Cold Shoulder: An Alaskan adventure

Christine C. Berlin

University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract
Multicultural novels are a must for school libraries. Where books about world cultures abound, lacking are sufficient books about Native Americans, especially Eskimos, set in present day. The purpose of this project is to create a resource that introduces life and Yup'ik culture in present-day bush Alaska. This project is limited to the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in Alaska.

Cold Shoulder is a middle grade novel exploring life in Alaska through the eyes of an eleven year old boy. For the first time in his life, the main character is an outsider trying to find his way in a new land and new culture.
This Project by: Christine Berlin

Titled: COLD SHOULDER: AN ALASKAN ADVENTURE

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the
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5/1/2013
Jean Donham
Graduate Faculty Reader

5/7/2013
Yolanda Hood
Graduate Faculty Reader

5-8-13
Jill Uhlenberg
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I stepped outside, it took about thirty seconds for the ice to freeze my eyelashes together. I knew then that this was a whole different world. I knew nothing about this land or this culture, and I had not even left the United States.

Multiculturalism is a buzzword in today’s libraries. The Iowa School Library Program Guidelines (2007, pg. 11) recommend that, “The library collection contains materials that represent diverse opinions on controversial topics and are multicultural and gender fair.” Multiculturalism does not simply mean cultures outside of the country. Donna Norton (1991), an expert in multicultural children’s literature, defines multicultural literature as “literature about racial or ethnic minority groups that are culturally and socially different from the white Anglo-Saxon majority in the United States whose largely middle-class values are represented in American literature” (p. 531).

Here in the United States we have many cultures that never became part of the “melting pot.” These separate and distinct cultures need to be represented in library collections across the country. The 1989 Grolier Award winner, Patty Campbell states, “the scarcity of quality multicultural fiction still leaves a large hole in children’s and young adult publishing” (Campbell. 496). Authors should be taking this into consideration when looking for inspiration to write.

In addition to the scarcity of material, much of what is published, especially about indigenous cultures, is not about contemporary life. The most popular books about indigenous cultures, for example, are historical fiction rather than contemporary realistic fiction. For example, *Minuk* by Kirkpatrick Hill (2002) focuses on an Alaskan Native in
1892, *Sixteen to Nome* by Max Brand (1930) is about mining in 1890, *Aleutian Sparrow* by Karen Hesse is about the 1942 Japanese attack on the Aleutian Islands. As Kopacz and Lawton (2011) point out, “Such depictions construe Natives as romantic relics of the past, thus denying the nations a viable role in the modern society” (p. 243). Debbie Reese (1999), writing in *School Library Journal*, pointed out that stories about modern day Native American children playing video games, eating fast food and dreaming of becoming engineers are rare. The National Council for the Social Studies (2008) states, “Cultures and systems within cultures are dynamic, ever-changing, and highly influential on the thoughts and actions of those who belong to them” (p. 19). Although there are some exceptions like Joseph Bruchac’s or Cynthia Leitich Smith’s novels, the majority of texts about indigenous peoples focus on these cultures prior to European influence. These cultures are not stagnant. They have evolved since that time, but the texts for young people do not reflect their present character. Students growing up in the typical American culture have limited access to resources about non-mainstream cultures set in modern times. According to Cooperative Children’s Book Center (2011), of the approximately 3,400 books that the center received in 2010 only 22 featured American Indian themes, topics or characters. A search on World Cat, the world’s largest network of library content, yielded no fiction results featuring Yup’ik people. If young readers do not “see” themselves in a novel’s characters, then may not develop as strong of a connection to the rest of the book.

The past decade has seen an increasing drive to close the achievement gap. According to Nadean Meyer’s (2006) article in *Education Libraries* “Native American students are a sub-group to target with appropriate resources about their history and
To accomplish that, Cornel Pewewardy (1998) explains, educators must view Native American cultures as multicultural rather than monocultural. Meyers suggests the three major reasons educators struggle is the lack of training, ongoing racist portrayals, and difficulties locating trustworthy sources. MacCann and Richard (1993) interviewed Naomi Caldwell-Wood, president of the American Indian Library Association, in *Wilson Library Bulletin*, in which Caldwell-Wood details one of the many examples of ongoing racist portrayals. She discussed the use of headdresses worn by many Native cultures as a sign of honor and position. She equates creating headdresses with construction paper and fake feathers to painting a Styrofoam cup with glitter and calling it a chalice to be used at Catholic mass.

