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READING: THE CONFERENCES

Jeanne M. Jacobson

Understanding our world through literature

"Soaring to new heights"

National Middle School Association, October 1989

"We didn't create the problems children in our society are experiencing, but we have to work with them when the children come to us." Ruth Cline, faculty member at the University of Colorado and president-elect of the National Council of Teachers of English, addressed an audience of fellow educators at the annual NMSA conference in Toronto, Canada, on the theme of using literature to help students cope with important issues in their lives. "Literature gives us an avenue. We must be aware of the literature, and aware of ways to use it to enter into dialogue with our students."

Diversity in family patterns is a fact of life within our society, and schools can show awareness and understanding of this diversity without emphasizing value judgements. Stereotypical views of families with a single child and families with many children, for example, encourage antagonistic views about which pattern is "better." Research, Cline noted, shows similarities across family patterns, as well as advantages of both family structures. Life with siblings, and life as an only child, are the themes of many books written for children in the intermediate and middle school grades.

Group reading and discussion of novels about a variety of family patterns, including families under severe stress, can foster family cohesiveness. Cline urged teachers to be aware of the riches and the difficulties to be found in the diversity which exists within actual family systems, and the resources available to teachers and students through the fictionalized accounts of family life found in current literature.

"Family cohesiveness," she said, "can be fostered by talking about families in school. By asking students questions which encourage them to relate their own ideas and feelings to those of characters in fiction we encourage thoughtful reading, and enable students to discuss issues of strong personal concern without impinging on their privacy."

She applauded current trends in the study of literature, pointing out the importance of engaging students as thoughtful readers, rather than as analysts, of text. "Some former methods of teaching literature," she asserted, "treated students as if they were preparing, not to develop as readers, but to become literary critics."

"I would like to see you reading to your students, reading with your students, using whole class and small group and dyadic discussions, conversing and writing together," Cline concluded. "Communication is the key."

A four-page annotated bibliography, "Fiction about families with only children/families with siblings" was distributed to participants. Dr. Cline has agreed to send copies to Reading Horizons readers on request. Send 50¢ for copying costs and a SASE to: Dr. Ruth Cline, University of Colorado CB 249, School of Education, Boulder, CO 80309.



Celebrating Diversity
National Council of Teachers of English,
November 1989

"African-Americans in children's books: Images and ideals, past and present" was the theme of a panel at NCTE's annual conference in Baltimore. Violet J. Harris, of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, spoke about her research into books and periodicals for black children which were published between 1865 and 1940. Although these books are virtually unknown today, they were influential among black readers over a period of many years. Analysis of these readers has contemporary importance, Harris noted, because the issues the texts raised are pertinent to current discussions and policy decisions about literacy and the type of content of material used in literacy instruction.

One catalyst for the production of these texts — which include a basal series for black children, a black ABC, and a children's magazine published for more than twenty years — was "the need of individuals to express creative impulses and the need for a forum from which to share that creativity." Another impetus was the desire to combat tales presenting negative images of black children which became part of mainstream American culture.

"One cannot discuss books [such as Little Black Sambo] as aberrations," said Harris. "They were typical and remain in circulation. Many passed from one generation to the next in families as enjoyable literature. Further, one cannot dismiss these books as atypical and innocent, because they are instruments of power. They represent the power of one group to control and shape the images of another group."

In one of the basal readers she prepared, the black educator Emma Akin wrote a children's story which conveys vividly the tragedy of books which demean members of one group of people and mislead members of other groups. In her story, Betty, the major character, falls asleep while reading *Little Black Sambo*. In her dream, Sambo escapes from the story crying.

"Clown! Clown!" shouted Sambo. "I know I look like a clown. But this is not a play. They are sending me on a long journey. I shall meet many boys and girls. They will think I am really like this all the time. They will look at me and laugh at me day after day after day. They will draw pictures of me in these clothes. They will talk about the funny black boy in the bright clothes. Think of meeting boys and girls who might become friends if they could see me as I really am. Alas! They will think that I am just a funny clown."

The comprehension question Mrs. Akin suggested for the readers of her story was "Why does Betty dream of Sambo?" Present day readers and educators have another question: To what extent has our vision of the world been narrowed because we have been unaware of writings by people whose experiences differ from our own, but whose talents, emotions and opinions could have informed and enriched our lives?

"Most of these books," Harris explained, "were used by relatively small numbers of children and were not commercial successes. Yet they were a success in one way: they represent what Susan Cox labels a 'storied tradition of resistance.'" The books for young black readers "were not merely propaganda or didactic lessons, nor were they linguistically contrived texts. They were skillfully written materials which developed literacy, language and ideals. They would challenge today's students."