



## Reading Globally: The Reader's Responsibility in Literary Transactions

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**Abstract:** Cultural authenticity is always a central consideration in evaluating international children's literature. However, in addition to the author's role in creating authentic texts –particularly when authors are writing outside their own cultures– readers bear responsibility for reading globally. That is, readers must read both widely and critically. These two aspects of global reading are demonstrated through close examination of selected paired books from different cultures in South Africa and the United States.

**Key words:** critical reading, cultural criticism

One of IBBY's primary goals has always been to promote global diversity and tolerance through children's books. However, in literary transactions, readers also have a major responsibility to *read globally*, which my colleagues and I describe in our work elsewhere (Lehman, Freeman & Scharer, 2010). This paper addresses two aspects of that term. One meaning for reading globally is to read *widely* –that is, to read books from outside our own cultural contexts, indeed from around the whole world. A second way of reading globally is to read *critically*– that is, to become informed readers who assess the authenticity of global books.

### Reading globally as reading widely

In the first case –that is, reading widely– I have found in my work with U.S. teachers and students that reading globally often is facilitated by pairing books from abroad with American texts that have similar themes, characters, or plots. These kinds of pairs help readers to see connections more easily between the familiar and the foreign. Based upon my experience as an American who has lived and researched children's literature in South Africa, I will demonstrate this type of reading globally through a pair of picture books –*The Day Gogo Went to Vote*, by Elinor Batezat Sisulu (1996) from South Africa, and *Papa's Mark*, by Gwendolyn Battle-Lavert (2003) from the U.S.

The primary theme of these two stories concerns first voting experiences for previously disenfranchised groups of people. In *Gogo*, young Thembi's 100-year-old great-grandmother is determined to vote in the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 in spite of her family's doubts about Gogo's physical stamina to wait in a long line at the polls. Thembi proudly accompanies Gogo to the polling booth in a rich neighbor's fancy car and



watches Gogo show her identity book, have her hand swabbed with ultraviolet ink, and cast her secret ballot for Nelson Mandela. As the oldest voter in the township, Gogo has her picture with Thembi taken for the newspaper, and the whole extended family later celebrates the election at home with feasting, singing, and dancing. Helpfully for non-South African readers, unfamiliar terms are explained in a glossary and pronunciation guide.

*Papa's Mark*, which is set in a southern state after the end of the United States Civil War, portrays an African American community's excitement leading up to the first election day in which they will be permitted to vote. A boy named Simms determines to teach his papa how to write his name so he will be able to sign his name properly to get his ballot. The "mark" in the title refers to the X that illiterate persons used as their signature. With daily practice, Papa's "chicken scratch" becomes legible, and he proudly leads a group of African American men to the courthouse to cast their votes. An author's note adds historical context regarding the rights of Black people to vote in spite of southern Whites repeated attempts to disenfranchise them. Legal milestones during the century from 1870 –when the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guaranteed Black men's right to vote– until 1965 –when the landmark Voting Rights Act passed Congress– are described.

Both books also depict intergenerational relationships, as two children accompany and/or assist their elders with voting. Gogo insists, despite Thembi's parents' objections, that she needs Thembi's help at the polling place to hold her blue bag while Gogo votes. The experience makes a huge impression on Thembi, which her great-grandmother certainly intends. Gogo wants the child to witness Gogo's first –and possibly last– time to exercise the right for which Black South Africans had struggled for so many years. Likewise, Simms, who attends school and writes signs urging Black Americans to vote, wants to help his papa be spared the shame of only being able to mark an X for his name. When Papa at first resists Simms' offer to teach him how to write his name, Simms persists until Papa gets it right. Thus, both children are educated by their families in the significance of the vote to their hard-won freedom and equality and the importance of voting to a better future for them. Both children also feel part of the democratic process and make an important contribution to it. Thembi and Simms share personal and political commonalities, ones with which many other child readers may identify and empathize.



### **Reading globally as reading critically**

The second aspect of reading globally –that is, reading critically– involves becoming educated about the authenticity of books to the cultures they represent. This can be particularly problematic for readers who are outside those cultures. To demonstrate this type of reading globally, I present two novels with many parallels for older readers, *Song of Be*, by South African author Lesley Beake (1993), and *Julie of the Wolves*, by American writer Jean Craighead George (1972). These two books, which both feature indigenous cultures and young female protagonists coming to terms with modern realities, offer many benefits for broadening readers’ perspectives. Both books have received wide literary critical acclaim and have been translated into multiple languages in addition to English.

*Song of Be* is a novella set in Namibia at the time of its independence from South Africa. The protagonist, Be, is a Bushmen girl who has gone with her mother from their tribal home to live with her grandfather, who works on a white farmer’s land. When they arrive at the farm, Be is befriended and educated by the boss’s wife Min, but slowly Be loses her childhood innocence as she discovers secrets about the boss, his deeply troubled wife, and Be’s own mother, Aia. As Be learns these things, she becomes very disillusioned –a classic coming-of-age theme, when the realization of parental faults, dashes childhood images of perfection.

Another clear theme in this novel is the clash between indigenous cultures and dominant outside colonizers whose modernity threatens a traditional way of life. The current lives of people like the Bushmen have become degraded by removal from their land to “locations” established by white settlers, by a lack of meaningful employment, and by alcohol abuse. Although this former way of life, in a sense, is dying and must change, we later learn that some Bushmen –far from becoming extinct as in the popular perception voiced by both Min and a visiting journalist– were actively involved in the independence movement and politically and socially reinventing their place in the new country. Thus, as Be matures, she must come to terms with both positive and negative realities of life and decide what she wants for her future.

