Going Global: Books to Help Us Better See Our Ever-Changing World

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Recommended Citation
Going Global: Books to Help Us Better See Our Ever-Changing World

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Classrooms are continuing to become increasingly diverse, and today’s teachers often look for trade books that will help them reach students from places near and far. One of the best sources for teachers looking for exemplary global literature is the annual 25-title Notable Books for a Global Society. Since 1995, this subcommittee of the Children’s Literature/Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association has selected poetry, nonfiction, novels, and picture books that aid readers in understanding themselves, others, and cultures throughout the world. The first list was selected under the leadership of Yvonne Siu Runyan to “promote understanding across lines of culture, race, sexual orientation, values, and ethnicity” (n.d., ¶ 1). The committee’s original goal of increasing understanding of and appreciation for the world’s range of diverse cultures and ethnic and racial groups has remained the same even as many more global titles have been published in recent years. While technology and world trade draw the far-flung members of the global village ever closer, many parts of the world remain filled with tension, conflict, and ignorance of others. By recognizing the ways in which we are alike and celebrating our differences among all races, cultures, religions, and sexual orientations, readers of global literature expand their horizons, recognizing that we all possess equally legitimate viewpoints. Interested readers will also want to check out the excellent Breaking Boundaries With Global Literature: Celebrating Diversity in K-12 Classrooms (Hadaway & McKenna, 2007) which offers lists of previous Notable Books for a Global Society as well as chapters suggesting how teachers may incorporate this literature into their classrooms.

Each year, the committee selects twenty-five outstanding books for grades K-12 that reflect the diversity of the human narrative, continuing to expand on definitions of diversity while bringing the global community closer to home through literature. With the exception of Donna Jo Napoli’s (2010) Alligator Bayou, which
was described in an earlier Reading Horizons article, here are the 2010 Notable Books for a Global Society titles published in 2009.

**Early Grades**


Religious beliefs are important to children and families across the globe, and this photo essay provides evidence of the many ways those beliefs are celebrated—through meditation, prayer, chants, songs, holidays, and festivals. Readers will recognize some familiar traditions while others will be new. The importance of clothing, food, and drink are depicted in the colorful images spread throughout the text. Filled with full-page photographs of children, often in traditional attire, celebrating their own faiths as they receive Holy Communion, break the Ramadan fast, or braid the Sabbath bread (Challah), the book uses short text to identify the specific religion and practices of the children as they perform religious rites and obligations. Back matter includes “Words to Know,” a section explaining the “Elements of Faith” (praying, chanting and singing, reading holy books, listening and learning, cleansing and holy places), and a worldwide map showing where the photographs were taken. This primer on religious practices across the world is informative and filled with joyous images.


Like Ashley Bryan himself, his autobiography, told in an exciting collage of words, photos and book images, inspires readers to reach for their dreams regardless of the obstacles placed before them. We learn of his early life as a child of immigrants from Antigua and growing up in the Bronx during the Great Depression. We see how the Jim Crow laws touched his life as he was denied entrance into a
college and served in the segregated military. Yet, most of all, we see how art infused his life with joy—whether it be his children’s book illustrations, his paintings, his stained glass designs, or his found-object puppets.


This factual text tells the story of how one Maasai village in Kenya responded to the horrific attacks on 9/11. Kenyan Wilson Naiyomah, who was attending medical school in the United States, visited his family and shared the story of the terrorist attacks in New York City. Filled with empathy, the villagers ponder how to show their support of the American people, offering something sacred in honor of the thousands of lost lives. Eventually the Maasai decide to donate 14 of their sacred cattle. Gonzalez’s stunning mixed media illustrations are the perfect complement to the written words as they beautifully capture the people in their nomadic setting and remind readers that others care about worlds they have never seen.


Colorful Aborigine art with distinctive symbols and colors fills the pages of this collection of Aboriginal tales. The author has pulled together ten tales and myths collected by Aboriginal storytellers first told in the Australian desert for thousands of years. The art beautifully supplements the stories so important to the culture they describe. Readers learn how Great Mother Snake created the world, filling it with living things as well as death, and other human concerns. Still other tales explain why some things are the way they are: “How the Kangaroo got her Pouch,” “Why Frogs can only Croak,” and “How the Crocodile got its Scales.” The stories are short, usually three pages long. An informational page follows each retelling, giving
Readers facts about a creature featured in the story. Back matter provides a brief explanation of the Aboriginal Australians, information on Aborigine symbols, and a glossary. The book gives a glimpse into a culture rarely depicted in trade books for children.


