Diversity in Young-Adult Literature: Ethnic, Cultural, and National

Our attempt here is to show the wonderful, creative, and very useful range of young-adult literature representing the diverse cultures found in many of our classrooms. In these books we meet Clay Lancaster, a teenager from Seattle who has an adventure in the Southwest; we meet Filipe, his sister, and his mother, who must leave their native El Salvador to escape persecution; we meet fourteen-year-old Issac Stone and Malcolm X, both African Americans who struggled with racism during the civil rights movement; and we meet Aaron and Zev, two Jewish boys caught up in the struggle for survival because they are Jews. Our hope is that these, as well as other young-adult books that we could not review, will help teachers engage their students with literature reflective of the young-adult experience from diverse cultural perspectives.


Clay Lancaster, a teenager from Seattle, makes the journey to Monument Valley in the desert Southwest to look for his uncle who disappeared a few years ago. What follows is an intriguing adventure in which Clay travels by burro, with the company of a small dog, through Navajo country along the Colorado River Basin. He learns from Sam and Russell Yazzie, two Navajo Indians, that his uncle has been trying to save the last of the wild horses of the Escalante Mountains. When Clay does meet up with his uncle, all is not well. The uncle has been put in jail and may have to serve time in state prison for taking the wild horses away. The reader will find the ending satisfying albeit a bit romantic. Middle-school readers will find the dreams, the friendship, the love in The Big Wander to be most compelling. They will also experience vicariously the wonders of the desert, the customs of the Navajo Indians, and the love for family in small Western communities.


A powerful novel about the Civil Rights Movement in general and the movement in Alabama during 1963 in particular. Told from the point of view of fourteen-year-old Issac Stone, better known to his friends as Stone, Ossie Davis's first novel recounts the racism of the South and the nonviolence movement during the early days of the struggle for civil rights. Stone's father looks upon the nonviolence movement as cowardice and prohibits his son from going on the bus to the Washington, DC, march. Young Stone doesn’t want to defy his father, but he wants to follow in the footsteps of Martin Luther King, Jr. Stone’s personal struggle is to help his father see that nonviolence is the way—his way—to attain justice for all. Davis takes his readers through a bombing of the Holy Oak Baptist Church in which two young people are killed, a march that gets out of hand and turns into a riot in which the senior Stone is bludgeoned repeatedly. He delineates the personal crises that young Stone and his father face as they work through their differences and come to an understanding of what it means to live in a nonviolent way—a decision that will surely please readers at all levels.


This readable account of one of the most controversial leaders in the Civil Rights Movement explores why Mal-

In 1827 Czar Nicholas I of Russia passed a decree ordering that a specific number of Jews at age eighteen be drafted into twenty-five years of military service. The Czar's intention was to force them to convert to Christianity. Jewish authorities in self-governing towns were forced to fill military quotas; however, this was often very political and frequently only the poor Jewish boys were sent. When quotas could not be filled, khappers were paid to kidnap boys who in many cases were tortured and killed. This novel relays the first-person points of view of Aaron and Zev—two teenaged Jewish boys who were caught up in this terror in different ways. Aaron, a very bright boy who comes from a financially stable family, is kidnapped by Zev, a khapper who has always been jealous of Aaron's successes in school and his betrothal to a beautiful village girl. During the brutality of the marches to military camps, the witnessing of other deaths, the beatings by the soldiers, and the tactics of starvation to force conversion, Aaron helps the younger and weaker boys. He also comes to grips with his own physical and spiritual strength as he, too, gives in—in act only—to the conversion, eating non-Kosher food, and wearing a cross around his neck. Justice prevails, however, as Zev is run out of town by Aaron’s family. Zev loses his voice when the music practices are too loud, and Mrs. Nagy, a nosey, grumpy woman who always complains when the music practices are too loud, and Mrs. Rossi, a woman whose husband is a professor at the university. When their Aunt Eva returns to the apartment, having evaded the German guards, she convinces the children to trust Mrs. Rossi with a proposed plan to smuggle them across the mountains to safety in Italy in a delivery van. Complications ensue, however, as they not only realize that they must leave their treasured stringed instruments behind but that they must also include Mrs. Nagy in their risky endeavor. Given strict instructions by the Rossis to hide their presence from the driver of the van, they board in the middle of the night. The suspense begins and builds to the point at which the van breaks down in the mountains.

Several twists in the plot follow, but the ending is realistic.


This is a beautifully written lyrical story about a young woman named Marigold. Marigold is an orphan, born in a swamp and forced to live with a cruel woman, Ruby, and her two cruel twin daughters. Troubled by the mystery surrounding her birth, Marigold seeks refuge writing songs and singing in the swamp where she thinks no one can hear her. However, Anthony, from the Rose of Sharon Church, does hear her and hopes that her voice will be the one to replace the voice of Queen Mother Rhythm from the church. When Anthony’s search turns up no singer, however, he and Queen Mother decide to put on a Great Gospel Convention, hoping that the unknown lady with the nightingale-like voice will appear. Ruby, however, forbids Marigold to sing for others; instead, she is instructed to design dresses for her own daughters as well as teach them a new song that Marigold would sing if she were allowed to go. In the spirit of the Cinderella fairy tale, the reader may well predict the outcome of this story, but surprises of the interwoven relationships of the characters still await. This novel will appeal to middle-schoolers on up and will serve as an excellent read-aloud.

This is a wonderful collection of short stories and poems written by and about Asian Americans. As suggested by the title, the book’s contents exemplify the Asians’ spirit of the dragon, a symbol of their courage and continuity, as they entered a new land which frequently met them with conflicts. The wide variety of plots and themes represents the experiences of Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and other Asian Americans. One section deals with the need for individual identities during the process of blending into the American culture. Other sections focus on relationships with parents and grandparents, love relationships, teenage conflicts, abuse, death and suicide, and the effects of World War II. Appealing to middle-school ages and up, these selections should allow Asian American teenagers realistic reading experiences as well as connect other American teenagers to elements of Asian cultures—those that are unique to Asian Americans as well as those that are universal.


The story of Cricket, a young Anasazi boy, and his family as they may have lived many years ago in the Southwestern part of the United States captures the family love, tribal traditions, and day-to-day experiences of the Anasazi, who built elaborate homes in the cliffs and canyons. Readers learn of this culture through the eyes of the young boy and his lovable bear. We learn of the spring planting of corn and how children keep the animals away as the young plants grow. Readers travel with Cricket and his grandfather as they make trips to the trading post for supplies. Early in the novel, Cricket finds a small bear soon to be called Raindancer because he loves to dance and brings rain when he does. During the dry season, Cricket and Raindancer, who have come to be called The Rainmakers, go from village to village to bring rain to the dry crops. The customs of Anasazi are fascinating and should be of interest to all readers. Inspired by cave paintings, the author shares his imagination of a diverse culture.


“A tale in a book is like a drum in a museum; it’s silent, it’s dead, it’s just there doing nothing. And that’s sad because tales are for telling; they’re for laughter, they’re for singing, for sharing.” So writes Tony Fairman in the forward of Bury My Bones But Keep My Words. In this collection of African tales for retelling, Fairman describes the African setting, the people, and, in general, the African culture. His stories include stories about greed, arrogance, and foolishness. The strength of this book is that not only are the stories wonderful for retelling, but Fairman also suggests ways for making the stories come alive whenever they are retold. The stories reflect the variety of cultures found throughout the continent of Africa. There are stories from Kenya, Egypt, Botswana, Nigeria, and South Africa.