

Surfing a Wave of Good Books

Laura E. Meyers

Children's literature is one of the more popular and useful teaching tools in the elementary social studies classroom. Indeed, "[m]ore teachers than ever are turning to literature-based social studies teaching."¹ Children's books have the potential to "communicate social studies content in an artistic manner. In books of high quality, both the author and the illustrator present their subject in aesthetically pleasing forms, making human stories beautiful."² Thus, the impact literature can have on students during a social studies lesson is significant, and the importance of selecting quality literature becomes all the more important.

"Carefully chosen picture books present compelling stories that invite students to identify with and care about social studies content."³ How do practitioners 'carefully choose' appropriate literature in an efficient manner? The Internet has quickly become a major resource for finding curricular materials and related teacher resources, such as lesson plans, recommended readings, and pedagogic critiques.

My Internet journeys in search of 'good' children's literature began much like other people's web adventures: I surfed the amazing Amazon, Borders, and Barnes and Noble websites to seek out and purchase children's books. Over time, I turned to specific websites passed on to me by peers and colleagues and grew experienced at using Internet search engines. I sought websites that met certain criteria. Quality resources need to remain updated, available, accurate, and user friendly; they must have clear connections between social studies content and children's literature. I have grown to depend on nationally recognized sites that are dedicated to students, teachers, social studies, and/or children's literature. What follows then, are the results of my personal adventures: brief descriptions of a collection of sites I have found useful for identifying

quality children's literature to use in the social studies classroom.

Children's Literature Databases

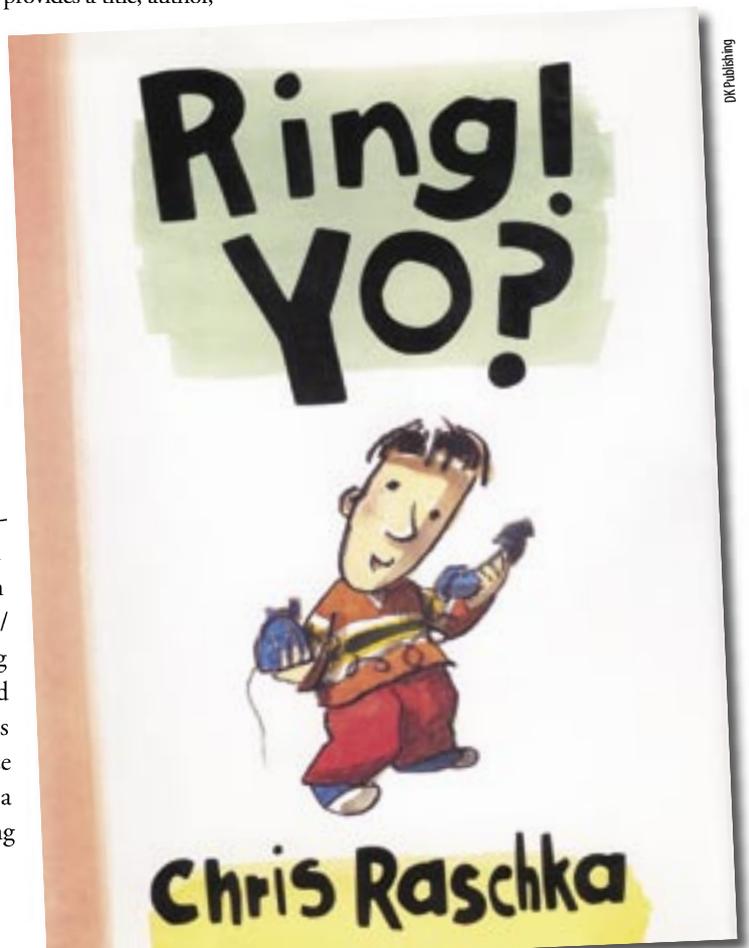
Miami University's Children's Picture Book Database
www.lib.muohio.edu/pictbks

