

Skipping Stones Magazine's Annual Book Honor Awards Celebrate Diversity

By Arun Toké and Nicole Degli Esposti

Are you searching for authentic multicultural books and teaching resources? Since 1994, *Skipping Stones* magazine has recognized outstanding books and teaching resources (including educational videos) with its annual *Skipping Stones* Book Honor Awards. The honored books, published by both large and small publishers, promote cooperation and cultivate an understanding of the diverse cultures around the world. Bound to provide a great reading adventure, they are culturally sensitive and offer a variety of learning experiences for students, teachers, parents, and children. The selection process is always inclusive. Reviewers come from diverse cultural backgrounds and cross-sections of society, from students to grandparents. This article focuses on the history, goals, processes, and outcomes of this unique award program.

The History and Goals of the Book Awards

Mahatma Gandhi once said that if we want good fruit, we have to plant the right kind of seed, water the young shoot, and nurture the sapling until it gets strong enough to stand on its own. This is why, in 1988, following an international peace conference at a Gandhian ashram in India, Arun Toké took on the challenge of publishing a nonprofit, multicultural children's magazine, *Skipping Stones*. Upon his return, he enlisted the support of a number of other people and organizations, including Amy Klauke Minato, the magazine's first co-editor. We felt that to make any meaningful changes in the world, we would have to start with children—the future citizens of the world. We started the magazine with the express goal of promoting sustainability of human societies. Our definition of sustainability included the development of ecological, multicultural, and international awareness in children.

The need for multicultural children's reading material that educates and celebrates rather than perpetuating stereotypes or bias cannot be underestimated. Back in the late 1980s, there was definitely a need for more authentic multicultural and multiethnic reading material for young people. The word "multicultural" was by no means a buzzword; it could not even be found in the dictionary. We began the magazine using the word "multi-ethnic" in our subtitle, but we had to hyphenate it. Certainly, some universities and schools taught "global studies" classes, but elementary and secondary curricula lacked genuine multicultural and global perspectives. In addition, to us, multiculturalism was something much broader than ethnicity and race—encompassing other experiences such as disability, religion, language, and economic class. We felt strongly that the broader issues of sustainability of human societies, which include peace, social justice, and environmental justice, are advanced through multicultural education. The components of sustainability—treating one another with respect

and establishing harmonious relationships among people and between people and nature—have been of special interest to us ever since the seeds of *Skipping Stones* were planted at the peace conference that we attended.

As we embarked on our multicultural journey, we realized that we could also encourage the publishing industry as a whole to bring truly multicultural content into their children's books and teaching resources. We knew of only a few awards for "multicultural" (mostly, African-American) books and none for "ecological" books for children. So, beyond featuring book recommendations in each issue on our BookShelf page, we established the *Skipping Stones* Book Honor Awards.

We did not feel it would serve well to have just one winner a year. We knew that we would be unable to select only one book that catered to possibly only one cultural component of a diverse multicultural world. It would be against the very notion of multiculturalism, because it went against the philosophy of validating multiple perspectives. Hence, we embraced the idea of honoring a selection of books representing the inherent diversity of our world as an integral part of the awards program. To recognize, honor, and promote authors, illustrators, and publishers of exceptional, authentic multicultural and nature books for young readers, we announced the first selection of multicultural books and resources in early 1994. We hoped these awards would encourage more multicultural material in the juvenile literature market. And since then, every year we have invited publishers to send us their recent titles for our annual recommendation of books that represent the very best of children's books in the market. Since we have a thorough and independent evaluation process but lack a large institutional sponsor, like the American Library Association or the National Council on the Social Studies, we charge a nominal entry fee, \$50 per entry, to offset the costs of administering and promoting the awards. The fees also pay for publicity—printing, postage, personnel needed to write the press releases, publisher invitations, entry forms, and so on.

As a small, nonprofit organization, we recognize the role money plays in the ability of large publishers to dominate the industry. With their huge publicity and marketing budgets, they are sure to carry a lion's share of the market. To make the market more accessible to small and/or nonprofit publishers, we felt that our awards also had to be more accessible to these publishers, who were willing to take financial risks by bringing out authentic multicultural books. Therefore, we offer a 50 percent discount and even free entries to publishers who are not in a position to enter awards



programs that carry an entry fee. Our goal is to encourage quality multicultural and nature books produced by publishing houses, both small and large, in three categories.

The Three Categories of Awards

Multicultural and International Books focus on ethnic diversity and intercultural or global relationships. These books build bridges of communication, understanding, social justice, and peace, and offer examples of positive role models from all ethnic communities. The wide variety of titles honored by us clearly shows that our society is indeed a great multicultural salad bowl, with pockets of distinct flavors. We choose books for a wide range of reading levels, from picture books to books appropriate for high school readers, that focus on any and all components of the five broad cultural groups that are recognized in North America and in much of the world. The setting can be in any culture or country. As long as the information is authentic, we will consider it for the awards.

