CHICANOS AND CHILDREN'S FICTION

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Evidence indicates that children's attitudes may be changed by what they read. If this be the case, then children's literature has the power to foster better race relations and to improve understanding among all human beings. "At its best it can hold a mirror up to minority life and provide memorable characters with whom minority children can identify. At its best it can enable children to gain insights into the lives and essential humanity of people who seem superficially different. Any culture in the world is enormously multifaceted. There is no one white life or black life or Latin American life or Indian life that is entirely representative of its people. Children's literature that 'tells it like it is' about a culture must talk of patience and joy and triumph as well as of violence, pain, and despair. Children's literature, therefore, may make the distinct contribution of dispelling stereotypes about groups." 

For my project I chose to explore the field of children's fiction in relation to the Chicano child. I read forty-four books that claimed Chicano themes and analyzed them for relevance to the Chicano child's lifestyle. From reading these books would a Chicano's self-image be enhanced? Would a non-Chicano child gain a better understanding of Chicano culture? Are the books well written? How much stereotyping, if any, do they contain? Do these books mirror minority life?
Many of the books purporting to have a Chicano theme actually do not. Definitions of Chicano are so broad that publishers include in that category books about Mexico, about Mexicans, about characters with Spanish names, about characters who speak Spanish, and about people who live in the Southwest. Since these books are being used to present a picture of Chicano life, it is important to be aware of their contents, also.

One of the most interesting picture books having characters with Spanish names is Don Bolognese's *A New Day* which imaginatively retells the Christmas story in a modern setting. José and María are young Chicanos who try to find lodging in Los Angeles. Their special son is born in a garage and receives visits from three cowboys and some migrant workers. *A New Day* depicts the birth of Christ in images that today's Chicano child can understand.

In *Helinda's Christmas Stocking* by Ruth Jaynes there are no references at all to Chicanos, either positive or negative. Having no real theme or plot, the book shows the joy of a small girl with her Christmas stocking. The characters, illustrated by colored photographs, appear to be Chicano because of their dark skin, hair, and eyes.

Ruth Jaynes has written two other books in the Early Childhood Series about Chicano children. *What Is a Birthday Child?* is a non-racist, non-sexist story about a little Chicana and her birthday. The colored photographs present multi-ethnic children. The other book, *Tell Me, Please! What's That?*, shows a visit to the zoo by Chicano Juan and his Anglo friend David. Each teaches the other the names of different animals in his own.
language. The purpose of this book is to teach Anglos a few Spanish words and to show the friendship between the two races. Although these two books are lacking in plot and interest, they are positive in their treatment of ethnic groups.

One book that fails totally is Something Special by David Tucker. Pablo looks like an Anglo with dark hair and Billy stereotypically has blond hair. The book does contain an element of suspense, but it is poorly written and lacking in literary value. There is nothing here with which a Chicano child could identify.

The only thing remotely related to Chicanos in Ann Nolan Clark's La Marfa's Garden is the title. Even though the book does not present any Chicano culture, any child would benefit from reading its poetry and looking at Ezra Jack Keats' fine illustrations of desert life.

I was dissatisfied with Gilberto and the Wind by Marie Hall Ets. Gilberto is supposedly Chicano, but the only things Chicano about him are his name and his stereotyped dark complexion. Also, his escapades with the wind are rather dull.

For so long Anglos have ignored the contributions made by the Chicanos' Indian ancestors that only recently have Chicanos discovered the pride of their true heritage. Byrd Baylor's beautiful, poetic narrative of Before You Came This Way describes the cave paintings of prehistoric man, thus giving an insight into Chicano heritage. Tom Bahlö based his illustrations on prehistoric rock drawings found in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.

The Chicanos' ancestors, however, are not always praised
in children's literature. *Wild Boy* by Thomas Fall demeans both the Comanches and the Mexicans. Roberto, wise in the ways of the Comanches, is able to prevent an Indian raid on "innocent" white people. The Indians are shown as cruel and unlawful; whereas, Roberto is wild and a loner. A Chicano child could not positively identify with either the Indians or Roberto.

*Amigo* is a Spanish word meaning friend, and friendship is the theme of *Amigo* by Byrd Baylor Schweitzer. Garth Williams delicately illustrates this story of a prairie dog that tames a young boy and vice versa. The boy in this story has a Spanish name, but the book does not concern itself with his life as a Chicano. The value of *Amigo* lies in the love between a boy and his friend, love that any child, Chicano or otherwise, needs.