The Children's Picture Book Database is a database bibliography that covers more than 5,000 picture books for elementary classroom use. Faculty and students at Miami University created and maintain it. Alphabetical keyword and Boolean search capabilities are available for over 900 topics, concepts, and skills—factors that are mentioned in each book's description. For example, a Boolean search on the word "rights" identified two abstracts, including Evelyn Coleman's *White Socks Only*, which is an excellent literary resource for teaching about civil rights. Each entry provides a title, author, publisher, plot summary, and related key words (e.g., African American, community, exercise, family, fear, feelings, grandparents, multicultural, prejudice, pride, seasons, summer, walking, and weather). Each keyword led to booklists about that selected topic. I chose to continue my search and explore the keyword "prejudice" and was offered seventeen recommended titles/abstracts including *Baseball Saved Us* and *The Other Side*. This is a wonderful resource to use when creating a reading list, developing

a literature-based thematic unit, or selecting a book to read aloud that focuses on a particular social studies topic, concept, or skill.

Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (CLCD)
www.childrenslit.com

The Children's Literature Comprehensive Database is a comprehensive resource to use when looking for recent news about children's literature, author/illustrator websites, book lists, and book reviews. However, unlike other recommended sites suggested in this article, this particular site requires a hefty subscription fee to obtain access to its comprehensive database of children's literature. It is worth the free seven-day trial subscription to determine if this is a good resource for you and/or your school/library.



What makes one consider purchasing a subscription (and makes the free visits very useful, while they last) are the critical reviews. The CLCD staff of librarians and teachers reviews thousands of picture books and chapter books each year. Currently, there are “more than 150,000 reviews of children’s books” available along with over 1,800 links to author and illustrator web pages. The book reviews of the CLCD are licensed to Barnes and Noble who uses these reviews on their own website and within their store kiosks.

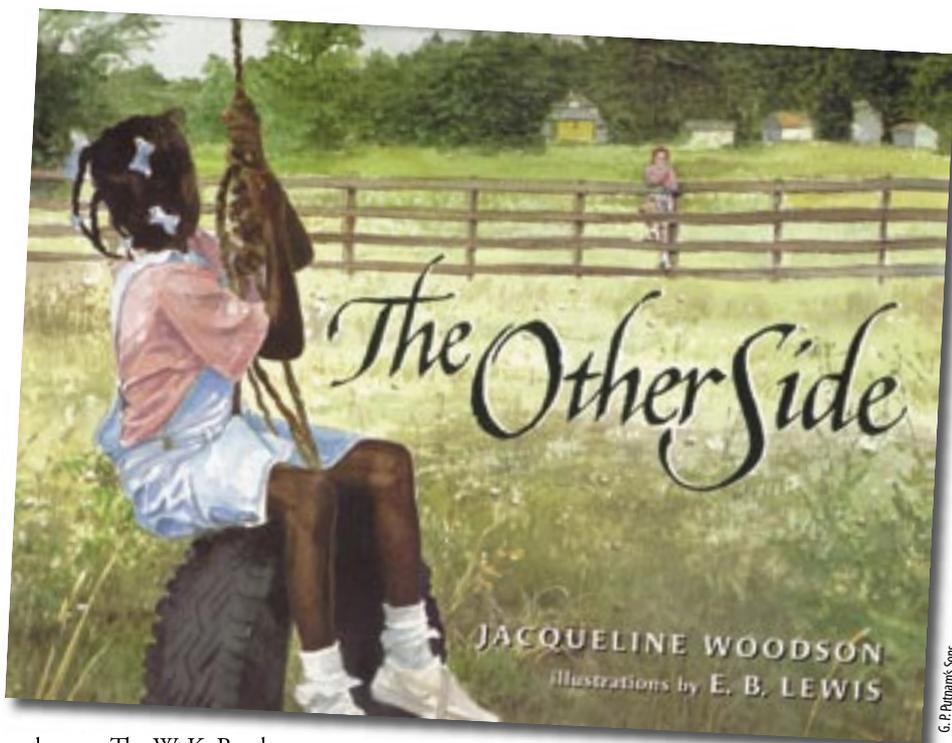
The CLCD search options include: category, genre, keyword, author/illustrator, title, series, annotation, subject, awards, best books, reading lists, reviews, reviewer, and ISBN. Searches can be limited by including the age of the reader, language, author, illustrator, publisher, and publication date. During my free 7-day trial, I tried a search for books about the American Revolution for age 10. I limited my search to historical fiction published from 1995 to the present and had 116 records returned. The returned records contained an annotation, book reviews, a list of awards won by the book, the ‘best books’ lists the book appears on, links to books on the same subject, and links to other books by the same author.