Author Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard (1991) explored the idea of authenticity. She explains that it is necessary for readers reading outside of their own culture to relate to a universal theme. “Readers from the culture will know that it is true, will identify, and be affirmed, and readers from another culture will feel that it is true, will identify, and learn something of value, sometimes merely that there are more similarities than differences among us.”

**Problem Statement**

Educators are focused on providing multicultural resources but we need to enhance resources that educators use on the various non-assimilated cultures in America today. The majority of juvenile and young adult fiction multicultural novels, according to a study by Yoon, Simpson and Haag (2010) focus on assimilation rather than cultural pluralism. The study found two major themes: the first involved transitioning from resistance of the new culture to assimilation, the second theme focused on America as the...
Land of Opportunity. These books left the impression that people needed to choose one culture or the other, but not co-exist in both.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this project is to create a resource that introduces life and Yup’ik culture in present-day bush Alaska. The experience of living in an Eskimo village in bush Alaska has given me both the experience and perspective necessary to write a chapter book about contemporary Yup’ik culture. This book would be useful in the curriculum because it would provide a text for students to learn about an American culture that is dynamic and contemporary. Additionally, it is especially important to expose upper elementary and middle school students to multiple cultures because it is at that age that students begin to develop their own cultural identities.

**Research Questions**

1. How will plot events and characters in this story teach readers about traditional and contemporary Yup’ik culture?
2. How should an author incorporate culture in narrative fiction?
3. What concerns are there for an author writing outside his/her own culture?

**Definitions**

Yup’ik- The southwest Alaska Natives surrounding the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers who are named after the two main dialects of their associated language, Yup’ik and Cup’ik. (Alaska Native Heritage Center, 2008)

Eskimo- Yup’ik and Inupiat cultures. Athabaskan, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Eyak or Haida cultures consider themselves to be Native American cultures. (CultureGrams 2002)
Limitations

This project will be limited to the Yup’ik culture in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in Alaska. Reference to indigenous cultures is limited to those inside the United States. The book is intended for fourth through seventh grade students. Cultural information will be limited to interests of that age group.
CHAPTER 2

The purpose of this project is to create a juvenile fiction novel about an American culture that is under-represented in literature. In order to do so effectively, it is vital to know why multicultural literature is important, how indigenous cultures are currently represented, and what must be taken into consideration to generate an authentic piece of cultural literature.

Multicultural Literature

The American Association of School Librarians (2007) standards ask that teachers and librarians teach students to “consider diverse and global perspectives in drawing conclusions” (p. 5). To do this, students need access to texts and tools, which build background knowledge of different cultures and global perspectives. As Landt (2006) stated, “Literature can open doors to other cultures and introduce students to ideas and insights they would otherwise not have encountered” (p. 891).

Campbell and Wittenberg (as cited in Barta & Grindler, 1996) listed six purposes for how multicultural literature in the curriculum will better serve students: it heightens respect for individuals; it acknowledges contribution of minorities; it brings children into contact with other cultures; it enhances students’ self-concept; it helps children realize that society has developed a value system that validates some differences and minimizes others; and it encourages student to detect prejudice and to work toward its elimination” (p. 269 [895]).

In Arlette Willis’ (1998) book about using multicultural literature in the curriculum she stated “opening up the curriculum to a more diverse literature not only enriches all students by giving them a broader perspective; it also provides them with a
more complete and honest history in general” (p. xvii). Currently, “most middle school students have little, if any, knowledge about the values, beliefs, social practices, or arts of cultures other than their own” (Dressel, 2003, p. 3).

Willis found, as a result of her study, that dominant-culture young readers assume non dominant-cultures have the same advantages as they do, advantages such as having adults who know what they have been through, fictional characters who look like them, and peers who do not need a background lesson to understand them.

