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Crossing boundaries: Addressing ageism through children's books

Patricia A. Crawford

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ABSTRACT

Age-related biases, evident in so many aspects of modern society, are often perpetuated through stereotypical representations of older adults in children's literature and other print media. Quality children's literature can serve as a forum for critiquing these stereotypical perspectives and as a springboard for the development of healthy, positive, and accurate perceptions of the aging process.

*Well, child, I recall once upon a time
An old woman lived on our street,
Oldest woman I'd ever seen...*

So begins Jane Yolen's (Philomel, 1997) sensitively rendered picture book *Miz Berlin Walks*. These lines could introduce one of many recently published children's books that feature older characters or that deal with issues related to aging. This attention to aging is nothing new. As Americans, we are a culture that has become consumed with the ideal of youthfulness and perplexed by issues related to aging (Almerico and Fillmer, 1989; Blunk and Williams, 1997; Kupetz, 1994; Laws, 1995; Seefeldt, Warman, Jantz, and Galper, 1990). Issues related to growing older and concerns about age-related biases have made their way into popular literature for both children and adults. These concerns have been addressed by authors as diverse as Dr. Seuss (1986) in *You're Only Old Once* and Betty Friedan (1993) in *The Fountain of Age*.

In children's books, some authors have explored the concept of aging through the utilization of metaphor, as seen in Shel Silverstein's (1964) *The Giving Tree*. Other authors have provided light, humorous looks at what would otherwise be very serious subject matter, such as Mem Fox's (1983) treatment of Alzheimer's Disease in *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*. Still others have presented poignant stories of growing older that can be classified as nothing short of tear jerkers. One need only to look at Robert Munsch's (1986) *Love You Forever*, Eve Bunting's (1994) *Sunshine Home*, and Aliko's (1979) *The Two of Them* to see that growing older is often treated as both sad and serious business in the world of children's literature.

With such a variety of texts and resources, it seems that it should be easy for teachers to find quality literature that addresses age-related issues and that fairly represents characters who are growing older. However, studies have consistently shown that grandparents and other older adults tend to be presented as one dimensional characters in the pages of children's literature (Ansello, 1978; Crawford, 1996; Janelli, 1988; McElhoe, 1999). Storylines reveal that they are characters whose activities are limited to stereotypical tasks and who appear to have been "born old". Typically, little information is provided about older characters' personal histories, their work life, their passions, or their dreams. These characters tend to be represented as sedentary people who have few interests that extend beyond those directly related to grandparenting.

In addition to the ways in which older adults are stereotyped in the printed text of children's stories, these characters also are stereotyped by way of the visual images presented in picture books. Studies of images of grandparents in children's picture book illustrations, consistently indicate that these characters are visually typecast (Ansello, 1978; Barnum, 1977; Crawford, 1996; Janelli, 1998). Thus, a disproportionate number of grandmothers are represented as rocking chair-bound women who frequently wear aprons, sport gray buns, and engage only in traditional experiences such as cooking, baking, or sewing. Meanwhile, a likewise disproportionate number of grandfathers are depicted as bald or gray-haired characters who wear suspenders and glasses, and who engage only in stereotypical activities such as taking walks or fishing.

In the pages of children's literature, grandparents are also frequently stereotyped in terms of age differentiation. Few distinctions are made among the ages of grandparents, with the majority of these characters

being depicted as very elderly. This stand in stark contrast to the reality of the young children who comprise the audience of most picture books. Studies indicate that the majority of people who become first time grandparents experience this landmark event before leaving their fifties (Porcino, 1983). Thus, in the real world of preschool and early elementary students, many have grandparents whose lifestyles are more in keeping with that of middle, rather than later, age groupings. These younger grandparents are typically engaged in a full range of professional and social activities that extend far beyond the immediate family. By not including images of young grandparents, the collective body of children's literature denies these experiences (McElhoe, 1999).

WHY LOOK AT AGING?

