

BOOKS TO GROW WITH NEWSLETTER FOR JULY 2004

Hello! In this month's issue, we talk with Cynthia Leitich-Smith, award-winning author of multicultural children's fiction.

* * *

EDITOR'S NOTE

I spent four packed days at the American Library Association (ALA) Conference in Orlando, during the end of June. Lots of great folks, great conversations and sessions, but one announcement in particular caught my attention, that a new award has been established by the ALA. The Schneider Family Book Awards honor an author or illustrator for a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences. Three annual awards each consisting of \$5000 and a framed plaque, will be given annually in each of the following categories: birth through grade school (age 0–10), middle school (age 11–13) and teens (age 13–18). The book must emphasize the artistic expression of the disability experience for children and or adolescent audiences. The book must portray some aspect of living with a disability or that of a friend or family member, whether the disability is physical, mental or emotional.

In other news: *Books to Grow With: A Guide to Using the Best Children's Fiction for Everyday Issues and Tough Challenges* (Lutra Press; ISBN 0-9748025-7-3) is now available! You can order online (www.lutrapress.com), by fax (503-292-5697), by phone (866-311-0265) or buy it at your bookstore.

We've added "It takes a library to raise a child" t-shirts to the Lutra Press website, by popular demand! These T-shirts were a big hit at the American Library Conference.

* * *

NEW BOOKS AND TOPICS OF INTEREST

We're now featuring our new books and topics each month right on the Lutra Press website, at www.lutrapress.com. Check the tab marked "Idea of the Month" for the latest new books.

* * *

OUR INTERVIEW FOR JULY: Cynthia Leitich Smith, author of three books for young readers: JINGLE DANCER (Morrow Junior Books)(ages 4-up); INDIAN SHOES (HarperCollins)(ages 7-up); and RAIN IS NOT MY INDIAN NAME (HarperCollins and Listening Library)(ages 10-up) She has also published middle grade short stories in recent Harper anthologies. She was a 2001 Writer of the Year in Children's Prose from Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers and a featured author at the Second National Book Festival.

Cynthia's Web site, Children's Literature Resources at www.cynthialeitichsmith.com, was named one of the top ten writer sites on the Internet by Writer's Digest. She is a tribal member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and lives in Austin, Texas with her husband, children's author Greg Leitich Smith. Cynthia is the author Cynthia lives in Austin, Texas with her husband, children's author, Greg Leitich Smith.

Interview Questions for Cynthia

Cheryl: Hello Cynthia, and welcome to the *Books to Grow With* newsletter
I want to focus particularly on your novel, *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*, which explores the experience of death of a close friend and the process of healing and reconnecting to family and intertribal community after the sudden death.

What experiences have you had that caused you to be interested in looking at this issue?

Cynthia: When I was a young teen, I was upset by the unexpected death of a boy at my school. The memory haunted me. Then later, while the story was in progress, my grandfather was battling cancer, and we had been particularly close all of my life. I started the novel with the question of how we heal after loss.

Cheryl: How do you portray Rain's grief in *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*?

Cynthia: Rain becomes quite withdrawn, refusing even to go to her friend Galen's funeral. It's not until outside events step in that she begins to heal.

Cheryl: How do you portray Rain's process of coming to terms with her friend's death in *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*?

Cynthia: Basically, I just take her further along that journey. I don't think the death of a loved one is something we get over. Rather it becomes part of who we are. By beginning to make new friends, open up to those who care, she's allowing herself to more fully enjoy life again. And by building a cyber memorial to Galen, she finds a way to honor his memory.

Cheryl: How do you portray Rain's process of reconnecting to family and intertribal community in *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*?

Cynthia: Rain becomes involved in her small-town newspaper as a photographer, covering a Native American youth summer program. This forces her to work with The Flash, a college intern working that summer for the paper, and to interact with the kids participating in the program. She also faces a crisis at home as her twenty-something brother and his girlfriend are wrestling with an unplanned pregnancy.

Cheryl: What aspects of the story are unique to the experience of a Native American child? What experiences or reactions does Rain have that are universal?

Cynthia: I'm probably too close to it to say. From my perspective, Rain's story is not much different than if she were any other girl under that set of circumstances. Perhaps because she is biracial and wonders how others view that, the novel is distinguished somewhat from the "average" protagonist. But really, I think many/most people have something about themselves that makes them wary of outsider opinions. I know that Rain's point of view is well grounded in her tribal background. But again, to me, that seems the norm.

Cheryl: What resources have you provided so that classroom teachers or librarians can use *Rain Is Not My Indian Name* for group or one-on-one reading to help kids understand this experience? Can you tell us something about how they have used your book?

