

A Multicultural Society

Franklin's New Friend. Paulette Bourgeois. Illus. Brenda Clark. Kids Can, 1998. 32 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-361-9. *Finders Keepers For Franklin*. Paulette Bourgeois. Illus. Brenda Clark. Kids Can, 1998. 32 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-370-8. *Christopher Changes His Name*. Itah Sadu. Illus. Roy Condry. Firefly, 1996. 32 pp. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-24624-0. *We Are All Related*. Ashley Allen (ed.) Foreword George Littlechild. Polestar, 1997. \$15.95 paper. ISBN 0-9680479-0-4.

In the realms of literature and education, and especially in the many spaces where they intersect, multiculturalism has become a popular buzzword. It overarches a myriad of issues and perspectives, and is often connected with pleasant-sounding, if somewhat vague, phrases such as “celebrating our diversity” and “appreciating difference.” These issues and ideals become real and tangible in the stories of four recently-published picture books. Each addresses, or has as inherent in its text, different aspects of the Canadian reality of a multicultural society. The consistent focus throughout the four is found within their illustrations, which do indeed celebrate diversity. The different approaches taken in each case reflect the variety of degrees to which multiculturalism exists and is integrated in Canadian communities. In the case of *Franklin's New Friend* and *Finders Keepers for Franklin*, many different types of animals are part of Franklin's group of friends, and while they play and share together, the illustrations demonstrate their differences in details such as the species-appropriate food they eat. For educators in most Canadian urban centres, multiculturalism is more than a buzzword: it is a daily reality. The illustrations in *Christopher Changes His Name* and the real-life collages of *We Are All Related* are radical in a very simple way: they reflect this reality.

The writing style of *Christopher Changes His Name* identifies the author as an energetic oral storyteller. Intonation, emphasis and enthusiasm are sculpted into the sentence structure, making it difficult for even the sleepest of parent bedtime readers to squelch the fun in the flow of the story. Roy Condry's distinct illustrations add to the exuberance of the book: snapshots of action follow and fill out the narrative, capturing and adding wonderfully to the humour and irony of the story. I found this comic strip-like style, often complete with words in bubbles, a bit complex for an audience of four- and five-year-olds, but wonderfully engaging for older readers (it was particularly well received by an age eight audience).

Plot details involving banking and reference to Chicago Bulls player Michael Jordan place the text firmly in the '90s, heightening its appeal to current readers, but positing it as potentially soon outdated. Children hearing the story responded positively to these current references, and related to Christopher's desire to have an exciting, special name. Unfortunately (at least, to my mind), Christopher's affirmation of the uniqueness of his name at the close of the book is motivated by the need to sign a cheque — a reinforcement of capitalistic greed? Perhaps, or perhaps only another reflection of our current reality.

While Christopher craves change and longs for a name that is different, Franklin is intimidated by difference, and in *Franklin's New Friend* he has to come to terms with his fear of the unknown. At the start of the story, Franklin is established as having a settled, unchanging life — for the purposes of analogy in Canadian society, Franklin is a suburban, white, middle-class turtle. A new family moves in down the street — a moose family. Franklin, who has never seen moose before, is

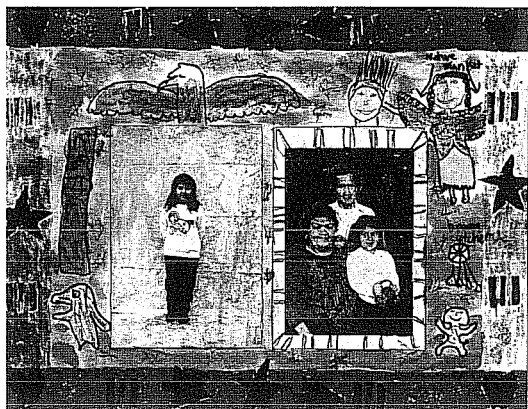


Illustration from *We Are All Related*

terrified by their size, and much to his initial dismay, Moose becomes part of his class. The text addresses the tendency we have to allow our own insecurities to turn into fear, fear into defensiveness, and defensiveness into a weapon we use to oppress that which we fear. When we fear other people, we tend to objectify them, making it easier to ignore the reality of their pain. For the first part of the story, Franklin, driven by his own fear, refuses to acknowledge that Moose might be shy and scared at being in a new place. The turning point in the book comes when Franklin considers Moose as a fellow being. As they work together toward a common goal and discover similarities, the unknown becomes known and is no longer to be feared. The book deals simply and effectively with issues deeply embedded in multiculturalism. Brenda Clark's warm, colourful illustrations create a comfortable atmosphere for younger readers, who can relate to the characters' emotions, and identify them easily by the animals' tender, often humorous facial expressions.

