

Dick, Jane and Jamela

As a first grader, I remember falling in love with Dick and Jane and Tip and Mitten. Those characters felt like part of my own family. Learning to read was the way I could get to know them better. They motivated me beyond words.

Looking back, I don't wonder at my affection for this fictitious family. After all, they looked just like me. They might have lived next door.

It never occurred to me to wonder how Dick and Jane motivated children whose faces were brown or yellow. When every person portrayed in literature had fair skin, why would black children think that reading had anything to do with them?

Immediately on the heels of the civil rights movement, multicultural books began trickling unto libraries. First came Ezra Jack Keats who saw a need for books depicting black children and produced some multicultural masterpieces: "The Snowy Day," "Whistle for Willie," "Peter's Chair," and others.

Publishers took note of Keat's success and created a market for multicultural books. Many of these books are written like tour guides to explain or celebrate some cultural heritage.

But my favorite multicultural books are those that simply tell wonderful stories. These books enable me to identify with characters despite our ethnic differences.

For example, in her book "Squashed in the Middle," Elizabeth Winthrop's character Daisy bemoans her birth position as the middle child. Daisy's family's beautiful brown skin enhances the illustration, but her experience is one every middle-born can relate to.

Niki Daly's "What's Cooking, Jamela?" features the familiar story of a child falling in love with a pet which was intended to become Christmas dinner. It could have been a goose on a farm in New England or a pig in Iowa, but it happens to be a chicken in a South African township. Jamela accidentally sets the chicken free, of course. The hilarious illustrations, including the chicken's bold dash into the local beauty salon where all the ladies are getting their hair done, give a new flavor to a timeless tale.

Multicultural books are critical for minority children. But they may be even more critical for majority children.

In her book "Against Borders," Hazel Rochman reminds us that "A good story lets you know people as individuals in all their particularity and conflict; and once you see someone as a person—flawed, complex, striving—then you've reached beyond stereotype."

Dick and Jane played their part, but my education would have lacked depth if they had been the terminus of my literary experience. Multicultural books provide us with texture,

as rich as fine oil paintings. Sharing such books with our children is a way we can prepare them to value the astounding complexity of the human race.