

**RB: Today I am speaking with Assistant Professor of Education, Jean Rohr. Her areas of research include children's literature, literacy, and diversity. Jean is also a playwright.**

**Thank you, Jean, for joining me.**

**I would like for us to begin by briefly talking about the ways in which you think diverse voices can be represented in books and specifically in material used in schools?**

JR: It is so important that diverse voices are represented authentically in text...There is no point in simply browning up the faces if the narrative does not relate to the lives of the people. The average diverse learner would not see him or herself in such narrative. Let's say for example the lovely little story by Barbara Cooney Miss Rumphius was simply converted to make the little girl Black – It would be interesting, but many African American children would not be able to see themselves in that story. Diverse voice can also be represented in ways that celebrate children's cultures and their way of life, and the contributions that people who look like them, or act like them have made to the development of this world. But when we talk about cultural contributions I have a serious problem with stereotyping in text....You know, for example, Mexicans do not eat tacos at ever meal and not every Jamaican child wears his or her hair in dread locks and walks around say "yah mon" all time. So those kinds of narrow, banal views of culture are problematic.

**RB: Describe ways in which students can see themselves in a text?**

JR: Students can see themselves in a positive light, doing affirming constructive kinds of things, standing on a principle for which they believe. Begin smart enough to become part of the solution to an issue..... As someone who shares and cares about others..... As real, as being absolutely proud of who they are, of the color of their skin, or of the texture of their hair...(I recently way a wonderful sesame street video called I love my hair – encouraging AA girls to embrace their natural hair.... Let's face it life has its ups and downs and children are aware of that...when those situations are represented in text, children need to see how characters with whom they can relate, deal with these issues, can make decisions - sometimes tough ones and how these characters deal with the consequences of their decisions. They can also see in text how characters deal with the struggles and pleasures of being oneself. And another thing that is valuable in narratives for children is that in this global interconnected world, novels can articulate the authentic experiences of immigrant families so children can see they are not alone in certain experiences or thoughts they might have about their adopted country or about the countries they left.

**RB: Can you give us some examples of narrative titles that provide an accurate sense of character and culture?**

JR: Yes, *Everything Asian*. A really lovely story By Woo Sung, New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2009.

It is set in New Jersey in the 80s. The main character is young man David Kim, he is 12 years old and has just moved from Korea to America with his older sister and mother to reunite with his father who moved years earlier. Once the family reunites we begin to see the complexities of the many obstacles they face as they try to bond and adjust to living together in a new country. This story, *Everything Asian* is a great portrayal of the experiences of the immigrant.

I also love *Tan to Tamarind*. Malathi Michelle, illustrated by Jamel Akib. New York: Children's Book Press, 2009.

This book about the acceptance of one's self there are some wonderfully illustrated poems. *Tan to Tamarind* celebrates the range and beauty of the color brown in a variety of shades and cultures. The chalk pastel drawings and the poetry highlight the loveliness of all the browns from "masala tea brown to "adobe brown

My mother is Cuban so I love *Cuba 15* by Nancy Osa. It's about a 15 year old girl Growing up in Chicago, who doesn't know much about her Cuban heritage until she reluctantly prepares for her Quinceañero – her coming of age ceremony.

**RB: Can you tell us about the play that you wrote called Valued Voices?**

JR: Yes, in 2008 I had a wonderfully diverse class and unfortunately for me I have not had that level of diversity in my classes since that group. I say it's unfortunate because these pre-service teachers brought a richness to our classroom born out of their diversity and lived experiences that allowed for the kinds of discussions which gave rise to *Valued Voices* – this is a play about the struggles of AA male students in many of our high schools .....It focuses on one student in particular Jamal Harris who is failing miserably in school yet, he is quite bright, a situation not uncommon in schools. My diverse learners could relate to Jamal because some of them saw themselves or friends they know in Jamal.

**RB: What motivated you to write the play?**

JR: My pre-service teachers were coming back to my classroom with questions and incidences they saw in classrooms they couldn't quite fathom...They would talk about parents who the teachers could not reach and they could not understand why so many of the little black boys they encountered by the 4<sup>th</sup> grade seemed so disconnected from school, and were doing poorly, yet in one on one conversations they realized that these boys were nobody's fools and quite often, understood the work for which they were receiving failing grades.

In an effort to try to highlight for them the complexities of school and schooling I began to write was started as journaling but eventually became the play as the explanations become more and more layered.

**RB: How has the play been received?**

JR: Quite well actually, we first read it here at the conclusion of my class in 2008, then it was performed during celebrate week and this year it was picked up by the NCBR teen ensemble for their spring performance. I plan to enter it in the National Black theater festival next year....wish me luck.

**RB: I will. Thank you, Jean, for your contributions to a world in which school texts include authentic characters and situations which represent all people.**

JR: Thank you. Thanks for having me.