

Mosaic: Our Characters in the World

a workshop for children's and young adult book writers

"We become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic," Jimmy Carter writes of the U.S. Immigrants and refugees contribute identities to the picture of who we are as a country. They also bring news of the wider world, news that is often in the headlines of our newspapers. This workshop is an envisioning session for your work in progress. Through quick responses to questions and study of passages of novels, we will explore adding depth and layers to your character by building the character's awareness of, or connection to, the mosaic he is a part of. We will explore ways to step into the cultural mosaic of characters' lives and look at examples of characters who might have multiple cultural identities. An immigrant child is already part American when she steps off the plane. And long-term residents are shaped by the influx of words, food, music, good luck charms of newcomers. How do we find that center-of-the-world that each individual has? How do we imagine that place as we write about characters outside the culture we identify with? What are the writer's responsibilities as he enters cultures in his imagination? We'll look at the many forms research can take from cultural immersion to cooking new foods to the art of listening in order to reflect a culture with honesty.

"I've tried to be a witness to the large and small events of my times and use my songs to explain what I've seen"

Natalie Merchant

Suggested reading. We've included books that relate to our topic in many different ways. They range from Roddy Doyle's comic but dead-on story about stereotyping, "Black Hoodie," (a story for adults and teens) to new-arrival memoirs to contemporary YA and middle grade fiction.

Novels, Poems, Stories

Abdel-Fattah, Randa. *Does My Head Look Big in This?* Pan Macmillan Australia, 2005.

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Little Brown, 2009.

Almond, David, *The Fire-Eaters*. Delacorte, 2004.

Doyle, Roddy, "Black Hoodie," *The Deportees and Other Stories*. Penguin, 2008.

Farish, Terry. *The Good Braider*, Skyscape, 2012, 2014.

Hijuelos, Oscar. *Dark Dude*. Atheneum, 2008.

I Remember Warm Rain: 15 Teenagers, 15 Coming to America Stories. The Telling Room, 2007.

Nye, Naomi Shihab, "My Father and the Fig Tree," in *19 Varieties of Gazelle*. Greenwillow, 2005.

Padian, Maria, *Out of Nowhere*, Knopf, 2013.

Peters, Julie Ann. *It's Our Prom (So Deal With It)*. Little, Brown and Company, 2012.

Rowell, Rainbow. *Eleanor and Park*. St. Martins, 2013.

Schmidt, Gary. *Trouble*. Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

Stork, Francisco. *Marcelo in the Real World*. Arthur Levine, 2009.

Woodson, Jacqueline. *If You Come Softly*. Putman, 1998.

Zia, Farhana. *The Garden of my Imaan*. Peachtree, 2013.

Articles, Essays

Eash, Kendra. "This is a Generic Brand Video," *McSweeneys.net/tendency*
<http://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/this-is-a-generic-brand-video>

Here is the essay linked with stock film footage:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YBtspm8j8M>

We offer this video as a satirical take on issues of generic advertising and writing that attempts to "loosely" portray everyone in the cultural mosaic.

Farley, Christina, "Don't Be Afraid." <http://www.diversityinya.com/2014/03/dont-be-afraid/> Tips for writing outside your own culture, with special emphasis on YA. From the website *Diversity in YA*, March 25, 2014.

Heller, Zoe and Mohsin Hamid, "Write What You Know – Helpful Advice or Idle Cliché" *New York Times*, March 25, 2014.

Myers, Walter Dean, "Where are the People of Color in Children's Books?" *New York Times*, March 15, 2014

"I did not want to become the "black" representative or some shining example of diversity. What I wanted, needed really, was to become an integral and valued part of the mosaic that I saw around me."

Walter Dean Myers

Ting, Renee, "Writing Race: Reflecting the Modern World." *SCBWI*, September/October, 2013

Blogs and Links on Diversity in Children's and YA Books

American Indians in Children's Literature

<http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>

Beyond Diversity <http://beyonddiversity.org/>

The Brown Bookshelf <http://thebrownbookshelf.com/> This site features African American voices writing for young readers.

CBC Diversity <http://www.cbcdiversity.com/>

"Everyday Diversity" Hennepin County Library Book List by Emily Lloyd.

"Everyday Diversity" Books have characters who are non-white, non-physically-abled, GLBTQ, going about everyday things like playing in the snow, losing a tooth, starting school, etc.

Everyday Diversity in Picture Books

<http://www.hclib.org/BirthTo6/MyBookLists/ShowList.cfm?ListID=6618>

Everyday Diversity in Chapter books

<https://www.hclib.org/pub/bookspace/mybooklists/ShowList.cfm?ListID=6310>

"I'm Here, I'm Queer, What the Hell Do I Read?" <http://www.leewind.org/> GLBTQ books and blogs for young readers.

Latinos in Kidlit <http://latinosinkidlit.com/>

Rich in Color <http://richincolor.com/> Features YA books about people-of-color, by people-of-color.

Teaching Tolerance: a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center

<http://www.tolerance.org/>

"**M**osaic: Our Characters in the World" is a presentation by writers [Terry Farish](#) and [Maria Padian](#) at the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators New England Conference, May 4, 2014.

Contact: Terry Farish, [tfarish at gmail.com](mailto:tfarish@gmail.com)