Using Stories

TO INTRODUCE AND TEACH
Multicultural Literature

by Patricia Goldblatt

If stories can ease lost boys into adulthood and fledgling doctors into compassion, so it would seem that stories could also play a role in introducing migrants to a new and alien world, for stories are everywhere

In the story of Peter Pan, Pan takes the girl Wendy to Never-Never Land so that she can be a mother to the Lost Boys. The boys sit transfixed as Wendy spins her tales, enfolding and enchanting the lads. When the stories have facilitated the boys’ development and growing up, Pan has no choice but to relinquish his troop. What powers of transformation does stories possess that cause these children to escape from the world of eternal childhood and adults to regain their innocent childhood perspective?

In The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination (1989), Robert Coles addresses the transformative nature of stories that allows children to enter and apprehend worlds beyond their own experience. Coles became aware of the power of stories when he met 15-year-old Phil. Phil had lost his father in World War II, his mother in a car accident, and the use of his limbs to polio, which had rendered him permanently paralyzed. Coles was surprised when Phil began to talk about The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Phil confided that this book has made him feel “different.” He reflected,

I forget about myself—no, I didn’t actually. I joined up with Huck and Jim; we were a trio. They were really nice to me. I explored the Mississippi with them on the boats. I had good talks with them... they straightened me out. (Coles 1989, 35–36)

Phil went on to read Catcher in the Rye, explaining that the novel “got to me,” lending purpose to one who was “flat out” (Coles 1989, 38). Phil came to believe that his own misfortune had caused him to see life sardonically: he was now able, like Holden, to spot the “phoniness,” hypocrisy, and deceit of the world.

So impressed was Coles by Phil’s forays and lessons learnt through short stories and novels that in 1974, Coles decided to integrate stories into a course at Harvard Medical School called “Literature and Medicine.” Coles selected novels, short stories, and poetry written by and about physicians. By sampling from literature, young doctors vicariously comprehend, or are at least privy to, the human aspect of illness. More than statistics and body parts, stories written by or about doctors’ decisions, personal conflicts, and confrontations impart knowledge that speaks to the medical students’ hearts as well as to their heads.

If stories can ease lost boys into adulthood and fledgling doctors into compassion, so it would seem that stories could also play a role in introducing migrants to a new and alien world, for stories are everywhere, waiting to accost unsuspecting ears. Stories can present diverse aspects of our globe that are blatantly ignored, feared, deemed exotic, or merely taken for granted; these stories possess the power to inform our lives, opening our eyes to new perceptions and possibilities.

Visiting Ellis Island last summer, I was mesmerized by the stories of a park ranger who recreated the experiences of those hopeful travelers arriving at New York’s infamous port. She described the six-second medical inspection that sealed the fate of many newcomers to the United States:

If while ascending the stairs to the second level of the processing building at Ellis Island, a person—child or adult—cast their eyes upwards towards the ceiling, they were labelled as ‘mentally defective,’ and either returned to their country of origin, or confined in a mental hospital.

Why? The ranger explained the doctors’ belief that every sane person knows above their heads is only ceiling and sky, and therefore there was no reason, indeed only a lack of reason, to cause a person to look upward while mounting the stairs.

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Similarly, the musical *Ragtime*, an adaptation of the novel by E. L. Doctorow, depicts the story of immigrants’ arrival and adjustment to a new world. Directors Terrence McNally and Garth Drabinsky have translated problems, worries, adjustments, and restrictions into the concrete impediments of gates, fences, locked doors, and surly, condescending officials. Visually and aurally, the play’s symbolic representations convey to the viewer and listener the barriers encountered by those fleeing oppression in one country and the resultant frustration of discovering more limitations in the “new world.” Instead of being relieved of fears and hostility, the play’s travelers, on disembarking, feel depressed and lost. They are confused and perplexed, filled with regret and wonderment at what this land of “milk and honey” might offer their children. Both the stories of the Ellis Island ranger and the popular musical begin to address the painful transitions of the immigrant. Instead of ignoring the reality of these newcomers to America, authors and playwrights who write about these experiences impart validity to the newcomers’ plight. Addressing the issues and hearing their voices cause us to empathize with their trials and tribulations: the stories make us aware that the issues are real.

To focus on these real problems, students from Somalia, Jamaica, and Sri Lanka at a high school in Toronto have created a drama program as a subsidiary of an already existing program called CultureLink. Improvising scenes, the students dramatize obstacles encountered by their peers: for example, obtaining directions on a bus when a bus driver cannot be bothered to understand a dialect or language foreign to him; or a guidance counselor’s assessment that a newcomer will be incapable of tackling courses at university. One student reflected that these scenarios, although educating the audience about the trials faced by newcomers, also made her very aware that “these encounters based on skin color and accent left her feeling like an outsider in a country she was trying so hard to call home.” Yet she emphasized that the audience viewing these skits shouldn’t be scared and “if they see a newcomer struggling in everyday life, they should help make newcomers feel welcome” (*The Toronto Star*, June 16, 1998).

