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The World as Presented to U.S. Children: Building Bridges or Confirming Expectations?

Christina M. Desai

ABSTRACT: This article examines contemporary children's books from or about countries outside the United States that are available in the U.S, surveying and analyzing their origins, prevalent themes, and images.

Miss America contestants champion it; world leaders advocate it: world peace is a commendable goal. The International Board on Books for Young People, publisher of *Bookbird*, was founded to promote peace and international understanding through the free flow of children's books across borders. It is taken for granted that children absorb lasting attitudes toward others from the books they read. Metaphors involving bridges and horizons abound.

The multicultural movement in U.S. schools operates on the belief that books can promote (or discourage) tolerance. Carl Tomlinson, introducing his bibliography of international children's literature, enumerates well the goals and benefits of exposure to world literature: "to build bridges of understanding between the people of the world," to span "geographical and cultural gaps," and to build "in American children a foundation for international understanding." On the other hand, "having no exposure to books from other countries might give children the impression that there is little worth knowing outside the United States" (1998). And more darkly, as MacCann and Donnarae warn in their study of Apartheid attitudes in South African children's literature, the worldview found in children's books provides "a valuable predictive gauge for historians, policy makers, and the citizenry at large. Children's literature is a transparent window on the future--a way to glimpse how the literary imagination constructs cultural value" (2001). If indeed images and attitudes in children's books have lasting effects on attitudes toward others, it follows that accuracy and authenticity in the representation of other countries and peoples is of considerable value and should be promoted.

But is this faith in the power of international children's literature well founded? Are such books readily available? This article examines contemporary books from other countries outside the United States that are available to children in the U.S, surveying their origins, prevalent themes, and images. Each book is a microcosm, presenting a small slice of another's culture. Despite the truism that books expand our horizons, this study finds limited availability of books from abroad and a limited vision of the world beyond U.S. borders. Many excellent examples of realistic portrayals exist, yet many pieces of the map are missing and many titles merely confirm outdated stereotypes. They reinforce images of the homogeneity of western culture and the remoteness of the world beyond.

The sample for this analysis is taken from the bibliography *Growing Up Around the World: Books as Passports to Global Understanding for Children in the United States*¹ (ALA, 2009, hereinafter "the Bibliography"). The Bibliography was compiled "to make books that accurately depict contemporary life in other countries more widely available to American children." Therefore the Bibliography is expressly limited to books

that "accurately depict contemporary life in other countries," are currently available in the U.S., were published within the previous ten years (1998-2008), and were "written or illustrated by people [who] have lived for at least two years within those cultures" (ALA, 2009). By these explicit criteria, the genres of fantasy, history, fairy tale, and folklore (so often the staple of international children's books available in the U.S.) are excluded. Thus, though naturally not exhaustive, this Bibliography makes an ideal sample of current images of today's world that American children are likely to encounter, including roughly 150 titles. Introducing the first edition of this Bibliography in 2006, Phelan remarked on the scarcity of books meeting the criteria: "Of those that are available, the vast majority have nothing to do with how real people live in the country of origin" (2006). This study finds that the scarcity continues. The overt didacticism of children's literature may be a thing of the past, yet teachers and parents continue to "use" children's books to teach, whether it be a geography lesson or a life lesson. Therefore the contents of recommended book lists such as the *Growing Up Around the World* Bibliography are worthy of study.

The Regional Lens

The Bibliography is divided into regions by continent, which creates some imbalance from the start. For example, the forty-six countries of Asia and the Middle East form one region, while two countries, Australia and New Zealand, form another. Though persistent attempts were made during the compilation to represent all countries, many were simply not available. Fewer than a fourth of Africa's fifty-three countries are included, while over forty percent from the Americas are represented. On the other hand, the limit per country was ten entries, so some countries have far more entries than average. One to two is the average number of titles for Europe, but England has ten (Scotland, Wales, and Ireland have separate entries.). As Figure 1 shows, the Bibliography reflects greater availability of books from more developed countries and from countries with closer cultural ties to the U.S., particularly where English is widely spoken.

	Africa	Americas (excluding U.S.)	Asia & Middle East	Australia & New Zealand	Europe
Total No. of Countriesⁱⁱ	53	34	46	2	47
Countries Represented in the Bibliography	12	14	14	2	17
Average No. of Titles per Region	1-3	1-2	1-2		1-2
Exceptions	South Africa: 6	Canada: 11	India: 8 China: 4 Israel: 3	Australia: 10; New Zealand: 3	England: 10

Figure 1: Countries Represented in the Bibliography and Number of Titles by Region

Recurring Themes

Several themes or approaches signal to readers that these stories do not take place in the United States; these include non-fiction; village life; war or conflict; and girls' striving for greater freedom. Many others, however, are nearly indistinguishable from books set in the U.S. These sometimes overlapping themes are far from evenly distributed by region.

Non-fiction

The Bibliography includes a number of factual books about a given country's geography, peoples, culture, etc. Like the number of entries per region, these titles are unevenly distributed. They are often colorful, if predictable accounts of festivals, foods, and customs, such as *I Live in Tokyo* (Japan, Takabayashi, 2001). Also included here are travelogues, counting and alphabet books, and books describing a child's typical day. There are more such works about the more remote parts of the world: ten of the thirty-two Asian entries and ten of the twenty-eight African entries are non-fiction. The African and Asian examples include some first-hand accounts of poverty and conflict, as well as descriptions of daily life, customs, and holidays. The Americas list includes only three non-fiction titles. In the European list, only five (describing Eastern Europe and the Romani) fit this category. Certainly many factual works about the Western European countries exist, but are not included, perhaps due to assumed familiarity with these countries. This is curious since many Americans are descended from East European immigrants and may be assumed to know something about its cultures. From Australia/New Zealand, only two travelogues fall into this category, one of them describing a boy's year in an Aboriginal community (Australia, Lester, 2000). This distribution pattern points to a sense of who is considered like us, who is Other.

Village Life

A second common theme concerns village life in the developing world. Some titles emphasize the poverty and hardships of village life while others present it as a tropical paradise. Many are perceptive tales of valued cultural traditions, evocatively told and beautifully illustrated. Yet while both urban and country life are depicted in books from Europe, Australia, the Americas, and Asia, stories set in the myriad expanding cities of Africa are largely absent, especially from the picture books. Though "told" in the present day, several stories, such as *Faraway Home*, (Ethiopia, Kurtz, 2000), and *I Lost My Tooth in Africa*, (Mali, Diakit  & Diakit , 2006), unfold as reminiscences about former, idyllic times in a harmonious rural setting. They do not portray present realities. In her analysis of representations of Africa in children's literature, Yenika-Agbaw (2008) notes that by failing to show the evolving nature of culture and the pervasive forces of economic, technological, political, and educational changes, such books perpetuate anachronistic images. By invoking only nostalgic village images, readers may infer that African cultures cannot be simultaneously alive and well, i.e., culturally vibrant, adaptive, and prosperous. Some books reinforce this generic image of Africa by naming the continent rather than the country in their titles. A few Asian examples also fit this

model, for example, *Long-Long's New Year* (China, Gower, 2005) which follows a small boy through a timeless, technology-free marketplace in China.

There are notable counter-examples describing evolving villages. In *An African Christmas* (Nigeria, Onyefulu, 2005), a Nigerian city boy goes to his village for Christmas, showing through photographs how tradition is maintained, though everyday life has changed. *My Great-Grandmother's Gourd* (Sudan, Kessler, 2000) shows the coming of technology to a parched Sudanese village while also demonstrating the continued value of traditional solutions. *In Our Village* (Tanzania, Cervone, 2006) shows not only traditional lifestyles in Tanzania but also the entrepreneurship made possible by the coming of wireless technology. *The Garbage King* (Ethiopia, Laird, 2003) moves between city and countryside, showing the realities of both with no signs of nostalgia. Yet the general lack of examples from African cities, together with the many frozen-in-time images of generic African villages, leaves an unbalanced picture of the continent, reinforcing stereotypes of Africa as a homogeneous land of pre-industrial villages and jungles. Anachronistic images of village life are also common in stories from the Caribbean, even those by Caribbean authors. Sands-O'Connor (2008) points to recurring images in British children's literature of the West Indies as "an entirely rural, technology-free, isolated set of islands," its people therefore lacking in status. While the Central and South American titles in the Bibliography include both village and city settings, those set in the Caribbean continue to reinforce stereotypes, painting the islands as a tropical paradise, as in *Island in the Sun* (Jamaica, Belafonte, Burgie & Ayliffe, 1999), *My Island and I* (Central and South American Region, Silva Lee, 2002), and *Fish for the Grand Lady* (Trinidad, Bootman, 2006). Asian village stories are far fewer, and more realistic. For example, *In an Indian Village* (India, Das, 1999) uses contemporary photographs and *The Diary of Ma Yan* (China, Ma & Haski, 2005) is a diary describing harsh conditions in a remote Chinese village. Yet some Asian stereotypes persist; for example, *Shiva's Fire* (India, Staples, 2000) paints a wistful image of India as a land of benevolent maharajas, magic, and mysticism. Perhaps such idealized images of pastoral harmony are comforting to readers in today's fast-paced developed world and therefore hard to relinquish. Yet they contrast with European examples such as *Eva's Summer Vacation* (Czech Republic, Machálek, 1999), which makes it clear that though the Czech wedding customs and costumes may be quaint, they are only used for special occasions, and Eva's stay in the country is temporary.

War and Political or Ethnic Conflict

A small number of books deal with the strife of war and political oppression. Selections favor countries in which the U.S. has an interest or involvement. Despite the numerous armed conflicts besetting African countries in recent times, only one, on Apartheid (South Africa, Naidoo, 2003), mentions such conflict. The sole example among the European titles is a diary from Sarajevo (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Halilbegović, 2006), and from the Americas, one from Chile about life under dictatorship (Chile, Skármeta, 2000). On the other hand, six Asia/Middle East examples fall into this category, predictably focusing on Afghanistan, Israel, and Iraq. The titles from Israel are notable in that the two fictional works, *Running on Eggs* (Israel, Levine, 1999) and *Samir and Yonatan* (Israel, Carmi & Lotan, 2000), explore the possibility of friendships

between opposing sides, whereas the first-hand account, *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* (Middle East Region, Ellis, 2004), shows a mutual hardening of attitudes.

Quite a few books deal with racial discrimination, ethnic conflict, or cultural identity. Canadian and Australian selections in particular include books highlighting the multicultural nature of their societies with such titles as *Suki's Kimono* (Canada, Uegaki, 2003), and *Ernie Dances to the Didgeridoo* (Australia, Lester, 2000), representing diversity in a positive light. A few European examples note the presence of ethnic stereotyping and discrimination, such as *Bindi Babes* (England, Dhimi, 2004), but do not make it the sole focus of the work; characters in this story face stereotyping by teachers and others but nonetheless lead full lives and continue to value their Indian heritage. Others draw attention to long-standing prejudice, as in *A History of the Romani People* (European Continent, Kyuchukov & Hancock, 2005) and *Out of Bounds* (South Africa, Naidoo, 2001), about the struggle to end Apartheid. Several titles from the Americas deal sensitively with discrimination against poor, darker skinned, or indigenous people, as in *Colibri* (Guatemala, Cameron, 2003), *Letters to My Mother* (Cuba, Cárdenas Angulo & Unger, 2006), and *Talking with Mother Earth* (El Salvador, Argueta and Perez, 2006). Books in the non-fiction series *A Child's Day* mention diversity in endnotes, providing details on peoples, languages, etc., but except in the Peruvian title (Peru, Fajardo, 2002), they hardly show such diversity in the texts. On the whole, however, diversity is portrayed as valued in English speaking countries, still problematic elsewhere.

