

From the Editor

By Lyn Miller-Lachmann



As part of getting the word out on my recently published young adult novel, *Gringolandia*, I've been visiting blogs hosted by teen readers. Although they can't substitute for face-to-face interaction, these blogs are a great way to discuss books with dedicated readers while saving money and the environment. In September the Reading in Color blog (<http://black-teensread2.blogspot.com>), which reviewed my novel, hosted a giveaway of *Gringolandia* to discussion participants who answered the question: "If you could work to stop any evil dictator in the world (past or present) who would it be?" The blogger, a high school student who goes by the name MissAttitude, acknowledged that most contestants would select Adolf Hitler as the most notorious dictator and thus ruled him out in the interests of sparking a range of suggestions and debate. She and I discussed our choices, which we revealed when she announced the winners (though in the end the winners were selected by a drawing because of the number of duplicate answers). She chose the Soviet Union's Josef Stalin. I chose Pol Pot in Cambodia.

One would not expect the Cambodian genocide to make for appropriate reading material for elementary-age children, but Icy Smith, the award-winning author of *Mei Ling in China City* (East West Discovery Press, 2008), takes on the challenge in her powerful new picture book, *Half Spoon of Rice: A Survival Story of the Cambodian Genocide*. Mary Lickteig reviews the book, and a stunning cover illustration by Sopaul Nhem, whose father survived the killing fields, serves as the cover for this issue of *MultiCultural Review*. I would recommend the picture book for children in second grade and up for several reasons. I teach religious school in a Reform Jewish congregation, and the entire school, from kindergarten to grade seven, raises money to help refugees from the genocide in Darfur. Though set in a different country, *Half Spoon of Rice* shows in a non-frightening way the experiences of genocide survivors, so that children who wish to help those in similar circumstances today will know who they are helping and why. In addition, the story has a strong universal dimension, offering solace and inspiration to children facing poverty, danger, and separation from loved ones no matter where they live.

The discussion of dictators on Reading in Color isn't alone in revealing teenagers' capacity to think and to take positive action. At the end of October, high school freshman Kelsey of The Book Scout (<http://thebookscout.blogspot.com>) interviewed me, and in the discussion that followed, she talked about the need for more teen materials and programs at her public library. Several people offered suggestions, and at the end of the evening she wrote, "I see a plan forming." Yes, novels are written to entertain, but they can also lead to understanding and empower readers to effect change in the world around them.

This issue of *MultiCultural Review* focuses on materials and approaches for working with children and adolescents. Regular reviewer Kena Sosa teaches many children of mixed racial and cultural heritages in her elementary school in the Dallas, Texas, area and is herself the parent of biracial and bicultural children. The election of a biracial president and the creation of a multiracial category for the 2010 Census (which also appeared in the 2000 Census) have brought this topic to the forefront. In "You Don't Know Me: Picture Books to Make Biracial and Multicultural Children Comfortable with Dual Identities," Sosa draws on interviews and personal experience to identify the concerns of parents and children in multiracial families, and she follows these observations with a list of recommended books. Through text and illustrations, these exemplary books present a wide variety of situations that reflect the experiences of multiracial families and raise awareness among readers of all backgrounds.

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A high school English teacher in a culturally diverse working-class high school in Montgomery, Alabama, Foster Dickson has worked hard to develop an appreciation of poetry among his students. In his article, "Bringing Poetry Back Home," Dickson challenges both the literary establishment and promoters of hip-hop poetry—the former for their irrelevance to the lives of working-class students, the latter for their lack of attention to the craft of poetry. Dickson cites notable poets of diverse backgrounds who have combined both relevance and quality and who can serve as a model for young people as they learn about poetry and write their own. Dickson recommends several anthologies of multicultural and working-class poets as well as collections by individual poets such as Rodney Jones, John Beecher, and Garrett Hongo.

We are fortunate to have an interview with the multi-talented Joy Harjo in this issue. The author of a recently published picture book, *For a Girl Becoming* (University of Arizona Press), Harjo is a poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, storyteller, and musician of Muskogee/Creek heritage. In an interview conducted by professor and former American Library Association president Lorlene Roy (who also reviews the book in this issue), Harjo talks about her journey to writing picture books, how writing for children has influenced her other work, and how she drew inspiration from her culture and family in creating the poem that is *From a Girl Becoming*.

Our regular feature on recommended books in Spanish for children and teenagers almost didn't happen this winter. Isabel Schon, who recently moved from California State University–San Marcos to the San Diego Public Library where she founded the Isabel Schon International Center for Spanish Books for Youth, called me this past summer to tell me about the precipitous fall-off in Spanish-language publishing for young people. Schon attributes the decline to the global recession, which has especially impacted Spain and Mexico—two publishing centers. Schon was reluctant to assemble an annotated list of recommended books with so few recent publications from which to choose; instead, she chose to list all the books in Spanish that have come into her collection in the past year. Among the recently arrived titles, series dominate, as do publishers located in the United States. Does this foretell a crisis in Spanish and Latin American publishing? Only time will tell.

Fortunately, the tough economy has not hampered the Sundance Film Festival, and this year's Sundance report assesses the state of independent film and the rise of interactive multimedia. Christine McDonald reviews six films—three that depict indigenous communities in the United States and Canada, one that introduces the work of *New York Times* international correspondent and columnist Nicholas Kristof, and two that focus on various forms of violence in Iran and Iraq. Accompanying the reviews is a question-and-answer with French director Marie-Hélène Cousineau who co-directed the Canadian production *Before Tomorrow*, the story of an Inuktitut grandmother and grandson trying to survive the Northern winter following the massacre of their village by White invad-

ers. Film buffs can find more reviews of international films in the report on the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival, which reviews three outstanding productions from Algeria, Turkey, and Japan that address the tension between tradition and modernity.

Throughout 2009, *MultiCultural Review* has addressed the challenges of authors writing about characters from cultures that are not their own. Our "Parting Words" closes out the year with the reflections of debut novelist Matthew Aaron Goodman, a former inner-city teacher whose *Hold Love Strong* (Simon & Schuster, reviewed in this issue) is the coming-of-age story of an African-American teenager. Goodman describes how exploring his Jewish beliefs and heritage led him to identify the universal feelings, experiences, and conflicts at the heart of the story of the biblical Abraham, son of the idol-maker, and of Abraham Singleton, Goodman's young protagonist, who also finds himself in opposition to his family, friends, and community. 🌐



Lyn's Blog and Web Site

Editor-in-Chief Lyn Miller-Lachmann has a new web site and blog! Please stop by for a visit at <http://web.mac.com/lynml>.

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