Organizations Promoting Children’s Literature

American Library Association (ALA) ala.org

The American Library Association’s mission “is to promote the highest quality library and information services and public access to information.” In doing so, it includes quick links to various literary awards on its website. Click on the “Awards & Scholarships” link on the homepage. Then, click on the “Book/Media Awards” in the left column. A list of awards will be available that includes the Caldecott Medal Award, the Newbery Medal Award, and the Coretta Scott King Book Award. Each award hosts its own website, where books that won the award in past years are listed and described (sometimes in great detail).

It is interesting to check out some of the less well-known awards and categories. For example, Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers offers a bibliography of approximately 75 fiction/nonfiction titles that have been nominated as books teenagers are more likely to choose on their own to read for



pleasure. The W. K. Boyd

Award is given to the author of the best piece of fiction that takes place during a time when the United States has been at war. This award “recognizes the service of American veterans and military personnel and encourages the writing and publishing of outstanding war-related fiction.”

Children’s Book Council (CBC) www.cbcbooks.org

The Children’s Book Council encourages the enjoyment and celebration of children’s literature through sponsoring and promoting such events as National Poetry Week and Children’s Book Week for young people. This site consists of a plethora of useful information including a wide variety of children’s book titles. The “Bimonthly Showcase” highlights themes such as families, holidays, and biographies. A plot summary and description of the art are part of each bibliography. Educators can visit the “About Authors & Illustrators” link to retrieve background, and contact information for authors and illustrators. I found two of my favorite author-illustrators listed: Chris Raschka (*Charlie Parker Played Be Bop* and others) and Ashley Bryan (*The Sun is So Quiet* and others). A lengthy list of “must know” authors/illustrators is available for preschool through 8th grade students. Each compilation includes a brief description of an author’s or illustrator’s work and published titles. A “Hot Off the Press” site supplies, on the 15th of each month, titles and descriptions of current and

upcoming publications. CBC encourages educators to use local, independently owned bookstores when purchasing children’s books. BookSense.com is included as a useful link throughout their site and allows teachers to track down book stores near home.

Children’s Literature Association (ChLA) ebbs.english.vt.edu/chla/

The Children’s Literature Association promotes “serious scholarship and research in children’s literature” and does so through sponsoring literary awards, hosting an annual conference, and publishing a quarterly journal. I found the most useful aspect of this site to be the “Links” due to the variety of topics it introduces, such as “folklore,” “multiculturalism,” “genre,” “young adult literature,” “censorship,” and “research tools.” When skimming through the suggested links, I discovered Professor Kay Vandergriff’s name appearing again and again, and thus her website is described below.

International Reading Association (IRA) www.reading.org

The International Reading Association supports the promotion of “literacy for all by improving the quality of reading instruction, disseminating research and information about reading, and encouraging the lifetime reading habit.” The IRA collaborates with the Children’s Book Council each year to compile a list of children’s, teachers’, and young adults’ personal choices in literature. The list of the

Children's Choices Awards is divided by reading levels (beginning, young, intermediate, and advanced readers) and calls attention to titles that are favorites of young students. The Teachers' Choices Awards are grouped in a similar fashion, but highlight literature that reflects notable literary quality, requires adult interaction for full understanding, and is useful across the curriculum. I found immediate, obvious connections to the social studies curriculum throughout the Teachers' Choices and Children's Choices booklists. It would be helpful if these lists were divided by topics. For easier searching, I recommend printing a hard copy of the list (available in PDF format) for skimming and sharing with colleagues.