Themes and Trends in *Growing Up Around the World: Books as Passports to Global Understanding for Children in the United States*ⁱ

- **Non-fiction**
- **Village life**
- **War and political or ethnic conflict**
- **Girls' strivings**
- **Books assuming cultural familiarity**

Girls' Strivings

A fair number of the stories from Asia and Africa revolve around young protagonists striving to earn money, to buy a bike perhaps, or help the struggling family. The protagonist may be male or female. However, a recurring theme in books from those regions concerns girls rebelling against cultural restrictions or aspiring to roles traditionally reserved for men. Though gender disparities plague both western and non-western countries, this theme is not found in the books from the Americas, Europe, or Australia. Of the twenty-five Asian titles having one clear protagonist, twenty are female; five recount girls' attempts at resistance. In *Rickshaw Girl* (Bangladesh, Perkins, 2007), a Bangladeshi girl longs to be allowed to earn money and finds a way to do so by entering a traditionally male trade. In *My Forbidden Face* (Afghanistan, Latifa & Hachemi, 2001), an Afghan Muslim girl rages against Taliban restrictions. In *The Diary of Ma Yan* (China, Ma, 2005), a poor Chinese Muslim child is determined to stay in

school though most girls in her community cannot. Notably, most of these stories involve Muslim characters. Among the African titles, two stories concern girls' attempts to break sexist traditions, *Madoulina: A Girl Who Wanted to Go to School* (Cameroon, Bognomo, 1999) and *The Best Beekeeper of Lalibela* (Ethiopia, Kessler, 2006). In most cases, the girls' poverty is a strong motivating factor. Yet by consistently linking gender restrictions to poverty and foreignness (and Islam), authors risk evoking pity and a sense of Otherness rather than identification with these striving characters, particularly when the solutions come from an outside force, as in the case of characters Madoulina and Ma Yan.

Books Assuming Cultural Familiarity

The final category of contemporary literature available in the U.S. from other countries are works that either need no "translation" of place names, customs, coinage, etc. to make them intelligible to American children, or else have been edited to remove any foreign elements. Books of this type are mostly selections from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and the Americas. They assume familiarity with the settings and lifestyles of the characters and get right to the story. Indeed, it is often difficult to determine that the book was first published beyond U.S. borders: country of origin is often omitted entirely from publication information. Cataloging-in-Publication information also usually omits any geographic designation, which is typically specified in books from Asia or Africa.

Rather than describing foods, holidays, or a typical day-in-the-life, these books recount the problems and personal journeys also typical of children in the U.S., such as divorce, addiction, moving, solving a mystery, learning to fit in, or pursuing a dream. For example, in *Home* (Australia, Baker, 2004), the only indication that the story takes place abroad is that cars are shown driving on the left. *A Book of Coupons* (France, Morgenstern, 2001) retains French names, but otherwise could be set as easily in the U.S. Few of the books in this category can be said to increase cultural understanding. A notable European exception is *Divided City* (Scotland, Breslin, 2005), about tensions between Protestants and Catholics in Glasgow, which makes no concessions to American readers unfamiliar with the historical background or local terminology. While some of the characters in these books are poor, their poverty is not equated with village life or cultural restrictions and is not presented as a characteristic typical of exotic foreign countries. A few books from other regions, for example, books by South African author Niki Daly (South Africa, Daly, 2003, 2006), though set in unfamiliar places, focus similarly on the ordinary life of the child. These books break down stereotypes and present characters with whom U.S. children can identify, without ignoring differences in culture or continent.

Resistance to Difference

Publishers of course must publish what will sell. Many factors work against book border crossings to the U.S. Besides the obvious difficulties of translating accurately, in the spirit of the original, each step in the translation process is "subject to the assumptions of publishers and translators as to what children can understand, what they enjoy, what is suitable and acceptable" (O'Sullivan & Lathey, 2006). Lathey (2006)

notes that publishers often assume "young readers will find it difficult to assimilate foreign names, coinage, foodstuffs or locations, and that they may reject a text reflecting a culture that is unfamiliar." Furthermore they "cannot be expected to have acquired the breadth of understanding of other cultures, languages and geographies that are taken for granted in an adult readership." In effect, broadening of young readers' horizons is thwarted because of their assumed lack of broader horizons! These considerations result in extensive alterations to the text, variously referred to as localization, domestication, or cultural context adaptation. Whitehead (1997) found that even books from the UK must undergo extensive revisions to appeal to the American market, suggesting that "in spite of lip service to multiculturalism, American children are being overprotected from exposure to different cultures." These assumptions and adaptations no doubt explain why so many books in the category above are indistinguishable from books originating in the U.S. It is clear that the paucity of international books available in the U.S. reflects lack of interest or acceptance among U.S. buyers and/or publishers' perception of this resistance.

Conclusion

Even if children are indeed tolerant by nature, we cannot assume that the books they read (written, marketed, and selected by adults) are free from bias. Books discussed here present images of the world to U.S. children via fact and fiction: travels through a landscape or an author's imagination. Despite the outstanding quality of individual titles, collectively they can paint only part of the true picture, and that, often, is the picture we've come to expect—carefree fishing in Jamaica, war in Bosnia, conflict in the Middle East, village life in Africa, gender restrictions in Muslim countries, economic change in Asia, and a Europe virtually identical to the U.S. Since the village life reminiscences appear exclusively in stories from poorer, remote countries, it seems unlikely that American children will make meaningful connections to dilemmas and hardships caused by poverty at home. Since most of the European titles are indistinguishable from U.S. publications, it seems unlikely that readers will discover the extent of cultural and ethnic diversity there. The overall picture, then, is of a familiar, homogeneous western world contrasted with a very different world beyond, emphasizing both geographic and cultural distances. It should be noted also that publication date bears no relation to how realistic or contemporary the work is. More recent works perpetuate outmoded, simplistic images as often as older ones present more realistic, nuanced images.

What is missing from this selection is arguably more noteworthy than what is included. Many countries, conflicts, and settings are not represented at all. In many poorer countries, publishing for children is at best a nascent industry. Young readers may unconsciously register those missing countries as unimportant or impossibly distant. Redressing these imbalances will require the development of the publishing industries and indigenous authors from those countries. It will also require greater willingness on the part of U.S. consumers to risk exposure to the unfamiliar, the different, by buying and reading such books with children, thus encouraging that market.

Yet there are many outstanding examples that may indeed foster intercultural understanding. The Central and South American titles provide the most balanced and realistic images, showing children from all social classes, cities, villages, religions, and ethnic origins. In these books some children may be comparatively poor, but poverty is not the sole focus of their story. Children in these selections grow and develop through their experiences, perhaps especially from the harsher experiences, but solve their own problems with the help of family and community, in the process showing U.S. readers how those communities work.

Stories and images we pore over as children often remain with us for a lifetime, planting the seeds of future understanding *or* discord. A recent young adult novel about a Palestinian family, *The Shepherd's Granddaughter* (Carter, 2008), illustrates this power. The opening scene is sketched in with a few key details: a remote mountainside, a wise, old shepherd/grandfather, a flock of sheep, immediately evoking the stock pastoral image in the reader's mind. Assumptions and stereotypes are jarred, however, when on the next page father flips out his cell phone. Which image is more likely to lead to real understanding, the comforting idyll, or the contemporary juxtaposition of tradition and modernity? If indeed the children's literature of today shapes children's minds and is thus a window onto our future, then those of us who present books to children must seek out realistic, wide-ranging examples of global children's literature, if we truly seek international understanding and tolerance.

Notes

ⁱ The Bibliography was compiled by the International Relations Committee of the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) of the American Library Association. The author was a contributor. The Committee has since been "sunsetting" by ALSC as not aligned with the strategic goals of the organization.

ⁱⁱCountry totals are as reported in <http://www.infoplease.com>

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