

Hadley and Annabelle Irwin for **WE ARE MESQUAKIE, WE ARE ONE** for its effective contribution to peace, social *justice*, and world community.”

It is very confusing to be the writer of a cross-cultural book. Is the negative review correct or should she believe Joyce Flynn in *SOJOURNER*, September of 1982?

The non-Indian reader is given the sense of Hidden Doe's whole world, different but internally coherent, and its role in shaping actions . . . provides for young readers a paradigm of the delicacy and democratic sentiment that could form the basis for a friendship with a “different” person — whether the difference is one of race, gender, age, or culture.

It is the risk one takes when she attempts to write from a heritage other than her own. Is there such a thing as a criss-cross cultural review? Was the writing worth the effort? Hadley Irwin would prefer to believe the criticism of Adeline Wanatee, a Mesquakie, who said, “There is one thing terribly wrong with your book. It is too short. You stop in the 1800's. Couldn't you bring it up to the present?” Come to think of it, that is a wonderful idea.

THE LONE RANGER RIDES NO MORE
AND TONTO DOES NOT DO WINDOWS.

Note

¹Paulette Fairbanks Molin and Diane M. Burns. “Review of *We Are Mesquakie, We Are One.*” *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*. Vol. 12, Nos. 7 & 8 (1981) 22.

White Like Me: A Problem or a Plus

Ann Irwin

In a tiny Iowa rural community, stuck like a mud dauber's nest on the banks of the Little Sioux River, a WASP was born and brought up thinking everyone in the world was just like her. As she went on to be educated, she was told she was the product of a culturally deprived childhood. Everyone was not like her. Didn't she know people were different? Didn't she know there were minorities in the world?

After years of teaching in grade schools, secondary schools, and college, decades of trying to write for young adults, and seemingly eons of living, the WASP circled back to thinking she was right in the first place. Other people were not different. Everyone was like her, and if the world did not believe, she would try to make it believe through the fantasy of fiction. During her deprived childhood, when she was caught in the middle of fisticuffs with an unruly brother, her mother patiently took her aside and said, "Put yourself in his place. Feel how he feels." It was a lesson in living she never forgot.

She would not confuse the issue with logic. She would BE. In her heart and head, where color, sex, age, creed, and culture could not intrude, she could be a 14-year old facing her parents' divorce, although the WASP had never experienced divorce, and she was certainly light years away from being a 14-year old. She could be the tall, thin new girl in a strange school who learned to love horses and to see boys as friends, not necessarily as boy friends. The WASP was never tall nor thin, and she hated horses, but she was sure it was not how her outside looked; it was how her inside saw.

The WASP author discovered that writing helped her make sense of a crazy world. Where was the problem? Of course, in the early 1960s she was careful to hide her sex so that boy readers would not be turned off, and even in the 1970s it was smart not to have her picture on the jacket of a young adult book thereby hiding her age, color, creed, nationality, or anything else that might creep in from her culturally deprived childhood. She learned other things, too. The voice of her character must ring true as to historical setting, cultural environment, and educational experience, yet the dialogue must be so that a young reader would not be hindered by the overt dialect and usage. The WASP worked to catch the rhythm of the speech rather than the actual pronunciation or idiosyncrasies, a technique as delicate to perceive as the correct intonation of a major third in a tonic chord. To filter human speech onto the printed page became a fascinating preoccupation: to catch the musical lilt of a Welsh coal miner, the clipped, harsh fragments of a Midwest farmer, the rich living cadence of a Native American. She knew all this must be done with the finesse of a card shark, manipulating sentence order, sentence length, comma placement, word inversions, and all the other interesting tools that language offers.

Although writing created questions, the WASP felt she knew the answers. Could a 100-odd-year old WASP author think like a 14-year old? The book sold. Could a WASP author think like a Native American? That book won a prize. Could a WASP author think black?

Dare she try? Could she be a black Anson J. Davis riding a train through Iowa to find a home in Athabasca, Canada, where he could live in dignity and grow up to be somebody?

In the murky groves of academia, the unanswerable can always be answered through research. In the library stacks, she unearthed what looked like an answer: *Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English: A Criteria to Evaluate Young Adult Fiction*.¹ The WASP had criteria. English teachers thrive on criteria.

1. Is the book written so that a black perspective has been taken into consideration?

2. What is the dimension of blackness in the book? [How does one measure?]

3. Do the black characters look like human beings?

4. Will the young reader know that she is looking at a black person or do the characters emerge gray in appearance to resemble Caucasians in black face?

5. Does the clothing or behavior seem to perpetuate the stereotypes about blacks being primitive or submissive?

6. Is the black character portrayed as a unique individual or as a representative of a group?

7. How are the black characters shown in relationship to white characters?

The WASP was stung into instant writer's block! She was still the Iowa farm girl, sitting on the banks of the Little Sioux knowing that everyone in the world was supposed to be like her. She re-researched her research and read the criteria again from a different viewpoint, as her mother had taught her.

1. Is the book written so that a WASP perspective has been taken into consideration?

2. What is the dimension of WASPness in the book?

3. Do the WASP characters look like human beings?

4. Will the young reader know that she is looking at a WASP person or do the characters emerge gray in appearance to resemble blacks in whiteface?

5. Does the clothing or behavior seem to perpetuate the stereotypes about WASPS being primitive and submissive?

6. Is the WASP character portrayed as a unique individual or as a representative of all White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants?