We are always on the lookout for new voices and new perspectives on timely and timeless themes. In 2003 we honored *These Hands I Know: African-American Writers on Family* edited by Afaa Michael Weaver (Sarabande Books). This exceptional book for upper grades to adults draws together the remarkable writings of 17 African-American writers. In the same year, we honored a collection of personal stories, *My Crazy Life: How I Survived My Family* by Allen Flaming and Kate Scowen (Annick Press)—ten stories of teenagers who survived significant abuse during these difficult years. This year, we honor *Rules*, a novel by Cynthia Lord (Scholastic), about a 12-year-old girl struggling to understand and relate to her autistic brother.

Some of our recommended books are bilingual. In 2007 we picked two bilingual books. *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow* by Amy Lee-Tai, illustrated by Felicia Hoshino (Children's Book Press), is a bilingual Japanese/English picture book for elementary grades about a Japanese-American girl's experiences living in an internment camp during World War II. Another book, *The Ruiz Street Kids* by Diane Gonzales Bertrand (Piñata Books), is set in the American Southwest. This bilingual Spanish/English chapter book, geared toward readers age 10 to 13, is about the hot summer vacation days of young kids in a working-class, predominantly Hispanic neighborhood.

Nature and Ecology Books promote an understanding of natural systems; specific species or habitats; human, plant, and animal relationships; resource conservation; environmental protection and restoration efforts; community projects; and sustainable living. Many of these books are set in various cultural or international settings, adding to cultural diversity in children's literature. One of our 2003 selections, *Encantado: Pink Dolphins of the Amazon* by Sy Montgomery (Houghton Mifflin) offers educational information not only about dolphins, but also on the flora and fauna, and the indigenous people who live in the "enchanted" ecosystem called Amazonia. The outstanding international collection *River of Words: Images and Poetry in Praise of Water*, edited by Pamela Michael and selected in 2004 (Heyday Books) pays homage to one of the most basic resources we've got—water—through the

gushing torrents of poetry and art that youth around the world have created in its honor.

Knowing that educators—parents, teachers, and librarians—are searching for truly exceptional, engaging, and mindful educational resources for use in their classrooms, each year we also decided to honor several *Teaching Resources*, including books, manuals, educational videos, DVDs, and multimedia programs. A lot of audio and video material is already being used in the classroom, but many educators have expressed serious concerns about the quality, content, and impact of these videos over the years. As of this year, we will also consider web site entries into the awards competition.

As our criteria for this category, we select resources that educators should find extremely helpful in their work with students to develop multicultural and nature awareness. For example, in 2004 we picked the 30-minute video *So They May Speak* and its accompanying resource guide (Ideas in Motion and California Tomorrow) because they would likely inspire schools and communities everywhere to implement more educational language-immersion programs. The video introduced three immersion programs, in French, Spanish, and Hmong, in Louisiana, Texas, and California, respectively. In 2001 we honored a video about family diversity, *That's a Family*, produced by the Respect for All project of the Women's Educational Media. In this video, children act as tour guides into their lives and unique family situations—multiracial, multigenerational, single-parent families, and more.

The Review Process

The criteria used to judge the entries include authenticity, accuracy, and cultural sensitivity, as well as reader-friendliness (including attractive visual presentation). Our reviewers and the selection committee consist of a cross-section of society—students of various ages, teachers, parents, librarians, and, of course, we the editors. Each year, we have been able to attract upward of 20 individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds to help us decide which books to recommend. Reviewers' ages vary from eight to 80. This year, for example, a fourth-grade classroom in Eugene and a number of students from another high school participated by reading entries and writing reviews in addition to our longtime, more seasoned reviewers.

In the early years of the awards program, the Eugene-based Young Writers' Association members helped us create a standard review form for evaluating the books. Because each year we have a number of novice reviewers, this review sheet helps us keep consistency in the selection process. It also helps the reviewers in evaluating the books they read. The review sheet poses a set of questions for our reviewers:

1. Does the book come alive to you? Does it catch and hold your attention?
2. Did the book help you understand or appreciate a culture? Did it promote international or intercultural cooperation or other languages? For a nature and ecology category book, the question becomes: Did the book help you understand a particular species

or habitat or ecology or perhaps, conservation and sustainable lifestyle?

3. Did the book challenge or inspire you? Did it empower you to take positive actions? Did it promote nonviolence or creative responses to conflicts?

4. Did you like the use of language and illustrations? Did pictures and words complement each other?

5. Is the book educational? Does the information presented come from personal experiences? Do you believe the book is authentic?