Even now, many of the new arrivals’ stories have not had a recognized place in the literary canon taught in the high schools of Canada and the United States. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said points out that novels focusing on colonization have always been written from the point of view of the colonizer. A popular choice in high school English courses, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* does not even consider that the Africans of the Congo have a story to tell; they are only props, catalysts for the experiences and revelations of the British intruders, Kurtz and Marlowe. The reader experiences the tales and tribulations only from the point of view of the white man.

Mindful of this problem and of the needs of immigrants to Canada, in 1988 the Canadian Parliament passed the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, in which “the Constitution of Canada recognize[d] the importance of preserving and enhancing the multicultural heritage of Canadians... while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada.” In 1992, an amendment to the Education Act required all boards of education to put in place anti-racist and ethnocultural equity policies. As a result of that policy, Mandarin Chinese, Hebrew, Sanskrit, and various other language and cultural programs are offered during and after school hours to students in Toronto public schools. In 1995, a policy document called *The Common Curriculum* stated that:

The curriculum must reflect the diversity of Canadian society. Curriculum must present an accurate picture of the world in which students live and will work. Students’ self-image and their attitudes to others are affected both by what is taught and how it is taught. Students are entitled to have their personal experiences and their racial and ethnocultural heritage valued, and to live in a society that upholds the rights of the individual. Students will also learn that their society is enriched and strengthened by its diversity. (19)

With the goals of multiculturalism in mind, educators were instructed to offer texts and curricula that extended greater connection to their students, course material in which all Canadians could recognize themselves, their families, and their former countries.

Even before these goals had been officially addressed, Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond selected stories by a variety of Canadians whose backgrounds were Polish, Tamil, Hungarian, Jewish, Indian, and Armenian, for an anthology titled *Other Solitudes*. The authors’ diverse topics include suicide, spousal death, adjustment, language classes, letters, longings, and forging new identities. “The multiracial and multiethnic nature of this country is made real... in the end [in] help[s us] understand that there are ways of seeing the world, and of writing in and about it, that may be different from our own—ways—whatever they might be—valuable because of that difference” (*Hutcheon and Richmond 1990, 5*).

In *Other Solitudes*, Himanji Bannerji describes the tensions faced by East Indian parents and children transplanted to a new environment. Bannerji’s story, “The Other Family,” portrays a little girl who is required to draw a picture of her family for an assignment in school. Excited and proud, the child shows her rendering to her mother, who becomes distraught and confronts her daughter:

“Listen,” said the mother, “this is not your family. I, you and your father are dark-skinned, dark-haired, I don’t have a blond wig hidden in my closet, my eyes are black, not blue, and your father’s beard is black, not red, and you do not have a white skin, a button nose with freckles, blue eyes and blond hair tied in a pony tail.” (*Other Solitudes* 1990, 142–143)

The child and many of her immigrant classmates have produced similar images of their families, drawing on a schoolbook’s images of what a family should look like. More importantly, they have had their efforts not only acknowledged but also applauded by their teacher. The mother in this story is frightened and yet terribly angered by the school as an environment of socialization in her new country. She trembles to think about this process of assimilation and the insensitivity of the teacher, who will knowingly obliterate her daughter’s past and with it,
her child's identity. Although fiction, "The Other Family" addresses the problems of assimilation, acculturation, and adjustment made by immigrants from visible minorities. Banerji bases his story on the experiences of real children.

The pain felt by Eva Hoffman in her revealing memoir, Lost in Translation, pinpoints the horror of having her Polish name changed because her schoolteacher in Vancouver is unable to pronounce it. In this way, Hoffman's identity is swept away. Her life's experiences, friendship, kinship, even the countryside of her 13 years lived in another land, another language are torn away in an instant. She writes:

These new appellations, which we ourselves can't yet pronounce, are not us. They are identification tags, disembodied signs pointing to objects that happen to be my sister and myself. We walk to our seats, into a roomful of unknown faces, with names that make us strangers to ourselves. (Hoffman 1989, 105)

It is said that children are malleable, and whether by group pressure, a desire to fit in, or a real devotion to the new culture, perhaps they do inevitably adjust. However, the cost is high for Hoffman and her sister. I recently heard her speak in Toronto, pensively reading her words to an audience of rapt listeners. Years after her arrival to Canada, she was still repeating her story. Although an accomplished journalist, university professor, and author, Hoffman has recently decided to become a therapist. I could not help but wonder if those first traumatic experiences in Vancouver had rendered her vulnerable, severing her from the language in which her initial identity had been forged. Perhaps her desire now was to help others who had suffered as she had.

