

# Talking about Books

## *Critical Conversations about Identity*

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In this month's Talking about Books column, *Kauffman* and Short consider books that were used in an exploration of "identity" in *Kauffman's fourth/fifth-grade* multiage classroom.

In a world of change, children are faced with many questions and struggles as they sort out their multiple identities. School can play a crucial role in inviting children to explore significant personal, social, and cultural connections and to envision new possibilities for their lives. Throughout their elementary years, they struggle with constructing their own identities in relation to family, friends, and significant adults, and with determining who they want to be versus who others want them to be. Interactions around literature can provide the space for students to explore issues of identity that they find difficult to directly address. In this column, we review literature that invites critical conversations about identity and we highlight children's responses through talk, sketches, and writing.

We negotiated a context with Gloria's class of fourth/fifth-grade multiage students to thoughtfully respond to these books by introducing the broad theme of identity. As part of a whole-class discussion, the students brainstormed a web of their understandings and the issues related to the question, "What is identity?" They then created a list of questions about their own identities:

### Questions I Have about Identity

- What cultures do I come from?
- Why do I act differently in different places?
- What talents do I have?
- Why am I not heard?
- Why don't I try new things?
- Why do I get judged by others?
- Why can't we have freedom to express ourselves in our own country?
- Why am I forced to be someone I'm not?
- How have my identities and understandings grown?
- Why do our actions change in school?
- Why am I so afraid to share my ideas?
- Who am I really inside?
- Why do I get embarrassed in front of others?
- Why do I feel people laugh at me?
- Why do people always depend on me?
- Am I going to be judged differently when I get older?

We placed a large set of possible books to review in the classroom for a week and asked students to browse them. While children were browsing, they kept track of their topics,

issues, and questions related to identity and we noted which books they returned to frequently and which they ignored. In looking across the webs, lists, and children's notes, we saw that several themes came up repeatedly:

- Freedom to define and redefine one's self;
- The need for love and for finding someone who cares for you and needs you;
- Dealing with obstacles (hate, pride, truth, greed);
- Allowing others to define and influence you;
- Defining yourself by comparison to others;
- Finding a space to be yourself;
- Hiding from yourself and suppressing who you are.

Based on these themes, we organized the books into several text sets and students read and discussed them in literature circles. In these circles, they talked about the books, wrote literature responses, and made a group web on the theme of their set. Based on their reading and discussion of all of the books, we then asked them to choose one book that really engaged them as readers and that was related to the issues on their group's web. They spent time in their groups discussing this book and doing a quick write.

Throughout this time, Gloria read aloud four novels that we had chosen to highlight because of their powerful connections to the issues of identity raised by the students. The class talked about the books as they were read aloud and engaged in a focused, whole-class discussion at the end of each book. To pull together the focus on identity, the students returned to the original list of questions they had generated about their own identities and sketched their new understandings about themselves.

As we looked across all of the fieldnotes, transcripts, writing, webs, lists, and sketches, we identified the following four major, recurring themes which we used in organizing the books for this column: Making a Choice and Changing Your Life; Judging and Being Judged; Relationships Within Families; and Overcoming Obstacles. In presenting each of these sections here, we first highlight one of the chapter books that was read aloud to the class and include some of the transcripts of discussions that occurred around this book. Then we note other related books and include some of the children's written comments and sketches as well as our own review of the books.

## MAKING A CHOICE AND CHANGING YOUR LIFE

A key issue for children was the enormity of being faced with choices that they realize may change their lives, even though they can't always foresee the consequences of the choices. They also felt that they are often asked to choose from options, none of which are really the choice they want to make. So, choice offers students exciting possibilities for the future and for asserting their own voices and, at the same time, frightens them because of the unknown and because of adult expectations and control.

