

## 24 Critical Literacy

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*Contributing reviewers included Beth Berghoff, Randy Bomer, Amy Seely Flint, Mitzi Lewison, and Karla Möller.*

### Criteria for Excellence

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

### Understanding Differences That Make a Difference

- ★ Hesse, Karen. **Witness**. Scholastic, 2001.  
Johnson, D. B. **Henry Hikes to Fitchburg**. Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- ★ Lowry, Lois. **Gathering Blue**. Houghton Mifflin, 2000.  
Roth, Susan L. **Happy Birthday, Mr. Kang**. National Geographic Society, 2001.
- ★ Spinelli, Jerry. **Stargirl**. Knopf, 2000.  
Wiesner, David. **The Three Pigs**. Clarion, 2001.

### Giving Voice to “The Indignant Ones”

- English, Karen. **Francie**. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999.
- Fradin, Dennis. **My Family Shall Be Free! The Life of Peter Still**. HarperCollins, 2001.
- Grove, Vicki. **The Starplace**. Putnam, 1999.
- Haskins, James, and Kathleen Benson. **Building a New Land: African Americans in Colonial America**. Illustrated by James E. Ransome. HarperCollins, 2001.

Meltzer, Milton. **There Comes a Time: The Struggle for Civil Rights.** Random House, 2001.

Noguchi, Rick, and Deneen Jenks. **Flowers from Mariko.** Illustrated by Michelle Reiko Kumata. Lee & Low, 2001.

Wiles, Deborah. **Freedom Summer.** Illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue. Atheneum, 2001.

### **Taking Social Action**

Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. **Kids on Strike!** Illustrated with photographs. Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

Brumbeau, Jeff. **The Quiltmaker's Gift.** Illustrated by Gail de Marcken. Scholastic, 2000.

Fradin, Dennis, and Judith Fradin. **Ida B. Wells: Mother of the Civil Rights Movement.** Clarion, 2001.

Miller, William. **Rent Party Jazz.** Illustrated by Charlotte Riley-Webb. Lee & Low, 2001.

Paladino, Catherine. **One Good Apple: Growing Our Food for the Sake of the Earth.** Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

★ Ringgold, Faith. **If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks.** Simon & Schuster, 1999.

Wittlinger, Ellen. **Gracie's Girl.** Simon & Schuster, 2000.

### **Understanding How Systems of Meaning in Society Position Us**

Bunting, Eve. **Gleam and Glow.** Illustrated by Peter Sylvada. Harcourt, 2001.

★ Cronin, Doreen. **Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type.** Illustrated by Betsy Lewin. Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Konigsburg, E. L. **Silent to the Bone.** Atheneum, 2000.

★ Morrison, Toni, with Slade Morrison. **The Big Box.** Illustrated by Giselle Potter. Hyperion, 1999.

Skármeta, Antonio. **The Composition.** Illustrated by Alfonso Ruano. Translated by Elisa Amado. Groundwood, 2000.

Strasser, Todd. **Give a Boy a Gun.** Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Wittlinger, Ellen. **What's in a Name.** Simon & Schuster, 2000.

### **Examining Distance, Difference, and "Otherness"**

Ancona, George. **Cuban Kids.** Marshall Cavendish, 2000.

Garden, Nancy. **Holly's Secret.** Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000.

Marx, Trish. **One Boy from Kosovo.** Photographs by Cindy Karp. HarperCollins, 2000.

Medina, Tony. **DeShawn Days.** Illustrated by R. Gregory Christie. Lee & Low, 2001.

- ★ Myers, Christopher. **Wings**. Scholastic, 2000.
  - Myers, Walter Dean. **Monster**. HarperCollins, 1999.
  - Smith, Frank Dabba. **My Secret Camera: Life in the Lodz Ghetto**.  
Photographs by Mendel Grossman. Harcourt, 2000.
  - ★ Taylor, William. **Jerome**. Longacre, 1999.
  - Trueman, Terry. **Stuck in Neutral**. HarperCollins, 2000.
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What's with all of this emphasis on *critical* stuff?" a friend asked recently. "You know that I read aloud to my class twice a day and introduce them to lots of great books. Isn't that enough?" This question is not an easy one to answer, since a simple yes or no belies the complexity of the issue. Of course, we would never suggest that reading lots of wonderful books to children isn't a good thing to do. At the same time, however, we also want to argue that reading aloud and even talking with children about books will not necessarily help them or us become critically literate. The way we talk about books and the kinds of questions we ask can make a big difference. Critical literacy isn't about books per se but about social practices that keep particular structures of knowing, believing, and being in place. It is about power relationships and how language positions others and us. It is about access and how language is used to welcome some children into "the literacy club" (Smith, 1988) while denying access to others. It is also about diversity—specifically, how issues of diversity force us to rethink our approach to how we share literature with children.

In response to the question of why we need to talk about *critical literacy* rather than just *literacy*, Gee (2001) offers the following explanation: "The forms of literacy learned in school usually do not lead to the urge or ability to think 'critically' in the sense of understanding how systems and institutions interrelate to help or harm people" (p. 2). Only when we read quality literature and then engage children in conversations about how systems of power are portrayed in books as helping or harming people do we begin to position children as critically literate beings. This role is further developed when these conversations lead children to make connections to their own lives and the part they might play in challenging inequities or supporting the status quo.

Within any given culture are many "different literacies associated with different domains of life" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 11). Similarly, any elementary school classroom has its own set of well-defined literacy practices and procedures. Providing time for reading aloud to children is a familiar literacy practice in many classrooms. This activity

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constitutes a distinct domain with its own set of rules and procedures. Children learn early on what to expect from their teacher during read-aloud time and what the teacher will expect from them during and after the experience. In many classrooms, the read-aloud domain is characterized by a focus on helping children enjoy books and make personal connections to them. Teachers frequently ask questions such as "What did you like about this story?" and "What was your favorite part?" Some teachers also see the read-aloud domain as an appropriate channel for assessing comprehension and for providing comprehension instruction.

But these aren't the only possibilities for the read-aloud domain. Teachers who want to reimagine it as an opportunity to engage children in critical conversations about power and social justice can help them begin to understand that every text is written from someone's perspective. Although authors often want readers to think they are neutral or unbiased, they can never separate themselves from the background of experiences and beliefs they bring to their texts. Asking questions such as "Whose story is this?" and "What would it be like if it had been written by a female [or male or young child or senior citizen] or an African American [or Hispanic or Asian] author" leads to conversations about perspective. Since critical literacy is about redesign, teachers might also ask children to identify other stories that need to be told about this subject in order to achieve a more equitable representation. Raising issues and moving on without taking the time to figure out what is going on and why is not productive in the long run. Although language always *means* something, it also always *does* something. Children should be invited to analyze texts and hypothesize about the work authors are doing and how they are using language to get this work done. Our belief is that in order to be truly literate for the twenty-first century, children need to do more than just read and respond superficially to text. They need to understand how language works, how to find and question the cultural story being told, and how to act on their new awareness.

One of the books we've included in our review is *Happy Birthday, Mr. Kang* (Roth, 2001). This is the story of Mr. Kang, a Chinese American who carries on the tradition of owning a caged *hua mei* bird. Every Sunday, Mr. Kang and his Chinese American friends meet with their birds at the Sara Delano Roosevelt Park in New York City. Tension arises when Sam, Mr. Kang's grandson, tells him that he shouldn't own a caged bird in the United States, the land of the free. Mr. Kang thinks about what Sam has said and, much to the surprise and horror of his fellow Chinese Americans, frees his *hua mei* bird. At one level, this book can be shared with children to build enjoyment for reading and increase

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comprehension; it is an interesting, beautifully illustrated story. Yet under the surface of the text is the unspoken question of who is an American and who gets to decide on the qualifications. Mr. Kang and his countrymen carry on their Chinese traditions, but Sam is becoming Americanized, and in this case, his attitude wins out. Should we be happy or sad? What social practices make immigrants feel that they must act like the dominant group in order to be seen as Americans? Why has Sam bought into these social practices? If we wanted to change things, what would we have to do? Rather than see diversity as a problem, we could see it as a strength. How might the diversity of our population lead to the betterment of our society?

From our perspective, even this set of conversations is not good enough. Children also need to be invited to think about how they are going to position themselves in the world. This often includes changing what they say as well as how they act. Critical literacy isn't something one takes up in sixth grade; it begins in kindergarten with books such as *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* (Cronin, 2000) and *The Big Box* (Morrison, 1999). These books, like the others included in this chapter, invite children to think about compelling social issues that might not be as obvious in other children's books. While any text can be (and should be) examined through a critical lens, the books described below lend themselves to the kind of conversations we have described. They all meet one or more of the criteria we developed for selecting books for our chapter in this edition of *Adventuring with Books*.

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

One new insight has evolved from our observation that most of the books meeting our criteria don't have neat or happy endings. They leave readers with a problem to think about long after the book has ended. But this lingering feeling of uneasiness is often what leads to social action. *Gracie's Girl* (Wittlinger, 2000), for example, leaves many unanswered questions about how to address the needs of homeless peo-

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ple. Is this an appropriate issue for children to consider? We think it's an issue for everyone—not only to consider, but also to try to solve.

Identifying books for critical discussions is a dangerous enterprise. On the one hand, if the books identified are not used in a critical fashion by teachers and children, then the whole business of building a critically literate consciousness is stopped in its tracks. On the other hand, some will think that using the books in the manner we suggest is equally dangerous. Using them in this way will change the social practice of how reading is taught and schooling is conducted. We, like other critical literacy educators, understand these concerns but believe that the issues raised by these books support conversations that are just too important not to have. But, in some ways, the critics are right. The books listed below are meant to support teachers in opening up space in their classrooms for the development of a very different literate being. Whether this being is "critically literate" depends on the social practices with which teachers surround these books, not just on the books themselves.

### References

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### Understanding Differences That Make a Difference

Clements, Andrew. **The Landry News**. Illustrated by Salvatore Murdocca. Simon & Schuster, 1999. ISBN 0-689-81817-3. 123 pp. (I) (See 19.2.)

- 24.1 ★ Hesse, Karen. **Witness**. Scholastic, 2001. ISBN 0-439-27199-1. 161 pp. (ALL).

Fear and prejudice turn to violence in a small Vermont town in 1924 when the Ku Klux Klan moves in and successfully recruits members. The families of twelve-year-old Lenora, who is African American, and six-year-old Esther, who is Jewish, are targeted as many town members' racism and moral contradictions are

revealed. Told in interconnecting first-person narratives from a cast of eleven townspeople, this story creates spaces for critical conversations about historical injustices, current prejudices, and the efficacy of neutrality in the face of racism. Rather than simplistically depicting good versus evil, Hesse encourages a deeper contemplation of the internal struggles that take place when people confront their own or others' hatred by developing relationships across barriers of prejudice. Forgoing either a happy or a tragic ending, Hesse skillfully gives readers room to examine horrific acts as well as consider the possibilities for change when hatred is replaced by humanity. (KM)

- 24.2 Johnson, D. B. **Henry Hikes to Fitchburg**. Houghton Mifflin, 2000. ISBN 0-395-96867-4. Unpaged. (ALL).

This book is critical only to the extent that teachers take time to consider the underlying issues it raises: Why is our society always on the go, thinking faster is better? What social practices keep this lifestyle in place? Who benefits? What do we as a society lose? How could we, like Henry (a.k.a. Thoreau), make a difference? The story line is simple: Two friends agree to go to Fitchburg to see the country. They choose different methods of travel based on their different approaches to life. It is, unfortunately, possible to reduce this charming little story to clichés such as "Take time to smell the roses," "Faster isn't necessarily better," and "Different strokes for different folks." The illustrations also don't provide a counterperspective. Nevertheless, in the hands of the right teacher, this book can rise above the level of "cute" to make a critical difference. One suggestion for doing this is to introduce the story with the explanatory note at the back of the book. (JCH)

Lester, Helen. **Hooway for Wodney Wat**. Illustrated by Lynn Munsinger. Houghton Mifflin, 1999. ISBN 0-395-92392-1. 32 pp. (P). (See 14.4.)

- 24.3 ★ Lowry, Lois. **Gathering Blue**. Houghton Mifflin, 2000. ISBN 0-618-95581-9. 215 pp. (I).

Orphaned and physically flawed, Kira faces death in a futuristic society that shuns and discards the weak. When summoned to the Council of Guardians, Kira finds, much to her surprise, that the council has plans for her and her talent for weaving. While

performing her new duties, Kira gathers "blue" (a metaphor for truth) and begins to question taken-for-granted notions of community, creativity, and values. Like her earlier book *The Giver* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993), *Gathering Blue* is a provocative tale that inspires contemplation long after the last page is turned. (JCH)

- 24.4 Roth, Susan L. **Happy Birthday, Mr. Kang.** National Geographic Society, 2001. ISBN 0-7922-7723-6. Unpaged. (ALL).

Mr. Kang, a Chinese American, carries on the tradition of owning a caged *hua mei* bird. Every Sunday he and a group of his countrymen meet with their birds at the Sara Delano Roosevelt Park in New York City. Sam, Mr. Kang's grandson, doesn't believe that caged birds belong in the United States, the land of the free. Mr. Kang thinks about what Sam has said and, much to the surprise and horror of his fellow Chinese Americans, frees his *hua mei* bird. While on the surface this is a beautifully written and illustrated book, several critical issues just beg to be discussed: Who is an American? Who gets to decide who is an American? Sam has become Americanized, but should we be happy for him? What social practices make immigrants feel they must act like the dominant culture in order to be seen as American? How might our society benefit from the diversity that members from other cultures bring with them? (JCH)

- 24.5 ★ Spinelli, Jerry. **Stargirl.** Knopf, 2000. ISBN 0-679-8837-0. 186 pp. (I).

"She was elusive. She was today. She was tomorrow. We did not know what to make of her. In our minds we tried to pin her to the corkboard like a butterfly, but the pin merely went through and away she flew" (p. 15). Who is she? Stargirl. Or at least that's what she calls herself today. She is new to town and new to Mica High. She is as strange as her pet rat and as mysterious as her name. The students are fascinated, but even the ones who love her urge her to become the very thing that can destroy her: normal. Fortunately, she manages to slip away as elusively as she arrived, the only difference being that lives have been touched and perspectives changed. This book is a celebration of identity, of nonconformity, and of differences that make a difference. *Stargirl* invites students to explore what our society means by "normal," as well as what life might be like if another definition of normal were commonplace; many students will want to explore the social practices operating in their own school. (JCH)

- 24.6 Wiesner, David. **The Three Pigs**. Clarion, 2001. ISBN 0-618-00701-6. Unpaged. (ALL).

In this delightful postmodern version of *The Three Little Pigs*, the story starts out traditionally, with the wolf discovering a house of straw and huffing and puffing and blowing the house down. The story takes an unexpected twist when the wolf also blows the first pig right off the page. Thus begins a refreshing tale of deconstruction, reconstruction, and liberation. When all three pigs get outside of the story, leaving the wolf trapped inside, they start a grand escapade by flying off on a paper airplane made from one of the folded pages of their story. On their adventure, they encounter other book characters, eventually bringing back a dragon they rescued along the way. This story presents an effective demonstration of how things don't have to be the way they've always been. (ML)

### Giving Voice to "The Indignant Ones"

- ★ Bridges, Ruby. **Through My Eyes**. Scholastic, 1999. ISBN 0-590-18923-9. 64 pp. (I). (See 2.4.)

Corey, Shana. **You Forgot Your Skirt, Amelia Bloomer! A Very Improper Story**. Illustrated by Chesley McLaren. Scholastic, 2000. ISBN 0-439-07819-9. Unpaged. (P) (See 2.5.)

- 24.7 English, Karen. **Francie**. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999. ISBN 0-374-32456-5. 199 pp. (I).

