

Children's Literature

Who Writes History? Developing a Social Imagination with Third Graders

Joan Zaleski and Vera Zinnel

I swam closer to get a better look and had to stop myself from laughing. The strangers had wrapped every part of their bodies with colorful leaves and cotton. Some had decorated their faces with fur and wore shiny rocks on their heads. Compared to us, they were very round. Their canoe was short and square, and, in spite of all their dipping and pulling, it moved slowly. What a backward, distant island they must have come from.¹

In order that they would be friendly to us, to some of them I gave red caps, and glass beads, and many other things of small value, in which they took so much pleasure and became so much our friends that it was a marvel. In sum, they took everything and gave of what they had very willingly. But it seemed to me that they were a people very poor in everything. They should be good and intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seems to me that they have no religion.²

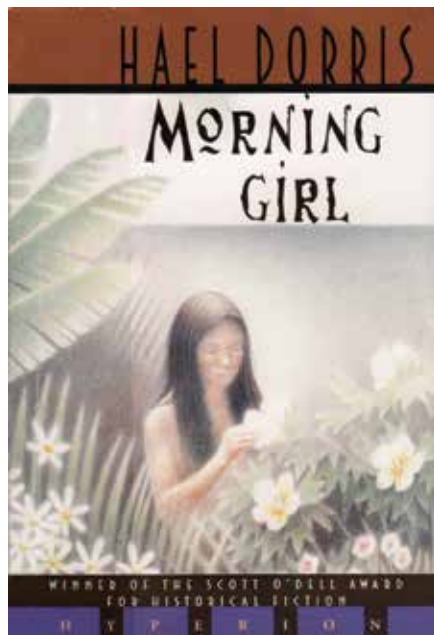
It is hard to imagine a more serious clash of cultures than that which happened with the arrival of the Christopher Columbus and his fellow Europeans in 1492 in what is now called the Americas. As Michael Dorris imagines in the excerpts above

from his children's novel *Morning Girl*, the initial meeting holds hints at what will happen to the gentle and friendly native Taino peoples. History has recorded what happened to Columbus and his crew, much of it translated and transcribed from Columbus's own words, and further embellished in our national mythology

every October in our classrooms. But could there be other stories about this meeting of peoples that haven't been recorded? Are there other voices that might tell a different story about the arrival of Columbus? Why haven't their stories been part of history? What place do they have in our annual October discussions as we celebrate Columbus Day with our students?

These questions were important for Vera, a third grade teacher (and co-author of this article), who developed her unit on Columbus with the lens toward teaching with equity and social justice. Over her 23 years of teaching elementary school, Vera had often fallen into the familiar rhythm of the fall social studies curriculum, with its predictable narrative of discovery, bravery, heroism, and thanksgiving. Her journey to becoming a more reflective, thoughtful, and equitable

teacher of young children is the product of her own growth and discovery.³ During her own studies and professional development, she found herself taking on different perspectives that made her question some aspects of her teaching. In addition, being part of a teacher inquiry group, she was becoming more



familiar with global children’s literature that would help students think more about their place in the world around them.⁴ She found the support from others in the group to create “a pedagogy of joy and justice,” where the voices brought into the classroom include not only those of students, but also the underrepresented and marginalized.⁵

Vera describes below how she chose to rethink her social studies unit on Columbus with her third graders by focusing on the Big Idea, “Who gets to write history?” That is, whose stories are told? What can we learn from listening to others’ stories? Ever mindful of adhering to standards (Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects), Vera implemented reading, writing, listening, and speaking experiences to develop concepts of perspective in this unit.

Vera’s Story

Columbus Day was approaching. I thought this was the perfect opportunity to help my students explore multiple perspectives and think more globally, as well as think about issues of equity and social justice. Through these lessons, I wanted them to develop a “social imagination,”⁶ to think about the actions of individuals in history, to wonder about their impact on a variety of peoples and places, and to develop empathy for people with whom they may not think they have much in common.

I began by asking my class, “What is history?” Their answers ranged from “It happened long ago,” “Events that happened in the past,” to “A story reborn,” and “His-story.”

I then asked, “Who writes history?” Again, I noted their responses: “People who lived through it,” “People in it,” and “The person in charge.”

To help students think more deeply about these questions, I told them a story that I wrote of two islands. Any analogies to the history of the Tainos and the arrival of Columbus and the Europeans is intentional.

Once there were two islands. The people of the island of metal traveled in boats to the island of fruit. They admired the fruit and eventually took all of it for themselves. The people of the first island were able to do so, given their metal resources which resulted in superior weaponry. Many of the people on the fruit island were killed, and their island was settled by those from the island of metals.

I end the story this way:

Books were written about the history of the people of the two islands. Children were taught the history in school, and

the history books said this: Once there were two islands. One had many wonderful people on it. The other had no people living there, but they had a special tree. Brave explorers found the island and the fruit from the special tree. That is how our great nation came to live on two islands.

