

be an assigned text more often than a freely chosen entertainment. The authors' desires to encourage and give moral reinforcement shine through with "uncool" earnestness. If, however, as modern orthodoxy maintains, the young strenuously prefer literature about people like themselves, then this collection should find receptive audiences, captive and even free, as a worthy adjunct to other fiction.

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The Art of Multicultural Living

Tiktala. Margaret Shaw-MacKinnon. Illus. Laszlo Gal. Stoddart, 1996. 32 pp. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-29208. *Big Boy*. Tololwa M. Mollel. Illus. E.B. Lewis. Stoddart, 1995. 32 pp. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 07737-2851-1. *Marisol and the Yellow Messenger*. Emilie Smith-Ayala. Illus. Sami Suomalainen. Annick, 1994. Unpag. \$14.95 cloth, \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-973-9, 1-55037-972-0. *Freedom Child of the Sea*. Richardo Keens-Douglas. Illus. Julia Gukova. Annick, 1994. Unpag. \$16.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-373-0, 1-55037-372-2.

Timely subject matter, such as multiculturalism in children's books, as in any book, is not enough without an impressive writing style to keep both the sentiments expressed and the educational value alive and flourishing. Four picture books excel above the commonplace, conveying complex ideas concretely, imaginatively, and without didacticism. The characters are able to hold up the burden of the messages convincingly and innovatively. The books go beyond the boundaries of the basic moral of the tale, and have the staying power to provoke a reader's thoughtfulness and wonder.



Tiktala, by Margaret Shaw MacKinnon, is inspiring both for its content and style. Concerned with the future of soapstone carving, and set in a far northern village, the story reveals the child Tiktala who proclaims to her elders that she will carve in soapstone. She cannot see, however, beyond the material value of the art. In short, she lacks “heart.” In order to understand the significance of becoming a true soapstone carver, she must go on a three-day journey in search of her spirit healer. The journey becomes a spiritual quest, which in the end deepens her role as an artist associated with Inuit art.

Although realists may balk at the idea of a young child wandering alone in the harsh north, the author is skilful in blending fantasy and adventure with striking touches of realism. The effect is pleasing and satisfying. Moving and brilliantly realized is the author’s rendering of the inner creative process, and how the child comes to see creative endeavour as a sacred undertaking.

The book exceeds itself in its portrayal of the need to recognize and keep alive culture and tradition. The book also captures the importance of art itself and its place in the world, challenging artists, young and old, to question their own role and motives.

The double-page colour illustrations by Laszlo Gal complement the story with the same mix of realism and fantasy. The artist’s application of soft blues, greens, and design within design capture Tiktala’s inner journeying.

Tiktala is appropriate for people of all ages, a welcome addition for its theme of multiculturalism, and also as an inspiring prod for anyone grappling with the creative process.

Tololwa M. Mollel in *Big Boy* writes for a younger audience (four to seven years), but, like Shaw-MacKinnon, gives, as he says, “a mythical element in a realistic framework.” In the Author’s Note, Mollel gives credit to a motif he encounters in African folklore — that of a prodigious boy endowed with



miraculous powers who is seemingly invincible. *Big Boy* features a child frustrated at being too young and too small to engage in the activities of his older brother. During naptime, the child is granted a wish to become big. In fact, he becomes a giant. An accumulation of haphazard events resulting from his huge size becomes insurmountable for him. In the end, he longs to be nurtured and cared for by his family, acknowledging readily that, after all, he is just a little boy. He awakens reassuringly in the arms of his family.

Perhaps not the most inventive plot, for the dream is a convenient device used again and again, as is the theme of one's desire to be other than what one is, but Mollé's gifts lie in his ability to tell the story convincingly through a child's eyes. The rhythmic prose and repetitive structure are appropriate and engaging for young readers. Mollé is able to retell a folktale so that readers appreciate its cultural context, which is then universalized. His depiction of the boy and his family is exceptionally endearing, and the boy's trials are unique, showing aptly aspects of African culture. Included also is a glossary of the words used throughout the story in Kiswahilli.

The pictures by E.B. Lewis bring to life the child's adventures in double-page colour spreads. The pervasive browns and tans call up the African landscape, and gently radiate with the warmth of the community depicted.

