



**Books are windows, books are mirrors:  
multicultural collections for children and young  
adults opening new worlds**

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**Abstract:**

*In the 21<sup>st</sup> century most countries have multicultural societies. Multicultural books can build self-esteem and reinforce cultural pride (mirror), as well as promote understanding of cultures different from one's own (window). The reader glimpses differences between the people of this world and, at the same time, perceive that there are important things that human beings have in common.*

*The same criteria to evaluate children's books are valid for multicultural books, but one also has to look at specific issues. Examples from two South African children's books - *Madiba Magic*, and *Stories South of the Sun* - will illustrate how multicultural stories can contribute to communication and understanding between different cultures.*

*Multicultural collections in libraries can build a bridge between different cultures so that children from both sides will be able to cross over freely and fearlessly.*

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**1. Introduction**

Culture is the sum total of a group of people's living experiences within their own society – the way of life, traditions and beliefs of a group of people. This can be visible in traditions, music, art and literature, or more subtle like certain gestures, beliefs, values, behaviour, arguing and thinking. Weaver (1993) sees culture as an iceberg, where one-seventh of culture is visible (e.g. how someone would dress, greet, react), and six sevenths are invisible (we often do not know the motivation or reason why someone acts the way he does). Culture provides the standards for behaviour and gives a feeling of identification and sense of belonging. The values and traditions of a

culture are shaped by personal attitudes and beliefs. Perspectives are bound to cultural knowledge.

Few communities are truly homogeneous. There are and have always been differences among community members in life-styles, religions, education, language and cultural backgrounds. The global village of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is continuously changing and a significant feature of contemporary society is its multi-ethnic and culturally pluralistic character. In 1990 “people of colour” comprise 25 percent of the population in the United States and it is believed that by 2020 almost half of the learners in U.S. schools will be “of colour” (Temple et.al. 1998: 82). Many changes, for example, have taken place in Europe since 1989 and in South Africa since 1994. Most countries have a core culture - a macroculture - and a number of microcultures that are part of, or integrated into the macroculture to greater or lesser degrees (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson 1999: 188). Multiculturalism has become a prominent issue worldwide. The phrase pops up everywhere, for example multicultural education, multicultural communication, multicultural management, multicultural organisations.

There is always a difference between how people view themselves and their group, and how they see others. Globalization is driving us as individuals and cultures to acknowledge our judgements of others.

As a child is part of his society and member of a cultural group, the cultural interpretations of one’s own identity merge from childhood. According to the social constructivist approach, children construct meaning through social interactions across and within cultural settings (Schmidt & Finkbeiner 2006: 3). There is a Zulu saying “*Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*”, which implies that a person is only a person through his interaction with other people (Elion & Strieman 2002: 41).

Communication is the key to understanding and appreciation of human differences. “You have to understand your neighbour’s language before you judge him”, according to a Douala proverb (Cameroon), (Schipper 1999:1).

Major stumbling blocks in understanding other cultures, are ignorance and prejudice. Many children may feel uncomfortable when they have to interact with someone from a different culture. According to Schmidt and Finkbeiner (2006) “Know thyself and understand others” is of fundamental importance to develop and grow tolerant and empathetic citizens, and to cooperate effectively in ethnically, culturally, linguistically, religiously, politically and socio-economically diversified communities. In a multicultural society one needs to adopt a way of thinking by building on the abundance of goodwill, acceptance and tolerance that one has for one another (Lowen 1995: 7).

## **2. “Books are windows, books are mirrors”: multicultural children’s literature**

Literature portrays the values of a society. Multicultural children’s literature focuses on the reality of various cultures. Multicultural literature is about racial or ethnic groups that are culturally and socially different from another group. Readers often see themselves and others sharing universal experiences without focussing on cultural

differences, but culturally specific stories offer insights in understanding different cultures. No culture is superior to another.

Demands for multi-ethnic literature are not of recent origin. A children's journal *The Slave's friend* (1836-1838) published poetry, stories and essays that were pleas for the emancipation and equitable treatment of freed persons in the United States (Harris 1991).

Cultural imperialism has for many years silenced the voices from minority cultures worldwide – the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Africa. Many cultures were portrayed in stereotyped ways. Literature in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had to serve as justification for colonialism. The literature culture in the world is traditionally Eurocentric. When the multicultural genre was initially created, it meant everything that wasn't part of the Eurocentric white society. This has eventually changed notably to include all cultures, regardless of colour.