In this stunning photo essay, Jan Reynolds explains the concept of sustainability through the example of Balinese farmers who are a major producer of rice and use a system of water sharing and crop rotation that is interwoven with their daily, spiritual, and social lives. In the ninth century, a remarkable temple water system was built that redirected river water to provide residents with fresh water throughout the island of Bali. Reynolds explains how the Indonesian government developed a Green Revolution movement in which farmers were asked to plant hybrid rice as often as they could. Dams and new irrigation systems were built to support the continuous rice planting. “This threw the ancient water temple system into chaos, threatening the ties that had connected community members and synchronized their lives with the natural cycles of water and plants” (n.p.). Surprisingly, scientists found that the ancient water temple system was more productive than the methods promoted by the Green Revolution from both cultural and ecological points of view. “They realized the temple system had coordinated water sharing and crop rotation better than the government had” (n.p.).

Middle Grades


Budding writer Jason must cope with the expectations of teachers, the bullying of classmates, and the confusion of his own mother as he navigates being
decidedly different in a world where different seems to be bad. The way 12-year-old Jason, who has autism, behaves, thinks, and uses words is anything but typical. Still, he finds solace in his online writing, his relationship with his younger brother Jeremy, and the possibility of romance with PhoenixBird, who posts on the same online writing site Jason does. When his parents reward him by sponsoring a trip to a writing conference, Jason panics, realizing that his online friend may not know how to cope with his uniqueness. This insightful and touching glimpse into the complicated world of someone like Jason is memorable, both for his appealing and honest nature, but also for the stories he crafts of Bennu, a dwarf whose dilemmas and journey to acceptance mirror Jason’s own. Jason’s insight into the world of the neurotypicals around him will prompt readers to reconsider the labels and expectations we place on those around us.


In this highly accessible verse novel, Ann Burg tells the story of 12-year-old Matt. Although he now lives with his adopted American family, Matt’s dreams are inhabited by his mother and his scarred and dismembered little brother, the family he left behind two years earlier when he was airlifted from Vietnam. His memories include images of both the beauty of Vietnam and the horrors of war. Struggling to become thoroughly American, Matt develops talents in both piano and baseball. In baseball he suffers from bullies who taunt him with names, threats, and accusations, particularly from one teammate who informs him that “my brother died because of you” (p. 48). Piano, on the other hand, offers him sanctuary. “When
I play the piano, I’m sheltered in that safe place where the only thing that matters is music” (p. 62). Through the love of his adopted parents, the support of his coaches, his piano teacher, and some Vietnam veterans, Matt learns to deal with his emotional struggles and guilt.


The long-term effects of war’s savagery are explored in this tale of how one group of humans turns on another. As a 5-year-old, Emma hides behind a couch while her mother is murdered by Hutus intent on ridding Rwanda of all Tutsis. After the slaughter, Emma wanders about until being befriended by Mukecuru, an elderly Hutu woman who, against all odds, risks her own life for Emma to give her a place to heal. Emma’s healing process is slow, understandably haunted as she is by memories of the 1994 slaughter. Other survivors—Ndoli who gave away secrets when he was tortured and an older man who survived several genocides—eventually come into her life, and she travels back to her village where she unearths a family treasure. Emma’s journey reminds readers that humans are capable of both good and evil, sometimes found within the same individual.


Back in 1948 the United Nations Commission on Human Rights described 30 essential human rights, that are just as relevant in 2010 as they were decades ago. This tribute book attempts to explain the meaning of freedom by describing the rights in simple terms; for instance, Nobody
should be tortured, bullied, or punished too severely. By accompanying the list of rights with photographs and comments from youngsters as well as evocative poems written by students from around the world, the book makes it clear that freedom is a global concept rather than an American one. Each of the rights has been summarized or restated to make them accessible to young readers. The text and photographs prompt thoughtful consideration of the rights many of us take for granted, offering hope for the future. Readers may reconsider their own definitions of freedom, and how the meaning of human rights varies from nation to nation. Right number 22 is worth pondering as it calls for an individual’s right to government assistance under certain conditions. The book also includes an introduction by Mary Robinson, the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as well as a two-page spread of the complete Declaration of Human Rights.