Today we live in an age when people are living longer, healthier, and more productive lives than at any other point in history (Cartensen, 1996). Factors such as improved medical treatment, healthier lifestyles, and a declining infant mortality rate, have all contributed to increased lifespans. As the baby boom generation begins to approach their golden years, America as a whole, is graying. Estimates from the United States Census bureau indicate that the population among those aged 65 and over has more than doubled during the past forty years. Meanwhile, projections indicate that this number will double again within the next forty years (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). It seems clear that aging is an issue that has serious and far-reaching implications for all of us. Thus, it is important that young learners develop a well-informed and realistic understanding of the aging process and the dynamics that accompany it.

There is another factor that makes age-related study essential; one much more personal and relevant than that related to demographics. The aging process is an important part of all of our lives, one that promises to have an impact on each of us (Kupetz, 1994). Not only do young children interact with grandparents, older neighbors, and mature family friends on a regular basis, but one day, hopefully, they will also see their parents grow old, and eventually grow old themselves. Aging is a normal and natural part of human growth and development, and should be treated as such.

Finally, there is also the issue of teaching for justice and equity. In 1976, Comfort coined the term ageism, defining it as follows:

...ageism is the notion that people cease to be people, cease to be the same people, or become people of a distinct and inferior kind, by virtue of having lived a specific number of years. Ageism is a prejudice based on fear, folklore, and hangups of a few unlovable people who propagate these images. (p. 35)

By not addressing age-related biases, we open the door to the systematic stereotyping of people simply because they are old; creating an environment and world view in which it seems reasonable to consistently portray, and ultimately perceive, all older adults as being the comic or tragic caricatures so readily portrayed in the media: the feeble old woman, the weak old man, individuals who are lonely, dependent, and hopelessly behind the times; in short, disposable people who are only a shadow of their former selves. Ageism poses the risk of perpetuating a type of inequity and social injustice that is not only aimed at a significant part of our population, but also one which will one day impact each of us in a very personal way.

LOOKING AT LITERATURE

Social and developmental factors point to the importance of addressing age-related biases within educational settings. Teachers have the opportunity to confront these biases among students and help them to develop healthy, accurate, and respectful concepts of what it means to grow older in our society. In order to do this, care must be used in developing curricula, in choosing appropriate instructional materials, and in the thoughtful selection of children's literature. Literature acts as a springboard from which readers construct meaning and begin to developing both affective and cognitive concepts. Quality children's books provide an effective and accessible avenue for inviting children to explore issues related to older adults and the aging process. Young readers need to have the opportunity to press beyond the stereotypes and to encounter older literary characters who are well-rounded individuals, who are active in a variety of life activities, and who represent the wide range of diversities that are common among older adults today. The books listed in Appendix A are examples of such literature; ones in which mature characters are presented in all their complexity, and challenge commonly held notions of what it means to be old.

In *Miz Berlin Walks*, Yolen's poetic words, along with Floyd Cooper's rich oil-wash illustrations leave little doubt in the reader's mind that Miz Berlin is old — very old. No punches are pulled here. Miz Berlin walks slowly and sometimes she even talks to herself. The text acknowledges that the protagonist's personality may lean towards the eccentric and that her movements may be a bit slower than those of her younger self. However, Miz Berlin is never reduced to the kind, but decrepit stereotype so often found in the pages of children's literature.

As seen through the eyes of young Mary Louise, Miz Berlin is a fascinating woman; one with a past worth holding on to and who has a story worthy of being told. Initially Mary Louise simply watches Miz Berlin from afar, wondering about this unusual old woman who regularly walks the block. Then one evening, she decides to join Miz Berlin for her nightly stroll. As she falls into an easy stride beside her, Miz Berlin says, "Well, child I recall the time..." and begins to tell some of the most fascinating stories that Mary Louise has ever heard.

Mary Louise and Miz Berlin become nightly partners and forge a relationship that crosses boundaries. Their relationship is one between neighbors, that hovers between eras, and that is both interracial and intergenerational. Much to Yolen and Cooper's credit, there is not a hint of superficial moralizing or inappropriate sentimentality here. Rather, *Miz Berlin Walks* is a celebration of the connection between past and present, as well as of the authentic, genuine relationship that evolves between young and old. It is a story of hope and respect.

