

★ 2016 CLA MASTER CLASS

Diverse Children's Literature at the University

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The 2016 Master Class featured a panel of professors, authors, and illustrators who focused on diversity in children's literature that crosses boundaries and expands our understanding of the world.

THE ANNUAL CHILDREN'S Literature Assembly (CLA) Master Class began in 1994 with the goal of bringing together instructors of children's literature, particularly those who prepare future educators and librarians. It was designed to provide opportunities for those who teach in university settings to gather together as colleagues and discuss their work and to share experiences, explore questions, and respond to challenges that arise during the course of teaching children's literature (McClure, 2011). On November 19, 2016, CLA hosted its 23rd Annual Master Class in Children's Literature, reaching out in this tradition of collaboration to engage in discussions about contemporary issues involving "Diverse Children's Literature at the University." The session sought to address some emerging, as well as ongoing, issues and challenges that arise when teaching diverse children's literature with preservice and inservice teachers and college students more generally (see, e.g., Dávila, 2015; Glenn, 2014; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

While scholars and instructors have long advocated for the importance of diverse children's literature (Harris, 1997; Sims [Bishop], 1982), it has taken a little longer for that wave of acceptance to make its way into K-12 classrooms (Crisp et al., 2016). A rise in public discussions and debates about diversity, both in social media and the popular press, issues of representation, and cultural authenticity in children's literature, alongside recent movements like the *#WeNeedDiverseBooks* campaign and an evolving U.S.

population, have fueled demands for a greater understanding, awareness, and appreciation of the need for diverse children's literature. But, even still, change is slow.

The 2016 Master Class session looked at the current landscape of teaching and researching children's literature at the university level, the evolution and transformation of definitions and considerations of the use and place of literature, the resistance that remains (or no longer exists) in certain areas or around certain topics or populations, and the roles that authors and illustrators of diverse books may play in this dynamic. The interactive, panel-led session initiated a discussion about the complicated conversations that arise in today's college classrooms around the teaching of diverse children's literature.

A Retrospective Look at Teaching and Researching Diverse Children's Literature

Drs. Evelyn Freeman and Barbara Lehman, both professors emerita at The Ohio State University, began the panel discussion by providing a retrospective look at pedagogy and research involving diverse children's literature. In the brief history they shared, Freeman and Lehman helped contextualize the current state and status of the field of children's literature within American university settings. Drawing parallels between the landmark Caldecott win by Ezra Jack Keats' (1962) *A Snowy Day* in 1963 and the historic Newbery win and Caldecott honor by de la Peña's (2015)

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Last Stop on Market Street in 2016, they took the audience on a short spin that highlighted conversations and developments in diverse literature from the 1960s to the present day. Lehman and Freeman reminded the audience of some of the foundational scholarship in this area, including the immensely influential work of individuals like Rudine Sims Bishop (1982, 1990, 2008) and Nancy Larrick (1965)—the latter of whom built upon research by librarians of color, such as Muriel Estelle Crosby (1963) and Charlamae Hill Rollins (1941/1967). Drs. Lehman and Freeman also paid tribute to some of the trailblazing authors and illustrators, including, among others, Virginia Hamilton, Walter Dean Myers, John Steptoe, Mildred Taylor, and Laurence Yep.

Using recent statistics from the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and data from the most recent U.S. Census, Freeman and Lehman illustrated the continued lack of ethnic and racial diversity in children’s books published annually in the United States, disparities that exist in spite of several decades of research on the importance (and lack) of diverse children’s literature and in the face of an increasingly diverse U.S. population. As statistics from the CCBC indicate, the number of multicultural books published each year has remained relatively stagnant for more than 20 years (Horning, 2013). However, the U.S. Census demonstrates that our population is increasingly diverse.

At the same time, Freeman and Lehman noted three distinct changes they have observed in the field around the topic of diversity in children’s literature.

- (1) We now utilize a broader definition of what is meant by “diverse books”— a move from simply a consideration of race or ethnicity to one of multiple, overlapping identity categories involving culture, sexual orientation, gender identification, class and socio-economic status, age, religion, disabilities, immigrant status, and more (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Harris, 1997).
- (2) Increased attention to questions of literary quality and cultural authenticity— ongoing, complicated

discussions about the “insider/outsider” status of authors, illustrators, editors and publishers, and critics in the creation and recognition (e.g., awards) of children’s books (Fox & Short, 2003; Kidd & Thomas, 2016; MacCann, 2013).

- (3) Increased interest in global children’s literature— a rise of international children’s literature courses, increased attention to the stories of immigrant and refugee experiences, and more (Liang, Brendler, & Galda, 2009; Liang, Watkins, * Williams, 2013; Parsons, 2016; Yokota & Teale, in press).

Just as these sorts of changes help shape our understandings of what “counts” as diverse children’s literature, so, too, does our teaching of it. It brings into question how—in the face of these new understandings—current contexts in this country and around the world influence our teaching at the university level. Freeman and Lehman ended their portion of the panel discussion by asking participants to consider where we are now: How do anxieties about terrorism influence our teaching of diverse literature? How might the results of the 2016 presidential election affect our courses and our teaching? And, further afield, how do events around the world shape our teaching? The questions they raised completed the framing of where our field has been and where we might be heading as teachers of diverse children’s literature at the university level.

**“My Books Are Used in University Courses!":
Writing and Advocating for
Diverse Children’s Literature**

Building upon the historical overview and professional context provided by Freeman and Lehman, next to speak on the panel were Matt de la Peña (Random House), Donna Gephart (Random House), and Christopher Myers (Random House and Disney-Hyperion), three award-winning creators of children’s books. Matt de la Peña is the *New York Times* best-selling author of six young adult novels and two picturebooks, including the 2016 Newbery Medal winner, *Last Stop on Market Street* (illustrated by Christian Robinson, who also received a 2016 Caldecott Honor and Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor for his work on the book). Donna Gephart, a self-identified “professional nerd,” is the author of several novels for middle-grade readers, including *Lily and Dunkin* (2016), which received starred reviews from *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, and *School Library Connection*, and was included on “best books” lists by organizations like the American Booksellers Association and the New York Public Library. Finally, Christopher Myers is a writer and artist whose credits as an author-illustrator include *My Pen* (2016),

Wings (2000), and *Black Cat* (1999). The recipient of both Caldecott Honor and Coretta Scott King Honor Awards, Myers was also the featured speaker at the 2016 CLA Breakfast. For academics who (most likely, but certainly not exclusively) teach and write about children's books more than we actively write children's books ourselves, the participation of these authors and illustrators provided an opportunity to hear the voices and perspectives of individuals who create some of the books we utilize in our courses. Throughout the Master Class, de la Peña, Gephart, and Myers addressed issues relevant to diversity in children's literature, the publishing industry and, specifically, university teaching of children's literature.

Each of the three panelists stressed the important role of stories, particularly stories found in literature. Using an example from her own experience as a young reader, Gephart spoke about growing up in a tiny row house in northeast Philadelphia. "I lived in a neighborhood with people who looked like me," she said. "We didn't have money to leave and travel anywhere to see other people. My only passport to see other lives and other people was to go to the library." There, she discovered *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944), a book she felt was a representation of her own life. The discovery of this text helped her develop a view of books as a means of both understanding and opening the hearts, minds, and lives of others. Gephart stressed that it is by reading diverse books that "everyone can develop and grow in empathy," because it is through literature that we come to "understand others' hearts." De la Peña also spoke about his experiences as a reader, recalling the pleasure he took and continues to take in "digging deep into books."

While Myers expressed similar sentiments about finding himself in books, he also noted that it is no longer enough to say that we want all children to see images of themselves in books. "It's not just about reflection," he argued. "We need a framework for understanding our changing world. What's important is that books reflect our society." While acknowledging that lots of books exclude particular readers, Myers suggested we focus upon finding books that do not disinvite readers from identifying with them, books that cross lines and boundaries, and offer multiple points of entry for as many readers as possible. He pointed to the books of Jane Yolen, texts he loved as a child, as examples of books that invited him in even though he didn't "see his face" in them.

Those Complicated Conversations That Arise in Our College Children's Literature Classes

Lehman and Freeman's opening remarks and the authors' thoughtful insights helped to lay the groundwork for the open discussion and Q&A that followed. Questions asked

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by participants centered mainly on differing conceptions of "diverse" literature within the context of literature writ large, as well as on cultural competency, cultural respect, and student responses while reading and utilizing diverse literature. Participants shared experiences and raised questions such as the following: Is diverse literature a "niche" market? How do we best address students' pre-existing beliefs, misunderstandings, or pushback to the use and inclusion of diverse literature in classrooms and libraries? How do we help teachers to have better, deeper conversations around diverse books? How do we more effectively engage and work with our university students and colleagues around diversity, inclusion, and cultural issues?

A "Niche" Market

Not surprisingly, issues of diversity and representation in children's literature were at the forefront of presentations and conversations throughout the 2016 annual convention, and this came out in the discussion at the Master Class. One participant shared an experience earlier in the week during a conversation that occurred at the CLA Workshop, "Diversity 2.0: Advocating for More than Just Diverse Faces." He expressed surprise that some of the publishing representatives at the workshop, including individuals who work for houses that focus specifically on multicultural children's literature, referred to diverse literature as a "niche" market. Myers responded first, stating that it ultimately should not matter if publishers or anyone else think about diverse books as a niche market. He expanded further, reminding the audience of the sheer breadth of diversity and the fact that the writing and publishing of children's books is neither about ethics nor altruism. Referring back to the statistics provided by the CCBC, he echoed the feelings of many participants present when he stated that the changes needed in the industry are not only about individuals, but also involve the larger structures at play. As Myers pointed out, diversity should truly be the regular market.

