

An Invitation to Consider the Value of Personal Stories in Cultural Narrative

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The 26th Annual Children’s Literature Assembly Master Class focused on professional conversations about the importance of children’s literature in university-level classes. Children’s authors and scholars of children’s literature considered the value of teaching diverse children’s literature in university-level children’s literacy courses and how such texts can be a tool for inquiry into personal cultural narratives to better understand ourselves and the world in which we live.

PERSONAL STORIES, OR STORIES of self (e.g., memoir, autobiography, and fiction based on real experiences), in children’s literature offer rich opportunities for inquiry into who we are and what matters as we connect with and learn about other people. Short (2016) states that “because literature expands children’s life spaces, they travel outside the boundaries of their lives to other places, times, and ways of living to participate in alternative ways of being in the world” (p. 4). For educators, this inquiry and understanding influences teaching from the university to the grade school classroom, particularly in terms of understanding culture and building community.

The Children’s Literature Assembly (CLA) Master Class in the Teaching of Children’s Literature session, currently in its 26th year, provides opportunities for those who teach in university settings to share experiences related to teaching children’s literature in the university and discuss contemporary trends and issues in the field

of children’s literature. Short observed, “The master class has always been about teaching—the teaching *of* children’s literature as well as teaching *with* children’s literature.”

The 2019 Master Class focused on the importance of viewing cultural experiences through the lens of personal narrative (Florio-Ruane & deTar, 2001, p. 55) and addressed using children’s literature to provide an opening for cultural narratives and gaining new perspectives. After a welcoming by CLA president Lauren Liang, scholar moderator Kathy Short provided a curricular framework for thinking about and discussing the theme of personal stories as cultural narrative in children’s literature. Award-winning authors and illustrators of children’s and young adult literature Tonya Bolden, Thanh Hà Lai, Gail D. Villanueva, and Yuyi Morales followed Short’s introduction with stories of their work. Short noted that these authors’ personal narratives expand “our life space so we can go outside the boundar-

ies of our lives to participate in other times, places, and ways of living.” What follows is a summary of each of the presentations.

Summaries of Prepared Remarks

KATHY G. SHORT

Scholar moderator Kathy G. Short is a professor at the University of Arizona and the director of Worlds of Words (<https://wowlit.org>), a center located at the University of Arizona that promotes building intercultural understanding through global children’s literature. She has authored numerous professional articles and books, including her most recent edited books, *Teaching Globally: Reading the World Through Literature* (Short, Day, & Schroeder, 2016) and *Critical Content Analysis of Visual Images in Books for Young People* (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2019). She is a past president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY).

Short began the session by asking why personal stories matter in the teaching of and with children’s literature. She explored this question through a discussion of her comprehensive framework for a curriculum that is intercultural and the four curricular experiences that comprise this framework (see Short, 2009 for further discussion). According to Short, a curriculum that is intercultural crosses both multicultural and global spaces and invites alternative perspectives to how we can live and be in the world. This is a curriculum framework that Short uses in the classroom with both children and university students, many of whom have only thought about identity in terms of race or ethnicity rather than considering the multiple identities that are part of each of us, such as gender, sexuality, social class, language, age, family structure, education, religion, or parts of the country or regions that we have lived in. In the first curricular experience, Short encourages explorations of personal cultural identities to help students recognize that we each have multiple cultural identities. According to Short, books that are based on the personal experiences of an author are invitations to this identity work, providing opportunities for readers to see aspects of themselves and their life experiences.

Cross-cultural studies, the second level of curricular experiences in a curriculum that is intercultural, are an invitation for readers to immerse themselves in story worlds that are not their own, and provide an opportunity for readers to recognize that every culture has depth, complexity, and diversity. Short observed that because personal narratives are anchored in someone’s actual life, personal narratives in cross-cultural studies allow readers to go beyond the facts to make strong emotional connections to what they read. These emotional connections, she

explained, allow us to read with empathy and become more conscious of and committed to others. Thinking about the difference of reading with an emotional connection that is empathy, versus reading with an emotional connection that is sympathy, Short argued that sympathy is highly problematic. Sympathy is part of pity, she explained, and drives disconnection: “When you read with empathy,” she said, “you’re trying to understand the emotions of someone else that connects to something that’s deeply within yourself and that feeling, even if it is not necessarily to that same life experience.”