“If we wish to help dominant-culture readers value others and celebrate diversity as natural and necessary, we need to help them recognize that their unearned advantage carries with it both the responsibility and the obligation to hear the silent word on the pages [of multicultural literature] and to respond with integrity to those voices” (Willis, 2003, p. 123). Schmidt and Pailliotet (2001) found, “through literature, children can discover diverse populations and learn about the moral power of stories” (p. 4).
The studies mentioned above describe what multicultural literature, idealistically, can be. However, in practice, educators struggle to find resources to fulfill these goals.

Researchers Koss and Teale (2009) set out to find what genres were predominate in young adult fiction, who is and is not represented, the current content of young adult books and to identify trends in narrative style and structure. Researchers reviewed 370 books. These were selected because either educators deemed them as high quality, young adult considered them favorites or they were best sellers. Twenty percent of young adult literature would be considered multicultural. Of those, only 16 percent were considered culturally focused. The majority of the international titles were “culturally generic.”

In a study examining the ideology of multicultural picture books, Yoon, Simpson and Haag (2010) found that, although authors were well-intentioned, most multicultural literature available for young adults fell within two themes: “transition by the main
character from resistance of a new culture to assimilation” or a theme which focused on “the United States as the land of opportunity” (p. 112). Data in this research were collected from a rural northern Texas district. Researchers asked the librarian to randomly select books from her “multicultural” collection.

Agosto, Hughes-Hassell and Gilmore-Clough (2003) found that “while there has been a notable increase in multicultural publishing over the past several years, this study indicates that the increase has not extended into the genre fiction for the middle grades” (p. 271). They examined books reviewed by School Library Journal and Voice of Youth Advocates between 1992 and 2001 which met three criteria: featured a person of color as the main protagonist or major secondary character, represented one of the predetermined genres, and indicated readers in fifth though either grades as the intended audience. Their results showed 84 percent of protagonists were white, 32 percent of non-white protagonists were African-American and 25 percent were American Indian. This study did not distinguish Native American from Alaskan Native.

**Portrayal of Native Americans**

The white man’s sidekick, the wise elder, the medicine man, the doomed warrior, the squaw and the princess are stereotypical representations of traditional Native Americans, according to Kopacz and Lawton (2011). In their estimation, “Such depictions construe Natives as romantic relics of the past, thus denying these nations a viable role in modern society” (p. 243). During this study researchers asked self-identified Native Americans to view YouTube videos of Native Americans. Viewers were asked to rate each video based on cultural accuracy. Overall, the highest rated videos tended to have one common theme: they specifically identified with one tribe not
a generalization of all Native Americans. This study showed “viewers favored clips that identified Native tribes by name” (p. 252). Additionally, “the results of this study suggest that audiences responded favorably to the videos showing positive, counterstereotypical characteristics of Native Americans” (p. 252).

These over-generalizations lead to indigenous American cultures being mashed together by non-natives as one generic culture. Inglebret, Jones and Pavel (2008) explained “each of these sovereign nations has its own unique stories; therefore, selection of stories for the inclusion in intervention will involve a multifaceted process” (p. 524). In her research, Willis (1998) stated, “in the United States, these cultures comprise approximately two million people and are reflected in about 750 related and diverse tribal groups and communities” (p. 143).

Stereotypes were also the focus of Stephen Brown’s (1998) study. He found in his literary study that classic literature, such as Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*, “reinforced racist stereotypes among white students” (p. 32). London’s book is set during the time of the Alaskan gold rush and is an example of the Western canon imperialistic literature. Brown found that London’s book and James Fennimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* “enact the ‘Orientalization’ of Alaska, depicting it in ways that excite the settler impulses of the Empire’s readership by conforming to that readership’s stereotypic images” (p. 31). Because Brown taught on an Athabascan Indian Reservation, his study focused on Athabascan culture. Some books, like those of Farley Mowat, were embraced by the culture because of the “tales about trapping, fishing, hunting and mushing” (p. 34). However, others rejected those books because of the emphasis on premature deaths, alcoholism, superstitions, and self-destructive behavior.
Perpetuating some stereotypes is the notion that these cultures are all the same. Although many scholars warn against viewing Native American culture as a singular culture there are some commonalities among many of these cultures. Tony Sanchez (2001) examined twenty randomly chosen trade books published between 1964 and 1997 based on what he called the “Five Great Values.” Those are generosity and sharing, respect for elders and women, getting along with nature, individual freedom and leadership and courage. The trade books included illustrations and photos as well as what Sanchez considered well-written narratives. The authors of these trade books intended these materials to provide educators with accurate educational content. Sanchez explained that many of the narratives focused on trivial matters and lead to a romanticized perspective rather than a historically accurate one. Throughout his research Sanchez found that reverence of nature was the most consistently and accurately depicted value.