De la Peña also commented on this subject, saying that sometimes this question comes up around recent children's book award selections. He stated, "Is a book winning this award just because it's diverse? I think, 'Who cares?' Every choice for an award is a political choice." Reflecting upon his experience serving as a judge on the

National Book Award committee, he discussed his initial responses to *Inside Out and Back Again* (Lai, 2011). As an early champion of the book, he thought about its prowess and thought, “That’s what it’s about— seeing yourself in a situation you might not ever encounter.” As time went on, he continued to think about the book and experienced what he described as an epiphany about how powerful the book could be for readers who are outsiders and encounter someone whose self-identity aligns with that of the protagonist. De la Peña explained his belief in the valuable role diverse books play for us today, largely because of their potential to create spaces for deeper understanding. He emphasized how important it is for the people entering the field of education to have access to this type of literature and to understand its possibilities.

But How Best To Provide That?

De la Peña’s comments helped turn the conversation back to the pedagogical uses of diverse literature and the role university classes might play in increasing teachers’ comfort and confidence integrating such literature in their classrooms. Questions and comments brought up some of the issues individual educators faced in wanting to use books outside their own cultures, issues university instructors have witnessed, and the hesitations or concerns educators may have.

Here, Lehman addressed the issue of how challenging it can be to critique books outside of one’s own experience. She stressed that literary criteria are not value free, and one cannot just take a book and evaluate it without regard to its context and/or the context of the people who are reading it. Lehman explained that when she reads a book outside her own experiences:

Sometimes, I don’t know if a book is an accurate/authentic representation. I have to turn to critics and readers who can inform me from those perspectives. As well, one book is not going to give a whole picture; you need to read many, many books to get a better sense of what a particular population views as part of their literature. You have to talk to people who know more about it than you do.

Gephart added to this statement, noting how important it is for teachers to model that it is okay to admit when they do not understand something or that something makes them feel uncomfortable. Using statements like “I don’t know the answer” and “Let’s find out together” can be a powerful way to help students (as well as teachers) grow in their cultural understandings. De la Peña mirrored this sentiment, suggesting that many teachers are concerned about knowing the “correct” answer and about doing things “right,” but this becomes especially challenging with litera-

ture. “Books are about all of life,” de la Peña said. “And nobody knows all of life.” He suggested that perhaps a heightened sense of pedagogical humility would be beneficial when teaching and using children’s literature.

Freeman followed up by pointing out that many universities are growing in their sensitivity to issues of diversity and creating more opportunities for faculty to become more aware. While the academy has a lot of room to change, she feels professors as well as K-12 teachers want to learn more. With greater acceptance and understanding of the limitations of what we know comes greater opportunities for growth in terms of our own learning, our awareness, and our sensitivity.

The Importance of Invitations

Continuing on this theme, attendees asked the panelists about how to encourage students who are engaging with texts outside their personal experiences and understandings. They wondered what they could do better or differently when students say they “don’t, or can’t, relate.” Myers addressed this question by referring back to the notion of “disinviting” rather than “inviting” engagement and identification. He also stressed the importance of avoiding flat characters and assigning a single trait as the totality of a character’s identity. He highlighted the importance of characterizations that encourage multi-layered understandings that allow for more gates of invitation and entry. Using gender identity as an example, he said:

Gender issues in our society are kind of interesting right now; part of what marks the tension around thinking about gender in our society is the flatness with which it’s presented. [Someone] can be represented as either one circle of flat identity (e.g., “that’s a girl”), or you can present our characters as overlapping and concentric circles.

Within this idea of multiple entry points, Myers also reflected on authenticity, saying that he is not a person who would say, “You can’t write that story.” However, he did stress the caveat that, first and foremost, he believes strongly in the importance of good writing.

De la Peña reminded the audience that invitations are not always well understood. He stressed the

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importance of things happening in specific contexts. In a particular moment, for a particular reader, one's text might take on a completely new meaning. He added that he finds literature is, in many ways, magical because it allows readers, who are often "smarter than the writer" who created the text, to locate spaces (intended or not) that allow for multiple interpretations and understandings.

Final Thoughts From the 2016 Master Class

This CLA Master Class occurred just over a week after a presidential election that incited a powerful social reaction by many in the U.S. While children's literature discussions, particularly around diversity, have always included concerns about social responsibility and justice, there seemed to be a particular intensity at the heart of the discussion in this Master Class. It would be impossible to separate this specific discussion about diverse children's literature at the university from this social context, and the panelists' comments reflected this.

De la Peña talked about a new feeling of fire to his work and what he sees when visiting schools in recent months. Freeman remarked on the importance of safe spaces, reminding us that we, as university instructors, our students, as well as their young students, are often not sure of the answers and are working outside our comfort

zones. It is so important, she stressed, to create places where students can feel safe to bring up their questions, concerns, and issues and discuss them together. Myers commented on his own need to start visiting those schools and places where he might not be as welcome.

A statement by Gephart perhaps best summed up the overall feeling in the room. While we often struggle with addressing the complicated conversations around diverse children's literature that arise in university classes, we know about the importance of these books and discussions. University classes function as proving grounds where K-12 teachers prepare for and rehearse the kinds of difficult conversations they will likely have in their own classrooms. As Gephart reminded us, "We need these books [and the discussions around them], so everybody can grow in their empathy and understanding, and make the world a kinder place." ■

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