

# Talking about Books: Exploring Critical Literacy: You Can Hear a Pin Drop

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*This month's Talking about Books column focuses on texts that have the power to engage students in "critical" conversations about issues of power and social justice.*

"One thing about these books is that I can hear a pin drop when I'm reading them to my class," reports Lee Heffernan, who teaches third grade at the Childs School in Bloomington, Indiana. The "pin drop" description is supported by a videotape shared with us by Sheilah Lyles, a first-grade teacher from Indianapolis. Although the children were noisy and inattentive as their teacher began to read aloud, the change in their demeanor was dramatic as she got further into the book *White Wash* (Shange, 1997). Within a few minutes, the wiggling had stopped and the children were clearly focused on the pictures and their teacher's voice. This was surprising to Ms. Lyles, who later commented that showing such rapt attention during a read aloud is a rare occurrence for these children.

In both cases, the teachers were reading books from an evolving text set that provides a framework for a new kind of "critical literacy" curriculum which focuses on building students' awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead. These books invite conversations about fairness and justice; they encourage children to ask why some groups of people are positioned as "others." According to the definition we developed, critical books 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 traditionally have been silenced or marginalized;

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 don't provide "happily ever after" endings for complex social problems.

Among teachers, we have found mixed reaction to the critical literacy text set. We recently introduced *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998) to a group of teachers and found a wide range of opinions. This book shows how the same events can be viewed from different perspectives. The four gorilla (dressed

as human) characters take turns telling their own unique versions of what transpired in the park that day. For instance, the first voice, a wealthy, over-protective mother, observes that her son is talking to “a very rough-looking child” and decides that it’s time to go home. From the illustration, however, it can be inferred that the children are too far away for her to see them in any detail. One might conclude that the real problem is the other child’s shabbily dressed father, who glumly reads the want-ads as he sits on a nearby bench.

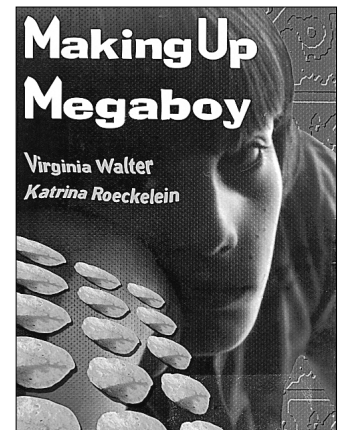
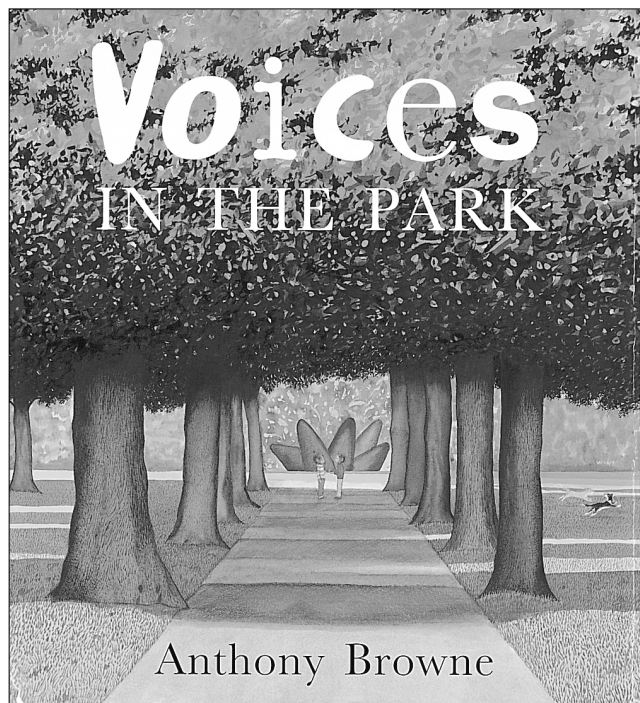
After this book had been shared, several teachers said that they thought it would be a good vehicle for promoting classroom discussions. Others disagreed, however, and commented that the book was “too sad for young children.” One teacher said that as a parent, she would object to having her child exposed to the book. “My daughter doesn’t have ideas like this and I don’t want someone putting them into her head. We don’t talk about stuff like that at home.” Another teacher agreed, claiming that “We don’t have problems like this at our school. Everyone in my class plays with everyone else, older or younger, boys or girls.” When the accuracy of this statement was questioned by one of the university interns, the teacher insisted that “there might be isolated problems, but these are the exceptions.” As in *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998), this incident shows that indeed, people often see what they want to see.