Not far from the Fruitless Mountain, Minli and her parents work hard with little reward; usually, they barely have enough for the three of them to eat. This constant struggle takes its toll on Minli’s mother who complains bitterly about her lot. Her father, on the other hand, brightens their existence by telling stories rooted in Chinese folktales. After her mother begrudges the money Minli spends on a goldfish, Minli sets off on a journey to find the Old Man of the Moon who may impart the key to good fortune. Along the way, she befriends a dragon unable to fly and receives help from others. By the time her quest is completed, Minli has some answers about the secret to happiness although they may not be the ones she expected. Everything about this title, which was a 2010 Newbery Honor Book, is delightful—from the characters themselves to the universal theme of finding happiness to the richly detailed illustrations throughout the book and including the tales told by Minli’s father and those she encounters.

Bass Reeves was one of those legendary men who always got his man, and this book is a tribute to his single-mindedness. The Wild West was tamed in part by fearless men such as Bass Reeves, the almost larger than life first African-American deputy U.S. marshal whose story is told here in engaging fashion. Using his wits and intelligence, this expert marksman brought many bad guys to justice. Middle grade readers will love the colorful language of the Old West, and the fashion in which Reeves captured more than 3,000 criminals with only a handful killed in the process. His story of dedication in the midst of adversity and racism is inspiring. Readers are sure to clamor for more about this fascinating man.


As long as life exists on Earth there will be conflicts, but, as described in the examples in this book, conflicts can be handled in many different ways, chiefly through nonviolent resistance. The authors, mother and son, begin tracing the history of nonviolence as a political movement by looking at the life, times, and actions of Mahatma Gandhi in India more than a century ago. This book includes stories of American activists Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez as well as peaceful activists from across the globe - Thich Nhat Hanh (Vietnam), Nelson Mandela (South Africa), Wangari Maathai (Kenya), Charles Perkins (Australian Aborigines), Aung San Suu Kyi (Burma), Vaclav Havel (Czechoslovakia), and Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams (Ireland). The authors then relate the stories of these men and women who fought against various causes in nonviolent ways. The authors even pay tribute
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to groups such as the student activists of Tiananmen Square in China and the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Disappeared) in Argentina. A brief entry on the worldwide protests against the war in Iraq reminds readers of the relevance of this movement. The main entries include brief background sketches as well as an account of significant events. Taken by itself, each story is inspiring, reminding us that one man or woman may be able to accomplish great changes. But regarded as a whole, they remind readers that nonviolence is a movement that has been in existence for at least a century as well as its potential as a catalyst for change. An author’s note and suggestions for further reading provide additional information, especially useful since the book contains no source notes.


Tofu Quilt is Ching Yeung Russell’s memoir written in verse about her life growing up in the 1960s in Hong Kong, and her visits to family members in Mainland China. Through the encouragement of her family members and her love for the dessert dan lai, Ching Yeung was determined to become a writer. A beloved teacher told her that, “A writer must love books and read a lot” (p. 71). To afford books, she arranged plastic flowers into bouquets and painted toy cars and wondered if those who purchased them would “know that far away, /a girl in Hong Kong/has a dream as big as/ the universe,/a hope as bright as/the sun?” (p. 75). Her friends did not understand her preoccupation with books: “But my friends don’t know/my books are my world,/ my best companions./ Their stories make me cry;/ make me laugh/ make me wonder,/ and dream/that someday I will/ read my own book” (p. 77). After she publishes her first story in a newspaper, she writes: “I will never wish to be a boy again./I am very content/ to be a girl./ I have a dream/ and I have a new name—writer” (p. 110).
Upper Grades


Bausum has created a volume of first-hand accounts that tell the dark side of U.S. immigration history. These stories “range from the deliberate exclusion of Chinese emigrants during the 19th century to the exploitation of Mexican workers during the 20th century” (p. 10). This passionate and poignant book raises a host of questions: How much border security does the nation need? Should relatives be allowed to join immigrant family members in the U.S.? What obligations does the country owe to the newcomers? Should Iraqis who supported the U.S. invasion or Iraq be allowed to immigrate to the United States? Should illegal immigrants have any rights at all? Can our country avoid future mistakes by looking at past mistakes? Bausum includes an annotated timeline and lists of resources for further reading.


