A year or so ago somebody - Pat, as I recall, or maybe Mary - slid a copy of an essay from Booklist (June 1 & 15, 1993) across my desk. By Michael Dorris, she said; a good one.

And so it is.

Dorris talks first about how he came to choose the very first brand-new hardcover book he ever owned: one of Laura Ingalls Wilder's novels, On the Banks of Plum Creek. He'd made friends with the intrepid Ingalls family down at the local library; so when the time came to own a real book, the choosing was easy. "On the Banks of Plum Creek was an old friend I knew I'd want to read many more times in the years to come, as indeed I have."

Things took an unexpected turn, though, when the time came for Dorris, the mixed-blood child of a single-parent family, to share a favorite Ingalls tale with his own two daughters, ages 7 and 8. "Not one page into Little House in the Big Woods, I heard my own voice saying, `As far as a man could go to the north in a day, or a week, or a whole month, there was nothing but woods. There were no houses. There were no roads. There were no people. There were only trees and wild animals who had their homes among them.'"

No people there? What about the Chippewa, immediate forebears of the Dorris girls? Or the Menominees, Potawatomis, Sauxs, Foxes, Winnebagos and Ottawas who had inhabited the area for hundreds of years?

Dorris was confronted by a dilemma that got him thinking: Whether to dilute the pleasure of a long anticipated event and a good story or to perpetuate a Eurocentric myth that continues to deny the native people.

For a while Dorris tried to compromise by reading selectively, picking parts where the "sense of space and sky on the Prairie was gloriously rendered," where "the book was everything I remembered - realistic, lyrical, exciting in all the right ways." But there were too many intrusions: "wild men with red skins" . . . "screeching devils" . . . whose "eyes were black and still and glittering, like snake's eyes." And too many exclusions: "there were no Indians, no cholera-ridden, starving reservations, no prohibitions to the practice of native religion, no Wounded Knee a few hundred miles to the north, no Sand Creek a [sic] equal distance to the west." And there were Ma and Pa Ingalls themselves: "Pa never felt as guilty as I would have
liked him to," Dorris says, "though he did disagree with his friend Mr. Scott, who maintained that `the only good Indian is a dead Indian.' Ma, on the other hand, remained an unreconstructed bigot - as late as The Long Winter, three novels and many years later, the very mention of even friendly, helpful Indians set her off." Ma despised Indians.

So Dorris didn't read the Little House books to his daughters; he realized that he couldn't have kept his mouth shut at the objectional parts. He avoided what he knew would have been an irresistible urge to interrupt the story with editorial asides, history lessons, questions, and critiques. He thoughtfully and deliberately passed up an opportunity to set the story straight because he didn't want his daughters to learn from him that every page of a book must pass a test in order for the whole to entertain. He didn't want to take a chance that reading with him would "become a chore, a `learning experience,' a source of tension and not the pleasure I wished it to be."

Nor did Dorris exercise his paternal "right" to censor. He put the Little House books on the top shelf of the bookcase and told the girls it would be better if they read them, when and if they wanted to, to themselves. I'll bide my time, an when, eventually, each of my girls bursts through a door, eyes ablaze with indignation, waving a book in her hand. . . then we'll talk about it."

Michael Dorris's essay made me wish that I'd had his insights when I was reading to Eleni. He had made some choices, struck some balances, that got me thinking. I wish we'd had - no, I wish we'd taken - more time to read together.

And there's one particular sentence - I like sentences - that stuck with me after I'd finished the essay. Dorris is remembering that when he was reading the Little House books, he never cared much for Ma - she struck him as prudish, cautious, and uptight, with untested prejudices and unexamined rules. Then he says, "I remembered that I had Ma to thank, possibly more than anyone else in real life or in literature, for my first startling awareness that an adult authority figure could actually be wrong and narrow-minded."

Sometimes . . . more often than I care to think . . .that adult authority figure has been . . . is . . . me.