Marisol and the Yellow Messenger, by Emilie Smith-Ayala, is more challenging stylistically and thematically, in comparison to either *Big Boy* or *Tiktala*. At first, the text might appear prosaic at times, the sharp transitions jarring with the story's poetic elements and careful building of imagery. On closer reading, however, one comes to appreciate the complexity of the subject matter, and the great sensitivity and skill of the author in expressing a child's harsh arrival from a politically torn country where her father has been killed and the remainder of her family forced to flee to Canada. The story's focus, however, is on the child's difficult adjustment to a new country. The text successfully captures a child's deep loneliness and her need to belong, which she discovers is resolved not by leaving behind the birth country she loves, but by bringing it forward with her.





The story brings these elements together by a careful selection of images: a dream of a multi-coloured cloth; a yellow bird of hope, trust, and confidence; even the significance of the child's name, Marisol, which translates, intriguingly enough, as ocean and sun. This book celebrates the bringing together of two cultures with enough poetical power to evoke different meanings in different readers.

The colourful impressionistic illustrations by Sami Suomalainen complement the text by depicting the happier memories of the child, and the inner journeying of the child who struggles to find her place in a new world. The book is suitable for children of all ages.

Freedom Child of the Sea, by Richardo Keens-Douglas, is for ages seven and up, and draws its inspiration from the Caribbean oral tradition. Like the other three books, it weaves fantasy with realism. It is told in the first person from the perspective of a small child who is saved from drowning by a small magical boy — the Freedom Child whose face is beautiful, but whose body is covered with welts and scars. Safe on land, the narrator encounters an old man who tells him that the scars are for the suffering of the mythical Freedom Child's people who were brought from Africa in slave ships, and how the Freedom Child and his mother must live in the sea until the world learns true compassion and understanding for all people.

The subject matter is challenging, but its message of hope is sure. The text significantly conveys the idea that the stories of people who have suffered cruel injustice must never be forgotten or ignored. The stories must be told and passed down from one generation to the next as a way of continuing to right the wrongs that were first inflicted on a nation's ancestors. Appropriately, the narrator runs home to tell his family about the old man's story.

The double-page colour illustrations by Julia Gukova richly comple-

ment the layering of metaphor in the story, with their blend of surrealism, suggestive design, and folk-art style.

All four picture books are highly recommended both for their vital subject matter and striking artistry which has created beautifully realized stories and illustrations.

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The Anglo-American Face of Malinche; or All Mothers Are Bad Mothers

Esteban. Gilberto Flores Patiño. Trans. Linda Gaboriau. Cormorant Books, 1995. 96 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-920953-92-1.

Esteban is the eight-year-old protagonist and first-person narrator of this short novel. He has moved to the small Mexican town of San Miguel de Allende, a well-known artists' colony, with his American mother who is a painter. While he knows nothing about his father except that he lives somewhere in the United States, the reader starts to assume that he must be of Mexican origin, given that Esteban is vehemently Mexican and, more significantly, because the ideological representation of culture and gender is absolutely manichaean. Esteban's mother is the archetypal bad mother and whore, a demonized representative of Anglo-Saxon language and North American culture. Her own son refers to her as a gringo (meaning "foreigner") throughout the novel. The divine realm is dominated by the benign Mexican patriarch, Marcela's father, and all things Mexican and Spanish. Unfortunately, the oppressive binary structure underlying Esteban's narrative destroys the illusion of the child's point of view, since the prejudiced and the manipulative propagandist erupts at every turn in the story to expose the author's own fixations and fears.

Ironically, Flores Patiño is very good at representing the child's point of view whenever the issues of culture and gender are absent. His observations on imaginative and imitative play are convincing and well expressed in Esteban's affectionate monologues with his little wooden horse. A fine example of the author's understanding of the child's desire for continuity and meaning occurs when Esteban watches an equestrian competition on television. He does not accept the limits of reality imposed by the frame of the TV screen and constantly wonders about what happens off-screen. His thoughts on the difference between the child's and the adult's experience of time, and how they value objects for emotional or pragmatic reasons, also ring true.

In sharp contrast to these lyrical insights, most of the novel deals with Esteban's mother and the pain and worry that she causes him by her extreme negligence. She abandons him each weekend to go drinking, after which she brings strange men home to spend the night. He therefore depends a lot on Marcela, his best friend and schoolmate, and her family. While both Marcela's parents are Mexican, the ideologically biased representation of gender difference continues to be the operative structure. The father is the embodiment of