In addition to the numerical score (from zero to ten) that the reviewers provide for each book, we also welcome their written comments. We even ask them to take up to two points off for unnecessary violence or insensitivity to cultural or ecological values. It would be hard to believe, but we know from our years of experience that some nominated books are blatantly insensitive to other cultures. After a computerized tabulation process, we're able to narrow down the entries to a manageable list of semifinalists. The winning entries are chosen after a series of review meetings and virtual communications.

Book Awards Program Outcomes

Each honored title and its creators receive a beautifully designed honor award certificate. Winning titles are also eligible to display our attractive honor award seal and thus distinguish themselves on the crowded shelves of bookstores and libraries. Close to 100,000 of our honor award seals have been used by the winning titles so far.

Every year since initiating the awards program, we receive requests from librarians and teachers for our list of recommendations. In fact, our Book Awards poster was created as a result of a teacher education professor's suggestion of a visual display containing the year's winning titles, which she could distribute to her student teachers and which could be hung in classrooms. These illustrated, two-color posters and/or press releases contain vital information about each of the honored books. Currently, they are used by educators in various universities and colleges as well as by media specialists and language arts teachers to inform and educate their students. They are also distributed at workshops, lectures, and conferences we attend, such as the annual conference of the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME). A number of newspapers and educational publications and web sites choose to announce the Annual *Skipping Stones* Honor Awards. In addition to *MultiCultural Review*, the NAME web site, *Multicultural Education*, *Reading Today*, and *NewsLinks* are among the publications and web sites that highlight the awards. A complete list of our annual selections for the last eight years is available on our own web site, www.SkippingStones.org.


Students who participate in the review process develop critical thinking skills, as well as a deeper awareness for cultural diversity. Since reviews of winning books appear in our summer issues, readers who have extra reading time during summer vacations can

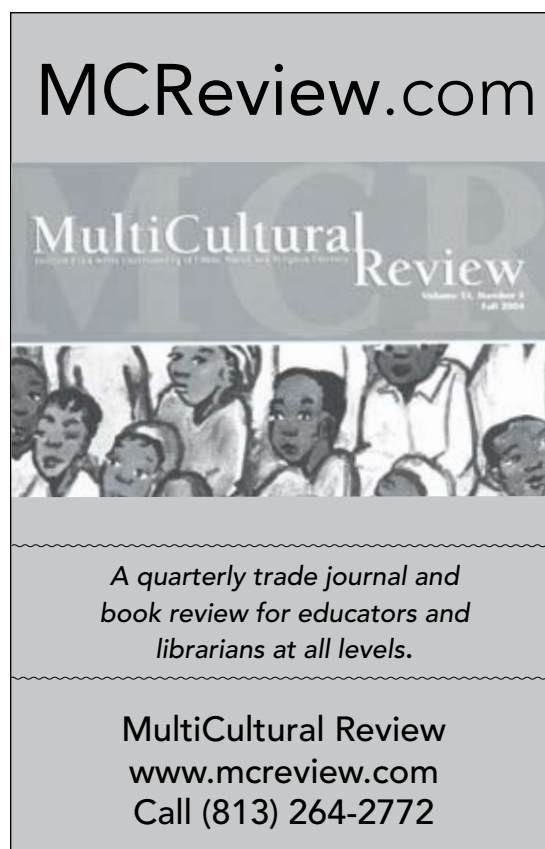
check out the recommended books in their local libraries or bookstores. We even know of some bookstores that have requested our awards lists, presumably to order books for their shelves.

Parents, teachers, and librarians look forward to receiving the recommendations of our summer issue Book Award announcements and reviews, which help them in their purchasing decisions. They know that they can trust the *Skipping Stones* Honor Awards recommendations.

About *Skipping Stones* Magazine

Skipping Stones is a unique international and multicultural magazine in its nineteenth year. It has a widely scattered readership, including more than 1,000 school and library subscribers in the United States and abroad. It features original art and writing by students and adults. Each issue also publishes photo essays about a region or culture and recommends multicultural books and teaching resources. *Skipping Stones* has received several awards from NAME, the National Association for Multicultural Education, and EDPRESS, the Educational Press Association of America, among others. Subscriptions, for five bimonthly issues during the school year, are: institutions, \$35; individuals, \$25, with discounts for multiple-copy and low-income subscriptions; sample: \$5, available from P.O. Box 3939, Eugene, Oregon 97403 USA. For a complete list of award winners, visit www.Skipping-Stones.org or contact the *Skipping Stones* office via e-mail at editor@SkippingStones.org.

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MCRReview.com

MultiCultural Review
Volume 11, Number 2
Fall 2007

A quarterly trade journal and book review for educators and librarians at all levels.

MultiCultural Review
www.mcreview.com
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