In *Just Ella* (1999) by Margaret Peterson Haddix, Ella seems to have all of her choices already made for her once the prince chooses her to become his wife. Ella's dream seemingly comes true when she goes to the ball as a commoner and meets her "Prince Charming"-with the exception of the "and they lived happily ever after" ending. This Cinderella story focuses on what happens to Ella after she goes to live in the castle to be trained as the future queen. She realizes that she was chosen only for her beauty and that Prince Charming's handsome face hides a vacant soul. Her life becomes a meaningless schedule of protocol and of others telling her who she is and what she must do. She agonizes over whether she has any choices left or if she is doomed to a mindless life in the castle with someone she does not love (see Figure 1).

The students initially struggled with following the storyline, and they were confused by the unfamiliar historical terminology and by the time shifts as Ella reflects on the past events that led to her current situation. By chapter four, how-



Figure 1. Responses to *Just Ella*

ever, they had connected with Ella and were alternately gasping in horror and laughing at her predicament. They focused particularly on her struggle to retain who she was on the inside even as others controlled her every action:

- TALANA: She doesn't want to be a princess but she doesn't know who to tell to get out of the situation, so she is stuck in her mind.
- MEGAN: Prince Charming doesn't know what to do. He hasn't had anyone say no. She does and he doesn't know how to think for himself or react. He was raised as a prince not to make a decision.
- SANELA: She was caught and felt she made a wrong decision. She felt the same outside as inside.
- TALANA: She tries to only be herself. She is trying to change because they want her. But she doesn't change on the inside.
- DONOVAN: This is better than a fairy tale. She actually changes her life and really cares for people. The prince still lived in a fairy tale.
- CHARLIE: She was still a slave with the prince.

Katherine Paterson's *Miranda* also challenges the traditional image of a princess in *The Wide-Awake Princess* (2000), a long picture book. Miranda is given the gift of being wide awake at her birth and so sees the suffering of those around her. After her parents die, greedy nobles declare her unfit to rule and so she disappears into the countryside to learn to be a queen by working alongside her people. Faced with their hopelessness, she teaches them how to create change through reading, music, and story. By using her mind, she is able to overcome ignorance and demand her rightful place as queen. Vladimir Vagin's fanciful watercolor-and-pencil illustrations fit the fairy tale setting with folk art figures that often appear flat and wooden.

Heather used poetry to capture her thoughts about Miranda's choices (see Figure 2).

Unlike Miranda, some kings and queens fail to learn how to live unselfishly. *The Man Who Caught Fish* (2000), a picture book written and illustrated by Walter Lyon Krudop, tells the story of a king who learns a hard lesson about pride. A stranger comes to the village with a fishing pole and gives away every fish he catches, saying, "One person, one fish." The king will not be content unless he receives a whole basket of fish and so suffers the consequences of his selfishness. Krudop establishes the context of long-ago Thailand through his impressionistic paintings that use pastel colors of village life to contrast with the vibrant hues of the royal company.

Two picture books to which students returned again and again challenge the restrictions put on women in historical contexts. The first, *You Forgot Your Shirt, Amelia Bloomer!* (2000) by Shana Corey with fashion sketches by Chesley McLaren, uses humor to tell the real-life story of the invention of bloomers

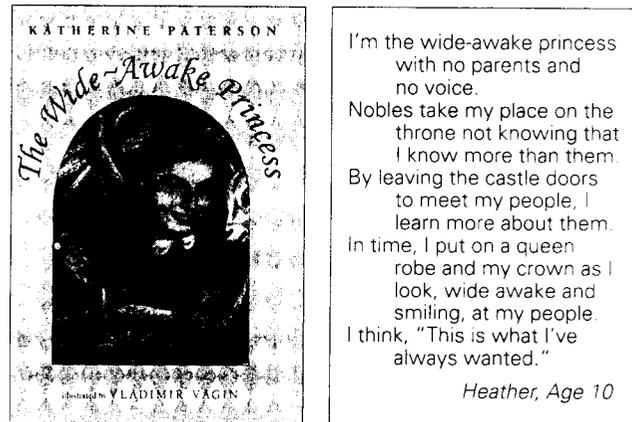


Figure 2. Response to *The Wide-Awake Princess*

in the mid-1800s. The second, *Dirt on Their Skirts* (2000) by Doreen Rappaport and Lyndall Callan with watercolor illustrations by E. B. Lewis, tells the exciting story of a championship game in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League in 1946 through the eyes of a young, female fan.