The class had much to say about the unfairness of this story. Not only was there the historical injustice of seized fruit and killed islanders, there was the injustice of an incomplete telling of the full story. I added a new response from the class: “The winners write history.” With this new perspective, we began our own journey to learn about the “discovery” of America by revisiting the story of Columbus they know so well.

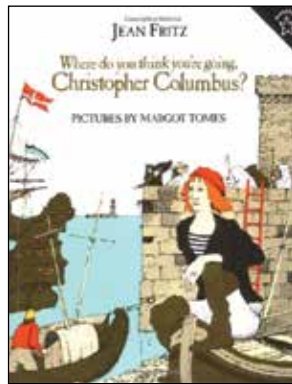
Reading Aloud

As I do with any unit, I created a text set⁷ of children’s books and other materials that would support this study of Columbus, including some older children’s books from my own childhood⁸ as well as some of the newer biographies, journals, and novels written to represent different perspectives.⁹ Some of the materials I used were primary sources, such as a translated version of Columbus’s own journal,¹⁰ and a fact sheet prepared by the Order Sons of Italy in America.¹¹ Most of these resources were written in the first person. I invited students to compare these versions of the Columbus story, to see what they have to say about this time period in history. I recognize that some of these books represented historical inaccuracies, yet I included them in the text set to invite students to read critically and try to notice inconsistencies in the narrative.

Although all of the materials in the text set were available for students to read independently or to browse through for information, I selected the children’s novel *Morning Girl* by Michael Dorris,¹² as a read aloud, a shared experience that allowed us to stop and discuss the story along the way. *Morning Girl* introduced the literary device of voice and perspective, as each chapter alternated

in the voices of the two Taino siblings, *Morning Girl* and her brother Star Boy. Through their inner monologues, we discover how each character sees him or herself and the world. Later, I gave my students a writing assignment that used this concept of inner monologue.

Reading books aloud made it possible for me to share texts that would be above most students’ individual reading levels, such as the fact sheet about Columbus by the Order Sons of Italy. After a read aloud, I encouraged discussion by asking open-ended questions, such as, “What do you think about what I just read to you?” or “How has your thinking changed after hearing this?” Through these texts, the class learned that



many cultures, not only the Spanish, captured slaves. Our class discussions allowed students to express their opinions (slavery is wrong), to ask questions of their own (Why didn't Columbus go to India by land?), and to note discoveries (Some of our English words today have their origins in the Taino language.). They listened with a critical ear and were quick to discover inaccuracies in some of the older texts, such as the use of the phrase "discovery of the New World."

Role Playing

After getting a sense of the many global players involved in this story of Columbus, my students participated in a role playing strategy developed by Christensen¹³ that I adapted to help my students take on different viewpoints and get inside an historical person's actions. What would it be like if all of these different perspectives were people who were in the same room together, meeting for the first time? Each person has a unique story to tell, while others listen and learn what is unique about this person. While Christensen imagines this activity with older students as a "tea party" or "mixer," where students freely move about the room telling and listening to a person's story, I adapted this to be a whole-class experience for my third graders. I wrote nine brief (historical fiction) monologues of people who lived during that time, including Columbus; Rodrigo De Tirana, who was the first to see land; Juan Casa, the interpreter brought along on the ship; Pedro, a ship boy; and five Taino people. Each student was assigned to a historical figure picked during our class mixer, or tea party. Later, in groups of three, each character introduced themselves to the class. As the rest of the class listened, they thought about the following questions:

1. Find someone who was on one of the three ships. Who was this person? What were his/her experiences on the ship?
2. Find someone who was frightened by the new people he/she met. Who was this person? Why was he/she scared?
3. Find someone who was taken away from their home against his/her will. Who was this person? Where and why was he/she taken?
4. Find someone who thought the newcomers were gods from the sky. Who was this person? Why did he/she think this?
5. Find someone who traded with Columbus and his sailors or helped them. Who was this person? What is this person's opinion about the newcomers?
6. Find someone who wanted to become rich. Who was this person? How did he/she think he/she would become rich?
7. Find someone who thinks the islanders would make good servants or Christians. Who was this person? Why did he/she think the islanders would make good servants or Christians?
8. Find someone who thought he/she landed in Asia. Who was this person? Why did he/she think this?
9. Find someone whose life was changed in a big way. Who was this person? How did his/her life change?

Our answers were listed on our class chart, noting those who felt Columbus was a good friend, as well as those who were taken against their will. This role-playing strategy helped students develop deeper understandings, empathy, and social imagination, as they thought about the reasons why these historical figures might have taken the actions that they did.

Writing

To follow up their role-playing, and in response to the reading of *Morning Girl*, children wrote "inner monologues"¹⁴ in the voices of the character they had selected. I shared with them an example from an inner monologue that I wrote myself. We reviewed the conversations that Morning Girl and Star Boy had with themselves as they thought about their world.

This was an academically rigorous writing task for third grade students. By this time of the year, students had moved beyond questions about how long the writing had to be. They had developed strategies for attempting to spell known and unknown words. What proved to be difficult for third graders was thinking like the character and having a conversation with oneself. Nevertheless, the following written inner monologues emerged:

I am a sailor. I am Rodrigo de Triana. I sailed on the Pinta. I saw land first. I wanted to become rich. Columbus said the money is his. The King promised money to the first man who saw land. I really wanted to get rich. I was mad because I didn't get any money. When I go back to Spain I will say, "Columbus took my money!?"

—Karl (Grade 3)

I think the people taking my friends and family should not be taking them. I am frightened because I don't want to be taken. I told my friend that did not get taken, "Don't get too close or they will take you too." He did not listen to me. They took him away! Now they're gone and I feel very upset.

—Abbie (Grade 3)

My name is Sunrise Girl. I am a native. I sleep on a hammock. With my friends I like to have fun and to make stuff. I see mom plant and I see dad hunting for food. I go to see the water and my friends come with me. I saw three ships coming my way and I ran to tell the chief what I saw. He said, "What are you talking about?"

I said, "I saw three ships." Then he saw the ships.

Soon little boats came and landed here. We said hi to the people. We gave them stuff. They were looking for gold when I was playing and talking with friends. Everyone thinks the strangers are nice but I think they want something that is ours, and when I mean something, that something is food!

They asked, "Where is the gold?" Then their leader took our people and made them show them where the gold was.

My friends and I ran away. "I told you that he is bad," I said to my friends.

They said, "You were right and we were wrong."

“We have to leave if they don’t leave,” I said.

So we went to see if the strangers were gone. They were, but so were some of our friends. My friends and I are alone. How can we live if we don’t know how to plant and to hunt? Soon we walked down to our hammocks, but we have a hard time sleeping. When I woke up I thought it was a bad dream, but it was real. I soon figured out how to plant because I did it with my mom. We ate the food. 50 years later I have grown old. When I was sleeping, I died with my friends.

—Sophie (Grade 3)

Final Thoughts

One thing we all learned from this unit on Columbus is that “social imagination” is something that even third graders are capable of developing.¹⁵ By reading critically, students learned that not everything you read is true. Rather than censoring books with inaccurate information, we compared books with each other and discussed possible inaccuracies. By hearing, and taking on the story of the Tainos, as well as the Europeans, students learned that there are many perspectives regarding an event in history. They understood that history is, for the most part, written by those in power. When they wondered why misinformation is perpetuated, they understood that this singular perspective is what is often taught in school and in what we often read in our history textbooks. Their social imagination helped them to understand that just because something is common practice does not make it right. Even though they recognized that many cultures throughout history may have kept slaves and taken over other countries, as they did during Columbus’s time, that didn’t make it right. They had taken on the roles of the other players in this story and, as a result, had a much more global view of the consequences of such actions.

As a result of this unit, Vera and her students applied what they discovered about history and their social imagination to other topics throughout the year such as Thanksgiving. It was much easier for the students to put themselves in others’ places in order to understand them. Students became more facile with writing inner monologues for other characters in books

they read throughout the year, to imagine what they may have been thinking.

Vera gives her final comments on this unit, “We asked questions all the time and tried to find answers. As a result, I doubt that my students will ever look at history the same way again.”

Notes

1. Michael Dorris, *Morning Girl* (NY: Hyperion, 2006), 69.
2. Excerpt from the diary of Christopher Columbus, October 11, 1492, *Dorris*, 73-74
3. Vera’s research included: Bartholome de las Casas, “A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies 1552,” nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/contact/text7/casas_destruction.pdf; Linda Christensen, *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word* (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 2000); Milton Meltzer, *Columbus and the World Around Him* (Danbury: Franklin Watts, 1990); Robert M. Poole, “What Became of the Taino?” *Smithsonian* 42 (2011): 58-70.
4. “Worlds of Words: International Collection of Children’s and Adolescent Literature,” University of Arizona, wowlit.org/
5. Linda Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice: Re-Imagining the Language Arts Classroom* (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 2009).
6. Bill Bigelow and Linda Christensen, “Promoting Social Imagination Through Interior Monologues,” Zinn Education Project, zinnedproject.org/posts/142
7. Kathy Short, Jerome C. Harste, and Carolyn Burke, *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers*, 2nd ed. (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1996).
8. Ann McGovern, *Christopher Columbus* (NY: Scholastic, 1962).
9. Pam Conrad, *Pedro’s Journal: A Voyage with Christopher Columbus, August 3, 1492-February 14, 1493* (NY: Scholastic, 1992); Michael Dorris, *Morning Girl* (NY: Hyperion, 2006); Jean Fritz and Margot Tomes, *Where Do You Think You’re Going, Christopher Columbus?* (New York: Puffin, 1997); Jane Yolen, *Encounter* (San Anselmo, CA: Sandpiper Press, 1996).
10. Peter Roop and Connie Roop, *Christopher Columbus: My Journal 1492-1493* (NY: Avon Books, 1990).
11. “Columbus: Fact and Fiction” (Washington, DC: The Order of the Sons of Italy in America, 2006).
12. Dorris, *Morning Girl*. [See #1]
13. Christensen, 2009.
14. Bigelow and Christensen.
15. Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson, *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years* (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 1998).

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