If one reads enough books on Chicano themes, he will find recurring themes and stereotypes. Many picture books, especially those of the 1940's and 1950's, show the "cute" little customs of a foreign culture. When one thinks of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans (the term Chicano is relatively recent), he pictures brown-skinned people wearing sombreros and serapes and riding a burro or sitting under a cactus. Any child can recognize a Mexican scene thanks to these picture books. Nowhere does the Mexico of modern cities, heavy industry and great universities exist. The people always live in small communities that are poor in comparison to Anglo standards.

The worst of all these picture books is Theresa Kaleb Smith's *Poncho and the Pink Horse*. It is a silly story about a boy and his burro who look sad when they are glad and look glad when they are sad. The story is superficial and the illustrations
are full of the usual stereotypes: "For the big event Madre Ortiz dressed herself in a beautiful dress and mantilla her mother gave her, the one she had brought from Old Spain. And Padre Ortiz put on his big sombrero, the one his father had worn before him in Old Mexico. Little Poncho, riding Chiquita, wore a big sombrero and a scrape over his shoulders." The book also ridicules Spanish names. To an Anglo a Spanish name often seems long and complicated, but Lorenzo Guadalupe Gonzales Romero Ortiz?

Leo Politi has written and illustrated several cultural picture books about children of Mexican descent. They are pretty but outdated. A child would receive a mistaken impression about Chicano culture if Politi's books were used as illustrations of Chicano life. A Chicanito might recognize some of the customs, but there are no characters with whom he could actually identify. 

Juanita describes the ceremony of the Blessing of the Animals on Olvera Street of Los Angeles. Juanita's family is poor (aren't all Chicanos?) but happy. "The Gonzales did not make very much money but when things did not go well they only had to look at Juanita playing like a little angel around the puesto and their troubles were soon forgotten." How easy it is! Again the men wear sombreros and the women, rebozos. All the children look alike. The book also insinuates by its pictures that Mexican-American women always have many children.

Sonz of the Swallows contains quaint, sweet illustrations of the swallows of Capistrano and the old mission church. There is an emphasis on the beauty of nature. The book is irrelevant to Chicano children today. Lito and the Clown and Rosa are additional Politi stories with familiar Mexican stereotypes,
although the pictures are updated somewhat.

Pedro, the Angel of Olvera Street describes the Christmas custom of Las Posadas. At all Mexican fiestas (as seen through picture books) a piñata is broken. Nine Days to Christmas by Marie Hall Ets and One Luminaria for Antonio by Flora Hood also describe Christmas customs. Toci, the little Mexican girl in Nine Days to Christmas, is the typical adorable little Mexican girl. This book is too full of piñatas and women with rebozos and children. One Luminaria for Antonio revolves around the legend of how the Christ child blesses the people with luminarias and Antonio’s great desire to have one. Antonio is a patient, religious child but is not a well-rounded character. The main purpose of the book is to present the custom of luminarias. This book could be used with a Chicano child to make him proud and aware of his culture, but Anglo children need to be warned that all Chicanos do not live in towns like the one presented in this book.

Leo Politi also illustrated Elizabeth Coatsworth’s The Noble Doll which is a beautiful story of a grand, but poor, Spanish señora and her doll Rosita. This book also contains an overabundance of Mexican images—piñatas, ponchos, cacti, sombreros. It does not reflect the Mexican or Chicano lifestyle as there are few Spanish señoras around any more.

Of the books I read, there is not one picture book that presents an accurate picture of the Chicano lifestyle. Most are stereotyped, and those that are not are silly, dull stories that do not show anything about Chicanos, like Fidelia by Ann Grifalconi about a girl who wants to play a violin and The Toy
Trumpet about a boy who wants to play a trumpet. These children are supposedly "Mexican-American", and they do have Spanish names, but there the connection ends.

"Mexicali Soup" by Kathryn Kitta belittles Chicano heritage. The mother is fat, wears a cross and has her hair rolled on each side of her head. The family is large and appears to be getting larger. Like all good Mexicans and Chicanos, the father wears a mustache. The family has just moved to the big city and the children want to ignore their background. "You know, Mama, they have different ways of doing things here, different from the ways of our town on the side of the mountain. I think we should try new ways." A Chicano reading this book would not have his pride in his own way of doing things reinforced.

Poverty is certainly a must in a story about a Chicano. Almost all the characters are poor. This poverty is usually contrasted with the affluence of Anglos which does not do anything for the Chicano's self-image.