English explores various levels of power and hope in this novel about twelve-year-old Francie, who endures social difficulty in a small Alabama town and longs for the day that she, her mother, and her brother will be able to join her father in Chicago. The story takes place during the Great Migration, and Francie's father has moved to Chicago for work. In his letters, however, he promises to find a way to bring his family to join him. Francie, who is good at school, begins tutoring an older boy who is then falsely accused of assaulting a white man. Through her compassion, Francie is drawn into a pervasively unjust social and judicial system. In the details of relationships, we see the ways in which unfairness and struggles for power are intricately complex, not simply matters of white over black, male over female. Well-crafted language makes this book valuable as a model for young writers as well. (RB)

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- 24.8 Fradin, Dennis. **My Family Shall Be Free! The Life of Peter Still.** HarperCollins, 2001. ISBN 0-06-029328-4. 190 pp. (I).

This book recounts the life of Peter Still and his family. Born into slavery, Peter and his brother Levin are separated from their mother and sisters at the ages of six and seven, respectively. Deceived into believing they are being taken to their mother (who has escaped to freedom with their sisters), the two boys are sold to a plantation owner six hundred miles from their home. So begins the story of how Peter waits over half a century for his chance at freedom and to be reunited with his parents and sisters. Readers come to know Peter and Levin and how through years of backbreaking manual labor in cotton fields and brick-yards, as well as abuse by slave owners, the two never give up the hope or ambition of being free. As they marry and have children of their own, their quest for freedom grows even stronger and more difficult. The accuracy of this text provides readers with useful information regarding the Underground Railroad and the work of abolitionists during the mid-1800s. (ASF)

Govenar, Alan, collector and editor. **Osceola: Memories of a Sharecropper's Daughter.** Illustrated by Shane W. Evans. Jump at the Sun/Hyperion, 2000. ISBN 0-7868-0407-6. 64 pp. (I). (See 2.24.)

- 24.9 Grove, Vicki. **The Starplace.** Putnam, 1999. ISBN 0-399-23207-9. 224 pp. (I).

This novel for young adolescents is set in 1961 in Quiver, Oklahoma, where racial segregation has been an unquestioned way of life despite the 1954 *Brown v. Topeka* Supreme Court decision. Celeste is the first black student to enroll in Frannie's school, and the girls become friends. Without being heavy-handed, the narrative exposes the prejudice among the students, parents, and teachers at the school and recounts the story of the Klu Klux Klan's lynching of Celeste's grandfather. Discussions of this book may raise students' awareness that communities have a history that affects the present as well as ways of being that include and exclude certain people. Who do they accept into their social groups and who do they leave out? Why? Where did they learn their attitudes? Would other attitudes be more inclusive? (BB)

- 24.10 Haskins, James, and Kathleen Benson. **Building a New Land: African Americans in Colonial America.** Illustrated by James E. Ransome. HarperCollins, 2001. ISBN 0-06-029361-6. 44 pp. (I).
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This book, part of the From African Beginnings series, describes the brutality of slave life in colonial America, including many uncelebrated aspects of slavery such as slave resistance, revolts, and rebellions. The slave economy is portrayed as it occurred in all of the colonies, not just in the South. Stories include those of individual slaves as well as lesser-known facts of the period, such as the existence of a thriving slave market on the spot that is now 60 Wall Street in New York City. *Building a New Land* strengthens the argument that this country could not have been built without forced black labor. *Bound for America: The Forced Migration of Africans to the New World* by James Haskins and Kathleen Benson (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1999), another book in the same series, works well as a companion book. (ML)

Look, Lenore. **Love as Strong as Ginger.** Illustrated by Stephen T. Johnson. Atheneum, 1999. ISBN 0-689-81248-5. Unpaged. (ALL). (See 16.9.)

- 24.11 Meltzer, Milton. **There Comes a Time: The Struggle for Civil Rights.** Random House, 2001. ISBN 0-375-80407-2. 180 pp. (I).

This historical account of the civil rights movement provides compelling stories and perspectives that will help older readers make sense of the need for social action. Meltzer traces the roots of racism back to slavery, describes the brutality of the segregated South in the first half of the 1900s, and chronicles the sit-ins, freedom rides, and other key events in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Children played an important role in this history, and Meltzer features them in the stories and black-and-white pictures. While he makes it clear that the civil rights movement was a partnership of blacks and whites, he also raises questions for readers to ponder. Why is power concentrated among the wealthiest members of society? Why do some people believe they can take the law into their own hands? How can a leader think racism is wrong but feel no moral passion to work for change? (BB)

Myers, Walter Dean. **Malcolm X: A Fire Burning Brightly.** Illustrated by Leonard Jenkins. HarperCollins, 2000. ISBN 0-06-027707-6. Unpaged. (P). (See 2.14.)

- 24.12 Noguchi, Rick, and Deneen Jenks. **Flowers from Mariko.** Illustrated by Michelle Reiko Kumata. Lee & Low, 2001. ISBN 1-58430-032-9. Unpaged. (ALL).
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After seeing the world through barbed wire for three years, Mariko's family eagerly awaits the end of World War II and the chance to leave the internment camp. Like hundreds of other families of Japanese origin, they were confined shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor. "Just because I look like the enemy doesn't mean I am," Mariko told her mother angrily. "I am American. I was born right here in Los Angeles." When they are finally allowed to leave, more challenges await this family. Mariko's father, who had owned a successful landscaping business, returns to find that his truck and tools have been stolen. He has to rummage through trashcans for broken tools that he can mend. This book provides a starting point for children to consider marginalization and what it means to be an American. In the wake of the tragedy of September 11, 2001, these conversations are needed more than ever. Pair *Flowers from Mariko* with *So Far from the Sea* by Eve Bunting (Clarion, 1998) for another perspective on Japanese internment camps. (CHL)

Pinkney, Andrea Davis. **Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters.** Illustrated by Stephen Alcorn. Harcourt, 2000. ISBN 0-15-201005-X. 107 pp. (I). (See 2.15.)

Rockwell, Anne. **Only Passing Through: The Story of Sojourner Truth.** Illustrated by R. Gregory Christie. Knopf, 2000. ISBN 0-679-89186-2. Unpaged. (P). (See 2.17.)

- 24.13 Wiles, Deborah. **Freedom Summer.** Illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue. Atheneum, 2001. ISBN 0-689-83016-5. Unpaged. (ALL).

This is the heartfelt story of two young boys who discover that even though the Civil Rights Act was passed, attitudes and beliefs do not change overnight. Readers travel back to the summer of 1964 when, for the first time, the town swimming pool and other public places are open to all, regardless of skin color. As friends Joe and John Henry race to be the first to swim in water "so clear, you can jump to the bottom and open your eyes and still see," they are confronted head on with the power of discrimination: the swimming pool is being filled in with tar to prevent anyone from swimming. Illustrator Jerome Lagarrigue captures the anger and disappointment Joe and John Henry feel at this turn of events. Joe tries to comfort John Henry by suggesting that they go into town to buy ice pops at Mr. Mason's store.

Readers are left at the end of the story wondering whether John Henry will experience the same kind of discrimination in the store and why this type of incident was so common during this period of U.S. history. (ASF)

### Taking Social Action

- 24.14 Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. **Kids on Strike!** Illustrated with photographs. Houghton Mifflin, 1999. ISBN 0-395-88892-1. 208 pp. (I).

Are children being exploited today in ways similar to those during the industrial revolution in the United States? Bartoletti's historical account of children in the workforce is complemented by hundreds of authentic, gripping photographs of children at work on city streets, in coal mines, and in the garment industry. The images of the children and descriptions of their inhumane working conditions will raise questions about human nature, progress, and U.S. economic values. The author highlights the resiliency and collective power of children by recounting ways in which children have participated in acts of resistance and organized strikes, but she also asks readers to consider how effective their efforts were in changing their own lives. How does children's limited power compare to the power of others to silence and control them in the pursuit of wealth and progress? Who else gets "used" in our society? Pair this book with Russell Freedman's *Kids at Work* (Houghton Mifflin, 1994) for two perspectives on child labor. (BB)

- 24.15 Brumbeau, Jeff. **The Quiltmaker's Gift.** Illustrated by Gail de Marcken. Scholastic, 2000. ISBN 0-439-30910-7. Unpaged. (P).

A generous quiltmaker "with magic in her fingers" sews the most beautiful quilts in the world and then gives them away to the poor and needy. A greedy king, "his storehouse stuffed with treasures," yearns for something that will make him happy. Although he is sure a quilt will do it, the quiltmaker refuses, saying she will only make him a quilt if he gives away all of his treasures. In the end, the king does give away his treasures and in so doing learns several lessons from the quiltmaker, such as that true happiness comes not from hoarding material possessions but from letting them go in order to bring happiness to others. By taking social action to support others, the king finally finds his own happiness. Children might be

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asked to consider what might cause them to become greedy like the king. A question of this sort can help them begin to understand how they are being positioned as consumers by big corporations such as Nike, Coca Cola, Disney, and others. (JCH)

- 24.16 Fradin, Dennis, and Judith Fradin. **Ida B. Wells: Mother of the Civil Rights Movement.** Clarion, 2001. ISBN 0-395-89898-6. 178 pp. (I).

This book is a historical account of Ida B. Wells's life as she crusaded against the unlawful treatment of African Americans in the early part of the twentieth century. Through her writing and speaking, Ida championed voting rights for women, spoke out against lynching, and helped establish the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She was outspoken in her beliefs, suggesting that those who did nothing to stop lynching and discriminatory practices were just as guilty as those who actually did them. By the time of her death in 1931, lynching had all but disappeared. The book includes striking photographs of Ida, her family, and her colleagues; pamphlets and other writings; and testaments to the horrors of lynching. Readers are invited to engage in important conversations about social action and how we all have the potential to make a difference. (ASF)

- 24.17 Miller, William. **Rent Party Jazz.** Illustrated by Charlotte Riley-Webb. Lee & Low, 2001. ISBN 1-58430-025-6. Unpaged. (ALL).

Rent parties originated in the South as a form of social action to help people in financial distress. They were most often held to protect African Americans from the harsh treatment of rent collectors who routinely changed the locks on doors and sold off people's belongings if they were even a day late paying the rent. Later, rent parties provided support for workers on strike and for people unjustly arrested. In this story, Sonny and his mother find themselves short on rent money after Mama is laid off from her job. While Sonny considers leaving school to get a job, a local musician helps him plan a rent party. As music spills out into the street, neighbors show up with food, coins, and hope for Sonny and his mother. The story emphasizes the power that is generated when community members come together to support one another. (CHL)

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- 24.18 Paladino, Catherine. **One Good Apple: Growing Our Food for the Sake of the Earth.** Houghton Mifflin, 1999. ISBN 0-395-85009-6. 48 pp. (I).

Despite the saying "What we don't know won't hurt us," this book points out how important it might be to know more about the foods we purchase and eat. *One Good Apple* explains how the pesticides and fertilizers used to grow perfect fruits and vegetables are toxic to our bodies and the balance of nature. The author's cogent, urgent argument for healthier agricultural practices raises many questions. Do the economic motivations of commercial farming justify the use of toxins? What are the alternatives? Whose needs are being met and whose are not? What can we do as consumers? Who is working on these issues? What other action is needed? (BB)

Polacco, Patrica. **The Butterfly.** Philomel, 2000. ISBN 0-399-23170-6. Unpaged. (I). (See 5.28.)