The plight of the elderly as well as the children newly arrived to this country is painful. Theirs is a story less told, but like Hoffman's, one redolent with loss. The title of Neil Bissoondath's short story "Security," published in The Penguin Book of Caribbean Short Stories (Markham 1996), is ironic because the experience of a man exiled from his former life is anything but secure. Bissoondath revisits the conflicts that exist both inside and outside a family that has departed its place of birth. Bissoondath's elderly protagonist, Alistair Ramgoonal, feels resentment and alienation in his strange new world; he longs for the friendship and traditions left home in India and Trinidad. Vijay, Alistair's successful businessman son, and Vijay's older brother, are too busy for the old man. Even Alistair's wife has deserted him for a job as a cook outside their apartment. Alistair moans that "everybody—even birds—needed a safe place to land... a point of reference from which they could assure themselves of their place in the world" (Markham 1996, 386).

In order to recreate his prior world, Alistair decides to celebrate Diwali, the Indian festival of lights, in Canada. In addition to preparing traditional food and dressing in his dhoti, Alistair lights 20 sticks of incense and sets the room ablaze with two dozen candles, unfortunately triggering the fire alarm. Like a mischievous child, he is soundly scolded. Depressed, chastised, and embarrassed, Alistair retreats to the world of the television, where the excitement of The Price Is Right allows him finally to obtain the dreams and longings unattainable in his present situation. Seeking a place of acknowledgement and understanding, a place free from conflicts or confrontations, people like Alistair Ramgoonal often purposefully distract themselves in order to dull the pain of separation from their previous life. Stories that examine the feelings of alienation cast light on and draw attention to the smiling individuals who pretend to cope, refusing to blame or even to acknowledge that their situations are desperate. Many sink wordlessly into depression in an attempt not to trouble the busy, seemingly well-adjusted, happy members of their family. Bissoondath's story focuses on the loneliness of the exiled.

From newly transplanted children and parents to those children born far from their parents' native land, people identified by racial characteristics often encounter thoughtless remarks and behavior that makes them feel they do not belong. A graduate student of Indian descent recently related his story: in spite of the fact that he had been born in Canada, he was constantly identified as a foreigner because of his Indian features. He lamented that his parents, at least, had the benefit of growing up in a country where they felt they belonged and were familiar with traditions, festivals, and celebrations that were part of their culture. In dark days in a new country, they could return in their minds to that place of acceptance and security. My student friend yearns for that lost country pictured so romantically in his parents' stories. He lives vicariously, as does Janet McIvor, a young schoolgirl in David Malouf's novel Remembering Babylon. Janet dreams of her mother's homeland of Scotland, wishing fervently to escape her life as a girl and an inhabitant of the dreary land of Australia. For her the stories in books are the passage out of her present situation:

She pored over books, anything she could lay her hands on that offered some promise that the world was larger, more pas-
We must suggest that our students reach out to past generations to reestablish valuable links and demand stories that reflect how people have successfully coped in their new lives in their new countries.
been individuals ready to confront and battle the injustices inflicted upon them. As role models, people from the past speak again, their voices remarkably echoing modern-day sentiments to reveal that there is an unbreakable chain among those who are oppressed. To people born in a particular country who might think these stories possess little interest or relevance to their lives, it must be underlined that freedoms, rights, and liberties are universal concerns for all peoples, and only aboriginal peoples are the indigenous ones. The issues of acceptance and love speak to the human condition, a condition we all must address.

In order to empathize with those pushed to the fringe of society, those misfits who whether by poverty, class, race, gender, or exceptionality have been alienated, stories provide insight into troubled lives. Stories have the power to inform us of another dimension of human experience. They facilitate our growth as people, as we read and vicariously experience the lives of those “others.” Toni Morrison’s excerpt from The Bluest Eye makes the reader privy to the feelings and madness of poor, sexually abused Pecola through the eyes of two sisters. The patent leather shoes, fluffy sweaters, and brightly colored knee socks worn by the rich set them apart from the narrators. The black girls know their place, or rather lack of it, and “step aside when [the white girls] want[ed] to use the sink in the girls’ toilet” (1992, 69). Bemused, irritated, and fascinated, the narrators search for flaws in a world of privilege, desperately needing a way to secure their dignity. They discover that one of their oppressors, Maureen Peal (aptly nicknamed by them “Meringue Pie”), possesses a “dog tooth” and the scars of a sixth finger on each hand. Triumphantly, they rejoice at her imperfection. They realize that she, too, possesses secrets that set her apart. Bitterness and pain are offset by giggles and sharing with a sister, a loved one who knows the pain of not belonging. Yet for Pecola—lonely, sad Pecola—her only escape from life’s affliction is a descent into soothing madness.