Multicultural stories can be found in all genres of children's literature:

- **Folk tales** can introduce the child to a variety of cultures. Folk tales have general and universal themes and characters.
- **Heroic stories:** Traditional stories about legendary heroes portray important values and beliefs of the group.
- **Biographies** encourage respects and admiration for the social contributions of outstanding individuals. The reader learns how someone from another culture can contribute to society and how to overcome obstacles.
- **Historical fiction:** Themes and conflict in historical fiction can show the survival of a culture's spirit and body.
- **Songs, rhymes and poetry** are important elements in a specific culture.
- **Contemporary realistic fiction** is very important to promote cultural understanding. Characters need to survive in a changing society. Problems, conflicts, dilemmas and joys of modern society and how to deal with them in a multicultural society are portrayed.

Stories are the structural coding of social values, beliefs and goals that underlie human interaction. At the centre of is usually a sequence of events that records the dilemmas people encounter and the methods used to resolve these dilemmas (Machet 1994: 72). Understanding a story depends upon knowledge of culturally unique patterns of social interaction, situations, motivation, behaviour and beliefs.

Stories can break down barriers and help build bridges of understanding across differences. Multicultural literature can feature one specific culture in a story/book, or more than one culture and their interaction. Multicultural literature can reflect children's own culture (mirror), as well as providing a window to other cultures.

❖ Value on a personal level (Mirror):

Mirrors allow readers to see images and reflections of their own lives. When the child finds his own cultural heritage and values in the book, it can develop a sense of cultural identity and it can be a powerful tool in building self-esteem and reinforcing cultural pride. When he is familiar with the milieu and traditions portrayed, he experiences a sense of belonging. A book portraying his own culture may inspire the reader from the culture to learn more about his own roots.

❖ Value on an interpersonal level (Window):

Windows allow readers to see the lives of others. To build bridges of cultural understanding, books are needed that are uniquely representative of a culture. Stories can present unfamiliar groups and their customs and traditions in ways that show them to be natural and understandable. Emotional involvement with multicultural characters could reduce prejudices toward that culture. An appealing story may entice the reader from another culture to find out more about the country or group of people from which the story comes. Background information could give the reader insight on the other culture or country's history, geography, nature, fauna and flora. A multicultural book should show the child how it would be to belong to the other cultural group. Multicultural books are important to develop attitudes of open-mindedness about diversity.

To choose a good story from a particular culture and to tell it well, is in a sense to honour that culture. The reader glimpses the many differences between the peoples of this world and, at the same time, perceive that there are important things that human beings have in common, as Maya Angelou says in *Human family*:

“In minor ways we differ,  
In major ways we're the same.  
I note the obvious differences  
between each sort and type,  
but we are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike” (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson 1999: 187).

One value of sharing multicultural literature with children, is thus increasing understanding that those who belong to groups other than their own are also real people with feelings, emotions, and needs similar to theirs (Norton 1991: 595). Universal values are important in multicultural books, as in any other book, for example friendship, family loyalty, hospitality, appreciation, respect, love and courage. The reader becomes aware of a “common humanity”. The child then identifies with a character as individual.

When we know ourselves, we can understand others.

### **3. Multicultural children's literature in South Africa**

South Africa is a multicultural and multilingual society – the rainbow nation with eleven official languages. In a society like this, intercultural relations and intercultural communication are very important issues.

The first folk tales were published late in the nineteenth century. Black tribes have a rich oral tradition. Stories from Africa had to compete with written stories from Europe. Black children did not have access to these stories, as they were published in English or Afrikaans (Töttemeyer 1989).

In South Africa apartheid kept black and white apart in many respects – also in South African literature. There was an “avoidance syndrome” (Töttemeyer 1989), where any issues around race were deliberately avoided. Many whites knew black cultures only

from some folktales that had been written up. White children were for many years isolated from the black culture, philosophy and spiritual wealth (Jenkins 1993). Black children grew up with oral storytelling. Children in South Africa who had access to books grew up with tales from Europe. Blacks were portrayed at the edge of the literature – vague background figures. Many South Africans had little social contact with people from other cultures. Based on this limited contact, incorrect judgements about other cultures were made. Stereotyping was common: Blacks were seen as being unintelligent, lacking initiative, slaves, superstitious, Malays were stereotyped as magicians, Indians were absent, Coloureds were funny people, and white Afrikaans people were all seen as racists.