- 24.19 ★ Ringgold, Faith. **If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks.** Simon & Schuster, 1999. ISBN 0-689-81892-0. Unpaged. (ALL).

Award-winning author Faith Ringgold uses brilliant acrylic illustrations and a simultaneously magical and realistic plot to tell the story of Rosa Parks. From the moment Marcie, a young African American girl, steps onto a strange, driverless bus, readers begin to learn about events in the life of Rosa Parks told in the voices of famous passengers, all of whom participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Although criticized for its condensed form, this picture book contains a remarkable amount of information about Mrs. Parks. She is portrayed as a courageous political activist, and readers discover much about her life before and after the boycott. This book can open up conversations about the civil rights movement, segregation, and political activism. (ML)

Ryan, Pam Muñoz. **Esperanza Rising.** Scholastic, 2000. ISBN 0-439-12041-1. 262 pp. (I). (See 17.38.)

- 24.20 Wittlinger, Ellen. **Gracie's Girl.** Simon & Schuster, 2000. ISBN 0-689-82249-9. 186 pp. (I).

This is the story of an adolescent girl who learns that she is not the only person in the world who needs love and care. As Bess

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Cunningham starts middle school, her main concerns are to become popular and to get more attention from her busy parents. Although she initially complains about her mother's commitment to a community soup kitchen and is reluctant to become a volunteer there, she becomes more involved after meeting and befriending Gracie, a homeless elderly woman. She finds a vacant building for Gracie to sleep in at night and enlists the help of her brother and friends in bringing her food. Instead of spending her time thinking of ways to be cool, Bess becomes more concerned with providing food and shelter for Gracie and others like her. Although the story doesn't have a happy ending, it provides many opportunities for starting conversations about how homeless people are positioned in society and what it means to take social action. (CHL)

### **Understanding How Systems of Meaning in Society Position Us**

- 24.21 Bunting, Eve. **Gleam and Glow**. Illustrated by Peter Sylvada. Harcourt, 2001. ISBN 0-15-202596-0. Unpaged. (P).

Set in a nonspecific country, Bunting's tale of wartime destruction and hope is narrated by eight-year-old Victor. With Papa in the Liberation Army, Victor describes the fears he and his sister share as they hear about burning villages from passing refugees. When Mama decides it's time for them to leave, Victor releases into the family pond two goldfish that a passing stranger had left with him, so that they can have a few more days of life. Reunited with Papa at the refugee camp, the family finally returns to find their home totally destroyed. Hope is renewed when they find their pond teeming with life, despite the destruction all around them. Accompanied by rich illustrations that depict both the joys of everyday life and the horrors of war, this book encourages discussion about topics that are common in the news but often not included as part of classroom discourse. (KM)

- 24.22 ★ Cronin, Doreen. **Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type**. Illustrated by Betsy Lewin. Simon & Schuster, 2000. ISBN 0-689-83213-3. Unpaged. (P).

Farmer Brown has a problem. His cows have found an old typewriter in the barn and are using it to make demands. They want electric blankets to keep them warm at night and are willing to

withhold their milk until they get them. Even worse, the chickens have joined the cows in their strike. No more milk! No more eggs! The ducks are the not-so-neutral party. They carry the cows and chickens' message: a promise to turn over the typewriter in exchange for blankets. Once Farmer Brown capitulates, however, the ducks have a few demands of their own. The delightfully understated text and expressive illustrations add to the hilarity. This is a read-aloud must for teachers who wish to prompt conversations about literacy and power among even the youngest of readers. (JCH)

★ Fleischman, Paul. **Weslandia**. Illustrated by Kevin Hawkes. Candlewick, 1999. ISBN 0-763-60006-7. Unpaged. (ALL). (See 14.27.)

★ Howard, Elizabeth Fitzgerald. **Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys**. Illustrated by E. B. Lewis. Simon & Schuster, 2000. ISBN 0-689-80076-2. Unpaged. (ALL). (See 6.9.)

- 24.23 Konigsburg, E. L. **Silent to the Bone**. Atheneum, 2000. ISBN: 0-689-83601-5. 261 pp. (I).

*Silent to the Bone* involves readers in a mystery. Branwell, a thirteen-year-old boy, has been accused by a nanny of dropping his baby sister and putting her into a coma. He is being detained at the Clarion County Juvenile Behavioral Center and has been silent since the accident. Branwell's father, Dr. Z, asks his son's friend Conner to see if he can get Branwell to talk about what happened that fateful afternoon. Through the visits at the detention center, Conner and Branwell discover there are many ways to communicate without using speech. As clues are revealed, readers begin to see the many layers in the complex relationships between family members, friends, and peers. Students might be invited to consider why Branwell was unable to talk about what had happened that day. (ASF)

McGill, Alice. **Molly Bannaky**. Illustrated by Chris K. Soentpiet. Houghton Mifflin, 1999. ISBN 0-395-72287-X. Unpaged. (I). (See 19.22.)

- 24.24 ★ Morrison, Toni, with Slade Morrison. **The Big Box**. Illustrated by Giselle Potter. Hyperion, 1999. ISBN 0-7868-0416-5. Unpaged. (P).
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This outwardly humorous book has a haunting message about children who don't fit accepted definitions of what it means to be "normal." In poetic form, the authors tell the stories of Patty, Mickey, and Liza Sue, who live in a big brown box with doors that open "only one way." Because of the children's behavior, the adults who are responsible for them have concluded that they just can't handle their freedom and must be locked away. Although they are provided with lots of toys and "fun" items such as beanbag chairs and Bubble Yum, the children are portrayed as prisoners who have been separated from their families and peers. The children's situation is reminiscent of students who are pulled out of regular education classes and segregated in special education classes because they don't meet the standard definition of what children at any specific age should be able to do. The story raises questions about the meaning of freedom and the fine line between maintaining order and destroying freedom. (CHL)

- 24.25 Skármeta, Antonio. **The Composition.** Illustrated by Alfonso Ruano. Translated by Elisa Amado. Groundwood, 2000. ISBN 0-88899-390-0. Unpaged. (I).

Chilean writer Skármeta, author of *Il Postino*, has created a children's book set in the dangerous environment of a dictatorship in an unidentified country. Pedro, a third grader, loves playing soccer with his friends. His parents listen to a "noisy" distant radio station every night to get news, which annoys Pedro. Although he's heard his parents talking about a dictatorship, the gravity of the situation he's living in doesn't touch Pedro until his friend Daniel's father is taken away by army troops. Soon after, a military captain comes to Pedro's classroom and has the students write on the topic "what my family does at night." Even though the book deals with a serious subject, Skármeta allows readers to experience tyranny from a child's perspective. This book can stimulate conversations about freedom, justice, and the double-edged power of writing to help and oppress in different situations. (ML)

- 24.26 Strasser, Todd. **Give a Boy a Gun.** Simon & Schuster, 2000. ISBN 0-689-81112-8. 128 pp. (I).

This multivoiced novel focuses squarely on gun violence and the social and personal issues facing adolescents. Two white middle-class students, Gary Searle and Brandon Lawlor, are both intelligent and exceptionally troubled. They move outside the circle of

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popular students at their high school. Gary's death by a self-inflicted bullet wound after he and Brandon terrorized the school with guns and homemade bombs is detailed in the opening pages. What follows is a story told by Gary's and Brandon's peers, teachers, and parents, as well as their own suicide notes, in interconnected interview segments. This is both a tragic story of the agony inflicted by students on peers and an indictment of gun availability and gun violence in the United States. This novel rings true. It can inspire important conversations about relationships and guns between adolescents and supportive adults. (KM)

- 24.27 Wittlinger, Ellen. **What's in a Name**. Simon & Schuster, 2000. ISBN 0-689-82551-X. 146 pp. (I).

"It's not just a name—it's an identity!" is more than simply the rallying cry of a group of wealthy citizens determined to change the name of the town of Scrub Harbor to the posh-sounding Folly Bay. This slogan also underlies the experiences of ten teens, each of whom narrates a chapter in this sophisticated novel. Through the backdrop of town politics, the characters struggle to understand their identities and how they are positioned both in school and in the community. The jock, the exchange student, the working-class kid, the immigrant, the brain—all are confronted with the realization of how much of who they are is constructed by others. This tale offers critical insights into how personal identity directly intersects larger social issues of class, language, sexual orientation, and race. (ML)

★ Woodson, Jacqueline. **Miracle's Boys**. Putnam, 2000. ISBN 0-399-23113-7. 133 pp. (I). (See 15.29.)

### Examining Distance, Difference, and "Otherness"

- 24.28 Ancona, George. **Cuban Kids**. Marshall Cavendish, 2000. ISBN 0-7614-5077-7. 40 pp. (I).

*Cuban Kids* takes a sympathetic look at the lives of Cuban children, presenting an alternative to the typically negative image portrayed in the U.S. media. Snapshots from daily lives of children manage to make Cuba look both exotic and ordinary, so that students will notice differences while still recognizing that Cuban kids go to school, have friends and families, and like to have fun. These children, however, end their pledge of allegiance with "*Seremos como Che!*—We will be like Che!" A gentle



mention of "American bosses" offers a window into U.S. complicity in Cuba's poverty, though the embargo is not discussed. It is impossible to look at Cuba without a political perspective, so examining this book alongside reports about Elian Gonzalez, for instance, provides an opportunity for critical reading. (JCH)

- 24.29 Garden, Nancy. **Holly's Secret**. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000. ISBN 0-374-33273-8. 132 pp. (I).

Twelve-year-old Holly has a secret—her parents are gay. Rather than face a new round of painful jokes and secondhand gay bashing, she comes up with The Plan, a new identity for herself. She uses the opportunity of a family move to change into Yvette, the epitome of sophistication, normalcy, and grown-up femininity. But keeping her two moms a secret is no easy task and maybe not such a great idea in the first place. As the story unfolds, Holly becomes more enmeshed in the lies she tells her new friends, giving new credence to Shakespeare's admonition, "What a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." Issues raised include identity, prejudice, homophobia, and the role that school plays in each. (JCH)

Grimes, Nikki. **My Man Blue: Poems**. Illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue. Dial, 1999. ISBN 0-8037-2326-1. Unpaged. (P). (See 15.13.)

- 24.30 Marx, Trish. **One Boy from Kosovo**. Photographs by Cindy Karp. HarperCollins, 2000. ISBN 0-688-17732-8. 24 pp. (I).

This book humanizes global conflicts and refugees by making them personal as well as political. Refugees are not "others" but people like us, complete with hopes and dreams. Global conflicts involve all of us, whether our response is to act or not. The story line focuses on Edi Fejzullahus, a twelve-year-old Albanian, and his family, who are driven from their home in Kosovo by Serbian soldiers. While the story ends with the family still in a refugee camp, their reunion with an uncle at the camp provides a note of hopefulness. An introductory chapter sets a historical and political context for questioning our society's practices and activities in the rest of the world. At issue are questions about the kind of people we wish to be, why we respond to some world crises and not others, what responsibilities we have to people in other nations, and how we might make a positive difference both locally and globally. (JCH)

- 24.31 Medina, Tony. **DeShawn Days**. Illustrated by R. Gregory Christie. Lee & Low, 2001. ISBN 1-58430-022-1. Unpaged. (P).

DeShawn Williams is a ten-year-old African American boy who shares his urban life in the "hood" with readers. Through the wonderful poetry and art of Tony Medina and R. Gregory Christie, we come to know DeShawn and his family. We meet his grandmother, who has "legs like an elephant's" and is in poor health. We meet his mother, "who's hardly ever home 'cause she works so hard and goes to college too," and his uncle Richie, who hugs DeShawn at night when bad dreams awaken him. DeShawn shares many aspects of his daily life with us. We learn that he is sometimes frightened by scary movies, graffiti, and watching the news on television. We share his grief when his beloved grandmother dies. Medina challenges stereotypical images of African American urban males and celebrates boys like DeShawn and the strong extended families that raise them. (CHL)

- 24.32 ★ Myers, Christopher. **Wings**. Scholastic, 2000. ISBN 0-590-03377-8. Unpaged. (I).

Ikarus Johnson is a new kid in the neighborhood who is very different from everyone else—he has wings and flies. This Icarus-inspired character is relentlessly taunted and laughed at by other kids and ordered out of school by his teacher. The narrator, an extremely quiet girl who is also an outsider, feels a connection to Ikarus but remains silent for most of the book. After a policeman orders Ikarus off the top of a building, the girl wonders, "Could the policeman put him in jail for flying, for being too different?" This realization galvanizes her to action, and she finally shouts at the other kids to stop laughing at Ikarus and to leave him alone. The provocative collages of this award-winning author and illustrator augment the text and invite extended conversations about difference and diversity. (ML)

- 24.33 Myers, Walter Dean. **Monster**. HarperCollins, 1999. ISBN 0-06-028077-8. 288 pp. (I).

"The best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help. That way even if you sniffle a little they won't hear you. If anybody knows that you are crying, they'll start talking about it and soon it'll be your turn to get beat up when the lights go out" (p. 1). Written in sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon's handwriting as he endures life

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in the Manhattan Detention Center, this powerful opening sets the stage for Steve's depiction of his life during his murder trial. Told with realistic intensity, Steve's story is personal and societal. Readers are forced to consider who Steve is and why he ended up where he is. Through flashbacks written as a movie script, readers share Steve's journey as he reveals his humanity in a narrative that parallels the prosecutor's depiction of him as a "monster." This book invites students to explore questions about justice and how it might be influenced by bias and notions of "otherness." (KM)

- 24.34 Smith, Frank Dabba. **My Secret Camera: Life in the Lodz Ghetto.** Photographs by Mendel Grossman. Harcourt, 2000. ISBN 0-15-20206-2. Unpaged. (I).

Mendel Grossman's life story is told in the afterword; the photographs he secretly took reveal the facts of life in the Lodz ghetto in Poland under Nazi rule. Teachers might want to begin with the afterword because Smith's fictionalized first-person narrative (presumably in Grossman's voice) almost takes away from the reality and historical significance of the document. The book serves as a painful reminder of the results of hate, prejudice, and, to some extent, our initial indifference and unwillingness to act to help others. While this story represents an extreme case of "othering," there are similar parallels in every classroom and playground that bear discussion with children. Students might be challenged to consider what kind of social action it will take to end the abusive treatment of other children that they witness or may participate in on a daily basis. (JCH)

- 24.35 ★ Taylor, William. **Jerome.** Longacre, 1999. ISBN 1-877-13529-1. 95 pp. (I/ Young Adult—graphic language).

Do you remember the Jenny Jones show on which a young man, on live television, named another young man he had a crush on? The result was that the young man he identified was so outraged that he hunted the first man down and killed him after the show. Should the first young man have kept his secret and killed himself instead? Is there any way to avoid such a violent ending? *Jerome* raises all of these issues as two friends, Marco and Katie, use e-mail, faxes, and online chats to come to grips with Jerome's suicide and his feelings for Marco. Given that as many as 33 percent of all teenage suicides are a result of adolescents failing to

deal with issues of sexual identity, this book provides opportunities for conversation that teachers of upper elementary and middle school students cannot afford to overlook. Whether these discussions are seen as an exercise in preventing suicide or in helping adolescents develop critical literacy and emotional intelligence, they are crucial to the health and well-being of young people. (JCH)

- 24.36 Trueman, Terry. **Stuck in Neutral**. HarperCollins, 2000. ISBN 0-06-028519-2. 114 pp. (I).

*Stuck in Neutral* is the life history of a genius told from the perspective of the genius himself. Shawn is a fourteen-year-old with cerebral palsy. Since he cannot communicate, he has been diagnosed as profoundly developmentally disabled. As a result, he is at the mercy of everyone. His age-mates make fun of him, and his family members either resent the effect of his illness on the family or feel so sorry for him that they contemplate having him euthanized regardless of the cost to them personally. This story leaves both adults and children feeling rather stunned. Virtually anyone who experiences this book will interact with disabled people differently and change the language they use to describe them. Several critical issues are raised, including the definition of "normal" and who gets to decide what normal is. (JCH)

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