Another frequent theme is the migrant theme. Several of the authors have tried to present a realistic picture of migrant life, but all their characters are similar. From these books one receives the impression that migrants are satisfied with the poverty in which they live or, if not satisfied, at least they feel like there is nothing they can do about it. Then a young Chicano militant arrives on the scene and convinces the people that they can have a say if they will all band together. Since the mid-1960's more of these migrant books have been written. They do a good job describing the living
and working conditions of farm workers, but the plots are almost always the same.

Migrant families travel from place to place while the heroine tries to get as much schooling as she can on the road. An Anglo female schoolteacher is always on hand to help out. Knock at the Door, Emmy shows only the bad side of migrant life. Andrés, A Chicano, wants to marry Emmy who is an Anglo, but he is not good enough for her. Chicanos in this book are presented as happy-go-lucky, non-caring, dirty migrant workers.

Dacey Cotter, Migrant Girl, hates migrant life but doesn't know how to fight against the injustice she sees until Juan comes into her life. Migrant Girl is a good protest novel, but the plot is unoriginal. Also, most of the Chicano characters speak English with a Spanish syntax which is a common stereotypical manner of presenting the English of those whose first language is Spanish.

Still another common theme of books about Chicanos is the importance of learning English. It is important that all American citizens learn English, but Chicano children must keep their own language, too. Usually in the books that emphasize learning English, the children aren't encouraged to retain pride in the Spanish language. Trina of Trina's Boxcar cannot make friends with an Anglo girl until she learns English. This is the most important thing in her life. The children make fun of her because of her Spanish. Men succeed if they know English thinks Trina's father who gets promoted, not because of his superior work, but because he knows English. "This is America where a man may go to the top, if he will speak and read English."
The book has a few good points. The children do get together and share cultures, and the school teacher tells Irina and her brother that they are fortunate to be bilingual.

A picture book stressing the importance of English is Bad Boy, Good Boy by Marie Hall Ets. Roberto is a "bad" boy until he learns English in a nursery school. The father kicks the mother out until a kind-hearted Anglo lady takes her in and teaches her to cook and to speak English. This book is not good for any child. It belittles Chicanos by not respecting their language. It shows a man angry with his wife because she forgot to buy food. Roberto is left alone during the day and gets into all sorts of scrapes until the police force his father to send him to school. This book negatively pictures Chicano family life.

The 1970's have seen an increase in the number of books being written about Chicanos. For the most part, these books are an improvement over those written in previous decades.

Scott O'Dell in Child of Fire accurately describes the struggles of the farm workers but gives the impression that all Chicano youths are juvenile delinquents.

Donna of Chicano Girl by Rila Colman is dissatisfied with her life and wishes to be rich like the Anglos. After meeting Romero, a young Chicano militant, and being convinced that she should be proud of her heritage, she goes home to her family and ends up hating Anglos. "She would never hold out her hand or accept anything from a gringo again. The chasm between them and her was deep. They were on their side, she was on hers, and there could be no bridge between them."
There are some Chicano leaders who want to break all ties with the Anglo world and establish an independent Chicano state. They feel that Chicanos and Anglos never will be able to get along. Moreover, this view is too pessimistic. This book provides a negative character for Chicanas to identify with, and it doesn't contribute to better race relations.

The only book that I read that is really relevant to Chicano youth is Rose Blue's *We Are Chicano*. Carlos is a lonely boy who discovers the meaning of Chicano and finds a place for himself. Ms. Blue sensitively portrays Chicano problems with no stereotypes. The book describes the social tension between Anglos and Chicanos, a demonstration by farm workers, and the pride and ability of Chicanos to make something of their lives.

The most circulated book on a Mexican-American theme is ...

...And Now Miguel by Joseph Krumgold. *Interracial Books for Children* cautions against using it as an introduction to Chicano life. The book is well written, but it is not representative of the Chicano lifestyle. It is good in that it shows a varying Chicano lifestyle. Miguel is a Hispanic, a very small population of Chicanos who live in New Mexico. The book's theme of a boy growing up holds value for all children.

By doing this project I have found out for myself the weaknesses and strengths of various books claiming to be about Chicanos. There are a few excellent books, many mediocre ones and many poor ones. A great needs exists in the field of children's literature for well-written books for and about the Chicano child. The books I read were mainly written about Chicanos for Anglo children. The Chicano child needs positive
characters with whom he can identify. He needs to read about
his culture and develop pride in it. He needs to read books
free from stereotypes. Hopefully within the next few years
these books will be available to him.
NOTES


2Ibid.


SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS