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century changes gradually came in. Changing European colonial views of Africans became visible in literature. The black children have learnt about themselves through the eyes of their white masters over the ages, but now they must see themselves as children of Africa (Jenkins 1993). After the 1960 Sharpeville incident “socially critical works” were written. The 1976 uprising marked the liberation of South African books from a taboo on matters of race and politics. More books with multicultural themes were published. During the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a common South African cultural vision which transcends ethnicity is found in literature. Changing social realities and concerns are being mirrored in children’s books - most notably in books reflecting multicultural experiences (Harris 1991: 31).

Through multicultural literature children discover that while people may share their beliefs and values, individuals must learn to live in harmony (Norton 1991: 531). Where a country is searching for better relations between its people, children should be taught to respect differences.

#### **4. Evaluation of multicultural children’s literature**

The same standards and criteria to evaluate children’s books in general should be applied when selecting multicultural books, for example good books expand awareness, provide an enjoyable read that does not overtly teach or moralize, tells the truth, embody quality, have integrity, and show originality (Temple et. al. 1998: 9-10). However, one also has to look at specific issues, such as the portrayal of the characters, the life style and milieu, illustrations, language, historical events and facts, the perspective of the book and cultural relations.

##### **➤ Characters**

Children enjoy a good story, whatever the cultural background of the characters may be. Characters should be individuals with true talents, dreams, fears, emotions and expectations – multidimensional. Characters of the featured culture should be multifaceted and well-rounded. Respect for the character/s is important. The reader should be able to identify with the character. Racial and cultural stereotyping should be avoided. The nature of stereotyping is that it unfairly assigns a fixed image or fixed characteristics to everyone within a group (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson 1999: 189). According to Temple et. al. (1998) a stereotyped impression of a cultural group may be created by how the characters are portrayed, how they interact with one another, how the setting of the book is described, how the theme is treated and how information is conveyed.

➤ **Perspective and milieu**

The greatest challenge is to include background information and cautionary remarks without disrupting the flow of the story. The culture portrayed should be represented authentic and multidimensionally. Once again, respect for the culture and its people are essential. Cultural details should be accurate.

➤ **Historical facts and historical events**

Historical facts and historical events should be accurate and unbiased.

➤ **Relations**

Relations among different cultures and how they react to one another should be realistic and not discriminating.

➤ **Illustrations**

Illustrations can strengthen the text to portray events and characters. Illustrations should be true to reality, accurate and authentic to transmit cultural images.

➤ **Language / Dialogue**

The use of language should also be authentic and true to the culture. This includes, for example, the names of characters, the dialogue and arguments. Terminology that refers to cultural aspects should be acceptable by contemporary standards. Language can portray interesting facts, for example in English one would say “mother country” but in German “Vaterland”.

➤ **Author**

Does the author have knowledge of the culture he is writing about? According to Yokota (1993: 156) multicultural literature could be authentic when “the author and illustrator are intimately familiar with the nuances of a culture”. The author can write from an inside or outside perspective. An author with an inside perspective writes as a member of the culture and is therefore more likely to portray the cultural group authentically. An author with an outside perspective writes from a point of view of a non-member of the group being portrayed (Temple et. al. 1998). However, inside perspective can be gained by cultural outsiders through their own life experiences and extensive research.

➤ **Date of publication**

Many books that present stereotypical images of a certain culture are still available. The date of publication could indicate from which mind set period the story originates.

It is important that the multicultural environment in which the child finds himself must be represented correctly and in a balanced manner.

#### 4.1 Evaluating stories from South Africa: Examples from *Madiba Magic*, and *Stories South of the Sun*.

##### \* *Fesito goes to the market* (Madiba Magic 2002)

(A market story set in Uganda. The story is written by Cicely van Straten, who was born in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, but grew up in Kenya and Uganda. She has written countless stories with an East African background).