As the story draws to a close, it is clear that Miz Berlin is a woman of substance. She has impacted Mary Louise to such a degree, that even after her death, she continues to walk on and live powerfully in the life of the little girl who once traveled the block hand-in-hand with her. As Mary Louise becomes a storyteller in her own right, she carries Miz Berlin's legacy proudly into the next generation. Inspired by Yolen's own grandmother, Fanny Berlin, *Miz Berlin Walks* provides a sensitive, yet forthright look at both the potentials and challenges of growing older.

Timothy Gaffney's (1996) *Grandpa Takes Me to the Moon* is another picture book that celebrates intergenerational relationships, while at the same time honoring the accomplishments of an older character. In this book, a young boy loves to hear his grandfather tell stories about his days as an astronaut. Grandpa's stories are so vivid that they transport the young listener through a vivid, imaginary journey to the moon.

Together, grandfather and grandchild suit up for the lunar journey, travel for days, and then embark on their important mission. They leave tracks on the moon's surface, travel in the lunar rover, and of course, take some time to gather moon rocks. Finally, they return to the safety and comfort of the child's bedroom. Barry Root's detailed gouache paintings provide a wonderful complement to the written text. Together, words and pictures communicate the message that Grandpa is not only loving and caring, he is also capable and competent. He has made his mark on this world and beyond.

Grandpa Takes Me to the Moon crosses genres by bringing together a gentle bedtime story with a significant amount of information about the history of the space program. Written as a tribute to the astronauts who flew in the original Apollo missions, this delightful and informative text shows that Grandpa's past actions have not only impacted the present, but that they also have the potential to transform the future.

In *The Wednesday Surprise*, Eve Bunting (1989), challenges the notion that growth and learning are only for the young. In this inspiring and provocative text, Grandma and Anna are working on a surprise for Dad's birthday celebration. Each Wednesday evening Grandma brings a very large and heavy bag of books with her when she comes over to visit with Anna. Together, they explore books and work on their secret project. In this well crafted text, Bunting hints at the idea that Grandma is helping Anna with her reading, but keeps readers guessing about the exact nature of their surprise. The story does not climax until the evening of Dad's birthday party. At this time, Grandma begins to take books out of her big bag and reads them aloud, one-by-one. There is not a dry eye in the house. Grandma has learned to read for the very first time, and Anna has been her teacher.

The Wednesday Surprise is a powerful book in that it shatters the conventional perception of older adulthood as a time of stagnancy. It also challenges the notion that helping relationships are one way streets, with the young as recipients. Rather, Anna and her grandmother enjoy a wonderful, healthy intergenerational relationship, characterized by mutual respect and in which both members contribute in significant ways. The joy and poignancy of this relationship are captured well in Bunting's moving text and Donald Carrick's gentle illustrations.

Old People, Frogs, and Albert is another book in which the author explores the mutual benefits experienced by participants in a relationship

between young and old. This short novel, written by Nancy Hope Wilson (1997), features the story of Albert, a fourth grade student who has always struggled with reading. Albert is just about to give up hope when he meets Mr. Spear, a senior citizen and school volunteer, who helps Albert on the path to success. After working with Mr. Spear, Albert's reading improves, his confidence soars, and he develops a tremendous fondness for the tutor who believed in him. However, when Mr. Spear has a stroke, Albert is taken aback. Although he is initially afraid to visit Mr. Spear, Albert realizes that it is now his turn to reach out to his friend. The experience causes him to take a hard look at his own perceptions about the elderly and to confront his fears. In the end, he comes to a new appreciation for what it means to be both a giver and a receiver in a helping relationship with an older friend.

The warmth and power that result from relationships between younger and older family members is celebrated in *Dear Annie*, Judith Casely's (1991) charming picture book. Grandpa marked Annie's birth by sending a letter to her on the very day that she was born. Since that time, he has written many more, and Annie has kept every single one of them. Grandpa's caring letters commemorate important family events, provide a record of his own childhood, and let Annie know that he is interested and concerned about her life. Young children will cheer as Annie becomes a writer and top notch correspondent in her own right and will enjoy reading this realistic chronicle of the correspondence that occurs between grandparent and grandchild. At the conclusion of the book, Annie brings her grandfather's letters to school to share with the other students. They, of course, decide that they too would like to have a penpal relationship like the one that Annie has with her grandfather. *Dear Annie* not only invites children to explore the relationship between young and old through the world of reading, but also in the realm of writing. Casely's text could serve as a wonderful model for primary students who are ready to enter a correspondence relationship with older family members or other people in the community.