Later:

A few weeks later I found myself reading a piece titled "A Rationale and Unit Plan for Introducing Gay and Lesbian Literature into the Grade Twelve Curriculum." Roberta Hammitt, an English teacher in Kings County, Nova Scotia, is the author; it's Chapter 22 in Becoming Political: Readings and Writings in the Politics of Literacy Education (Heinemann, 1992), edited by Patrick Shannon. I'd be using the book to focus discussions in a graduate-level course on
issues in reading education that was scheduled for the fall semester.

Hammit says that through discussions of AIDS-related issues she came to believe that her students' homophobia (fear and hatred of homosexuals) stems "from their ignorance or lack of knowledge and understanding of homosexuality and from institutionalized heterosexism." Since she believes that literature (as well as human rights legislation and other changes in the laws) can help to overcome homophobia, she set about developing a plan to add gay and lesbian literature to her Grade 12 English course. She also began, with tentative approval from her school principal and librarian, to create a specialized shelf in the school library.

I was particularly impressed by several points that Hammit makes in describing her rationale and plan.

She points out that "heterosexism, like racism and sexism, censors by omission," that gays and lesbians are rendered invisible by the fact that literature by gays and lesbians are rendered invisible by the fact that literature by gays and lesbians is generally taught without mention of their homosexuality. While there is no reason for cautious optimism that greater awareness of racism and sexism in the schools may change attitudes and practices over the next few years, homophobia and heterosexism are likely to continue so long as homosexuality is left invisible.

She suggests, however, that the time may be right to pursue the subject of homosexuality in the English curriculum. Her point, I think, is well taken. This is what she says:

McCarthyism, an implicit theme of Arthur Miller's The Crucible, was a witch-hunt against homosexuals as well as communists. The mass hysteria described in the play is similar to attitudes toward and treatment of gays and lesbians throughout history. The censorship of gay and lesbian literature issues, both covert and overt, is like the censorship of the theory of evolution, as described in Inherit in the Wind by Lawrence and Lee. Robert Bolt's A Man for All Seasons leads easily into discussions of moral courage, a theme very appropriate to much gay and lesbian literature. These connections to the regular curriculum, as well as the study of AIDS and related issues, severe to justify a unit on gay and lesbian literature.

Hammit also acknowledges, quite realistically I think, that "My lessons might be seen as promoting homosexuality." Since she anticipates the possibility of censorship challenges, she makes preparation for such battles a part of her unit plan. She would have her students learn how to consider a case - to find supporting evidence, to gather testimony from people who are opposed or supportive, to examine their own values and motives, to make informed judgements.

And finally, Hammit recognizes the importance of remaining flexible while encouraging her students to develop their own positions. She quotes John Milton, in Aeropagitica: "Where there
is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, many opinions; for opinion in
good [people] is but knowledge in the making."

Unfortunately, gays and lesbians have remained - "officially" at least - as invisible in Roberta
Hammitt's classroom as the native people in Laura Ingalls Wilder's books. Hammitt explains in
an Epilog to her article that her proposed unit and a related grant application got bogged down in
the dismal swamps of the bureaucracy. On top of that, she was attacked by two sets of parents
who claimed that by requiring students to use inclusionary, nonsexist language she was imposing
her personal political beliefs on them. Shades of Ma Ingalls!

That's bad news.

The good news, I think, is that articles like Roberta Hammitt's and Michael Dorris's give voice to
legitimate concerns and positive acts. They've caused me to become more appreciative of the fact
that "teaching reading" isn't just about Dick, Jane, and Baby any more.

Later still:

In the fall the students in the issues in reading course turned out to be a thoughtful, talkative lot.
In addition to Shannon, we read books like Susan Schaller's A Man Without Words (Summit
Books, 1991), Joan DelFattore's What Johnny Shouldn't Read (Yale, 1992), Out of the Barrio by
Linda Chavez (Basic Books, 1991), Slim's Table by Mitchell Dunier (Chicago, 1992), and
Enlightened Racism by Jhally and Lewis (Westview, 1992). Our discussions were lively, open
and no-holding-back examinations of literacy-related issues.

With one exception.