Cultural Authenticity

Cultural authenticity is a hotly debated topic in literature. Can an author accurately represent a culture that is not his or her own? Even if the author can, should he or she? Short and Fox (2003) searched for articles and book chapters, published in the last ten years, on cultural authenticity. They found “cultural authenticity can be defined as whether or not a book reflects those values, facts and attitudes that members of a culture as a whole consider worthy of acceptance or belief” (p. 374). On the one hand, Short and Fox reported, “authors have both a social and artistic responsibility to be thoughtful and cautious when they write about characters, plots and themes related to specific cultural groups, whether they are insiders or outsiders to that culture” (p. 376).
On the other hand, the researchers considered that authors outside the culture have a cultural arrogance that “is based in the assumption by many members of mainstream society that what they value is universally valued by other cultures” (p. 376). As a result of their study, Short and Fox found that “an author’s motivation for writing a particular book must be examined when considering the issue of cultural authenticity” (p. 379). Authors outside a culture generally focus on building awareness whereas with authors inside a culture, the authors’ intentions are often more focused on enhancing the self-concept.

Michelle Stewart (2002) agreed in her literature review that writers both inside and outside the culture can write effectively about a specific culture. Stewart looked at the debate of judging authors by their skin color through the realm of Native American texts. She reviewed books as well as interviews by authors who write outside of their culture and by authors who would like to prohibit such an action. Stewart pointed out that authors frequently create characters who are not the same gender or who live in different places without critics raising concern. She argued it was the content of the text rather than the ethnic background of the author that matters. To make her point she used Sharon Creech’s *Walk Two Moons* as an example of a Native American novel that merits inclusion in a classroom but is not written by a Native American.

Stuart Ching (2005) takes a more cautious approach than Stewart. Ching wrote a review of literature intended for teachers in the English and language arts classrooms. He set forth common concerns that classroom teachers have when approaching multicultural material. Ching explained what teachers should look for and what they should avoid
when selecting materials for their curriculum. On the topic of cultural authenticity Ching equated writing about another culture to dining at someone else’s home. He hopes

“The dinner guest, the cultural outsider, neither exploits the host’s generosity for personal gain nor determines the menu and directs the course of the meal. Rather she defers graciously and humbly to the host. She receives the meal—or gifts of culture experience and memory— with utmost care.”

**Summary**

With a diverse American culture it is important for young readers to have access to multicultural literature. That literature should focus on the values of a specific culture rather than promote transitioning to the dominant culture. Additionally, it is important not to over-generalize sub-groups in American culture. Native Americans and Alaskan Natives do not necessarily hold the same values nor share traditions. Cultural traditions are important to highlight but they do not need to be the focus of the entire book. Contemporary life is an important element in multicultural literature. Furthermore, a multicultural text will not be considered credible if it is not authentic. People within that culture must be able to identify with it if people outside the culture can appropriately learn from it.
CHAPTER 3

When children read books about far away lands they form ideas about what it is like to live there. When those portrayals include false or misleading depictions, as Kopacz and Lawton found in their research, readers grow up believing in characters like the sage medicine man or the doomed warrior. Additionally, Native Americans and Alaskan Natives are not stuck in the past, as many books would have us believe. These cultures are thriving in today’s society. In order to show that world to young readers literature should accurately represent that culture today.

Parameters

This project will be focused on the Yup’ik culture in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in Alaska. Events in this book will be limited to likely events occurring between 2003 and 2013.

