Juárez and Cinco de Mayo by Argentina Palacios (Steck-Vaughn, 1993). Inspire kids to have faith against all odds with the story of Zapotec Indian Benito Juárez, who became president of Mexico. The author provides information on Cinco de Mayo, a major holiday celebrated by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.

MEET GARY SOTO

Q: Your books portray the Mexican-American experience honestly and without sentimentality. How can teachers find this quality in works by other authors?

A: Find out whether the author is from the Mexican-American culture. If not, be wary. It can't be done from the outside-it's too hard to get it right. Also, look for good storytelling. If the author is not dealing with social issues-that's a good sign. Too often I see books about Mexican-Americans that adopt a patronizing "poor them, they're working too hard" tone.

KEEP IN MIND

- Select books that show Hispanic women in contemporary roles.
- Share biographies of Latinos so students understand Latinos' contributions to the U.S. and to the world.
- Use picture books and novels as a way to inspire students to learn more about the history and culture of the Latino group depicted in the story.
- Look for stories that use Spanish words and phrases -- they provide realism and show respect for the culture. Learn to pronounce the Spanish words correctly; many books include pronunciation guides to help you.

OTHER AUTHORS

Arthur Dorros, Joe Hayes, Carmen Lomas Garza, Alma Flor Ada, Pura Belpre

African-Americans: Lift Every Voice and Sing

Books that reveal the diversity within African-American culture

By Luther B. Clegg

Major changes have occurred in African-American literature within the last 25 years. Before 1970, books of this genre were few, and those that existed often perpetuated stereotypes. Since then, many outstanding African-American authors and illustrators have given voice and vision to their experiences through biographies, historical fiction, and contemporary fiction. Here are ten titles worth sharing with your students.

10 GREAT CHILDREN'S BOOKS

From Miss Ida's Porch by Sandra Belton, illustrated by Floyd Cooper (Four Winds, 1993). Miss Ida's porch is a place where mothers and fathers and uncles and grandmothers and neighbors gather to share stories. Cooper's paintings give dimension to this story about the power of memories.

A Caribbean Dozen: Poems from Caribbean Poets, edited by John Agard and Grace Nichols, illustrated by Cathie Felstead (Candlewick Press, 1994). A diverse and joyous collection of poems by a dozen Caribbean poets.

Meet Danitra Brown by Nikki Grimes, illustrated by Floyd Cooper (Lothrop, 1994). Cooper's drawings enhance the joyful poems of Danitra and her best friend, Zuri. Your students will love these city gal-pals as they jump rope and swap dreams.

The Sunday Outing by Gloria Jean Pinkney, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney (Dial, 1994). Ernestine's dream of visiting her relatives is realized when she takes a train trip to visit North Carolina.

Alvin Ailey by Andrea Davis Pinkney, illustrated by Brian Pinkney (Hyperion, 1993). This insightful biography about dancer/choreographer Ailey provides children with a model of an important 20th-century African-American.

Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters by Patricia C. McKissack and Fredrick L. McKissack, illustrated by John Thompson (Scholastic, 1994). This book provides historical accounts of Christmas on a plantation, using alternating narratives from the "big house" and the slave quarters.

Pink and Say by Patricia Polacco (Putnam, 1994). An unforgettable story of friendship between a black and a white soldier during the Civil War. Polacco bridges cultures like no other author/illustrator.

Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing by James Weldon Johnson, illustrated by Jan Spivey Gilchrist (Scholastic, 1995). The song that many consider to be the African-American anthem fills the pages of this book while Gilchrist's paintings make the lyrics soar.

The Last Tales of Uncle Remus by Julius Lester, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney (Dial, 1994). In the fourth in this series, Lester uses contemporary southern black dialect to preserve the richness of folktales.

The Glory Field by Walter Dean Myers (Scholastic, 1994). Myers takes readers from 1753 to 1994, tracing six generations of the Lewis family, in this complex story of struggle and achievement.

MEET FLOYD COOPER

Q: How do you portray African-American characters authentically in your illustrations?

A: I try to be true to the culture and take the reader there. I want readers to feel the atmosphere of the setting, to know what it smells like, what the light looks like, the sounds the characters hear—all these senses come into play. Hopefully my illustrations will strike a certain chord, bring back a certain memory, and help you feel the characters are someone you know.

KEEP IN MIND

- African-American experiences are diverse and unique. The black experiences of the South do not necessarily reflect those of the North, nor do inner-city situations parallel rural settings. Make sure your classroom library reflects this diversity, as well as that of blacks living in places such as the Caribbean, Africa, and Great Britain.
- Reject books with offensive expressions, negative attitudes, or stereotypes. You'll know them when you see them—trust your instincts.
- Don't ignore these books because there are no children of color in your class. Books depicting African-American experiences are valuable for all children.