Two stories, one set in 1917 and the other in 1989, are at the heart of this narrative about finding oneself. The first one describes the enormous loss of Inupiaq lives during the Great Death when smallpox ravages Nutaaq’s village. This horror combined with the loss of her beloved sister Aaluk to a handsome Siberian leaves Nutaaq uncertain of her own future. A blue bead links her story to the second one. After escaping from an abusive living situation in Anchorage to live with her grandmother near the Arctic Circle, Blessing, Nutaaq’s great-granddaughter, is angry and unmoored, searching for some meaning in her life. As she connects
with her cultural roots and traditions, Blessing comes to realize the significance of the cobalt blue bead she finds among her grandmother’s possessions.


On the tough streets of the Bronx in New York, three very different lives come together and work small miracles. Jimmi Sixxes, a veteran struggling with several personal challenges, including psychoses, rides his skateboard through his neighborhood and connects Tamika, 15, who prefers the silence of her world to an operation that will improve her ability to hear, and Fatima, a newly arrived refugee who knows no one in the city. The author deftly and sympathetically explores issues of immigration, gangs, violence, teaching, art, and reaching out to others in this tale of urban misfits who find acceptance with each other. If some of the coincidences and connections are a little too good to be true, readers will still root for all the protagonists to find their way to safety and all too short moments of happiness.


At the age of 15, Claudette Colvin was arrested and jailed for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white person in Montgomery, Alabama. This occurred nine months before Rosa Parks became famous for doing the same thing. Hoose illustrates how the lives and stories of many weave together to create a movement such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Likewise, readers quickly see that many lesser known citizens beyond the commonly known heroes such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Parks contributed to the Civil Rights Movement. Hoose provides the historical
background information to support Colvin’s first-person account of how she lived history. This moving book received the National Book Award and is beautifully designed as it makes use of photographs, documents, and resources for further reading. The detailed end notes provide evidence that the book is not only good literature, but good history as well.


Life goes from bad to worse for young Afghani Jameela after her mother dies. When her father uproots the family and moves to Kabul, she relies on her faith and her mother’s admonition to be good despite being betrayed by her father. As they move from one home to another, Jameela, born with a cleft palate, watches her father change in ways that make her uncomfortable. Oddly enough, she finds herself and her voice in an orphanage where she learns to read, write, teach, and fend for herself. The author has crafted a powerful story of trust and betrayal, and readers are certain to root for Jameela to find a measure of happiness. Set in 2001, the book is based on a true story and contains an afterword and glossary useful in understanding the Pushtu and Farsi words contained in the book.


In typical Jim Murphy fashion, the author deftly explains the causes of World War I and how it could have been prevented. Archival photographs illustrate the horror of a war that involved most of Europe and many distant nations. Over eight million soldiers died in the combat and six-and-a-half million civilians perished. Hundreds of thousands of others suffered
physical and emotional trauma that affected them for the remainder of their lives. Yet, during the holiday season of 1914 a miracle took place. As the sun set on the Western Front on December 24th, images of makeshift Christmas trees could be seen adorning the German trenches. Instead of volleys of bullets being fired, it was Christmas carols that rang out one after another, and religious services were held on both sides. On Christmas Day an unofficial truce took place, and soldiers on both sides left their trenches to wish their enemy well and to exchange conversation and small gifts. A French officer remarked, “For an instant the God of goodwill was once more master of this corner of the earth” (p. 61). In the epilogue, Murphy draws many parallels between World War I and the current war in Iraq.


Growing up in Kenya in the 1950s, Mathew, 11, and Kikuyu Mugo, 13, have been friends for years, but theirs is an unequal friendship since the younger boy is the son of an affluent white landowner, and Mugo is the son of the native Kenyan who trains the family’s horses. The author uses several incidents to demonstrate the unequal nature of the boys’ friendship as it is tested amid rumors of black uprisings against the white settlers. This State of Emergency leads to the deaths of thousands of Kenyans. Suddenly, Mathew finds himself trying to impress a schoolmate while two groups, the Mau Mau (a band of angry revolutionaries) and red hats (police guards trying to control the Mau Mau), become a threat. In ever-increasing fear, Mathew ends up betraying his friend and leaving Mugo to fend for himself. The book successfully evokes the moral dilemmas plaguing both European and native Africans in the post–WWII era and leads relentlessly to the story’s explosive climax. Amid the fear and racism that are uncovered, Mathew must decide whether to tell the truth and risk his standing in his community or betray Mugo. This powerful story illustrates how hatred may spark from even the most innocent of acts.

