



Teaching Literature By and About Minorities

JOANNE DALE *

HOW can teachers of English language arts become familiar with literature by and about ethnic minorities? How can they make appropriate choices from this body of literature for the students in their classes? To answer these questions the Office of the Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools undertook two projects. One was the publication of a bibliography entitled *Portraits, The Literature of Minorities*.¹ The other was a workshop on the teaching of literature conducted at Loyola University in Los Angeles in June 1970.

A Resource for Teachers

Portraits is a resource for teachers of English in junior and senior high school. It was developed over a two-year period by a committee of English teachers, librarians, and curriculum specialists. The bibliography includes annotations of 129 titles—novels, short story collections, poetry anthologies, plays, folk tales and legends, biographies and autobiographies, essays, letters, speeches, and anthologies which include several genres. All are by or about black Americans, Mexican Americans, North American Indians, and Oriental Americans. Ninety-one titles are by

or about black Americans.² A projected supplement will focus on the other three minorities as more materials by and about them become available.

The *Portraits* committee members believe each title included presents members of minorities in the United States as human beings who share all the experiences of their common humanity, but also as human beings whose experiences are unique because they belong to an ethnic minority. Every title contributes to the development of better self-concepts on the part of the minority person portrayed in the literature and to greater understanding on the part of the reader who belongs to the majority culture. The books included have the potential for engaging the reading interests of adolescents and possess some literary merit.

The annotations developed by the committee include more information than is customary in annotated book lists. Many titles are recent and not generally known to

² These are titles other than those included in the fine annotated bibliography developed by Charlemae Rollins entitled *We Build Together* and published by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1967.

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¹ *Portraits, The Literature of Minorities*. Los Angeles: County Superintendent of Schools, LACO Number 121; June 1970.

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teachers. Many are also controversial in nature, and there is a great range in the reading and maturity levels required of potential readers. Themes are identified and literary quality assessed. If language or situations are possible targets of criticism, this is pointed out.

The list provides routine information about publisher, copyright date, availability of paperback editions, and price. Other kinds of technical information may include names of authors whose works are sampled in anthologies, names of individual selections in collections of short fiction and drama, the ethnic background of the author if it is known, and such features as glossaries, biographical notes, and discussions of literary periods and movements. There are specific suggestions for the use of each title which reflect the considered judgment of the committee members based on extensive experience in guiding student reading in classroom and library. The stress throughout is on an individualized reading program in which a

sensitive teacher assesses carefully the emotional, social, and intellectual maturity of the student reader and guides his reading in harmony with this assessment.

Focus on Values

The workshop focused on these questions: Why should literature by and about minorities be included in school literature programs? What literature should be taught? How should it be taught? To whom? When?

Frank Sullivan, professor of English, Loyola University, opened the three-day session with an address entitled "Books as Weaponry." He stressed the power of literature to illuminate the human condition and to move man to examine his values. Dr. Sullivan drew examples from both classic and contemporary literature and set the stage for a consideration of the body of literature which portrays the ethnic minorities and their cultures. He made clear that many of the writers emerging from these cultures not only equal but surpass many of those whose works have in the past been the staple of literature courses.

Representatives of four ethnic minorities presented a panel discussion on the topic: "Why should literature by and about minorities be included in school literature programs?" Speakers included Jean Alexander, librarian for the Office of the Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools; John Ito, Civil Rights Advisory Specialist in the same office; Evelyn Lum, member of Cadre Two of the California English Teacher Specialist Program; Raymond Emery, member of the legal department of the National Broadcasting Company; and Helen James, Administrator, Title III, Los Angeles County Schools Office. Their presentation stressed the great need for teaching materials and methods which assure a more adequate presentation of the role and contributions of members of all ethnic groups in the total development of the United States.

In small groups, participants explored and experienced strategies for teaching of literature which assure maximum involvement of the learner. They worked with col-

lages, storytelling, improvisation, creative dramatics, and large and small group discussion much as their own students might. For these purposes elementary and secondary teachers met together.

At other times groups were organized on the basis of the grade levels at which the participants teach. These meetings were concerned with in-depth discussions of books in the bibliography, which participants had been urged to read before coming to the workshop. Also discussed were strategies for individualizing reading programs and utilizing the thematic approach. Group leaders were drawn from the ranks of the English Teacher Specialists. These are master teachers prepared for such leadership roles in a unique program developed by George Nemetz, consultant in English, California State Department of Education, and federally funded. Their impact in improving English instruction in the state has been so great that other subject matter fields are considering copying this approach to in-service education.

Showings of related films were an important part of the workshop. These included *The Weapons of Gordon Parks* (Contemporary—McGraw-Hill); *Paul Laurence Dunbar—American Poet* (Film Associates); *Books Alive: A Raisin in the Sun* (Bailey Film Associates); *The Novel of the Twentieth Century* (Grover Productions); *Rich Cat, Poor Cat*

(McGraw-Hill Films); *Evan's Corner* (Bailey Film Associates); and *A Place of My Own* (McGraw-Hill).

One session was devoted to previews of videotapes from an experimental program on minority literature entitled *Images* and developed by the Division of Educational Media, Los Angeles County Schools Office.

The final session, "Late Late Book News," presented the *Portraits* committee in brief reviews of books arriving too late to be included in *Portraits* and destined for inclusion in a supplement.

Those who participated in the workshop received copies of *Portraits*. In the spring of 1971 they will be invited to attend a meeting to evaluate the publication after a year's use so their insights may be incorporated into plans for a possible revision and supplement in the future.

Districts interested in conducting workshops similar to this one could do so with a minimum of expense. Colleges and universities could provide keynote speakers. A little research in any community would undoubtedly uncover lay people as well as educators who could illuminate the feelings of minorities who have been slighted or ignored in school programs. And all school districts have outstanding teachers with leadership potential. The involvement is rewarding to all concerned. □

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