Older students may also enjoy reading a record of correspondence between grandparent and grandchild. *Dear Hope...Love, Grandma* edited by Mara H. Wasburn, (1993) is a collection of actual letters written between Hilda Abramson Hurwitz and her granddaughter Hope R. Wasburn. This book was the result of a class project in which students were asked to correspond regularly with a senior citizen in order to gain

a firsthand perspective of life during a particular time period. In these authentic letters, Hope and her grandmother explore many issues. They write about family life, religious traditions, friendships, struggles, fears, and dreams. Together, they discover that the circumstances that surround each of their childhoods differ markedly. However, they also discover that important life issues transcend both time and years.

Dear Hope...Love, Grandma succeeds on a number of counts. First, as these two correspondents investigate their lives and celebrate the relationship that they share, it becomes apparent that the human factor supercedes any false or minor divisions that have been constructed between generations. Second, it honors the differences and unique experiences that family members have experienced while living during different eras. Third, it brings to life the fact that senior citizens bring a breadth of strengths and experiences to the table; experiences from which younger people can learn and draw upon. Finally, like *Dear Annie*, it provides a wonderful example of the way in which young and old can benefit from connecting and building relationships with one another.

Age-related biases are confronted head on in Allen Say's (1995) *Stranger in the Mirror*. Sam goes to bed as a vibrant, healthy young boy, and awakes to discover that he has changed. When he peers into the mirror he does not find his own face, but rather that of his grandfather. Neither Sam nor his family can understand how he could possibly have aged so many years in one night. While the doctor searches for a cure, Sam finds that his newfound wrinkles are only the beginning of his problems. Although he feels like the same person that he was prior to his transformation, he now finds that other people treat him differently than they did before. Although Sam still has the same interests and tries to maintain his regular activities, he finds that many people suddenly doubt his abilities and are not as anxious to be around him as they were previously.

Allen Say's beautifully illustrated text raises profound questions about the aging process and about what it means to grow older within our societal context. Presented in the deceptively simple format of a picture book, *Stranger in the Mirror* probes the fundamental issues surrounding ageism. A reading of this text begs the questions: Is aging a malady or simply a stage in life? Who defines what it means to grow older? How are images of aging shaped by those around us? And, what should our responses be as we and others around us grow older? This book, which

provides serious treatment of age-related biases, will cross stereotypic boundaries and be appreciated by both older and younger readers.

Finally, Nina Bawden's (1996) compelling novel *Granny the Pag* will invite young adult readers to rethink any preconception that they have ever held about what it means to be an older adult. In this book, Catriona Brooke is a budding adolescent who for all intent and purposes has been abandoned by her actor-parents and sent to live with her unconventional grandmother. Cat's granny is one like no other. A retired scientist, she now rides motorcycles, wears blue jeans and leather jackets, and smokes cigarettes like they are going out of style. Granny is a pag who does not dress like, look like, or act like a proper senior citizen.

When Cat's parents suddenly reappear in her life and demand that she return home, she cannot bear the thought of leaving her eccentric grandmother. She realizes that the pag has been more than a grandmother; she has been a friend, a nurturer, a bulwark, and an advocate. She has been family. With this realization, Cat determines that she will not leave her grandmother for any reason. Her decision requires her to take on her parents, the legal system, and even a would-be kidnapping attempt. But, she will not be swayed. Meanwhile, Cat's grandmother is torn between her relationship with her granddaughter, her sense of duty, and her commitment to her own daughter. However, in the end, her love for Cat supercedes all other loyalties and she enters the battle to gain custody of her granddaughter. *Granny the Pag* confronts and shatters ageist stereotypes and offers readers the image of a complex, well developed older character that breaks all the molds.