Finders Keepers for Franklin involves the same group of different-species friends as does *Franklin's New Friend*, including Moose. In this story, the turtle's struggle is a moral one: he finds a camera, ends up using the film in it, and needs to figure out what to do about it. Again, the expressive illustrations are an essential part of the text. An audience of children aged five to eight responded well to the illustrations (especially when Franklin's friends make funny faces for the camera!), but were especially concerned with justice throughout the story, reporting that telling the truth and finding a solution to the problem were their favourite parts of the book. Children's ability to make moral decisions about issues such as that raised in *Finders Keepers* is a key theme in the text, as well as in the two previously-discussed picture books. The adults in each story offer guidance and support, but give ownership of the situation to the child-protagonist involved. In this book, Franklin's father asks him, "What do you think should happen now?" Not only, then, is the story fun to read and look at, but it demonstrates to children and their

care-givers that they are capable and expected to have some responsibility in their daily dilemmas.

Intrinsically different from the previous three books, *We Are All Related* is an artistic exploration and expression of diversity in personal heritage. Its pages display collages made by children from an elementary school in Vancouver, accompanied with statements about the child's heritage/cultural origin, and quotes from their "elders." Initially, I responded to *We Are All Related* by classifying it as a fantastic project for the children whose collages are featured, but not at all appealing as a book to be read by people disconnected with the project. I found the size and shape of the book awkward and was disappointed by the seeming lack of narrative, convinced that, without a plot-laden story, a young reader would be very much less than riveted. My group of grade three (age eight) reviewing consultants disagreed. They conceded that it is not a text which lends itself well to oral storytelling, but responded to the book not at all as I had expected. There seems to exist among children a universal appreciation for the artwork of other children. The collages were received as deeply impressive, praised as "cool" and "very carefully done." Bright colours are prevalent, and the combined use of photos, colour, child drawings and potato print borders is quite striking. Structure and rhythm is achieved within the collages by the consistent use of border, and through the use of sentence starters: "My family comes from ," "This photograph shows ," etc.

Most important, I realized that by looking for a plot, I missed the detailed, beautiful stories on every page of this book, and was relieved that the young readers I spoke with had been able to identify and delight in those stories, even if I had not. The press release itself stresses that the collages tell more about the cultural heritage of these children — and hence, about us, collectively, as Canadians — than words possibly could.

Leanne Wild has a degree in theatre from the University of Guelph and she now lives and works in Toronto.

Is There a Lesson in Here?

Franklin's Class Trip. Paulette Bourgeois and Sharon Jennings. Illus. Brenda Clark. Kids Can, 1999. 32 pp. \$12.95, \$4.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55074-470-4, 1-55074-472-0. *The Butterflies' Promise.* Julie Ovenell-Carter. Illus. Kitty Macaulay. Annick, 1999. 32 pp. \$15.95, \$6.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-567-9, 1-55037-566-0. *Dirty Dog Boogie.* Loris Lesynski. Illus. author. Annick, 1999. 32 pp. \$16.95, \$6.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-573-3, 1-55037-573-5. *Mr. Reez's Sneezes.* Curtis Parkinson. Illus. Sami Suomalainen. Annick, 1999. 24 pp. \$15.95, \$6.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-557-7, 1-55037-556-3.

Of these four books written for the three- to seven-year age group, two entertain for the sake of a message, one casually slips in some counsel, and the fourth is written strictly to amuse. *Franklin's Class Trip* falls into the first category; its message is that visiting the museum is not boring, but Lots of Fun. The Royal Ontario