Sometimes, race and class influence choices that lead to life-changing journeys. In *The Piano* (2000), a picture book by William Miller, Tia's hunger for music leads her to accept a maid's job in order to be closer to the new and different sounds she hears coming from a house on the other side of town (see Figure 3). The expressive oil illustrations by Susan Keeter capture the warmth of the mutual love and friendship between a young African American girl and an older white woman in the deep south during the early 1900s.

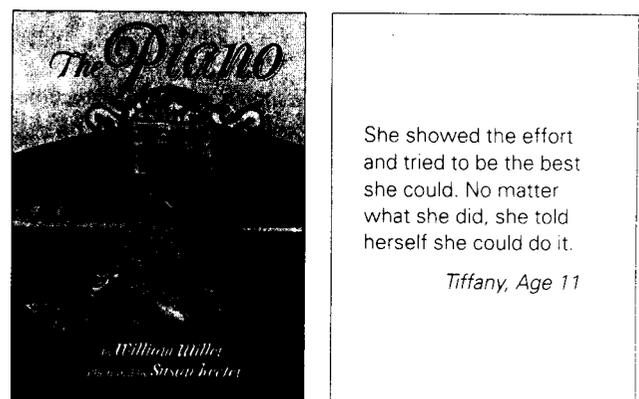


Figure 3. Response to *The Piano*

Walter Dean Myers tells of another life-changing journey in a picture book biography, *Malcolm X: A Fire Burning Brightly* (2000), illustrated with striking, layered paintings by Leonard

Jenkins. Malcolm "blazed his way through history" by aggressively acting on his belief that blacks should demand equality by taking their lives and futures into their own hands. While this belief remained at the core of his being, he made major changes throughout his life in how he believed this goal should be accomplished.

## GAINING CONTROL AND OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The students talked about having some control over their own identity construction through taking risks as they faced obstacles in their lives. As fourth and fifth graders, they struggled with the expectations of adults and their peers, all of whom want them to conform in one way or another. The cliché "just be yourself" was one they believed but found difficult to enact when faced with an obstacle that required risking either ridicule or physical danger.

The need to control one's own life is at the heart of *Cinderellis and the Glass Hill* (2000), another spirited Cinderella novel by Gail Carson Levine. Her first, *Ella Enchanted* (1997), a 1998 Newbery Honor book, introduced a strong, female Cinderella. In her new novel, Levine uses humor to tell the tale of a male Cinderella, *Cinderellis*, who is mistreated and ignored by his two older brothers. *Cinderellis* is an inventor who constantly tries to gain his brothers' approval, but to no avail. When the king offers his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who can climb the glass hill and retrieve the golden apples, *Ellis* sees a new challenge for himself as an inventor. His goal is not Princess *Marigold* but the golden apples which he believes will finally gain his brothers' attention. Both *Cinderellis* and Princess *Marigold* are lonely and have family members who try to control them and withhold the affection they deeply crave. The students loved the humor of the book and found connections to issues of gender and adult control in their lives as obstacles to their search for identity:

HEATHER: Bert and Ralph have control over *Ellis*, his actions and loneliness. He was always sad and trying to impress his brothers and make them see he exists. He does everything for them and they never say anything.

CRAIG: *Marigold* does what her father asks but does take control. She finds a way to make the horses slip so she can get control of who she marries. She's tired of being told what to do and of being treated as special. She wants to be normal.

DONOVAN: She had control on who fell down but couldn't have control over who came up the hill.