Conceptually, our investigation of critical literacy is anchored in Luke and Freebody’s (1997) model of reading as social practice. Arguing that literacy is never neutral, the authors lay out a grid showing four different constructions or views of literacy. According to the first view, reading is decoding and the function of reading instruction is to help chil-

dren break the code. The second view was introduced during the 1970s and 1980s when psycholinguistics and schema-theoretical notions of reading emphasized reader-text interactions. This approach drew attention to “text-meaning practices” and the development of a reader who understood how to use the textual and personal resources at hand to co-produce a meaningful reading. The third view evolved during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when sociolinguistic and socio-semiotic theory focused attention on language in use. During this period, reading came to be viewed in terms of what it did or could accomplish, pragmatically, in the real world. More recently, Luke and Freebody (1997) suggest that reading should be seen as a non-neutral form of cultural practice—one that positions readers and obscures as much as it illuminates. They argue that in the 21st century, readers 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 from this story?” 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. In a later communication, Luke (personal communication, 1998) suggests that rather than looking at the four categories individually, researchers should study programs that emphasize various combinations and aspects of them.

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. We have observed a movement toward social action in two classrooms where teachers or interns have been reading critical books.

In one classroom, third and fourth graders listened as their student teacher read aloud *Making up Megaboy* (Walter, 1998). The story is presented through the voices of various community members as they try to explain why Robbie Jones, on his 13th birthday, walked into Mr. Koh’s convenience store and shot the elderly Korean proprietor with his father’s gun. As we try to figure out why this horrible killing happened, we hear from his disbelieving 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 brings us face-to-face with real world issues like teen violence and the proliferation of guns. After lengthy discussions of this book and the different social problems it raised, the students felt the need to take some sort of action—they wanted to do something to stop things like this from happening in their neighborhoods. Their social-action piece involved making posters about the dangers of firearms and sharing these posters with the rest of the school.

In another instance, fifth and sixth graders who had read a number of critical books began to interrogate the assumptions embedded in a school rule that forbids student conversation in the lunchroom. In this case, their social action took the form of an editorial in the class newspaper. Although the principal had already agreed to give the older students their own area for lunch so that they could talk, these students immediately launched into a crusade to win the same privilege for the younger children.

Now that we get our own lunchroom, we can talk, but I think that everyone should be able to talk in the lunchrooms without the teachers and the janitor yelling and griping at us! We should be able to talk in a whisper, a six-inch voice for goodness sake! They can close the lunchroom doors when we're being too loud. The teachers talk and they can disturb other classes, too! When they yell, they're louder than us. We were born with mouths and tongues and we intend to use them!

What's particularly interesting about this example is how the author moves from "we" (the fifth and sixth graders) to "everyone" (students in the other grades) to "us" (both groups combined) in the first sentence. It would be easier for these students to enjoy their new freedom to talk in the lunchroom and not give a second thought to the others in the school, but instead they have positioned themselves as advocates for what they see as an oppressed group. In addition, they question the power structure in the school that makes lunchtime conversation permissible for some (teachers), but not for others (children).

From several perspectives, then, these books are of crucial importance to educators and how we view curriculum. While they invite specific conversations around specific topics, they function as a whole to create a curriculum which honors diversity and invites students and teachers alike to explore 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 serves a multilingual and multicultural society such as our own far better than the conformity-and-consensus model of learning that currently permeates the whole of our educational system.

### Chapter Books

- Leon's Story* (L. Tillage, 1997). Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Hardcover. ISBN: 0374343799.
- Bat 6* (V. E. Wolff, 1998). Scholastic. Hardcover. ISBN: 0590897993.
- My Home Is Over Jordan* (S. Forrester, 1997). Lodestar. Hardcover. ISBN: 052567568X.
- Follow the Leader* (V. Winslow, 1997). Yearling Books. Paper. ISBN: 044041296X.
- Flying Solo* (R. Fletcher, 1998). Clarion Books. Paper. ISBN: 0395873231.
- The Circuit* (F. Jiménez, 1998). University of New Mexico Press. Paper. ISBN: 0826317979.
- Just Juice* (K. Hesse, 1998). Scholastic. Paper. ISBN: 0590033824.
- Wringer* (J. Spinelli, 1997). HarperTrophy. Paper. ISBN: 064405788.
- Slave Day* (R. Thomas, 1997). Aladdin. Paper. ISBN: 068982193X.
- Old People, Frogs, and Albert* (N. H. Wilson, 1997). Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Hardcover. ISBN: 034356254.

### Books for Older Readers

- The Buffalo Tree* (A. Rapp, 1998). HarperCollins. Paper. ISBN: 006440711X.
- Just One Flick of the Finger* (M. Loribiecki, 1996). Dial Books. Hardcover. ISBN: 0803719485.
- Run for Your Life* (M. Levy, 1997). Paper Star Books. Paper. ISBN: 0698116089.
- Behaving Bradley* (P. Nodelman, 1998). Simon & Schuster. Hardcover. ISBN: 0689814666.
- Talk to Me: Stories and a Novella* (C. Dines, 1999). Laureleaf. Paper. ISBN: 0440220262.
- Making Up Megaboy* (V. Walter, 1998). DK Publishing. Hardcover. ISBN: 0789424866.

### Taking Social Action

- We Shall Not Be Moved* (J. Dash, 1998). Scholastic. Trade. Paper. ISBN: 0590484109.
- Whirligig* (P. Fleischman, 1998). Henry Holt. Hardcover. ISBN: 0805055827.
- Whitewash* (N. Shange, 1997). Walker & Co. Hardcover. ISBN: 0802784909.
- The Bus Ride* (W. Miller, 1998). Lee & Low Books. Hardcover. ISBN: 1880000601.
- Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story* (K. Mochizuki, 1997). Lee & Low Books. Hardcover. ISBN: 1880000490.
- Seedfolks* (P. Fleischman, 1999). HarperCollins. Paper. ISBN: 0064472078.
- Sweet Dried Apples* (R. Breckler, 1996). Houghton Mifflin. Hardcover. ISBN: 039573570X.

According to Arthur Applebee (1997), the best teachers think about curriculum in terms of what conversations they want their students to be engaged in, not in terms of what concepts they want to introduce through reading or through direct instruction. Concepts, he argues, will be developed as

learners engage in conversations which address the real issues that exist in the world in which they are living and the disciplines they are studying. 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 discussions about these books so important. The topic of critical literacy supports the kind of conversations we cannot afford to ignore.

Our expanded view of curricular possibilities for critical books encouraged us to develop an expanded format for reviewing them. While we still provide a summary of each text, we also highlight potential conversations that the reading of the text makes possible, and we share actual conversations that have accompanied the reading of these books in classrooms. We hope that this format will help teachers who wish to invite students to engage in critical conversations, given events that have transpired in their classroom or community, to locate texts that fit the bill. Others, who have already started these conversations with their students and wish to continue, will find it useful to refer to the themes and alternative perspectives identified for each book. Although there are a number of different ways to categorize these books, our primary purpose here is to share books that focus on the theme of “understanding how systems of meaning in society position us.”

## REVIEWS

### *Your Move*

Bunting, Eve. (1998). Illus. James Ransome. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co. Unpaged. ISBN: 0-15-200181-6. *Genre*: contemporary realistic fiction. *Primary Topics*: coming-of-age-in-difficult times; sibling relationships; gangs. *Picture Book*.

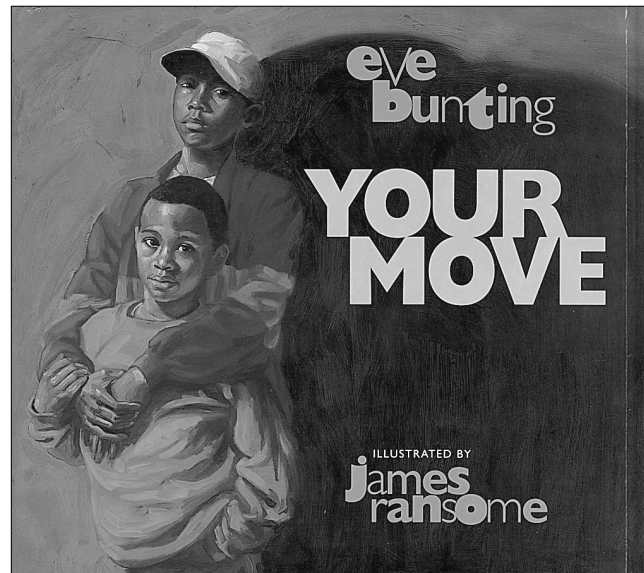
James is ten, and his six-year-old brother Isaac likes to do whatever he does. One evening, after their mother goes to work, James sneaks out to meet the K-Bones and brings Isaac with him. The K-Bones, led by Kris and Bones, say that they're not a gang—just kids who hang out together. When James wants to join them, they give him the task of spray painting the K-Bones' name over the Snakes' name way up on a sign over the highway. Although James is scared, he feels he must prove himself to the K-Bones.

After the mission is 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” (Unpaged).

That's when they run into the Snakes, who have a gun. 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



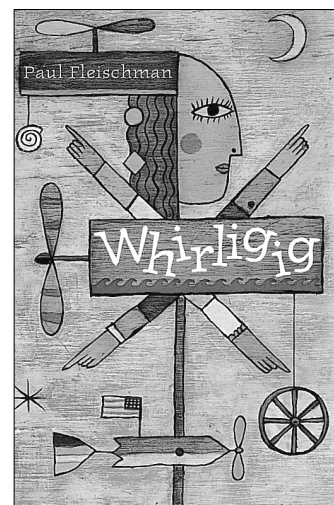
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even six-year-old Isaac are attracted to the K-Bones—both seek not only to connect with peers, but also to find older males to look up to, especially since their father left. The reasons why they both decide not to join the K-Bones, when Kris offers them the chance, are even more compelling. Exploring with kids how they would deal with similar situations is crucial, since (as the book reminds us) very young children may need to make such difficult and important decisions.

### *Whirligig*

Fleischman, Paul. (1998). New York: Henry Holt. 133 pp. ISBN: 0-8050-5582-7. *Genre*: Fiction. *Primary Topics*: coming-of-age; social responsibility; human interconnectedness. *Chapter Book*.

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. 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 United States. 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 are Brent's whirligigs. In each of these parallel stories, a character has a





unique encounter with one of the whirligigs. As a result, each character has to rethink his or her own life. These concurrent story layers provide the reader with a broad perspective of the impact Brent and the whirligigs have on very different individuals. The compilation of events shows the impact one individual can have on many others, regardless of time or space.

### **Flying Solo**

Fletcher, Ralph. (1998). New York: Clarion Books. 144 pp. ISBN: 0-395-87323-1. *Genre*: Fiction. *Primary Topics*: social responsibility; multiple perspectives; child/adult relationships; peer pressure; ethics. *Chapter Book*.

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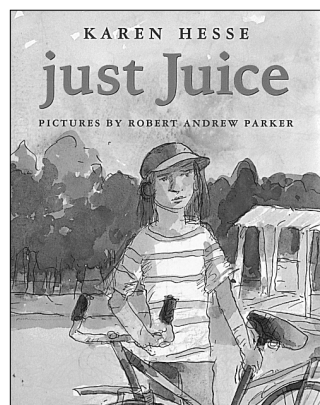
Told from the perspective of different students in Mr. Fabiano's sixth-grade class, this is the story of what happens when a substitute teacher doesn't show up and the class decides they'll run things by themselves for the day. No one discovers their secret as they maintain most of the usual routine, bringing the attendance sheet to the office, walking to music class in straight rows. But there's a lot 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 the teacher there. It's only at the end of the day that the principal discovers the deception.

When Mr. Fab does appear, 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 and on how school practices can both inhibit and empower kids.

### **Just Juice**

Hesse, Karen. (1998). Illus. Robert Andrew Parker. New York: Scholastic Press. 138 pp. ISBN: 0-590-03382-4. *Genre*: Fiction. *Primary Topics*: literacy as power; poverty; marginalization; intergenerational relationships. *Chapter Book*.

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 illiteracy greatly affects their acceptance by society and even by other family members. 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 negatively affect 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.

### **The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child**

Jiménez, Francisco. (1998). Albuquerque NM: University of New Mexico Press. 134 pp. ISBN: 0-8263-1797-9. *Genre*: memoir/historical fiction. *Primary Topics*: migrant farm workers; Mexican American immigrant experience; poverty; institutional dehumanization. *Chapter Book*.

In this powerful collection of short stories, Francisco Jiménez presents a brilliant, close-up view into the lives of Mexican immigrant farm workers. We see the humanity of this usually faceless group that brings food to our tables while continually being subjected to various types of political and media degradation. The book begins with the authors' parents risking all to come to the promised land of California to escape the poverty in Mexico. What they find instead of good jobs is the back-breaking life of migrant workers. As they continually follow the ripening of the crops on "the circuit," they live in tents, don't earn enough money to feed their children or provide them with medical care, and constantly worry about being deported.

The twelve stories in this book are told from the perspective of young Panchito, whose voice lets us feel both the joy and despair of migrant life. The 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, how schools position students whose primary language is not English, and health care issues. The book is an inspirational tale of personal courage and growth.

### ***Sweet Dried Apples: A Vietnamese Wartime Childhood***

Breckler, Rosemary. (1996). Illus. Deborah Kogan Ray. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co. Unpaged. ISBN: 0-395-73570-X. *Genre*: historical memoir. *Primary Topics*: war; social responsibility; child/adult relationships; social action. *Picture Book*.

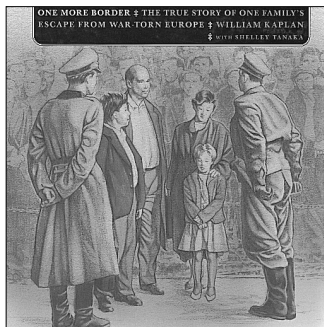
This story is told from the point of view of a young Vietnamese girl whose life is changed by the encroaching war that surrounds her. What starts out as a distant threat gradually comes to encompass her family and her life. A major figure in the book is Ong Noi, the girl's grandfather, a "revered elder" 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.

### ***One More Border: The True Story of One Family's Escape from War-Torn Europe***

Kaplan, William. (1998). Illus. Shelley Tanaka. Toronto, Ont., Canada: Groundwood Books. 61 p. ISBN: 0-88899-332-3. *Genre*: historical nonfiction. *Primary Topics*: Holocaust; segregation; marginalization; cultural differences; power and control; cultural persecution; social action. *Picture Book*.

In this powerful example of historical nonfiction, 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 the Kaplans to leave Europe reinforce that this is a true story.

The story reveals the social repositioning of the Kaplan family from living in comfort and luxury to being penniless. It raises issues regarding how some systems of meaning manage



to oppress certain groups or individuals. When partnered with *Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story* (Mochizuki, 1998), 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 escape Nazi persecution and rewrite their lives back into existence. A glimpse of their new home in Canada provides a sense of closure for readers. Both books encourage conversation about the Holocaust and why such terrible oppression was allowed to happen. After hearing *Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story*, a group of second and third graders got into a heated discussion of how someone like Hitler had been able to get away with doing the horrible things he did. When the student teacher asked if the way the Germans followed Hitler was similar to the way kids sometimes follow clothing fads, Caryn responded by saying, "It's like monkey see, monkey do. They copied off him instead of going against him."

### ***Sister Anne's Hands***

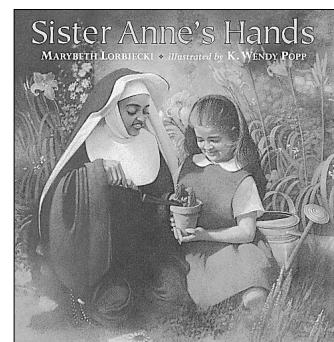
Lorbiecki, Marybeth. (1998). Illus. K. Wendy Popp. New York: Dial Books. Unpaged. ISBN: 0-80-372038-6. *Genre*: historical fiction. *Primary Topics*: African American culture; civil rights; creative response to racism & prejudice; school life. *Picture Book*.

Set within the context of the racially torn 60s, this is the story of Anna Zabrocky and her first encounter with an African American teacher. 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 multi-colored ones that Anna Zabrocky drew, become the metaphor for what we can give and learn.

*Sister Anne's Hands* is a gentle way to invite conversations about difference which teachers in both public and private school



Samantha      Colleen

did you fill sad when a  
kind throw the paper air  
plane? yes because she  
left. so did I because  
I know that black people  
are nice like us.

**Figure 1.**

A "Written Conversation" by Samantha and Colleen.  
(Translation: Samantha: Did you feel sad when a kid threw the paper airplane? Colleen: Yes, because she left. Samantha: So did I because I know that Black people are nice like us.)