The third level of curricular experience within Short’s framework, the integration of intercultural perspectives, can be a natural and continuous part of classroom inquiry. Short calls for educators to recognize that no matter what we are teaching with regard to grade level and content, including a range of cultural perspectives allows more opportunities for students to see aspects of their own identities in literature. It encourages more open discussion by allowing them to share and compare parts of their own life experiences within a critical frame.

Personal narrative is a critical component in inquiry into global issues, the fourth component in an intercultural curriculum. While it is important for children to know the facts about a specific global issue, they also need to hear the stories, the personal narratives, to understand how issues impact the lives of real people. When a book is based in a real personal narrative, then it is more likely that the underlying reason for that global issue will be understood by children. This provides an opportunity for the reader to better understand the whys of an issue and to make more emotional connections in empathy.

Short underscores the importance of understanding the why of an issue. All components in an intercultural curriculum are framed in a critical lens. Reading from a critical stance provides an opportunity for asking “Why?” and “What is...?” When children read and discuss personal narratives in ways that are not critical, they do not allow for changes in their thinking. If these changes in their thinking do not occur, “What if” questions related to imagining other ways and new possibilities cannot emerge. “What if” has to grow out of first critiquing what is. Educators can help children think critically by questioning what is, how the world works, why problems exist, and who’s benefiting from those problems being there. And from there, Short said, “you can go to hope, and hope is asking—it’s imagining—what else is possible?”

TONYA BOLDEN

Tonya Bolden is a critically acclaimed author of numerous nonfiction and historical fiction books for young people. Her award-winning books meticulously weave themes of Black

history in America—and her own history—into luminous, richly detailed narratives. Working around and within significant historical times, Bolden sheds light on the personal stories, the up-close and little-known moments of Black history, unflinchingly reminding us that everyone's stories matter to all of us.

During her presentation, Bolden discussed three of her books that move across American history with protagonists who are young Black women with drive, yearning, and ambition: *Crossing Ebenezer Creek* (2017), *Inventing Victoria* (2019), and *Saving Savannah* (2020). In particular, she shared, “These three linked novels reflect my passion for history, my passion for broadening our young people's perspectives of Black life on these shores. What you think of people in the past shapes how you view them in your present era.” In her novels, she draws on history to broaden readers' perspectives on Black lives. Acknowledging the history of slavery and oppression in America, Bolden stated,

When the subject of Black life during the days of Jim Crow—during slavery—Jim Crow comes to mind, images I think that first come to mind are sharecroppers, shacks, children with no shoes. They're to be pitied: “Oh, those poor people.” And yes, there was a lot of that, but at the same time there was so much more. You had people whose names we don't know building society and forging on and being successful. And laughing out loud. And have fêtes where there's squab and asparagus tips.

Referring back to the people who came before her, including her own parents, Bolden said, “I'm here because of hope and love and ambition and striving and resilience and resourcefulness.”

Bolden's stories provide another way of looking at the variety of the Black experience and thinking beyond stereotypes. Reading an excerpt from her newly released book, *Saving Savannah*, Bolden provided a glimpse into the opulence and prosperity of some Black lives in Washington, DC, in 1919. Savannah, a young woman on the verge of change, is facing major decisions in her life. Her story unfolds against the backdrop of the suffragist movement, anarchist bombings, the Palmer Raids, Red Summer, and the “hue and cry, sound and fury about immigrants.” Bolden asked of Savannah, “Will she retreat into the bourgeois comforts of her life? Or is there for her a new way?” It is clear that Savannah has choices and opportunity, and that she has been leading a full life.