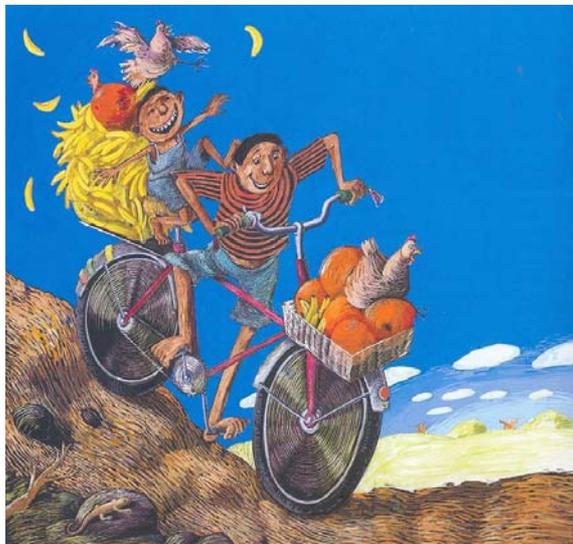
Fesito's father is ill and he has to deliver their bananas to the market on his father's bicycle. The load of bananas is very heavy and pulls him from side to side. On his way he meets Musoke. He is old and has a sore back. He asks Fesito to take his pawpaws to the market too. "It would not be good manners to refuse and old man", so he takes the pawpaws. Then he meets Kasiingi and she asks him to take her chickens to the market. "Do you think I a'm a mule?", but he agrees. He meets Kikyo, who is ill and has to go to the hospital to get his medicine. His legs are tired of the long way walking and he asks Fesito a lift, which he does. On the way Fesito encounters difficulties but manage to deliver everything safely and is rewarded.

The theme is universal: a triple reward for three good deeds.

The **characters** are round, full characters. Fesito is realistic.

The **perspective and milieu** portrays a typical African setup (Uganda): Bananas, pawpaws, peanuts, mango trees, Fesito sits under a mvule tree to eat his porridge and milk gourd, red hibiscus flowers, frangipani's, bulbuls sang in the cassias, the market is the centre of activities, Fesito carries the money in a small handkerchief, twisted round a few times, and bicycles and mules the way of transport.

The **illustrations** – bananas, a frangipani and Fesito on the bicycle add humour and colour. There is a Baobab tree in the background.



**Language:** Swahili words are used: "Wasusiotiano! How are things with you today?" "Bulungi! Good, my child"; "Weraba. Goodbye!".

This is a realistic story and a child from this culture can identify with the character and his circumstances. A reader from another culture can learn from this story about the way of living in East Africa.

**\* Bring and tell (Stories South of the Sun 2009)**

Alan and Themba are both new learners in a school and in an environment unfamiliar to them. They do not know anyone and do not have friends. Their teacher gives an assignment – for a Bring and Tell day they have to bring something to school and tell about it. Alan takes a seashell and by way of a poem the children must guess what it is. He is disappointed that no one wished to see his seashell or wanted to know more about it.

During break Themba asks him to help him to make a poem about his leather funnel. No one can guess what that is and Themba surprises everyone with his telling. Themba's Bring and Tell is judged the best, but he gives Alan credit for the poem and they are the joint winners. "Everybody crowded around them...". Now everyone in class is interested in them and they become part of the group and make new friends.

Thema and Alan are portrayed as realistic **characters**. Both are new, insecure, scared, shy, nervous and without friends. Different cultures are treated equally. The two main characters are in a normal everyday school situation with which readers are familiar with and can identify with. Social interaction is spontaneous. The one culture is not dominated by another. Alan tells what the seashell means to the white culture and Themba tells about the value of the funnel in the Zulu culture.

The **milieu** is realistic and convincing – a modern school where black and white go to school together and have to adapt to the same circumstances. Multiculturalism comes forward when each one presents something from his own culture. The reader can learn and appreciate something from another culture, just like the children in the class.

The **illustration** shows how Alan and Themba listen to the shell together and they experience the value and joy of friendship. The illustration shows the multicultural character of the story.



The use of **language** is convincing and natural. The children learn the Zulu word for the leather funnel - "uphondo".

The **perspective** of the story is realistic. A new child in school who is scared and insecure, is a universal emotion. Different cultures are treated with respect. In spite of Alan and Themba's differences in background, they learn the value of friendship, as well as reaching out to others. A positive message is conveyed.

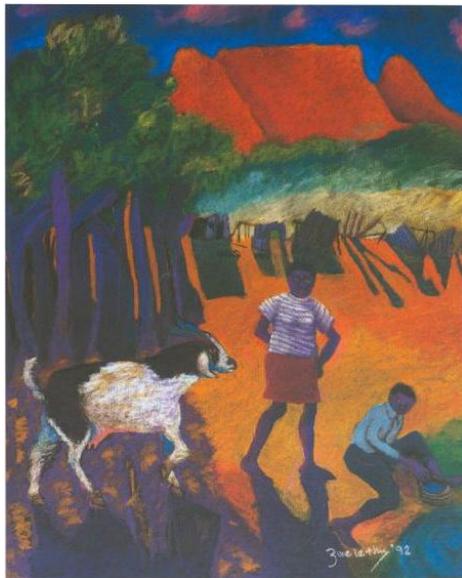
**\* Searching for Welcome (Stories South of the Sun 2009)**

