

Short, Day & Schroeder (2016). *Teaching Globally: Reading the World through Literature*. Stenhouse.

## **Cultural Authenticity and Reader Responsibility in Children's and Young Adult Literature**

Readers can ask questions about the cultural authenticity of a text as well as question their responses to a text. Social responsibility is thus positioned in the transaction of the reader and the potential text in the construction of an interpretation of a text.

### **Cultural Authenticity**

Cultural authenticity is the extent to which a book reflects the worldview of beliefs and values and depicts the accurate details of everyday life and language for a specific cultural group. Given the diversity within any cultural group, there is never one image of life within any group, and so the themes and underlying ideologies are often more significant for analysis. Readers from the culture of a book need to be able to identify and feel affirmed that what they are reading rings true in their lives, and readers from another culture need to be able to identify and learn something of value about cultural similarities and differences. Evaluating authenticity involves considering complex issues, not making a simple yes-or-no decision.

- **Literary qualities**  
How well does the author tell the story? Is it high-quality literature?
- **Origin of book**  
What is the origin of the book? Who was the original publisher, and in what country?  
Who is the author? illustrator? translator? What are their backgrounds?
- **Authorship**  
How do the author's experiences connect to the setting and characters in this book? What are the experiences and/or what is the research on which the book is based? Why might the author have chosen this story to tell?
- **Believability**  
Is this story believable? Could it happen? In what ways does it feel real? Are the characters larger than stereotypes but less than "perfect" heroes?
- **Accuracy of details and authenticity of values**  
What are possible issues of accuracy in the details of the book? What values are at the heart of the book? How do these values connect to the actual lives of people within the culture? Does this book reflect a specific cultural experience, or could it happen anywhere?
- **Perspectives**  
Whose perspectives and experiences are portrayed? Who tells the story? What is the range of insider perspectives?
- **Power relationships**  
Which characters are in roles of power or significance within the book? Who takes action? How is the story resolved? Where does the story go, and how does it get there? Who takes it there? Why?

- **Audience**  
Who is the intended audience? Is the book written for children from that culture or to inform children from other cultural backgrounds about that culture?
- **Relationship to other books**  
How does this book connect with other books about this cultural experience? Does the collection of books reflect a range of perspectives and experiences within the culture?
- **Response by insiders**  
How have insiders responded to this book?
- **Connections for your readers**  
What are the possible connections for students? Is the book accessible?

For more discussion of these issues, see *Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature*, edited by Dana Fox and Kathy G. Short (NCTE 2003). For reviews that focus on cultural authenticity of books, see *WOW Review* ([wowlit.org](http://wowlit.org)), *Kirkus Reviews* ([www.kirkusreviews.com](http://www.kirkusreviews.com)), *Oyate* (<http://oyate.org/>) (reviews of books on Native peoples), *Africa Access Review* (<http://africaaccessreview.org/>).

## Reader Responsibility

Reader responsibility addresses links between readers and global literature. Both books and readers embody a worldview of beliefs and values that influence the transaction between a reader and a text. Readers from a background similar to the culture of a book may more readily identify with the situation or character and thus be more “open” to the author’s perspective. Someone who does not share that cultural background may have more difficulty understanding the situation or the reasons a character acts in a particular way. In addition, readers might also come to understand that attempting to understand the characters or situation is not the same as agreeing with the author or the book, but rather a way of gaining a greater understanding of the world and those within it. Similar to evaluating a book for cultural authenticity, readers’ responses to books are complex based upon the context of the reader and the author’s text.

- **Reading context**  
What is the reader’s purpose for reading the book? Who selected the book, and why was it selected? What stance (thoughts and feelings) does the reader take toward the book before reading? In what ways could the political environment or the difference between the time of publication and the time of reading create different stances toward the story?
- **Reader’s context**  
What about this book resonates with the reader’s own experience? What creates discomfort within the reader? In what ways could the reader’s background create a positive or negative response to the book? What actions can the reader take to better understand the book? How can a reader remain open to understanding the book if holding values that conflict with those of the author or the characters within the book?
- **The use of language**  
How does the author tell the story? Is the language accessible? In what ways is language usage similar to or different from the reader’s language?

- **Origin of book**  
What is the origin of the book? How does the book's origin relate to the reader's origin? Who is the author? illustrator? translator? What are their backgrounds, and how do these relate to the reader's background?
- **Authorship**  
How does the author's telling of a story connect or not with readers' experiences? What gaps exist between the author and reader, and what impact would that gap have on the reader's understanding of or response to the text?
- **Audience**  
Who is the intended audience of this book? How does the reader relate to this intended audience? Is the book written for children from that culture or to inform children from other cultural backgrounds about that culture?
- **Resonance**  
How does this story relate to the reader's experience or understanding of the world? Does the reader's value system allow him or her to accept or reject the characters or situation in the book? In what ways does the story feel real to the reader? If the story is portraying a specific cultural experience, what do readers learn about that culture?
- **Connecting to characters**  
Are the behaviors of the characters acceptable according to the reader's value system? What values does the reader possess that might make it difficult or easy to relate to the characters?
- **Perspectives**  
Whose perspectives and experiences are portrayed? How do these perspectives relate to the reader's own views? Do readers understand the range of insider perspectives? How can a reader check to see if the story could actually happen?
- **Relationship to other books**  
How does this book connect with other books about this cultural experience? Does the collection of books reflect a range of perspectives and experiences within the culture?
- **Response by insiders**  
How have insiders responded to this book?
- **Connections for your readers**  
What are the possible connections for readers? Is the book accessible? What can readers do when the connection is weak? What happens when the connection is so strong that readers see only their own perspective? How do readers allow authors to speak through their books, especially if the connection is weak or creates conflicting feelings?

These are just some questions to address with students. To understand an author and/or the culture represented within the story, students should be encouraged to read other books from the same cultural group, region of the world, or country to build their knowledge. Remember that the book is just one of a number of possible stories from a particular place. . The TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story,” by Chimamanda Adichie, is one way to start discussions with older readers on reader responsibility: [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)