Advocating Multiculturalism: Migrants in Australian Children's Literature after 1972

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Advocating Multiculturalism: Migrants in Australian Children's Literature after 1972

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The values espoused by a society and its supporting ideologies are often quite overtly expressed in the literature produced for its young people, and the ways in which major differences in social values are constituted in the literature at different periods are of constant interest for scholars. Major shifts in ideology and values usually occur slowly, and accordingly only gradually emerge as a thematic shared norm; occasionally, though, more dramatic shifts can be identified, and my concern in this paper is with one of these: within a decade during the 1970s Australian political and educational institutions underwent a palpable shift towards an ideology of multiculturalism, and Australian Children's Literature shifted with it.

After 1972, with the first change of federal government in Australia for a quarter of a century, declared government policy on the place of immigrants in Australian society was rapidly transformed from the ideology of assimilation/integration to that of multiculturalism. Such a move at government level is always made, of course, in response to complex pressures: some, in this case, came from within society, as, under the impact of post-war migration, the percentage of the Australian population which was of non-British origin began to approach 25 percent, and, at the more cynical level, political parties rightly or wrongly perceived the existence of an "ethnic vote" and believed that political power might ultimately depend upon capturing it; some pressure came from without, as attitudes towards minorities changed within the international community, and, more specifically, Canada's espousing of multiculturalism as a national policy in 1971 provided an exemplar at a time Australia was monitoring Canadian immigration policies in general. Government policy and rhetoric during the seventies didn't always entirely coincide, of course, and the passage of government back and forth between the two major political parties meant that policy itself was generally in a state of flux. This situation has recently been carefully expounded in Freda Hawkins's comparative study of immigration policies and practices in Australia and Canada (1989, Chapters 3 and 5). Both major political parties were also inclined to proceed cautiously, but nevertheless the rhetoric was in place, and
included, for example, calls for multicultural education programs in schools. Educational authorities, syllabus committees, and teachers themselves have, indeed, pursued such programs with considerable enthusiasm and vigor, and in so doing have envisaged and explored various ways in which the socializing capacities of fiction might be made use of. There is, however, a significant lack of a supporting critical discourse examining this fiction, and so far, with the exception only of Singh (1981), discussion has not progressed beyond brief introductions to annotated lists of appropriate works (for example, Orme, 1979; Burgess, 1980; Aitken, 1987).

Many works dealing with immigrant experiences had been written before the seventies, but only a minority espoused a multicultural ideology. Writers of children's fiction, however, are usually quick to appropriate current social issues, and so by the mid-seventies multiculturalism had become an "issue" in Australian books written for children, where it was strongly advocated as a desirable social value and one to be inculcated in child readers. The multiculturalism being advocated through this medium is loosely conceived as acceptance of difference and heterogeneity, and is in accord with the very general principles expressed in a 1982 paper issued by the Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs, which outlines four principles perceived as essential for a multicultural society: social cohesion; respect for cultural identity and awareness of Australia's cultural diversity; equal opportunity and access for all Australians; and equal responsibility for commitment to and participation in Australian society (Hawkins 233).

Most of the mid-seventies books are novels whose target audience is secondary school children in years seven to ten; as often happens with issues books, the literary quality of many of them is rather meagre, and their actual grasp of the issues somewhat simplistic. This seems most apparent in one group of books which consists of spin-offs from telemovies or from TV mini-series. The putative audience is generally not the children of migrant families (and it...
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By John Stephenson

The understanding of the ways culture and society are shaped, shared and experienced in the community for its young people, and the ways in which different cultural values are constructed in the literature and in the education system is an important issue for educators. Multicultural values are critically important, and they need to be represented in the literature that is available to children.

In Australia, multiculturalism became an important issue in the 1970s and 1980s, as the country grappled with the challenges of immigration and the diversity of its population. This was reflected in the literature for children, with many books and stories written to explore these themes.

One major theme in Australian children's literature after 1972 is the representation of multiculturalism. Many books explore the experiences of children who have come to Australia from different cultural backgrounds, and these books often provide a window into the lives of these children and their families.

For example, books like "The Name of the Star" by Graham Johnston, "The Home of the Brave" by Robert Louis Stevenson, and "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" by C.S. Lewis, all feature children from diverse cultural backgrounds. These books help to broaden the horizons of children and to foster a greater understanding of the world around them.

In conclusion, the representation of multiculturalism in children's literature is an important issue that helps to shape the way children think about the world and their place within it. By providing a diverse range of stories and experiences, children's literature can help to promote a greater understanding of the rich cultural heritage of Australia.
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