On the eve of Hurricane Katrina, several musical instruments housed in an old New Orleans pawn shop while away the hours by telling stories of their glory days as part of an all-girls band. “Then effortlessly, a blues in C/Arises out of a phrase/And the old hocked instruments find the groove/And swing of the Good Old Days” (n.p.). Through the instruments’ voices, readers learn of the all-girl band members, their music, and their place in history as Jim Crow laws, USO tours, and sexism are woven into the fabric of World War II when the *Sweethearts* played their notes. Nelson’s rich poems pulse with rhythm, sound, and imagery of another time and place. Pinkney adds collage to his traditional palette of watercolor and colored pencil illustrations to render a beautiful tribute to the all-girl band. Back matter includes a time line, bibliography of film and recordings, print, and web sources for further information as well as detailed author and artist notes to give readers a better understanding of a difficult time period for our nation. This powerful poetry collection should grace every middle and high school library.


Although the body of literature covering the Civil Rights Movement is enormous, few books describe the parts played by children and teens in that movement. This book fills that gap nicely and will certainly merit a place on most library shelves. The prose, the songs, the poetry, and the memorable black and white photographs all draw readers back in time to these important moments in history, taking them to the front lines of Selma, Alabama in 1965 where community members formed protests against unjust voting practices. Acts of civil disobedience are examined through the eyes of the youngest demonstrators, some of whom were nine and ten. For instance, the book introduces Joanne Blackmon, who was first arrested when she was ten as a result of
her participation in freedom marches. Through moving prose, their bravery in the face of uncertainty and danger clearly inspired and motivated the adults in their lives, including their teachers, parents, and grandparents, to join the fight for civil rights. The importance of local churches is also stressed. Countless times, young protesters are shown singing or listening intently inside churches or standing outside their churches preparing to march. Marchers would retreat, sometimes bleeding, to the sanctuary of a church. The bibliography, source notes, photo credits, and resources for further discussion and research are particularly useful.

Perkins, Mitali. (2009). **Secret keeper.**
New York: Delacorte. 240 pages, $16.99,
ISBN: 978-0385733403

Set in the 1970s, this story speaks of 16-year-old Asha’s life, wonderful until her father leaves the family’s Delhi home to find work in America. Her family moves to Calcutta to live with her uncle and grandmother, a transition that is difficult but becomes even more so when word arrives that Asha’s father has died. The conflict between her extended family’s traditional values and her own feminism is heightened as the tomboyish Asha feels more and more disconnected from her family. As so many women have, Asha finds solace on the rooftop where she writes her innermost thoughts in her diary, which she calls “a secret keeper.” As she breaks her family’s rules in seemingly small ways, she finds an unlikely ally and friendship across the way. Her lovely sister Reet attracts many suitors, but an unexpected event compels Asha to sacrifice her own possibilities for love for the sake of her mother and sister. Readers may be disappointed in some of Asha’s decisions, but they also will admire her courage and selflessness. Offering insight into the Indian culture, Asha’s story features a likeable teen relying on her own ingenuity rather than her appearance or charm. An author’s note explains the turbulent times during Indira Gandhi’s regime that influence the narrative.

Marcelo Sandoval, a 17-year-old with an Asperger’s-like condition, is perfectly content with his life until his father’s plans clash with his own. Concerned about readying his son for the real world, he arranges for Marcelo to work in his law firm’s mailroom during the summer. In return, Marcelo can decide whether to stay in his special education classes or be mainstreamed for his senior year. Readers are immersed in Marcelo’s world as he navigates his job’s menial tasks and office politics with childlike naivety, grappling with ethical dilemmas, betrayal, and the possibility of love. Readers will quickly be drawn into the story as the complex Marcelo thinks constantly about religion, hears internal music, and prefers to sleep in a tree house. Using a first-person narrative, the author effectively enters Marcelo’s consciousness and creates a sympathetic and wholly believable character whose understanding of the real world is possibly more perceptive than those who have navigated it longer than he has.

References


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