7. How are the WASP characters shown in relation to black characters?

If the WASP author had to guard against stereotypes and hidden

implications, how could she if the implications in the criteria overwhelmed her? There was only one thing to do: sit down at the typewriter and start writing *I Be Somebody* about a black Rap Davis.

During the writing, the WASP kept her eye steadfastly on her audience: the young adult reader. Back in the 1960s, Margaret Early set forth three phases that readers go through in responding to the printed page.² She called the first stage “unconscious enjoyment.” Children read first for pure enjoyment. They neither question nor demand. They gulp down books for the pure fun of being someone else within the pages of the book. They become the characters; they rush through the plot; they shiver with the suspense. On the next level, readers not only continue to read for pleasure, but they become a bit more sophisticated and begin to ask questions: Why did the character act that way? What made her feel that way? They realize that a good story is really a cause-and-effect essay made specific, and they consciously pick up on implications. Readers reach the fullest level of appreciation when they can enjoy the entire literary art form: character development, use of language, manipulation of literary techniques, and such—the English major, if you will. Most of the young adults for whom the WASP writes are in the first stage and growing toward the second stage. They read because they are intrigued by the plot, because they can escape with pleasure to another world created by the author. They know it is fiction — something they do not always comprehend when they view television. The major problem with this audience is that implications, advertently or inadvertently included by the author, are taken in almost by osmosis and sub-consciously affect beliefs and attitudes. The moral and intellectual responsibilities an author for young adults must shoulder are staggering. Inadequacies glared from the printed page, but the WASP remembered facing 600 sixth graders in a Dayton, Ohio, assembly, and their enthusiasm bolstered her further efforts. A writer writes first for her audience.

What did the WASP really know about the experience of being black in 1910? She knew bits and pieces of other people’s experiences. Rosa, raised in the segregated section of Selma, Alabama, told how she, as a child, went to every Shirley Temple movie and never once thought of identifying with the little black girl who was made to appear stupid against Shirley’s supposed precocity. Of course she didn’t, but it wasn’t because of color. It was because of the “role model” offered.

Lesson 1: A book about the black exodus to Canada must be peopled with characters of dignity, pride, and humanness. Charles said, “We never said ‘pretend.’ We said, ‘make like.’”

Lesson 2: Idiomatic expressions enrich language.

“You can’t ignore the lynchings that were taking place all over the South in 1910 just because it didn’t happen in Clearview, Oklahoma,” said Russell.

Lesson 3: Don’t mold history the way you wished it had been.

“I never heard grace before dinner said that way. In our family,” Augustine warned.

Lesson 4: Don’t substitute Welsh Presbyterian for Southern Baptist.

Gina handed back the manuscript. “I don’t like the ‘ain’t’ in their speeches, but I guess it would have been true then.”

Lesson 5: People did say ain’t, but not because they were black.

In the process of writing and rewriting the book, the WASP’s learning took off in two directions. She began to see beauty in blackness, but more important, maybe for the first time, she really SAW blackness. There *was* a difference—a lovely one. The second learning affected the book. The story had to show three things at the same time: the universality of all human experience, the quality of black experience at a special time and place, and the particularity of ten-year old Rap’s experience and perception.

The book was done. On to the publisher! “You are taking a risk,” the WASP’s editor warned from the very beginning. So carefully did the WASP kill off stereotypes, struggle for proper names, filter language that in the first draft she discovered she had sacrificed suspense, pacing, plot and all the rest that captures the young reader. A total rewrite! Problems mounted. The publisher had to study the market. The dollar dictates the publishing world, too. Would a black face on a book jacket help or hinder sales? The WASP’s picture would not appear on the jacket, but would the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant name turn off readers and send critics into ecstasies of bad reviews?

The reviews would be either good or bad; there would be no in-between. The WASP was afraid now. Maybe she was wrong to attempt the book. She thought she had discovered something that she believed and that she wanted to offer to young readers. She could imagine the reviews. “You name a character Aunt Spicy? Stereotype!” But Spicy was the WASP’s own great aunt, a strict “slow Quaker.” “Must they eat chicken for Sunday dinner?” The WASP grew up on chicken for Sunday dinner. It was cheap and available on that Iowa farm; in fact, she was in college before she knew there was any other meat served on Sunday.

At this point, the poor WASP author felt like Gertrude Stein: she had the answers, but what was the question? And she was not too sure whether that was a fictional or truthful recounting of Stein's last words, but sometimes truth and fiction sound the same. Perhaps the right kind of fiction could change beliefs and attitudes, something governments and churches and schools seem unable to do.

Then, just as the book was going to press, the WASP was routed from her nest when her State Superintendent of Public Instruction assured a television audience that Iowa ranked high in education *because* "HERE IN IOWA WE'RE PRETTY HARD-CORE MIDDLE-CLASS, WHITE, PROTESTANT AND WESTERN EUROPEAN." Unfortunately, that bit of *fiction* can all too readily be mistaken for the *truth* by young unquestioning minds. The WASP could only say, "What's the use?" Maybe that was the question from the beginning. In Hadley Irwin's book, *I Be Somebody*, ten-year old Rap Davis does not have the answer either, but he does have the question as he and his Aunt Spicy ride the train for Athabasca, "I know everybody ain't alike, Aunt Spicy, but how come being different makes a difference?"

Notes

¹*Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English: A Criteria to Evaluate Young Adult Fiction*. Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer, 1983).

²Margaret Early. "Stages of Growth in Literary Appreciation."—*English Journal*. Vol. 49, No. 2 (March, 1960) 163-166.