Project Description

The result of this work is approximately 32,000 words. The main character was a young boy and his family. The text chronicles one year in the life of a family from downstates. The parents are both teachers who choose to work in a small Alaska village so that their two sons can gain cultural experiences. Their neighbors are a large native family of about eight or nine people. The youngest is a boy in the main character’s class at school. At first, the two boys are unsure about each other. There are many things that they don’t understand. Each time the neighbor boy does something “strange,” either one of the parents, a teacher or another villager explains things to the main character. Eventually they become good friends. One day there is a basketball tournament in the neighboring village, but there is not room for the smaller boys to attend. They decide to
steal a snowmachine (downstates it is called a snowmobile) and head to the tournament. Trouble befalls them and they are in danger of freezing to death. At that point they have to work together with knowledge from both cultures to get them out of the situation. They head back to town with a new appreciation of the others’ culture.

Each chapter is a short story in itself. Events are presented in chronological order. Cultural features include berry picking, seal hunting, salt drying fish, grocery shopping, building snow steps, having trouble with frozen pipes, watching the Northern Lights, fishing to provide for the elders, making a kuspik (an extra long hooded shirt with a pouch), traveling to Bethel (closest town with hospital), making Thanksgiving dinner, flying with the school team for a cross country meet and living with dramatic sunlight changes.

Procedures

Before I began writing, I reviewed my journals from the year that I lived in Alaska. I reviewed emails I had sent to friends and family during that year. After that I gathered non-fiction books about living in Alaska. Topics of those books included hunting, fishing, wilderness survival and living in the bush. Because the book chronicles a year in a young boy’s life, I organized the topics according to a likely schedule. I started with events in August, however, because that is the start of the school year.

Author Decisions

Before writing the book I decided on a point of view for the story. As I wrote the book I made decisions about character development and storyline.
CHAPTER 4

See the separately bound project entitled “Cold Shoulder.”
CHAPTER 5

Problem Statement

Young readers do not have enough novels that celebrate living in two cultures simultaneously. Middle grade novels often fall into one or two categories: either encouragement of assimilation or moving to America because it is the land of great opportunity. There are not enough juvenile and young adult novels that focus on living in another culture while still maintaining pride in one’s own culture.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project was to create a resource that introduces life and Yup’ik culture in present-day bush Alaska. Readers will experience, through the main character, what it is like to move into a new culture and new land. The main character will struggle with this new life but ultimately find a balance between the culture he grew up in and the new culture he is now living in.

Adjustments

Initially, the plan was to alternate perspectives between the Eskimo boy and the Caucasian boy. It quickly became obvious that it would be clearer and more effective to write from only one perspective. The story was told from the Caucasian boy’s perspective because the majority of readers will not be Eskimo and would better relate to the Caucasian outsider’s perspective. After a few failed attempts of writing from both Caucasian and Eskimo perspectives it became clear that I could not competently write from an Eskimo viewpoint. Instead, I focused on universal themes as Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard’s research suggests. Thusly, the resolution of the conflict centers on the similar needs of the boys rather than their cultural differences.
The biggest challenge was writing intertwining facts and storyline. The first draft of the novel was almost all a series of facts about life in Alaska. It was incredibly dry and boring. The second draft had pieces of storyline followed by long, dry, and factual passages. It took many revisions to integrate the story into the facts. Another adjustment was eliminating the focus on the neighbors. The main character meets his nemesis at school and never really meets the rival’s siblings.

The initial draft of the manuscript was sent to a young adult literature expert for review. Her concerns were two-fold. One, some of the characters were underdeveloped. Two, there was not enough about home life for the Yup’ik students. I agreed with both of these concerns. To address these issues, I added more conversations and interactions between the main character and the underdeveloped characters. To address the issue of home life, a chapter was added where the main character’s older brother is invited over by a Yup’ik boy. The main character tags along because he has no friends of his own. When the boys are visiting, they see a home unlike their own. They also see carvings made by an elder. The friend of the older brother explains his home life to both boys.

Conclusions

Ideally, I hope to find a publisher to print the book. If I cannot, I will have to decide if I will seek alternate means of publishing. If the book goes in to publication, the most likely purchasers will be classroom teachers. This book could be useful for an Iditarod unit, a Native American unit or a unit on American geography. Elementary librarians may suggest this book as a read-alike to Hatchet by Gary Paulsen.
REFERENCES