RICHARD: If it was today, it would be a game show, and whoever got to the top, she'd interview and choose.

MEGAN: Girls do things in their own way, but she has to act in a different way when the father is controlling her. She can't do things in a girl's way because he makes her do things his way.

SANELA: Children get mad and are not themselves. They stop believing in themselves when they are teased. The book teaches you to be yourself no matter what.

The focus on "being yourself" is also highlighted in a tenderhearted picture book, *Wombat Goes Walkabout* (2000), by Michael Morpurgo. The stunning full-page pastel illustrations by Christian Birmingham are alternated with quick pencil sketches which bring the Australian bush to life. The other animals taunt *Wombat* and don't think much of his gift of digging and thinking, that is until their lives are threatened (see Figure 4).



Wombat discovers that it doesn't matter what you do or how you do it, but it matters who you are on the inside. This is a good book for kids because it tells you not to give up on yourself and keep going.

Talana, Age 10

Figure 4. Response to *Wombat Goes Walkabout*

The obstacle in *Do You Remember the Color Blue?: And Other Questions Kids Ask about Blindness* (2000), is the loss of sight experienced by the author, Sally Hobart Alexander. The students liked how Alexander organized the book according to questions that she is often asked by children. The book is illustrated by personal photographs of her life from before and after she lost her sight at age 26. Donovan commented, "Being blind involves taking many risks. People don't understand and they judge you. It controls the rest of your life. It's not a choice but an obstacle to overcome." Joey added, "You have to trust people and animals to help you and know they won't hurt you."

The students couldn't put down *The Secret Camera: Life in the Lodz Ghetto* (2000), with original, heart-rending photographs taken secretly in Poland in the 1940s by Mendel Grossman. Frank Dabba Smith has added text in the voice of Grossman who, at great personal risk, hid a camera inside his

raincoat to capture images of fear, hardship, generosity, and the struggle for survival in the ghetto. He was determined to have some control over his life by using photographs so that, as Tommy (Age 10) says, "people in the future would know what life was really like in the ghetto."

On a lighter side, *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type (2000)* involves barnyard animals who use a typewriter, rather than a camera, to take control of their lives by demanding electric blankets from Farmer Brown. The cartoon-style, black line drawings with watercolor washes by Betsy Lewin are a perfect complement to Doreen Cronin's humorous tale about taking action in your life.

Another way to take action is through education. In *Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys (2000)*, Virgie is relentless in her requests to be allowed to attend school with her brothers. Her brothers argue that she is too little for the seven mile hike and that girls don't need school. Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard based this story on the lives of her grandfather and his siblings during the Reconstruction period in the American South. The watercolor illustrations by E. B. Lewis capture Virgie's warm family life and her determination to be free through education.

## JUDGING AND BEING JUDGED

The students recognized that even when they try to remain true to themselves, they face the unpredictability of being judged by others. Often, they are judged based on identities over which they have no control, such as gender, race, or age, and this increases their fear of not knowing when they will encounter rejection. They also realize that they, in turn, often judge others unfairly.

Students found that *Playing Solitaire (2000)* by Nancy Antle was, at the same time, the most powerful and disturbing book they read. They were captivated by the suspense of the novel. As Megan noted, "The book would all at once jump out at you and get your attention and then drift off, and then get your attention again." Brandon added, "The book was full of issues. It's what happens in the real world. It seemed real." In *Playing Solitaire*, the main character, Ellie, faces many hard issues after the death of her mother and the loss of several of her fingers as a result of her father's alcoholic rage. In the aftermath of this incident, she goes to live with her grandfather, always in fear that her father will reappear. She has decided she will kill her father using the revolver in her grandfathers drawer if he ever contacts her again.

TALANA: I didn't think the dad was trying to scare her; just trying to talk to her. But he would still drink to get rid of the pain so she would not be safe.

