

Recommended Works of Multicultural Literature for the Secondary Classroom

Provided below is a list of recommended readings suggested by teachers from the UCI Writing Project. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list of quality multicultural literature (for example, Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple*, does not appear). Rather, it reflects the literature currently being taught in our area that has been particularly engaging to students of all cultural backgrounds. Scholars of multicultural education advocate selecting literature that is "culturally conscious" (Sims, 1982)--that is, literature that accurately reflects the history, beliefs and values of a culture "without perpetuating stereotypes" (Tompkins, 1997). In most cases, but not all, the culture represented in the recommended literature reflects the cultural background of the author and, as such, is written from an "insider" rather than an "outsider" perspective. Michael Smith (1998) makes the point that if teachers primarily select works of literature by people of color because they feel they will be accessible to White audiences, they will be depriving students of "experiencing the uncomfortable growth that can occur when they have to face a character whose life is much different from their own" (p. 134). Part of what fosters growth may involve dealing with discrimination, prejudice, identity, and human dignity. Teachers need to keep the students in their classrooms in mind when selecting appropriate literature and plan ahead regarding how to sensitively deal with the harsh realities depicted in some of the literary works. The language used to lend authenticity to a text may also be of concern to some parents and teachers will need to consider whether it is advisable or necessary to obtain parent permission. Many of the works that are often deemed controversial and subject to censorship in some school districts (whether they are by mainstream authors or by authors of color) are often taught in Honors classes. Since the students we have been discussing in this chapter are often underrepresented in Honors classes, they are unfortunately excluded from reading and responding to certain literary works that might resonate with them and make their experience in school more meaningful.

African American

Bambara, T.C. (1997). "The War of the Wall." In *Literature and Integrated Studies: Grade Seven*. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman. This story about two boys who declare a small, private war against a "painter lady" who mysteriously arrives in the neighborhood and begins painting a mural, is great for exploring the theme of how first impressions can be deceiving. It elicits interpretive analytical writing.

Campbell, B.M. (1989). *Sweet Summer: Growing Up With and Without My Dad*. New York. G.P. Putnam's Sons. (Middle School and High School). This is a rich, autobiographical account of Bebe Moore Campbell's coming of age and her complex relationship with her father, with whom she was separated for nine months of each year. This book is ideal for teaching memoir writing and for looking at lyrical descriptive and narrative prose.

Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved*. New York: Penguin Putnam. (High School-11/12). Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, this masterful novel explores the legacy of slavery in the character of Sethe, who has escaped physically, but who is haunted by her past spiritually. Hailed as beautifully powerful and mesmerizing, this is a difficult text

that challenges the reader to slowly fit together the pieces of the puzzle of Sethe's past in order to make meaning.

Taylor, M.D. (1976) *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. New York: Bantam Books. (Middle School). Taught as a core text in many middle schools, this Newbery Medal winning book is the story of Cassie Logan, an eleven-year-old old African American growing up in Mississippi in the 1930s and the obstacles she and her family face as a result of insult and injury from White neighbors. It stresses the importance of family and the courage and endurance of Black people. This book lends itself to teaching character analysis and analytical writing about overcoming prejudice.

Walker, A. (1973). "Everyday Use." *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. (Middle School and High School). "Everyday Use" is the story of a mother and her two daughters who clash over the inheritance of the family quilts. The daughters' differing attitudes toward the quilts raises interesting issues about how we express and value our heritage. This is a good story for teaching analytical writing.

Walker, A. (1996) "Am I Blue." *In Alice Walker Banned*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books. This is a powerful essay about the treatment of a horse which deals with the broader issues of oppression. It is ideal for teaching the reflective essay.

Walker, A. (1973). *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. (High School). This collection of poetry represents a search for roots and the essence of the African American experience. The poem "Be Nobody's Darling" lends itself well to autobiographical writing concerning standing up for something you believe in.

Asian American

Houston, J.W. and Houston, J.D. (1973). *Farewell to Manzanar*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Book Co. (High School). In 1942, Jeanne Wakatsuki, an American citizen, was sent with her family to a Japanese relocation camp called Manzanar. Co-written with her husband, her book is a personal account of life in the internment camp and the years fighting prejudice after Manzanar. This text lends itself well to the Literary Scrapbook activity described in Chapter 6. It can also be paired with *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl*.

Snow Wong, J. (1989). *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press. (Middle and High School). This autobiography about the upbringing of Jade Snow Wong in the twentieth century in America by parents observing the "nineteenth century standards of Imperial China" will appeal to children of immigrants in the United States who are caught between two cultures. It can lead to a comparison/contrast essay.

Tan, A. (1989). *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc. This is a wonderful novel about four Chinese women and their American daughters. Each of the sixteen chapters is related from the point of view of either a mother or a

daughter, and each can stand alone as its own tale. This novel is rich with opportunities for many types of writing.