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settings will find uplifting. 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 we 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." In several primary classrooms, the part of the text where Sister Anne showed pictures of signs that said Blacks should go back to Africa generated much discussion. Jordan, a first grader, said that he didn't like that part: "Even though they are Black, they belong here. They are my sisters and brothers." Samantha, a second grader, said, "I don't want that to happen because I have plenty of Black friends." Later, as illustrated in Figure 1, Samantha chose to follow up on the book by doing a "Written Conversation" (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996) with her friend Colleen.

### **Tomás and the Library Lady**

Mora, Pat. (1997). Illus. Raul Colón. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. Unpaged. ISBN: 0-679-80401-3. *Genre*: biography. *Primary Topics*: literacy as power; marginalization; migrant farm workers. *Picture Book*.

Based on the life of Tomás 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 give voice to people who historically have been marginalized. With the help of a caring librarian and lots of books, Tomás 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, *Tomás 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.

### **Whitewash**

Shange, Ntozake. (1997). Illus. Michael Sporn. New York: Walker and Company. Unpaged. ISBN: 0-8027-8490-9. *Genre*: Contemporary realistic fiction; *Primary Topics*: African American culture; racism & prejudice; social action. *Picture Book*.

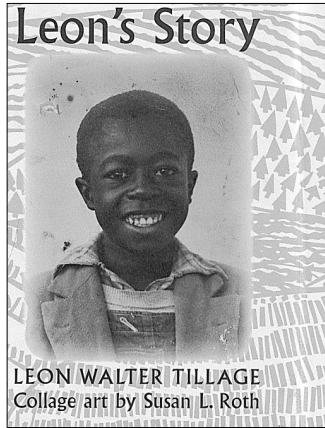
Helene-Angel, an African American preschooler, walks home from school with her brother, who doesn't particularly enjoy the task of walking his little sister home. One day, a gang of White kids surrounds them, blackening Mauricio's eye and painting Helene-Angel's face white as they show her how to be a "true American" and "how to be white." Helene-Angel is, of course, traumatized; she hides in her room until her grandmother convinces 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, *Whitewash* is a powerful story written in narrative style by the poet Ntozake 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 explore how they might transform the bad things in their own lives into triumphs. While several first graders like Porter said "It made me want to cry," others focused on the positive impact of Helene-Angel's friends. "When I saw how her friends helped her, it made me feel strong" (Desmond) and "Her friends made her happy" (Nia).



### Leon's Story

Tillage, Leon Walter. (1997). New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Collage by Susan Roth. 107 pp. ISBN: 0-374-34379-9. *Genre*: autobiography. *Primary Topics*: African American culture; racism & prejudice; civil rights; literacy as power. *Chapter Book*.



Every year, Leon Tillage tells the story of his life to the children at the Baltimore school where he works as a 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?" (Tillage, 1997, p. 88–89)

When he was fifteen, Tillage witnessed the violent murder of his father by some White boys who were drunk, "just out to have some fun," and who never faced any consequences for their crime. His voice, as he shares his story, is 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 discussions about the power of literacy and storytelling.

### What's the Most Beautiful Thing You Know about Horses?

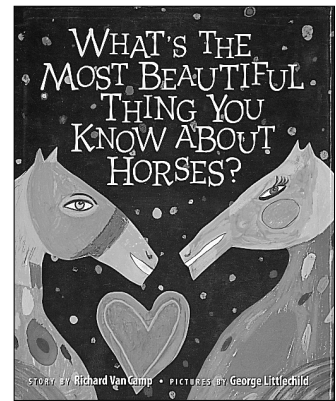
Van Camp, Richard. (1998). Illus. George Littlechild. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. 30 pp. ISBN: 0-89239-154-5. *Genre*: fiction. *Primary Topics*: multiple perspectives; Native American culture; ethnic differences; inquiry-based learning. *Picture Book*.

The most beautiful thing about this book is that it provides space for us to see the world and ourselves in entirely new

ways. Author Richard Van Camp is the main character. In his hometown of Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories of Canada, on a day so cold that he says the ravens refuse to fly, he cannot go outside. He decides to ask his friends and family a question he has been thinking about, "What's the most beautiful thing you know about horses?"

On the surface, the book appears to be a demonstration of what it truly means to be an inquirer. However, the perspectives offered to Van Camp in response to his question set up the possibility for a number of conversations to take place regarding stereotypes, ethnic differences, biracial 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 in conversations that are not primarily centered on such issues. George Littlechild's bold and bright illustrations encourage curiosity and support the generation of further inquiries.



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