RICHARD: She did want revenge. She was just that mad at what her dad did. He cut off her fingers and then ran away and didn't get her fingers and bring them to the hospital.

MEGAN: She could have put him in jail instead of wanting to kill him. It would stay with her the rest of her life if she killed him.

MARLENE: But Ellie's dad might have taken her away and hurt her more.

DONOVAN: When you are drunk, you are out of it and not the person you are meant to be.

HEATHER: When he was drinking, he didn't realize he was losing lots of things; he got out of control.

MEGAN: In the end, he was trying to confess to Ellie. He was trying to have a soft spot.

TALANA: Dexter [a neighbor] already knew what happened to Ellie and didn't make a big deal about it or ask questions or judge her.

DONOVAN: This book has a lot of issues that need to be brought up. It could happen to us and we need to know how to deal with it.

MEGAN: It's for older children over 9; younger wouldn't understand the issues and would be grossed out by the fingers. Our age can understand the issues.

Ellie is judged as "different" by her peers because of her physical deformity. In Eve Bunting's *Swan in Love*, Swan is seen as being different from the other animals in the pond because he has fallen in love with Dora, the swan boat. Swan knows that Dora is different because she is a boat while he is a live swan, but he also knows that differences mean nothing to love. Even as Dora begins to crack and fall apart, Swan is faithful (see Figure 5). Eve Bunting's wondrous love story comes alive with shimmering grace when combined with Jo Ellen McAllister Stammen's dazzling pastel illustrations. The unusual visual perspectives and close-ups beckon the reader to return again and again to the book.



The Swan had a lot of belief in himself because he encouraged himself to love and not think of anybody else's thoughts but just his own. The Swan used his freedom the way he wanted.

Cassandra, Age 10

Figure 5. Response to *Swan in Love*

*Dirt Boy* (2000) picks up on the theme of judgement in a more humorous way. This tale, by Eric Slangerup with hilarious varied-medium watercolors by John Manders, tells the frolicking story of a boy who will do anything to avoid taking a bath. His conversion into Dirt Boy separates him from his clean-and-mean mom but leads to an encounter with the threatening giant, Dirt Man. This book was passed from student to student and Jonathan said his fantasy is to "not be normal anymore and grow up to be Dirt Boy"

In the Rainfield: *Who is the Greatest?* (2000) by Isaac O. Olaleye is a traditional Nigerian tale illustrated in vibrant collages by Ann Grifalconi. Wind, Fire, and Rain engage in a contest to determine who is the greatest. Michael noted, "The spirits judged themselves as the greatest and gave into their power and destroyed what the people took so long to build. Sometimes people judge themselves just like the spirits did." David added, "In the end, it was the softest and most gentle spirit that won."

The triumph of the female spirit is a theme woven throughout Jane Yolen's collection of 13 traditional tales, *Not One Damsel in Distress: World Folktales for Strong Girls* (2000) with selected illustrations by Susan Guevara. Yolen's lyrical and spirited texts highlight the steadfastness and resourcefulness of spunky heroines from around the world. The strong, fearless, heroic women in these short stories range from Atalanta of Greece to Nana Miriam of Niger and Erna of Germany

*Girls: A History of Growing Up Female in America* (2000) by Penny Colman provides a perfect complement to these folk tales by tracing the spirited history of young girls from all regions of the United States (see Figure 6). What is most outstanding about this book is that the firsthand accounts come from ordinary girls from all walks of life, spanning the original indigenous arrivals to America to girls in the current millennium. Colman drew from diaries, memoirs, letters, household manuals, popular magazines, and advice books, and she uses black-and-white photographs to capture the worlds of each girl.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN FAMILIES

One of the most difficult issues for students in constructing their own identities is in defining themselves in relationship to family members. Family provides an important connection to their history and sense of being. At the same time, they struggle to separate themselves from their parents.