Oyate (Berkeley, CA)
oyate.org

Oyate encourages educators to seek literature that is honest in its portrayal of Native American children. This site offers book reviews of published children's literature to avoid and an extensive list of books to utilize within the classroom. The list of useful literature is broken down by grade levels (preschool through high school), but educators are reminded to look beyond that simple categorization. Teachers will also find useful resource guides that suggest activities, lesson plans, and literature for teaching such topics as "Thanksgiving" and "Christopher Columbus." This is a very straightforward, dependable, and user-friendly website. Purchases of literature, resource guides, posters, and other useful teaching materials can currently be made through this site.

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)
www.socialstudies.org

"The mission of National Council for the Social Studies is to provide leadership, service, and support for all social studies educators." Every year, NCSS (which publishes this journal) collaborates with the Children's Book Council to review and select a collection of children's books that are appropriate for use in the K-8th grade social studies classroom. The list of Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People has been published since 1972. Each entry includes a book's title, reference information, plot summary, reading level, and connection to the social studies curriculum standards.⁴ The sections of this booklist are organized by genres (e.g., biography, contemporary concerns, folk-

tales, and reference). Scholarly reviewers have listed a suggested connection to specific themes for each book.

NCSS established the Carter G. Woodson Book Award in 1974 "to encourage the writing, publishing, and dissemination of outstanding social science books for young readers that treat topics related to ethnic minorities and relations sensitively and accurately." I found this list of titles and authors/illustrators very useful. It alerted me to books that would fit well into the social studies curriculum that also center on a topic, such as baseball, that is likely to be of interest to young students.

III. A University Scholar

Kay Vandergrift's Children's Literature Page
scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/ChildrenLit

Dr. Vandergrift (a professor in the School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey) has compiled a diverse collection of information with regards to children's literature. She poses questions for educators to consider pertaining to the inclusion of various genres of literature. Each question is followed by a collection of booklists. Booklists on specific cultures (Islamic, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American) are available. The link "Native Americans: A Resource List for Teaching," includes booklists for young readers, resources for teachers, and recommended music and videos. The information presented at this site about authors and illustrators is very complete. It is one of the best author bibliography collections that I have found. For example, searching under "M" (which included over 80 names), I found one of my favorite authors Walter Dean Myers (*Blues Journey* and *Harlem*). His link includes a biography, bibliography of his published works, contributions to anthologies and articles, film adaptations, additional bibliographic sources, awards earned, banned books, and reviews and critiques. "Young people especially want to know about their favorite authors/illustrators because they often feel that an author/illustrator is speaking directly and personally to them through the work," writes Vandergrift. Several university departments of children's literature host Internet sites, but I found that this one had the best blend of options for seeking various genres of children's literature to implement in a social studies classroom.

Happy Surfing!

Enjoy testing the waters with these recommended sites. I have used these resources when assisting pre-service teachers in tracking literature related to a specific social studies topic, creating content-driven reading lists, and seeking literature elementary children may enjoy reading for pleasure. I hope these sites will help practitioners expand their bibliographies and libraries and link children's literature to their social studies curriculum. 🌐

Notes

1. George Maxim, *Social Studies and the Elementary School Child* (Columbus, OH: Merrill/Prentice Hall, 1999), 472.
2. DeAn M. Krey, *Children's Literature in Social Studies: Teaching to the Standards* (Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies), 10.
3. Cherryl Sage, "One Hundred Notable Picture Books in The Field Of Social Studies" in M. Zarnowski and A. F. Gallagher, eds., *Children's Literature and Social Studies: Selecting and Using Notable Books in the Classroom* (Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies), 5-11.
4. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Social Studies Curriculum Standards* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).

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- . *Harlem*. New York: Scholastic, 1997.
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