When Nopink wakes up one cold June morning, she realises they are housed in the church hall. Their shacks were destroyed in a fire and they had to flee. In the chaos no one thought about their goat Welcome. Nopink thinks about her and wants to go and look for her. Welcome is a valuable possession. Nopink's father saved her from the abattoir when she was very small. Welcome is a valuable possession. They get milk from her. The search is dangerous, but Nopink and her friends take up the challenge. After walking very far, they sit on the grass to rest. Suddenly they hear a "Blaa! Blaa!". They find Welcome, take her to the church hall and she can help with providing milk. In spite of hardships, Nopink goes happily to bed. Welcome is back and she prays for peace and a new home.

Nopink is a realistic **character**. She worries about Welcome. She is brave and courageous to look for Welcome. She is caring and knows how valuable Welcome is. These universal qualities make it easy to identify with her. Her relationships in her own cultural group are portrayed.

The **milieu** is Crossroads squatter camp on the Cape flats in South Africa. Children who are not familiar with living in these circumstances, get a picture ("window") of this way of life and can become aware of the problems and hardships.

The **illustration** shows Table Mountain, Cape Town in the background, some squatter houses and the main characters.



The **language** is very descriptive. The reader smells, sees, experiences and feels the atmosphere. The name *Welcome* is meaningful, as Welcome the goat is very welcome.

This story gives a valuable cultural perspective on Nopink's life and circumstances. One can learn empathy and appreciation. In spite of all the problems, Nopink is a positive character. One person can make a difference. The universal value is that there is hope in spite of hardships and unfavourable circumstances.

## 5. The multicultural collection in the library

Lukenbill (2002: 34) states that literature and materials in the library collection have been seen as important agents in influencing the behaviours and attitudes of individuals in society and, in doing so, in facilitating positive changes in society and culture. The children's library should provide children with a balanced collection of multicultural children's literature. Librarians can foster multicultural awareness and appreciation by building a collection of books about a variety of peoples, cultures, lifestyles and viewpoints.

Careful decisions are needed to make the best possible choices. Temple et. al. (1998: 103-104) have the following suggestions when compiling a balanced multicultural collection:

- **Consider reader's preferences:** Librarians need to understand the general background knowledge and the preferences of the readers for whom the particular collection is being developed, including the range of materials they enjoy and the types of books they choose. Readers often need to be introduced to and encouraged to select multicultural books.
- **Survey multicultural books already in the collection:** Multicultural books already in the collection form the core of the collection. Conducting an inventory of existing books may show what is needed, for example folktales, contemporary stories about people of diversity, books portraying different cultures.
- **Determine the availability of quality multicultural books:** No matter what the needs are, preferences should be given to high-quality books.
- **Provision of a strong selection over genres:** To establish a balanced collection of multicultural books, a variety of different genres needs to be provided. Include folklore, history, informational books, picture books, historical fiction, biography, poetry and modern realistic fiction.

Another important issue in building multicultural collections, is the availability of books in multiple languages if the community is multilingual.

The American Library Association (ALA) has issued a number of directives and policy statements to help librarians make good choices in building collections suitable for diversified populations while at the same time honouring the value systems and individual persons and groups (Lukenbill 2002: 27).

Marketing the multicultural collection is important. Market the multicultural collection by, for example, handing out lists of new acquisitions, or do marketing culture by culture.

## 6. Conclusion

One has to realise that “besides views of ourselves and of others, there are others’ views of themselves and of us” (Schipper 1999: 2). Cultural literacy will include empathy, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, as well as the ability to change perspectives and to put oneself in to the shoes of a person from a different culture.

Multicultural literature helps children to identify with their own culture (mirror) and exposes them to other cultures (window). The goal is to develop more positive attitudes towards different cultural, racial and ethnic groups. Multicultural collections can contribute to a deeper, richer, more sympathetic and enduring communication between people. A good story does more than changing a reader’s mind – it can change a heart. Somewhere between different cultures, bridges have to be built, so that children from both sides will be able to cross over fearlessly and freely.

Multicultural literature emphasizes the differences as well as the similarities across cultures. Let’s celebrate these differences, and celebrate these similarities!

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