Both aspects of family are at play in *Drawing Lessons* (2000), a short novel by Tracy Mack. Rory's identity is entwined with that of her father, with whom she shares a passion for art. Rory accidentally discovers a secret about her father that eventually leads him to leave the family. Distraught, Rory blames herself and abandons her art which leaves her with no anchor point for her life.

- SANELA: She believed in her dad more than her mother at the beginning. She thought she could trust him, but learned she couldn't.
- HEATHER: She gave up her art because of her dad.
- MEGAN: The dad took her power away. Her art was her power. She let her dad win.
- TALANA: As soon as she burned her sketch book, she became a shadow.
- CRAIG: She destroyed her sketches and herself. When she got it back, she got herself back.
- RICHARD: She talked in color; how she is feeling. If she was happy, she used light colors. And if she was sad or mad, she talked in bold colors.
- TALANA: She shouldn't have tried to get back at her dad. She should have left him alone to solve his own problem. She is a child and she can't do something she is not capable of.
- DONOVAN: Everyone is acting like a kid. Her mom and dad run off and she needs to take charge because no one else will.



When girls take risks, they learn to believe in themselves and not give up. They start having rights and they learn to change the world. With a little trust and belief you can do anything.

Heather, Age 10, and Ciara, Age 11

Figure 6. Responses to *Girls: A History of Growing Up Female in America*

- TA L A N A : But if you are an adult, you could try to solve the problem and not just let it go. But she is a child and should let it go and let the adults solve it.
- R I C H A R D : She is like a rope and her parents are pulling her and she is in the middle. They are stretching her arms. She doesn't know where to go. She is trapped.

Art is also the key to establishing relationships in the short chapter book, *The Magic Paintbrush* (2000), by Laurence Yep with occasional illustrations by Suling Wang (see Figure 7). Steve is forced to live with his harsh, disapproving grandfather and Uncle Fong in Chinatown after the death of his parents. When he needs a new paintbrush for school, grandfather pulls out an old suitcase and hands him an intricately carved bamboo paintbrush. Everything Steve paints becomes real and the resulting adventures bring back dreams and caring into all three lives.



The grandfather pays no attention to Steve and doesn't know he exists. Steve is so lonely, he feels invisible. The paintbrush is a new beginning. This book gets at things that kids have to deal with about parents.

Craig, Age 12

Figure 7. Response to *The Magic Paintbrush*

Sarah's problem is not a difficult relationship with her mother but her mother's struggle with cancer in Elizabeth Winthrop's picture book, *Promises* (2000). Sarah feels she must protect her mother and defend her from the stares of passerbys who see only a bald head and not the person Sarah loves. Winthrop's text and Betsy Lewin's simple pen-and-watercolor illustrations deal sensitively and positively with a difficult issue.

Elderly family members are a strong connection to history and story for young children. In *The Grandad Tree* (2000), by Trish Cooke, Leah and Vin realize that while their grandfather has died, his stories will stay with them forever-as long as they remember. The pastel illustrations by Sharon Wilson celebrate life and family. The importance of family stories is also at the heart of *Down the Winding Road* (2000) by Angela John-

son, a simple story of a visit to the seven Old Ones who live down a winding road in the country. The warmth and unusual perspectives of the oil paintings by Shane W Evans reveal the significance of the Old Ones in two children's lives.

When Carmen Teresa receives a blank notebook as a New Year's Day present, her family and friends immediately decide that she should fill it with stories from their childhoods in various Latin American countries. Each chapter in *Salsa Stories* (2000) by Lulu Delacre shares the story of a different person, but Carmen Teresa surprises everyone with her own decision of how to use her notebook. Readers will enjoy the tempting recipes from each story that appear at the end of the book.

## CONCLUSION

These books have the potential to become important touchstones for children as they explore their developing identities. Through literature and discussion, children can try on new identities and reach new understandings of their existing identities. They can experience this range by living within a book in order to consider how they want to live in their own worlds. Literature offers children safety and hope as they face difficult life events and choices.

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