

## **Multiculturalism and Identity through Literature (for children, adolescents, and adults)**

Laura Sicola

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**Going Home** (Eve Bunting, 1998. Going home. Illustrated by D. Diaz. New York: HarperTrophy. (K-3))

From a Caldecott-medal winning team comes the heartwarming story of one family’s special Christmas homecoming. On his trip to Mexico for the holidays, Carlos comes to realize that home can be anywhere, because it stays in the hearts of the people who love you.

**Bein’ with you this way.** (Nikola-Lisa, W. (1995). Illustrated by M. Bryant. New York: Lee and Low. (K-3))

An African American girl visits the park and rounds up a group of her friends for an afternoon of fun and playground games. The children discover that despite their physical differences, they are all really the same, and the similarities and differences alike are all beautiful. Wonderful rhymes and multicultural pictures.

**Stellaluna** (Janell Cannon)

Attacked by an owl, Stellaluna (a fruit bat) is separated from her mother and taken in by a bird and her nestlings.

Dutifully, she tries to accommodate--she eats insects, hangs head up, and sleeps at night, as Mama Bird says she must--but once Stellaluna learns to fly, it's a huge relief when her own mother finds her and explains that the behavior that comes naturally is appropriate to her species. An adorable cross-cultural metaphor.

**Oliver Button is a Sissy** (Tommie DiPaola)

This is an excellent book that confronts gender stereotypes and the importance of accepting people for who they are.

Oliver Button does not engage in the traditional activities that boys do, and thus, he is faced with repercussions and consequences (based on how others feel Oliver should behave/act).

**The Woman who Outshone the Sun** (Alejandro Cruz Martinez, Rosalma Zubizarreta, and Harriet Rohmer)

**(Bilingual Sp/Eng)** Kindergarten–Grade 3—(Hispanic folk tale) Lucia Zenteno is a mythic character, a woman of great beauty who is perfectly in tune with nature. She is indeed larger than life, and though beloved by the creatures of the countryside, she becomes the target of human hatred and fear and is driven out of her village because she is different. It is only as nature mourns and the river leaves with her that the people realize that they need her. Dealing with issues of the differences between people and respect for nature.

**Mommy far, mommy near: An adoption story.** (Peacock, C. A. 2000, Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman.) (K-3)

Although Elizabeth, a young Chinese girl, is secure in the love of her adoptive Caucasian American family, she still has questions. Why, if China is such a big country, wasn't there room for all the babies? Didn't her mother love her? Such questions surface in games with her younger Chinese sister, in loving give-and-take with her American mother, and in hurt feelings after seeing a Chinese mother and daughter at the playground. Elizabeth's misgivings are met head-on by her adoptive mother's reassurance, love, and thoughtful responses. The mother's tender support not only reassures Elizabeth but will also benefit other adoptees, especially those from developing countries, as it reinforces the efforts of all loving, adoptive parents.

**Gertruda's Oath: A Child, a Promise and a Heroic Escape During WWII** (Ram Oren; Translated by Barbara Harshav; Random House Pubs.)

(Non-fiction) Michael Stolorow, the only son of a wealthy Jewish family in Poland, was just three years old when war broke out and the family lost everything. He is left in the care of Gertruda Bablinska, a Catholic nanny devoted to the family, who promises his dying mother that she will make her way to Palestine and raise him as her own son. Told from Michael's perspective, now in his 70s and living in NY.

**Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet** (Jamie Ford; Ballantine press)

A novel exploring the age-old conflicts between father and son, the beauty and sadness of what happened to Japanese Americans in the Seattle area during World War II, and the depths and longing of deep-heart love.

**Laughing without an Accent: Adventures of a Global Citizen** (Firoozeh Dumas; Random House)

(Non-fiction) Autobiographical account of growing up Iranian American in Southern California. She mines her rich Persian heritage, saring stories on being a citezen of the world, her well-meaning family, new motherhood, and amusing cultural conundrums, all told with insights into the universality of the human condition.

**Shanghai Girls** (Lisa See; Random House Pubs)

A novel about two sisters, two cultures, and the struggle to find a new life in America while bound to the old, trying to assimilate into the strange new world of Los Angeles.

**America Street (short story collection) (Gr6-12)**

Fourteen short stories about growing up in America's diverse society. Written by such authors as Robert Cormier, Langston Hughes, Lensey Namioka, Grace Paley, Gary Soto, and Michele Wallace, they range from powerful to poignant to downright hilarious. Multiethnic experiences with 14 slice-of-life stories featuring teens (mostly contemporary) whose parents or grandparents immigrated to the U.S. The sociocultural backgrounds of characters are diverse, yet all share the common goal of finding a place for themselves. Some strive to rise above the crowd and to be recognized for their abilities. Other protagonists are concerned primarily with blending in and remaining as inconspicuous as possible. Incidents chronicled in this highly readable volume provide first-rate entertainment while shedding light on the unique struggles and dreams of first-, second- and third-generation Americans. It reflects the dignity of individuals and the strength of family bonds across different cultures.

**How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accent** (High school and up)

This sensitive story of four sisters who must adjust to life in America after having to flee from the Dominican Republic is told through a series of episodes beginning in adulthood, when their lives have been shaped by U. S. mores, and moving backwards to their wealthy childhood on the island. Adapting to American life is difficult and causes embarrassment when friends meet their parents, anger as they are bullied and called "spics," and identity confusion following summer trips to the family compound in the Dominican Republic. These interconnected vignettes of family life, resilience, and love are skillfully intertwined and offer young adults a perspective on immigration and families as well as a look at America through Hispanic eyes. This unique coming-of-age tale is a feast of stories that will enchant and captivate readers.

**The spirit catches you and you fall down**

(non-fiction) A compelling anthropological study. The Hmong people in America are mainly refugee families who supported the CIA militaristic efforts in Laos. They are a clannish group with a firmly established culture that combines issues of health care with a deep spirituality that may be deemed primitive by Western standards. In Merced, CA, which has a large Hmong community, Lia Lee was born, the 13th child in a family coping with their plunge into a modern and mechanized way of life. The child suffered an initial seizure at the age of three months. Her family attributed it to the slamming of the front door by an older sister. They felt the fright had caused the baby's soul to flee her body and become lost to a malignant spirit. The report of the family's attempts to cure Lia through shamanistic intervention and the home sacrifices of pigs and chickens is balanced by the intervention of the medical community that insisted upon the removal of the child from deeply loving parents with disastrous results. This compassionate and understanding account fairly represents the positions of all the parties involved. Suspense of the child's precarious health, the understanding characterization of the parents and doctors, and insights into Hmong culture.

**American Chica.** Arana, M. 2006.

(Non-fiction) Biographical story of a woman raised in Peru to a Peruvian father and American mother, questioning her own history and the mysteries of her mother's past.

**Grandfather's Journey.** Say, A. (1993).New York: Houghton Mifflin. (2-4)

A Japanese American man recounts his grandfather's journey to America which he later also undertakes, and the feelings of being torn by a love for two different countries.

**Kaddish for Grandpa in Jesus' Name Amen** (Howe, 2004, Atheneum,)

Five year old Emily, whose father was born into a Christian family but converted to Judaism, describes how it feels to go to a Christian funeral for her grandfather, and then to share in a Jewish ceremony of mourning as well. Meanwhile, she forms her own way of remembering her grandfather. "It wasn't the Christian way and it wasn't the Jewish way. It was just my way, My Kaddish for Grandpa in Jesus' name amen."

**Mismatch** (Namioka, 2006; Delacorte Books) Gr. 6-9.

When Suzanne Hua, a Chinese American, and Andy Suzuki, a Japanese American, meet in their high-school orchestra, their white classmates see them as a good match (Aren't all Asians the same?). But at home, things are different: Suzanne's beloved grandmother can't forget the brutality of the Japanese who invaded China, and Andy's father is prejudiced about the "dirty, backward" Chinese. Andy's dad hopes his son will find his roots when he visits Japan; instead, Andy discovers he's more American than he realized, and Suzanne must answer similar questions.

**Half and Half** (Namioka, 2004; Yearling pubs.) Gr. 3-5.

Her mother is Scottish and her father is Chinese, so Fiona Cheng, 11, doesn't know which box to check on the enrollment form for the folk-dancing festival in Seattle. She doesn't want to check "other," which will make her feel like a weirdo. Why don't they have a box for half and half?

**I Speak English for My Mom** (Stanek, 1992, Houghton Mifflin) (2-5)

Rosa, a Mexican immigrant and widow, needs her daughter Lupe's help in almost every aspect of daily life. Lupe quickly learns English, and so acts as interpreter for her mother, whether they are shopping in stores where Spanish isn't spoken, or going to the doctor for check-ups. Lupe usually doesn't mind, but there are times when she gets tired of being called on for help. When Rosa enrolls in night school to learn English, Lupe encourages her mother, but admits she'll miss helping Rosa.

**No English.** (Jules, J. 2008. Illustrated by A. Huntington.) Mitten. (K-2)

"No English" is all that Blanca, the new girl from Argentina, says. She spends her time drawing pictures instead of doing class work, and that hardly seems fair to second-grader Diane. One misunderstanding follows another until Diane begins to see how afraid Blanca must feel in their classroom. Their teacher helps her class understand that "different" is just different, not strange or weird.

**I hate English!** (Levine, E. 1995). New York: Scholastic Trade. (K-2)

Mei Mei, a bright and articulate immigrant from Hong Kong, is having much difficulty adjusting to the new language and culture at school in New York City. A sensitive teacher helps Mei Mei and succeeds in breaking through her fear of losing her identity.

**Maizon at Blue Hill** (Woodson, 1992, Delacorte). Gr. 5-7.

One of only five African-American students at a private girls' school, Maizon feels misplaced and lonely, trying to fit in. She struggles to cope with snobbery and is distressed by both black elitism and white curiosity. Rather than admitting defeat, Maizon is determined to "find a place where smart black girls from Brooklyn could feel like they belonged."

**Chopsticks from America** (Hosozawa-Nagano, 1994; Polychrome) Gr 2-4

Tiffany, 11, describes her Japanese-American family's move to Japan. Explores the differences between being Japanese and Japanese American. It really captures the feeling of isolation that a Japanese American can feel living in Japan. The book presents a fairly accurate portrait of kiddie culture shock, as well as an interesting child's-eye view of Japan.

**Everybody Cooks Rice.** Dooley, N. (1992)

Carrie canvasses the neighborhood, trying to round up her younger brother in time for dinner. Every household she visits represents a different ethnic heritage--Fendra Diaz's grandmother lives in Puerto Rico, Madame Bleu hails from Haiti, the Huas have emigrated from China, etc. All the families are either preparing or consuming dinner, and Carrie discovers that despite divergent backgrounds, "everybody cooks rice."

**The Jacket** (Clements, A. 2002. New York: Simon & Schuster.) (Gr 4-6)

After wrongly accusing a boy--an African American boy--of stealing his brother's jacket, Phil--a white boy--has some hard thinking to do. And a tough question for his mom: "How come you never told me I was prejudiced?" This seemingly small school incident turns into a challenging learning opportunity for the sixth grader, as he explores the myriad influences in his life and the way his thought patterns have formed. The intellectual evolution Phil goes through may be somewhat facile for a child his age, but the message will undoubtedly hit home for many readers. This is exactly the kind of situation that arises every day in schools (and offices and buses) all over the world.

**It doesn't have to be this way: A Barrio story.** Rodriguez, L. J. (1999). San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press. (4-6)

One day, a member of the local gang tells Monchi it's time to join up. He is scared but excited. The older boys give him the handshake, girls talk to him, and even teachers are afraid of him. But when a tragic event changes everything, Monchi must make an important decision. The love and respect of his uncle helps him find a way out. (*amazon.com*)

**Smoky night.** Bunting, E. (1999). Illustrated by D. Diaz. New York: Harcourt Brace. (1-4)

When the smell of smoke wakens Daniel and his mother during the night, they flee from the rioting outside their apartment to a shelter. Inspired by an innocent comment from Daniel, his mother introduces herself to a neighbor; the African-American woman's attempt to reach out to the Korean-American woman is a clear result of surviving the riots together.

**Neighborhood Odes.** Illustrated by David Diaz. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992.

Black and white illustrations accompany twenty-one poems about growing up in a Mexican-American neighborhood, finding delight in everyday places and items, such as the library, tennis shoes, sprinklers, and tortillas.

**Taking Sides.** San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1991.

Fourteen year old, Lincoln Mendoza, an aspiring basketball player, must come to terms with his divided loyalties when he moves from the Hispanic inner city to a white suburban neighborhood. Glossary of Spanish words included.

**Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World.** Mildred Pitts Walter. Lothrop, 1986. Gr. 3-5.

10-year-old Justin jumps at the chance to visit his cowboy grandfather, where he traces his black cowboy ancestors and learns that cooking is not just "women's work."

**How my parents learned to eat.** Friedman, I. R. (1987). New York: Houghton Mifflin. (K-3)

An American sailor courts a Japanese girl and each tries, in secret, to learn the other's way of eating. Told from the point of view of their daughter, many years later.

**Cleversticks.** Ashley, B. (1995). Illustrated by D. Brazell. New York: Random House. (K-3)

Wishing he had something to be clever at like each of the other children in his class, Ling Sung unexpectedly and happily discovers the others admire his prowess with chopsticks.

**Chicken Sunday.** Polacco, P. 1998. Gr 1-3

Despite the differences in religion, sex, and race, Winston and Stewart Washington are young Patricia's best friends, and she considers their grandmother, Miss Eula, a surrogate since her own "babushka" died. On Sundays, she often attends Baptist services with her friends, and Miss Eula fixes a sumptuous fried chicken dinner with all the trimmings, after stopping to admire the hats in Mr. Kodinski's shop. The youngsters hope to buy her one, but when they approach the merchant looking for work, he mistakenly accuses them of pelting his shop with eggs. To prove their innocence, the children hand-dye eggs in the folk-art style that Patricia's grandmother had taught her and present them to the milliner. Moved by the remembrance of his homeland, the Russian Jewish emigre encourages the children to sell the "Pysanky" eggs in his shop and rewards their industry with a gift of the hat, which Miss Eula proudly wears on Easter Sunday.