Cynthia: My Web site includes a series of pages that feature an online tie-in to Hannesburg, a sort of virtual tour of the fictional town where the story is set. Visitors are welcome to click on a map of the buildings—such as Rain's home or the city hall—to learn more about the characters, the stories behind the story, and related resource links. I also offer a reading group guide and multiple intelligence activities.

A number of classrooms and reading groups have read the book and used it for language arts and/or social studies curriculum. In a few cases, I've had the privilege of communicating with the young readers via a virtual visit using instant messaging and a computer projector. In one case, with a U.S. military school abroad, we had to communicate via email because of the Internet security measures.

Cheryl: You've commented that other authors whose work has influenced you include Judy Blume and Katherine Paterson. Both of them, and perhaps particularly Judy Blume, have tackled tough issues in their books. Do you have particular favorites among their books? Please tell us more about what you find compelling in those books.

Cynthia: With Judy Blume, her use of the first person had a tremendous affect on my writing. To me, this is the most immediate, the most intimate choice, and usually my first inclination when I sit down to write

(though both *Jingle Dancer* (Morrow, 2000) and *Indian Shoes* (HarperCollins, 2002) were written in third person). My favorite Judy Blume novel is *Tiger Eyes*, which was popular though perhaps not her best known. Growing up in a family where all the men collected guns, it inspired me to think harder about the role and responsibilities of weaponry in society.

With Katherine Patterson, I most admire the elegance of her writing, its unaffected simplicity, which is so deceptively easy-looking but really masterpiece art. It's as though her writer's ego is firmly in check; she's all about the characters. She also is tremendously adept at clearly outlining seemingly everyday stories that speak to the human condition, to the soul. I was a big fan of *Bridge To Terabithia*, and in fact, in writing a grief/healing book never considered starting the story when Galen was still alive because Patterson has already done that novel and brilliantly.

Of course these are authors I read as a child (and still do), but there are many more authors whose work has inspired me. These include: MT Anderson, Kathi Appelt, Joan Bauer, Joseph Bruchac, Esme Raji Codell, Kimberly Willis Holt, Jennifer L. Holm, Annette Curtis Klause, Jane Kurtz, Martha Moore, Gary Soto, among many others. I'm also tremendously influenced by my husband, author Greg Leitich Smith, because we're always reading each other's manuscripts.

Cheryl: You comment on your website that *"I'm torn on the issue of presenting books divided by the ethnic groups of at least some of their main characters. I worry that it serves to marginalize them, that people will think of "books" and "multicultural books," like the latter are a trend that will pass or a category to be held to an inferior quality standard. Yet as a child I remember searching to no avail for a book about a contemporary Native woman to be the subject of my third grade report on a famous, historical person (after much deliberation, I went with Sacajawea over Pocahontas -- neither known for her service to her own people). Today, still, too few outstanding books are published that reflect any particular community. This is worth saying another way: publishing any number of books inspired by a specific community is not the same thing as publishing enough quality books inspired by a specific community."*

How does the lack of books about Native American families and/or multicultural families hamper the ability to use these books to help kids with issues?

Cynthia: As a writer, I craft stories for the sake of telling stories first. What is eventually done with the books is more up to the young readers themselves, their parents, teachers, counselors, etc. But I know from having been a child that young readers need to see people like them reflected in their world of books. That identification lets them know that they are welcome members in the community of literate people. Also, reading about families different from oneself creates empathy, understanding. But above all, literary diversity is important because without it we would be missing some of the best books.

Cheryl: Is there anything more you'd like to add?

Cynthia: Thank you for the opportunity to answer your thoughtful questions.

Cheryl: I am honored to be included among the resources listed at your website! Here's Cynthia's review: *"BOOKS TO GROW WITH: A GUIDE TO USING THE BEST CHILDREN'S FICTION FOR EVERYDAY ISSUES AND TOUGH CHALLENGES* by Cheryl Coon (Lutra Press, 2004). *Into bibliotherapy? From adoption to working parents, Coon's guidebook provides recommended tie-in titles organized by subject, including of the more obscure like "gifted kids," "schizophrenia," and "sleepovers." The real strength of this guidebook is the emphasis on "best," on literary trade books, that both address the relevant issue and also meet the quality test as stories. Nicely inclusive, multicultural approach. Helpful to child-care givers and librarians building collections along themes."*

* * *

NEXT MONTH'S SPECIAL FOCUS: We talk with Claire Austin, a practicing bibliotherapist, about how she helps children through her work.

If you have received this newsletter in error or do not wish to continue to receive it, please let me know at cherylcoon@lutra.com.