Wong, N. (1983). "When I Was Growing Up." In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press. (Middle School and High School.) This poem captures the conflict of a Chinese American who is caught between two cultures and yearns to fit in. Students can respond by writing poems or phrases beginning with the line, "When I Was growing up..."

Yep, L. (1975). *Dragonwings*. New York: Harper Collins. (Middle School). This Newbery Honor Book is an engaging story of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco at the turn of the century and the dream of creating a flying machine. This high interest novel is perfect for Book Club activities and can elicit writing about pursuing a dream.

European American

Malamud, B. (1957). *The Assistant*. New York: Avon. This short novel is about an orphaned Italian American who is taken in by a Jewish American family and struggles to find his identity. It can lead to autobiographical writing about identity, family and community.

Petrakis, H. M. (1996). "A Whole Nation and a People." In C.B. Olson, (Ed)., *Reading, Thinking and Writing About Multicultural Literature*. Evanston, IL: Scott Foresman. (High School). To prove allegiance to a gang of boys, a young Greek American rejects his own ethnic background by throwing a plum that hits a Greek grocer in the face. Haunted by remorse, he returns to make amends and learns to take pride in his heritage. This story lends itself to autobiographical writing.

Polacco, P. (1988). *The Keeping Quilt*. New York: Simon and Schuster. (Middle School and High School). This children's book about a Russian Jewish family that immigrates to America and passes down a family quilt as each generation marries, enriching the family's culture and traditions, elicits appreciation for one's cultural heritage. It is useful for introducing the making of one's own heritage quilt and writing about one's cultural background.

Mexican American

Acosta, T.P. (1997) "My Mother Pieced Quilts." In *Literature and Integrated Studies: Grade Eight*. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman. (Middle School). This poem celebrates the life of a family of migrant workers and the mother who makes their story a work of art by piecing together remnants from their past into quilts. This poem is helpful in teaching inference making and works nicely with the making of a heritage quilt and/or teaching Alice Walker's "Everyday Use."

Baca, J. (1987). "XX." In *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*. New York: New Directions. (Middle School and High School). This section of Jimmy Santiago Baca's 99-page narrative poem deals with his respect for the elderly members of a Latino community, how they live, and how they prepare for death. It can

serve as a model for a free verse poem about the members of the older generation in any culture.

Cisneros, S. (1984). *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books. (Middle and High School). Cisneros creates a wonderful series of vignettes about growing up in a run-down section of Chicago. These vignettes easily lend themselves to teaching autobiographical writing

Cisneros, S. (1992). *Woman Hollering Creek*. New York: Vintage. (Middle and High School). Unlike *The House On Mango Street*, which is a unified series of vignettes narrated by a single persona, this collection of short stories depicts a variety of characters, from an eleven-year-old to a witch woman. "Eleven," the most frequently taught story, is the tale of a power struggle between an eleven-year-old on her birthday and a classroom teacher, Mrs. Price. This story is useful for teaching simile and metaphor and can lead to letter writing or analytical writing. "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," a fictional collection of letters, can be compared with Edgar Lee Masters' portraits in *Spoon River Anthology*.

Haslam, G. (1995) *The Horned Toad*. Petaluma, CA: Thwack! Pow! Productions. (Middle School). Influenced by his own Anglo Hispanic heritage, Gerald Haslam tells the story of a boy whose father is White and whose mother is of Mexican ancestry, who has to adjust when his Spanish speaking Great-Grandma comes to live with his family. At first the two clash, but they later join forces to protect a horned toad. This story works well for teaching symbolism and can be paired with "The Scarlet Ibis" by James Hurst.

Martinez, V. (1996). *Parrot in the Oven*. New York: Harper Collins. (Middle School and High School). This National Book Award winning novel is the story of an adolescent Mexican-American boy who is trying to define himself in terms of what he does and doesn't want to be. It deals with issues like the push/ pull of gangs and dealing with tension at home. Students relate to it well and it lends itself to autobiographical writing.

Muro, A. (1979). "Cecilia Rosas." In *The Collected Stories of Amado Muro*. Austin, TX: Thorp Spring Press. (High School). A young Mexican American boy develops a crush on an older woman only to find that she is definitely interested in older and more American boyfriends. This story is one that many students who have vied for the heart of someone inaccessible can identify with. It lends itself to several types of writing.

Ruiz, M., with Borchon, G. (1997). *Two Badges: The Lives of Mona Ruiz*. Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press. (Middle School and High School). This engaging autobiography tells the story of Mona Ruiz, who overcame her affiliation with a street gang and an abusive marriage to become a police officer in Santa Ana, California. This is a high interest text purposely written at about the fifth to sixth grade level. At middle school, teachers would need to read excerpts as some language and situations would be inappropriate for that grade level. However, the message is powerful for students of all ages.

Soto, G. (1985; 1990) *Living Up the Street*. San Francisco: Strawberry Hill Press, and *A Summer Life*. New York; Dell Publishing. (Middle School and High School). These short vignettes about growing up work well to elicit autobiographical writing and can be compared with those of Sandra Cisneros in *The House on Mango Street*.