When the time came to talk about the Hammitt articles, the discussion was . . . well, decidedly
subdued. People - me included - who had been able and inclined to talk personally and
passionately about topics that ranged from silencing effects of discourse differences to subtle and
not-so-subtle manifestations of race/class/gender stereotyping and of censorship suddenly fell . . .
not entirely silent . . . let's say noticeably subdued. It was as if we'd taken personally an
admonition from one of Roberta Hammitt's supervisors: "He, like the other supervisors who read
the unit plan, warned me that my own sexual orientation would be questioned."

It seemed at the time that we were indeed, as individuals, apprehensive - at least a little bit -
about inferences that might be made if we appeared to protest too much. But those fears aside, it
seemed, too, that we were ill prepared to speak. We's come a long way from Ma Ingalls' place on
the prairie, but we were still intimidated by our own untested prejudices and unexamined rules.
At least that's how it was for me.
A good reading teacher knows which book to put into whose hands. A really good one knows just when...

The day after our subdued discussion, Martha, one of the students in the issues class, showed up with a copy of Annie on My Mind by Nancy Garden (Farrar, 1982). "Have you read this?" she said..

She knew I hadn't. The discussion would have gone much better if I had.

Annie on My Mind is the well told story of what happens when two teenage girls, Liza and Annie, begin to realize that they have feelings of love for each other. The author also provides a glimpse into the lives of two of Liza's teachers, a lesbian couple who lose their jobs because of perceived indiscretions.

William Sleator does a better job than I can of saying why Annie was the right book at the right time for me:

What this book [does] is tell readers a story involving lesbian characters who may be quite different from what they have probably heard about lesbians from their peers or other unreliable sources. The gay characters in this book are ordinary people who have no choice but to express their love in a way that makes people hate and fear them . . . But the book is not a diatribe proclaiming that all gay people are innocent victims who have behave perfectly in every situation; they make mistakes, and with luck they can learn from them.

I'd been hung up in "gay and lesbian issues"; the actual people were as invisible as Wilder's Indians. Annie helped me see some faces.

Sleator's words are from his critique of Annie on My Mind Censored Books, edited by Nicholas J. Karolides, Lee Burriss, and John M. Kean (Scarecrow, 1993). He takes on some basic misconceptions that would make Annie a prime target for censorship. (The misconceptions have little to do with the actual content of the book and much to do with the topic: homosexuality. Censors, by and large, target topics; they don't read books.).

In the first place, Sleator says, the book does not idealize or encourage homosexuality. to the contrary, "it is an often painful account of the very serious problems that can result from a homosexual experience." And second, there is no explicit sex in the book. "The physical contact is very tentative at first - a touch, a hug. It is also entirely mutual - neither `seduces,' or puts any
kind of pressure on, the other. Implicit here - though - never stated directly - is the fact that nothing would happen if both girls did not want it to. No one can `make' someone gay if the inclination is not there already.".

In any event, Sleator says that contrary to what many parents claim to believe, kids don't find out about their own sexuality by reading about it in books. "The power of literature is not that it conveys information." It's important, then, that young readers have access to books like Annie on My Mind, "books that will give them a true and accurate picture of the world." Books that help them see some faces.

Next time:

In retrospect, I think it was the faces that were missing when it was time to talk about Roberta Hammitt's article. In an environment where political correctness has the cloying presence of an oil slick, we were ready to tackle gay and lesbian issues. Ready but not able. As a group we lacked the true and accurate picture that could have enabled lively, open, no-holding-back discussion. We hadn't read the books.

Next time . . . well, we'll see.

Things are on a positive track, though. The other day, Pat - this time I'm certain; it was Pat - gave me an article from the Journal of Youth Services in Libraries (Fall, 1993), "Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian Characters an Themes 1969-92: A Historical Reading of Content, Gender, and Narrative Distance" by Christine Jenkins. There's a chronological bibliography of the 60 titles published between 1969 and 1992.

Not only that, but I just finished reading the copy of Rita Mae Brown's Venus Envy that I ordered from QPB. One of these days - soon - I'm going to browse the shelves marked gay and lesbian at Borders Book Shop.

We'll see . . . but next time I think the discussion will go better.

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