

Stories Are Not Frills: Literature about Asia in the Elementary Classroom

by Mary Hammond Bernson

Elementary teachers often ask our resource center for advice in choosing books about Asia. They know that their decisions about book purchases have a potentially lifelong impact on students' attitudes, for as Katherine Paterson so aptly points out in *The Spying Heart*, "stories are not frills in the curriculum of life." Paterson is an author with a rare gift for creating compelling children's fiction, including five books about China and Japan, and is deeply aware of the profound power of stories. For many children, their first window on Asia comes from storybooks. Those books can entice, delight, inspire further study, and offer glimpses of worlds previously unknown. They can foster open-mindedness and an awareness of the existence of other ways of thinking and leading one's life. They can help a child understand that a classmate came from a place which was more than just the site of a war.

Since both pedagogical innovations and inadequate school budgets have contributed to a decrease in the use of elementary school textbooks, teachers also must consider the historical accuracy of the books they choose. Innovations such as a "whole language" approach to reading, new methods of assessing student learning, the encouragement of diverse and multicultural perspectives, the application of theories of multiple intelligences, and the integration of teaching across the curriculum often mean that a student in the primary grades hears a folk tale from another country, does an art activity based on that culture, uses the metric system in the art project, finds out a bit about the flora and fauna now living there, and writes a letter to a pretend pen-pal. This kind of integration across the curriculum is the opposite of closing a reading text at the stroke of 10:00 and opening up a totally unrelated social studies text. Integration puts a teacher's choices of fiction at the crossroads of the whole curriculum.

Imbedded in this curriculum is the basic fact that elementary teachers are teaching

citizenship. While scholars may ponder questions about the development of civil society in Asia, elementary teachers wrestle with citizenship issues, including the relationship of the individual to the group, every single day. A school district such as the one in which my children are enrolled teaches citizenship to children who speak 212 different languages and dialects. A book choice can send the message that "those kids" come from a weird place, or that those kids have a heritage about which we should know more. Books can stimulate empathy, compassion, and a search for solutions to problems we all face. They can teach us that contacts with others generate both conflict and cooperation. Books provide a safe place to explore life's troubling issues.

The illustrations make potent contributions to a book's spell. Anyone who is sensitive to the exquisite interplay of word and picture in some Asian art forms, as well as anyone whose clearest memory of 4th grade is a travel poster near the window, can appreciate the power of pictures. Sometimes those pictures are nothing but clichés—coolie hats and kimono, often wrapped right over left. Yet the best illustrations can offer a visual record of another place or time, introduce an Asian art style, or simply reinforce the power of the story.

Teachers choose from an avalanche of literature, including pre-packaged multicultural or world region collections, some of them including 60-year-old classics. Wonderful books about Asia do exist, including some of the 60-year-old classics, yet there are vast topics for which no suitable books can be found. A teacher must wade through these options, picking out the best, and then compensate for the near-total lack of good stories about people living in contemporary Asia by using other materials.

Many sources of book recommendations are readily available, including rosters of winners of prestigious awards and the list of "Notable Children's Trade Books" produced annually since 1972 by the National Council for the Social Studies and the

Grandfather's Journey



ALLEN SAY

©1993, illustration by Allen Say from *Grandfather's Journey*, published by Houghton Mifflin.

Children's Book Council. Reflecting the trend toward using fiction to teach or reinforce content once reserved for the social studies, the list now includes annotations about the social studies themes to which each book most closely pertains. The committee evaluates over 200 books per year, weeding out those not meeting high standards for quality and accuracy in both text and illustrations.

Here is a list of questions I find useful when searching for the best books:

1. Is the book compelling? Adults expect books to have literary qualities, or to be a "good read," and children deserve those qualities, too.

2. Is the book a folk tale, a retelling of a folk tale, "an original tale set in the ancient Orient," or something else altogether? You may want to use any of these, and find supplementary materials to reinforce the message that those whose stories took place long ago and far away have descendants about whom we should learn.

MARY HAMMOND BERNSON is Associate Director of the East Asia Center at the University of Washington, where she has directed outreach projects for more than a decade. Her main interest is education about Asia in elementary and secondary schools, for which she has written and edited numerous curriculum publications.