Bolden's message is that we do not need to subscribe to a narrow version of culture, and she warns of the dangers of stereotypes to all people. She explained, “When we go through history, we can help children see that this has happened before. This is who we are sometimes, unless you

get it right. It's just that the targets change.” Arguing that there is room for personal stories that go beyond the few we often use to represent an entire history and people, she concluded that it is her hope that we will use her work “to open young people's eyes to the variety of the Black experience and to think beyond stereotypes.”

Educators can help children think critically by questioning what is, how the world works, why problems exist, and who's benefiting from those problems being there. And from there, Short said, “you can go to hope, and hope is asking—it's imagining—what else is possible?”

THANH HÀ LAI

Thanh Hà Lai is the winner of the 2011 National Book Award for Young People's Literature and the 2012 Newbery Honor for her debut novel, *Inside Out and Back Again* (2011). She is also the author of the acclaimed middle school novel *Listen, Slowly* (2015) and the recently released young adult novel *Butterfly Yellow* (2019).

Born in Vietnam, Thanh Hà Lai came to the United States in 1975 as the south of her birth country fell to the communist north. She was 10 years old when her mother made the difficult decision to take her nine children and escape South Vietnam. Lai tells her story through Hà, the main protagonist in *Inside Out and Back Again*. As a refugee in Montgomery, Alabama, Hà, like Lai, does not speak a word of English in a place and at a time when no one else around her speaks Vietnamese, and when she and her family are likely the first Asians that any of her classmates or teachers have ever seen outside of television. This is a story, Lai said, she always knew she would tell.

According to Lai, the number one question she is always asked about *Inside Out and Back Again* is why she wrote it in verse. She explained that prose poems provided her the space to convey Vietnamese in the lilting, poetic, rhythmic language she hears in her head and learned through the poetic way her mother spoke to her in their daily lives, in the only language her mother could speak. That her mother did not speak any English forced Lai to retain her native language. This, according to Lai, was her mother's greatest gift to her. For Lai, it is the way Vietnamese is processed in the head. When Hà is thinking, it would be in prose poems. Through this voice, the reader is right

in the mind of Hà. Lai said writing *Inside Out and Back Again* in stanzas was her way into the story.

Lai identified language and the refugee experience as the two main themes that run through her work. When writing about the refugee experience, Lai said she thought she was writing historical fiction, but she now sees her stories as relevant to today's Syrian refugee crisis and other global immigration and refugee experiences. In *Butterfly Yellow* (2019), Lai revisits the refugee experience with Hằng, who has immigrated to the United States six years after the Vietnam War. Hằng has endured a perilous journey. Lai explained, "When you write about refugees, trauma is built in; you can't get away from it. I don't really spend any time focusing on the trauma. It's there. I focus on the healing instead." In working through the trauma, Lai asked, "How do you let life surprise you?" To that end, Lai provided Hằng with friendship, hope, and humor. She concluded, "I focus on unlikely events that end up making your life bloom."

GAIL D. VILLANUEVA

Gail D. Villanueva is a Filipina author born and raised in the Philippines. *My Fate According to the Butterfly* (2019) is her debut novel. She is also a web designer, an entrepreneur, and a graphic artist. She and her husband live on the outskirts of Manila.

Villanueva began her discussion by highlighting the underrepresentation of the Asian Pacific experience in children's literature and underscoring the further marginalization of the Filipino voice. Emphasizing her belief in the need for children's literature to seek out and tell stories from an author's own cultural experience, she read her dedication in *My Fate According to the Butterfly*: "If you are searching for a window to look through or yearning for a mirror to see yourself in, this book is for you."

In *My Fate According to the Butterfly*, Villanueva shares the story of a girl on the cusp of her 11th birthday, struggling to find value in herself as she strives to unite her estranged family. Villanueva identified acceptance as an important and universal theme in her book. This theme is explored through the issues of addiction and recovery, racial discrimination in the Filipino culture, and definitions of beauty. Although she acknowledged these are difficult issues, she promised they are presented age appropriately for her audience and are balanced with love and humor. She also expressed her belief that these stories are not being told and that it is important that they are made available.