BEYOND THE BOOKS

The books reviewed here provide starting points for personal and curricular explorations of the aging process, age-related biases, and intergenerational relationships. They are texts that invite readers to explore the permeable boundaries between young and old, and to take brave steps in crossing generational gaps. Of course, there are many other books that could also be used to serve this purpose.

When choosing these texts, teachers should seek to include books that include fair and varied representations of older characters, that raise provocative questions about ageist stereotypes, and that present models of successful and productive relationships between young and old. As

McElhoe (1999) notes, "We need to interrupt the steady diet of stereotyped grandparents that pervades so many picture books and increase the potential for grandparent characters to be realistically wholesome, interesting, productive and loving resources for our youngest children" (p. 256). And, of course, students will benefit from having the opportunity to construct thoughtful responses to these provocative texts. Together, with our students, we have the opportunity to grapple with the complex issues related to aging and to help them formulate positive and realistic images of what it means to be an older member of our society.

When choosing these texts, teachers should seek to include books that include fair and varied representations of older characters, that raise provocative questions about ageist stereotypes, and that present models of successful and productive relationships between young and old. As McElhoe (1999) notes, "We need to interrupt the steady diet of stereotyped grandparents that pervades so many picture books and increase the potential for grandparent characters to be realistically wholesome, interesting, productive and loving resources for our youngest children" (p. 256). And, of course, students will benefit from having the opportunity to construct thoughtful responses to these provocative texts.

Together, with our students, we have the opportunity to grapple with the complex issues related to aging and to help them formulate both positive and realistic images of what it means to be an older member of our society.

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APPENDIX A

Selected Bibliography of Children's Books Related to Aging

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APPENDIX B

Suggestions for Going Beyond the Books

- Invite students to begin a correspondence relationship with an older family member. This correspondence could take place via email or through a traditional penpal letter exchange. Books such as Casely's (1991) *Dear Annie* and Wasburne's (1993) *Dear hope...love, Grandma* provide a good model for this experience.
- Invite students to brainstorm a list of characteristics that they associate with the term "old". Repeat this activity with the words "elderly" and "senior citizen". Encourage students to compare the ways in which these lists are similar as well as different. This is a good opportunity to discuss the ways in which words have the power to shape our images and perceptions.
- Encourage students to be cultural critics by analyzing media representations of the elderly. Students may wish to keep a log of their television viewing in which they keep track of appearances of older characters and analyze the ways in which they are presented. Students can then examine whether or not older people are represented fairly and accurately over the airwaves. This might be a good time to challenge students to consider why old age is often presented in a negative or disparaging light and from a biased perspective.
- Encourage students to read biographies and explore the lives of older adults who have made noted contributions to our society. Senior citizens have served as President (e.g. Ronald Reagan), reigned as Pope (e.g. John Paul II), created enduring works of art (e.g. Grandma Moses), written best-selling children's literature (e.g. Dr. Seuss), illustrated books (e.g. Barbara Cooney), been award-winning actors (e.g. Jessica Tandy),

and been active in virtually every facet of our culture. The possibilities for exploring the lives of active, well known older adults are endless.

- Invite students to examine the contributions of older adults in their community. Students can scan newspapers, interview local citizens, and look for evidence of public service among older members of their community.

- Encourage students to consider the question, "What would it be like to be old?" After formulating a response, students can compare and contrast their ideas with those espoused by Norma Farber (Dutton, 1979) in her book, *How Does It Feel to be Old?*

- Encourage students to read a wide range of picture books that include older characters. Students can then analyze the ways in which these characters are represented in both the print and visual texts. Teachers can then guide students in determining accurate versus biased representations of older adults.

- Through writing, students can honor an older person who has played an important role in their own lives. This type of response activity provides a good opportunity for students to explore a variety of genres including biography, memoir, informational writing, personal narratives, and poetry.

- Students might broaden and contextualize their personal responses to the aging process by exploring literature in which aging is prohibited. For example, students could examine the attitudes and consequences that surround aging in Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993), a text in which aging community members are "released" before they have the opportunity to grow old, and in Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1975), a book in which the protagonists drink from a fountain of youth that immediately stunts their personal aging processes.