In comparison, *Julie of the Wolves*, portrays how Julie/Miyax, a 13-year-old Alaskan native, flees an intolerable home and arranged marriage situation in Barrow on the North Slope and becomes lost on the tundra. She is saved by a wolf pack and, in the end, finds her father but must come to terms with his new life. This classic realistic novel also depicts the



clash between a traditional way of life and modern civilization, as symbolized by her very name, Miyax/Julie. Her culture, like many other Native American cultures, has been degraded by Western civilization in ways similar to those that the Bushmen have suffered. In addition, Miyax, too, is disillusioned when she discovers that her idealized father, Kapugen, is implicated in the changes she so resists. He has married a gussack (a White woman), and in order to make a living, he has acquired a small airplane that he uses to carry sportsmen on hunts from the air, endangering the very wolves that had saved her life. A theme similar to the one in *Song of Be* is echoed in the last lines of the novel: “*That the hour of the wolf and the Eskimo is over* (italics in original). Julie pointed her boots toward Kapugen” (70), meaning that she decides to stay with her father. Julie’s way of making peace with these realities seems to be resignation. However, this resolution, which is less hopeful than in *Song of Be*, is mitigated in the novel’s sequels, *Julie* (1994) and *Julie’s Wolf Pack* (1997). Julie becomes an activist for saving the wolves in the second book, and in the third novel, Kapu, the wolf pup in *Julie of the Wolves*, is the central character. Julie, now an adult, returns to study him and his wolf pack on the Alaskan tundra, thus demonstrating a more positive and proactive response by Julie about her future.

Both *Song of Be* and *Julie of the Wolves* present the thoughts and emotions of early adolescents who are emerging from the innocence of childhood into the disconcerting and sometimes even disillusioning realities that accompany maturity. In spite of their geographical separation, these girls share many of the same concerns. They also share significant social and political similarities that affect both their personal future and the fate of their cultures’ ways of life. These broader issues can provide opportunities for students at this age to make comparisons between the two indigenous cultures depicted in the novels and with their own lives, wherever they live in the world. In the process, they may gain empathy from the broader perspectives afforded by reading them as a pair.

However, both books also have been criticized for their depictions (by outside writers) of the cultures represented, and it would be dishonest to ignore these critiques. Beginning with *Song of Be*, I learned from Lesley Beake’s website (2010) about her work with an anthropologist, begun prior to Namibian independence, as founders of the Village Schools Project in Nyae Nyae, Namibia, the setting for *Song of Be*. Recently, she initiated a new project with the people of Nyae Nyae to develop a website with the stated goal to provide:



a virtual space for networking and exchange of information among contemporary Kalahari communities and individuals throughout Southern Africa. On it, the San and other indigenous Kalahari dwellers speak in their own voices to each other and to interested people outside their communities (Kalahari Peoples Network, 2010).

On this website, I learned more about Be's people, and a page on the site, called "Primary School", includes information particularly addressed to students. From this research, I can tell that Beake is a knowledgeable outsider dedicated to the culture about which she writes.

Similarly, Jean Craighead George's website (2010) tells me about her background in a family of naturalists; her dual science-literature bachelor's degree; her summer at the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory in Barrow, Alaska, among wolf researchers; her two sequels to this book; and the nearly one hundred books she has written, virtually all on environmental and nature topics. I am impressed with her credentials, and I believe both authors have credible expertise about the subjects of their books.

Still, I realize that both women are white and not true insiders of the cultures they portray in these books. Both have been questioned about their status and authority to write about the cultures, and George has been criticized for inaccuracies and stereotypes in her portrayal of the Iñupiat culture. For example, see Martha Stackhouse's (2006) review of the book on the Alaska Native Knowledge Network website. Critics also charge that George presents the culture as becoming extinct (similar to the perception of Bushmen). Both authors have defended the terminology they call the people. In *Julie's Wolf Pack*, George explains why she refers to Miyax's people as "Eskimos", a term sometimes viewed as inaccurate or demeaning. In an author's note, she writes, "Currently the name *Eskimo* is being replaced by *Inuit* to identify the circumpolar Eskimo people living in North America, Greenland, and Siberia." However, "the native people of Alaska's North Slope call themselves Eskimos or Iñupiat Eskimos" (unpaged). Likewise, Beake defends her use of "Bushman" explaining in her author's note, "Much has been written about [the Ju/'hoan] people, who are sometimes called the San, but who prefer to be known as the Bushmen" (unpaged). At least, both authors acknowledge the controversy and explain their rationales for the language they use, citing the native people's own preferences. Readers must balance the evidence in their own evaluation of these books.



## Conclusion

In the end, as important as it is for authors to bear responsibility for the authenticity of what they write –particularly when they are not insiders to the cultures they are depicting– readers must educate themselves to be thoughtfully critical in responses to books –especially when those books are outside our own realm of experience and knowledge. Teachers and librarians who are committed to the ideals of IBBY will want to provide young readers with the kind of wide reading material that encircles the globe. At the same time, we should teach young people to read critically and become informed rather than to accept such texts unquestioningly. In the end, reading globally is as much the reader’s responsibility in the literary transaction as it is the author’s to strive for authenticity. The rewards and values of reading widely will be enhanced with reading critically.

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