Soto, G. (1991). "Oranges." In D. Appleman (Ed.), *Braided Lives: An Anthology of Multicultural American Writing*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Humanities Commission. This poem is great for teaching how to make inferences and can lead to autobiographical writing about a first date or about a time someone performed an act of kindness.

Villaseñor, V. (1991) *Rain of Gold*. New York: Dell. (High School). This epic novel traces the immigration of two families from Mexico to California. It pairs nicely with *The Grapes of Wrath* as both works deal with the migrant experience, the centrality of family, and the endurance of the human spirit. This book lends itself to analytical writing.

Native American

Burns, D. (1991). "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question." In J. Bruchac, (Ed.), *Songs from the Earth on Turtle's Back*. Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review Press. This poem is especially useful for talking about stereotypes and can lead to writing an autobiographical poem.

Sneve Hawk, V.D.. (1997). "The Medicine Bag." In *Literature and Integrated Studies: Grade Eight*. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman. (Middle School). Written by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, who grew up on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation, "The Medicine Bag" is about the passing down of a family heirloom, the medicine bag, from a grandfather to his grandson. This story is great for teaching symbolism and can be compared with Alice Walker's "Everyday Use."

Tecumseh. (1971). "Sleep No Longer, O Choctaws and Chickasaws." In W.C. Vanderwerth (Ed.), *Indian Oratory*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press. In this passionate speech, delivered in 1811, Tecumseh appealed to the Choctaws and Chickasaws to break their treaty with the Americans and join the British in the impending War of 1812. The speech is an excellent example of oratory and a model for persuasive writing.

Whitecloud, J.S. (1938). "Blue Winds Dancing." *Scribner's Magazine*, Vo. 103: Charles Scribner's Sons. This is a moving account of a Chippewa college student's search for identity as he tries to succeed in the whole world and still maintain his traditional values and culture. It lends itself well to teaching the reflective essay.

Puerto Rican American

Noboa, J. (1996). "Identity." In C. B. Olson (Ed.), *Reading, Thinking and Writing About Multicultural Literature*. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman. (Middle School and High

School). “Identity” is a five stanza poem written by Julio Noboa when he was in the eighth grade. It is ideal for teaching symbolism and elicits comparisons between oneself and nature.

World Literature

Esquivel, L. (1986). *Like Water for Chocolate*. New York; Doubleday. (High School). The number one bestseller in Mexico, this romantic novel about star-crossed lovers makes a great companion to Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*.

Frank, A. (1951; 1997). *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. O. Frank & M. Pressler (Eds.). New York: Doubleday. Anneliese Marie Frank was a German Jew who moved to the Netherlands with her family during Hitler’s rise to power. Her famous diary, which chronicles the her coming of age while confined in a Secret Annexe to avoid capture by the Gestapo, focuses upon anti-Semitism, the impact of war on human relationships, and the struggle of a teenager trying to cope in an untenable situation. Often required as a core text, it lends itself to the writing of diary entries as well as to analytical explorations of prejudice.

Fugard, A. (1982). *Master Harold...and the boys*. NY: A.A. Knopf. (High School/11-12). Set in the 1950’s in South Africa, this play is about a White boy who is confronted by his allegiance to his real father who suffers from disabilities and alcoholism and his surrogate father, a Black man, who has befriended him. The play lends itself to the study of symbolism and character development.

Head, B. (1977). “Looking for a Rain God. ” In *The Collector of Treasure*. London: Heinemann, African Writers Series. (High School). This powerful story shows vividly the problems that communities face in trying to live off African land. It can lead to writing about a controversial issue and can be paired with Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery.”

Heker, L. (1986). "The Stolen Party." In *Open Fires. Short Fiction By Latin American Women*, A. Manguel (Trans.). New York: C.N. Potter. (Middle School and High School). This story about a young girl who comes to a birthday thinking she is an invited guest only to learn that she has been perceived as a servant, is a wonderful text for teaching interpretive writing.

Hughes, L. (1982). “Thank You, Ma’ am.” In *The Langston Hughes Reader*. New York: G. Braziller. (Middle School.) Little does Roger, a latchkey kid who is out way past his bedtime, know what he is in for when he tries to steal the pocketbook of Mrs. Louella Bates Washington Jones. This engaging story is great for teaching students to make inferences and, if you withhold the last page of the story, is ideal for having students speculate about what will happen next and write their own ending to the narrative.

Neruda, P. (1974). “We Are Many.” In *Five Decades: A Selection* (Poems 1925-1970),

B. Belitt, (Ed. and Trans.) (High School). New York: Atlantic, Inc. This poem by Chilean writer, Pablo Neruda, is ideal for analyzing imagery and for teaching reflective writing about the issues of identity.

References

- Rabinowitz, P.J., & Smith, M. (1998). *Authorizing readers: Resistance and respect in the teaching of literature*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Semis, R.B. (1982). *Shadow and substance*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Tompkins, G. (1997). *Literacy for the 21st century: A balanced approach*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.