Not all story offerings in African American Literature are as contentious or as wrenching as Sojourner Truth’s or Toni Morrison’s. The excerpt from Maya Angelou’s memoir I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings recreates that dreamy place of childhood, opening the doors to a magical place where life’s sustaining visions are formed and kept safe as protections against the hostile universe of those who do not fit into society:

The lamplight in the store gave a soft make-believe feeling to our world which made me want to whisper and walk about on tiptoe. The odors of onions and oranges and kerosene had been mixing all night and wouldn’t be disturbed until the wooden slat was removed from the door and early morning air forced its way in with the bodies of people who had walked miles to reach the pickup place. (1992, 34)

The delicacy and fragility of this remembrance preserves that moment when a place or experience is crystallized and marks an epiphany, a magical point of beginning or ending in a life’s journeys. Stored in the writer’s mind, the smells and sounds of a special experience are kept safe, usable by the owner for inspiration or security, memories of a safe place, a home.

Stories that highlight the experiences of the outsider, the newcomer, extend links to readers and promote understanding between worlds. Rather than nostalgic views frozen in time, postcard images of happy “natives” marked by ethnic song and dance, “the meaning of being [the other] . . . beyond ethnicity and cultural talk” (Hutcheon and Richmond, 147) take place in stories. Connecting a past life and a present reality entwines two relevant worlds. Like the AIDS Quilt that uses a traditional format to address contemporary issues, writings by immigrant and minority authors tell of a history too often ignored by today’s young people.

Bridging times and worlds creates a hybrid culture. By conjointing worlds and by combining perhaps incongruent points of view and eras, something new and wonderful emerges. In his many stories of Chinese immigrants’ adjustment to life on the prairie, Paul Yee combines past and present by blending his own Canadian experiences with those of his Chinese ancestors. He draws on a wealth of multicultural tales, personal experiences, and contacts with a variety of people. From Chinese folktales to Red Riding Hood and British Columbia’s history of industrial capitalism, he interweaves past and present, near and far, here and there. Not stereotyping, ghettoizing, or promoting exotic and fossilizing ideas about cultures, he offers vibrant well-written stories to pierce the silence of the forgotten immigrant. The possibility of a “hybrid culture,” one that accommodates, or at least suggests, a reconciliation of the world left behind and the one presently inhabited acknowledges the difficulties, but also the promise, of acceptance and belonging in a new world.

Then there are those stories that must be set down. More horrific than stories of adjustment or acculturation, stories of abuse and murder proclaim the reasons why people choose or were forced to emigrate. I, Rigoberta Menchú is that living testament to the trials and confrontations of the Guatemalan-born author’s indigenous people. She speaks for them; Rigoberta is their voice. She tells the tale of the slaughter of her kinpeople. Exiled from her home, she is committed to raising awareness of the abuses in Guatemala. Spoken to the ethnologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, Rigoberta’s tale documents the deaths of her mother, her father, her brothers and sisters, and her many friends; she relates a story of all her people:

They tied him up, they tied his testicles . . . behind with string and forced him to run. And they left him in a well, I don’t know what it’s called, a hole with water and a bit of mud in it, they left him naked there all night. There were a lot of corpses in the hole with him and he couldn’t stand the smell of all those corpses. My brother was tortured for more than sixteen days. They cut off his fingernails, they cut off his fingers, they cut off his skin, they burned parts of his skin. (Burgos-Debray 1984, 174)

These are experiences that we would prefer not to know, and yet hearing them, we have a duty to respond to Rigoberta’s story. The words infiltrate our consciousness, making us aware of, and perhaps more willing not to judge but to view with compassion, those newcomers who have fled their homes and families.
Words. Stories. Glimpses. Ways to enter another’s world and know it—maybe just a little. Karen Blixen, also known as the Danish writer Isak Dinesen, once said that she had been an armchair traveler, and for many that is the only way that they will ever visit, touch, or experience another life or world. The beauty of the story is that each single account reflects a human who perceives, sees, and explains her world in a personally unique fashion. Whether by testimony, descriptive imagery, reported, direct, rambling, broken speech and dialect, or a straightforward narrative, the story has the power to create the world of the writer, allowing it entrance into the world of the reader. Thus, it communicates and links two individuals who perhaps might never have met in actuality. Through marks on a page, universes are shared. For the newcomers to any country, knowing that stories can impart their experiences in another land and that they will be respected and acknowledged as persons with rights, traditions, and history aids in transitions that are most often painful. For those persons who have lived in one particular place, feeling ease and comfort in the conventions of their society, stories open doors of understanding. Stories are a gift: precious offerings from the world of one into the world of another. Lovingly wrapped in words and images, the real treasure of the story is what is revealed by the giver and understood by the recipient, that which opens the hearts of both.

WORKS CITED

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