OTHER AUTHORS

Eloise Greenfield; Angela Johnson; Faith Ringgold; The Pinkney Family: Jerry and Gloria, son Brian, and his wife, Andrea Davis Pinkney

Jewish Culture: History, Humor, and Humanity

Jewish literature that spans the globe and imparts wisdom

By Etta Miller

Most of the Jewish children's literature I read as a kid was didactic: It set out to teach lessons, not to entertain. Today Jewish children's literature informs, inspires, amuses, and tackles larger themes, including coming of age and coming to terms with the past. The characters are full characters, growing up in a variety of cultures -- and mixed cultures. The following ten titles possess a richness of character and storyline that make them especially memorable.

10 GREAT CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Mrs. Katz and Tush by Patricia Polacco (Bantam, 1992). This heartwarming story chronicles the friendship between a lonely Jewish widow and a young African-American boy.

The Diamond Tree: Jewish Tales from Around the World, selected and retold by Howard Schwartz and Barbara Rush (HarperCollins, 1991) and ***Rachel the Clever and Other Jewish Folktales***, selected and retold by Josepha Sherman (August House Publishers, 1993). Both collections offer stories as diverse as the countries in which they originated.

When Shlemiel Went to Warsaw & Other Stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968). This is a classic book by the famous writer of folktales. Also read Singer's ***Mazel and Shilmazel*** (Sunburst, 1995 reissue).

Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins by Eric Kimmel (Holiday House, 1989). The author weaves another amusing modern folktale about Hanukkah.

King Solomon and the Bee, adapted by Dalia Hardof Renberg, illustrated by Ruth Heller (HarperCollins, 1994). This legend about the wise king imaginatively combines religious texts and folklore.

Sheltering Rebecca by Mary Baylis-White (Lodestar, 1991). In this Holocaust story, a girl is sent away from Germany by her family and must deal with the absence of her parents, as well as her Jewish identity.

Molly's Pilgrim by Barbara Cohen, illustrated by Michael Deraney (Lothrop, 1983). A Jewish immigrant from Russia is accepted in her third-grade class when, for a class Thanksgiving project, her mother makes a clothespin pilgrim doll that looks Russian. This is a good book to teach that not all pilgrims came to America in the 1600s.

The Devil's Arithmetic by Jane Yolen (Viking, 1988). In this compelling novel, a young girl is mystically transported from present-day New York to Poland during World War II, where she goes into a gas chamber to save the life of another.

MEET PATRICIA POLACCO

Q: Your books do such a good job of bridging cultures, and they never smack of contrivance. How do you make that happen story after story?

A: It's the way I've lived my life. My mother's people were Russian Jews who emigrated here at the turn of the century. My father's family is shanty Irish. I live in Oakland, California, in a mixed neighborhood. My best friend is a black man. We've done everything together from birthing babies to burying our dead. I'm used to seeing people of different races and cultures and religions in my living room. Most kids don't have that environment. When they can read stories that celebrate our diversity, hopefully they'll come away from them with a renewed respect for people who are different from them. If you can build this respect at a very young age, then society will eventually even out.

KEEP IN MIND

- Seek out good literature with a strong plot and believable character development. The story should be worth revisiting again and again.
- Make sure the illustrations and text do not leave the students with stereotypes. For example, many folktales portray Jews living in small European villages before World War II. Although many did live in rural areas, many others lived in large cities such as Odessa, Warsaw, and Berlin. Kids shouldn't come away from a book with a quaint notion of any group.
- Before sharing a book about the Holocaust with students, think through whether your students are mature enough to handle it.
- Avoid books that infer that there was a single cause for or a simple answer to the Holocaust, or that stereotype events or characters, whether Jewish or German. They should address issues of human rights and oppression in a way that shows that people living under brutal conditions often did so with dignity.

OTHER AUTHORS

Clara Isaacson, Sholom Aleichem, Judy Blume, Sheila Greenwald, Carol Snyder

Asian-Americans: The Heart of the Matter

Asian stories that teach universal truths

By Bill Vanderhoof

When I first delved into Asian children's literature, I was amazed how it both opened a new world to me and struck familiar chords. Reading ancient Chinese folktales and fables is like hearing a familiar song in another language - the lyrics aren't the same but the harmonical tones are. They remind me of Aesop in their power to impart ethical insights. Here are ten books that are especially memorable.

10 GREAT CHILDREN'S BOOKS

One Afternoon by Yumi Heo (Orchard Books, 1994). This book by a Korean-American author/illustrator communicates love through the simple story of a boy and his mother doing errands. *Father's Rubber Shoes* is Heo's latest.

The Journey: Japanese Americans, Racism, and Renewal by Sheila Hamanaka (Orchard Books, 1990). In this deeply personal book, Hamanaka shares a mural she painted depicting the racism her relatives and other Japanese-Americans endured while imprisoned in U. S. concentration camps during World War II.

Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear by Lensey Namioka, illustrated by Kees de Kieft (Little Brown, 1992). In this humorous story of a Chinese family in Seattle, tone-deaf Yingtao wants to give up his violin lessons, so he must convince his parents that he is not a virtuoso-in-the-making, like his siblings.

Hiroshima by Laurence Yep (Scholastic, 1995). The author expresses the tragedy of Hiroshima through the story of two sisters, only one of whom survives. Yep's understated tone makes this novella gripping.