Referring to the mirrors and windows metaphor (Bishop, 1990), Villanueva said that for those readers who see themselves in her stories, she wants them to *feel* seen. These themes and issues come from her own cultural and

personal experiences, and it took telling her stories of racial discrimination and beauty for her to realize that she is probably "enough." When providing windows, she wants children to know that there is a world beyond the borders of their own. Villanueva hopes that teachers will share this idea with their students; she cautioned that if our stories are not shared, they might go untold.

YUYI MORALES

Yuyi Morales is the picturebook author and illustrator of six Pura Belpré award-winning titles, including her recently published book, *Dreamers* (2018). Her illustrations for *Viva Frida* (2014) were recognized with a Caldecott Honor. Morales was born in Xalapa, Mexico, and the colors, textures, and cultural experiences of her Mexican heritage richly infuse her work.

Morales began her talk by asking, "Why tell a personal story?" She argued that our stories are who we are, and if we don't tell our own stories, someone else will. She warned that people have already done that, and they will continue to do that, and they will not get it right, particularly for the immigrant experience. In telling our own stories, Morales contended, we get to tell them in our own voices, rather than hearing them in the voice of someone who did not live through our experiences. For Morales, this is particularly important in personalizing the immigrant experience where individual stories humanize those people who are determined to cross the United States' southern border, and can present a counternarrative to the stories that are often told in the media.

Morales advocated for telling the simple stories of our lives. She sees these as stories to live by and learn from, not to admire, challenge, or change children and who they are. When writing about her own stories, she explained, "I knew that when I was going to tell my story, specifically my immigrant story, it wasn't necessarily because I was going to put out there something for children to admire." Morales believes that in making stories accessible, we create a space and provide permission for children to tell their stories. She said, "I realized how important it is that we authors tell our stories, so that children realize how important their stories are."

To create this space in her own work, Morales revealed her own vulnerabilities as an author. It is here that she hopes authors and readers can meet and children can feel the support to tell their own stories. As an author, Morales does not want students to hold her work at a distance. She wants them to know that she is their equal, and they can share their stories together. She encouraged the audience to start this dialogue with her books in their families and classrooms in order to visualize a better place than where we are right now.

Conclusion

During the panel discussion, authors Tonya Bolden, Thanh Hà Lai, Gail D. Villanueva, and Yuyi Morales told the stories of the books they have written, explained how the telling of their stories came to be, and described the life stories that are the wellspring of their work. Viewed within the intercultural curriculum framework provided by Kathy Short, important connections and threads throughout the session include the following:

- Personal narratives matter, particularly when they are read through a critical lens.
- Personal narratives are told from the life experiences of the author. These individual stories add layers to the larger, often stereotyped, narrative being told, providing a counternarrative.
- When teachers include personal narrative in their curriculum, they create space for those whose stories might not otherwise be heard or told.
- People live complex lives, with multiple identities. In reading personal narratives, children may come to recognize more aspects of their own identities through others' stories.
- Personal narratives can take issues like immigration, war, addiction, racism, and inequality and show how they impact the lives of real people. Making global issues real puts a face on an issue and enables emotional connections that can develop empathy in the reader.
- Personal narratives can avoid underestimating what children can understand. When writing about the variety of the Black experience in America, for example, Bolden does not shy away from the brutality. Villanueva does not shy away from showing addiction and family estrangement that impact a 10-year-old girl. Morales and Lai do not shy away from the details of the traumatic and sometimes perilous journey of refugees. They show resistance and how people have worked to effect change and take action.

- Personal narratives can be an invitation for children to tell their own stories and explore their own multiple identities and life experiences.

The connections and threads that ran through the talk of the presenters were often an affirmation of the CLA position statement *On the Importance of Critical Selection and Teaching of Diverse Children's Literature* (2019). We invite you to visit the CLA website to view this position statement, and to explore additional conversations regarding the importance and value of reading diverse voices in children's and young adult literature in the classroom through a critical literacy lens. ■

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