Ooka the Wise: Tales of Old Japan by I. G. Edmonds, illustrated by Sanae Yamazaki (Linnet Books, 1994). The scales of justice are always in balance as Judge Ooka seeks fairness in a variety of challenging and complex situations.

The Stonecutter by Demi (Crown, 1995). A stonecutter desires to be something or someone other than himself until one wish too many teaches him a valuable lesson.

Older Brother, Younger Brother retold by Nina Jaffe, illustrated by Wenhai Ma (Viking, 1995). This traditional Korean folktale explores the universal theme that if good is returned for ill treatment, good will triumph over evil.

Grandfather's Journey by Allen Say (Houghton, 1993). This is a simple but beautifully written and illustrated book depicting the force of our roots as we are drawn "home."

Hoang Breaks the Lucky Teapot by Rosemary Breckler, illustrated by Adrian Frankel (Houghton Mifflin, 1992). Hoang is distraught when he breaks the teapot that his grandmother gave to him when he left Vietnam for America. The pot held May Mun, the good fortune to protect the family from evil spirits. What will he do to avert bad luck? Readers will cheer the solution.

MEET YUMI HEO

Q: Both your books - *One Afternoon* and *Father's Rubber Shoes* - portray the Korean immigrant experience. Tell us how they came about.

A: I came to America from a small town in Korea six years ago. When I was at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, I did a book about the racial disharmony there. An editor said it would be difficult to publish, but she encouraged me to write a Korean immigrant story. So I wrote and illustrated *One Afternoon*. The child's experience of the big buildings, noises, and excitement of New York City was like my own.

In *Father's Rubber Shoes*, the father telling the story about the rubber shoes is a story my mom told me when I was little. The basis for the story is that when Koreans come to this country, they don't come with a lot of money. They start from the bottom and try to work their way up. They are trying to do better for their children.

KEEP IN MIND

- Search for stories that exhibit values inherent in many Asian cultures, such as cooperation and a respect for family and tradition.
- Ensure that the events depicted are historically accurate; in a work of fiction, that the events described are plausible.
- Asian-American children, as well as others in the class, should perceive the characters as competent problem-solvers, responding in positive ways to the challenges they confront.
- While including stories whose settings are in the United States, it is also appropriate to include those set in other countries, thus providing students with a richer description of the cultural roots of Asian-American students.

OTHER AUTHORS

Yoshiko Uchida, Sherry Garland, Paul Yee, Keiko Narahashi, Mitali Perkins

More Multicultural Resources

Celebrating Diversity: A Multicultural Resource by Luther B. Clegg, Etta Miller, and William Vanderhoof, Jr., is organized around the school year and contains a variety of information for the teacher. \$33. (Delmar Publishers, 1995; [800] 347-7707).

Kaleidoscope: A Multicultural Booklist for Grades K-8, edited by Rudine Sims Bishop and the Multicultural Booklist Committee (NCTE, [800] 369-6283) contains annotated bibliographies of the best multicultural books.

The Horn Book Guide is an excellent resource for keeping teachers abreast of minority literature. Published twice-annually, The Guide lists both fiction and nonfiction by categories and rates the books. \$50. (The Horn Book, Inc.; [800] 325-1170).

Multicultural Review is a quarterly journal that reviews new books and instructional resources, plus publishes feature articles in multicultural studies. Yearly subscription: \$59, school, \$29.95, individual. (Greenwood Publishing Group; [203] 226-3571).

Big Multicultural Tales is a series of illustrated folktales in big-book format for teachers of grades K-3. For more information, call Scholastic, (800) 325-6149.

Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children by Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale. A must for anyone selecting Native American literature. The text includes excellent book reviews and information about Native American resource organizations. (New Society Publishers, 1992. [800] 333-9093. \$24.95 paperback, plus \$3 shipping).

American Indian Reference Books for Children and Young Adults by Barbara J. Kuipers. This book includes a well-developed, two-page checklist that you can use to evaluate fiction and nonfiction literature about any ethnic group. \$27.50. (Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1991. [800] 237-6124).

African American Images publishes and distributes more than 300 Africentric titles and products. For a free catalog, write to African American Images, 1909 W. 95th St., Chicago, IL 60643; (800) 552-1991.

Multiethnic Children's Literature by Gonzalo Ramirez, Jr., and Jan Lee Ramirez is a comprehensive guide to books accurately depicting contemporary minority groups in the United States. \$27.30 (Delmar Publishers, 1994; [800] 347-7707).

Hispanic Books Children's Catalog is offered by Hispanic Books Distributors and Publishers; (602) 882-9484.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum offers free guidelines, bibliography, and videography for teaching about the Holocaust. Write to the museum's Resource Center for Educators, 100 Wallenberg Pl. SW, Washington, DC 20024-2150; (202) 488-6137.

Japanese American Curriculum Project (J.A.C.P.) offers a catalogue of Asian and Asian-American books. To order, call (415) 343-9408.

Cooperative Children's Book Center compiles an excellent annual roundup of the best multicultural books. To order, send a \$6 check payable to: Treasurer, Friends of the CCBC, Inc., Box 5288, Madison, WI 53705.

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