



Janelle B. Mathis
University of North Texas, TX

Fly Away Home: Insights from readers' aesthetic response

Eve Bunting's **Fly Away Home** (1991) caught the attention of many readers in the early 1990s by reflecting the growing social awareness of the many homeless people within society. Not only was the homeless population becoming more visible at this time, but its life style was described by the media who often captured the adapting and changing culture of these groups of people. As readers of **Fly Away Home** grappled with the potential reality of the situation described, that of a young homeless boy living with his father in an airport, the responses were diverse. As I shared this book in a children's literature class I was teaching at the time it was published, the response of the preservice teachers revealed numerous ways that this book touched both hearts and minds.

With a keen interest in the nature of reader response and its potential to create insights into other people and cultures for readers of all ages, I decided to investigate the initial aesthetic responses of various age groups to this book. The chosen groups with whom I shared **Fly Away Home** were (a) two classes of second grade students who lived in different parts of a middle-sized southwest town, (b) seventh grade students, (c) preservice teachers, and (d) two groups of educators. One of these groups was middle school teachers attending a regional reading conference and the other group consisted of predominantly elementary level Native American teachers from reservations taking part in a summer university program. The discussions were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. In each situation, I was interested in their initial aesthetic response and discussion and tried to create a very informal, low-risk context for response. The

results of this inquiry, *Fly Away Home: A diversity of response* (Mathis, 1994), provided significant support for both the transactional theory of reader response, the factors that influence our connections to the books we read, and the use of literature that represents diverse cultures. This study continues to serve as a powerful example for my present students as they contemplate the nature of the transactional theory of reader response to multicultural books. Four particular instances of response within this larger study are of interest in considering the value of an aesthetic stance to multicultural literature.

THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE IN RESPONDING TO LITERATURE -SECOND GRADE-

The significant role of life experiences in responding to literature representing other cultures was evident in the discussions of the second grade students from two different schools. In general, the categories of response that emerged included retellings, personal experiences such as family life, connections to school and community experiences, personal evaluation and interpretation, such as comments about how sad the situation was, and creating text from the illustrations. Children from the more centrally located school, had experience observing homeless men who lived in a community park to include the explanations and warnings of their parents regarding these people. This experience enabled them to respond with a sense of what homelessness can involve. With this prior knowledge, the children were able to use these experiences within their community to further contemplate the situation of Andrew, the young boy in

Fly Away Home. While Andrew's situation was not seemingly as dire as these men, the young readers had a sense of what the boy must do without. They responded based on both their insights into homeless people as well as comparing Andrew to their own home situations-how they lived and what they had. Many times these students commented about how sad the situation was and eagerly discussed Andrew's feelings in one picture showing his anger that other people in the airport have homes to go to. One student said:

When the people said, "It's so nice to see you come home," it sort of made me feel sad. And then he said, "How come you guys have homes? It's not fair. You guys have homes." He felt like he was going to go up and hit them and shout at them.

The students' experiences with homeless men also caused them to question the illustration of the "grandmotherly"-looking women being led away by police. Children responded to Ron Himler's, the illustrator of **Fly Away Home**, stark contrast of the authority figure of the police and the gentle appearance of the elderly woman.

Children in the more eastern located school, however, had no experience around homeless people and their personal connections to the story shared issues tangential to the story. They were seemingly not as touched by the situation, due probably to a lack of realistic understanding as to the dilemma of homeless people. In responding to literature about people from other cultures, aesthetic responses are more deeply rooted in understanding if we can connect to the characters through other life experiences.

**OPPORTUNITIES TO DIALOGUE
AND DEVELOP UNDERSTANDINGS
ABOUT SOCIETY'S ISSUES
-SEVENTH GRADE-**

The majority of responses within the seventh grade class consisted of negotiating the potential reality of such a situation. A few doubted that the boy and father would be unnoticed wearing all blue and carrying blue bags. If anything, one or two felt that they would be perceived as being gang members. The reality of being able to live without an address was questioned, and some discussion centered around the concern of how they could get mail and still live in the airport. The cost of food in the airport was also an issue and how the father spent the little money he had was discussed.

The notion of a child experiencing such an existence seemed almost like a fantasy to the students as they persistently discussed the possible reality of this happening. This exercise in critical thinking, quite characteristic of this age, dominated the discussion.

Seventh graders also addressed the concept of homelessness and what it means in today's society, particularly the intentions of homeless people. One discussion focus was about the people who stand with "WILL WORK FOR FOOD" signs and the validity of their various stated needs. For many students the homeless were people who spent their money on "booze and liquor." The middle school group seemed to have a "distanced" knowledge, such would come from the media, and this text served as a vehicle for discussing the varying perspectives of a social issue from a closer viewpoint. Teachers should include literature that will elicit dialogue within the classroom to develop an understanding of the various societal situations about which children are aware. Rosenblatt (1983) talks about increased social sensitivity.

Through poems and stories and plays, the child becomes aware of the personalities of different kinds of people. He learns to imaginatively put himself into the place of the other fellow. He becomes better able to foresee the possible repercussions of his own actions in the life of others (p. 184).

One girl's insightful response to this book clearly reflects this:

The part that got me thinking was when they didn't have a home. When you are homeless and people don't look at you as yourself or as you really are. They look at you as a dirty rotten person.

**AESTHETIC RESPONSE DRAWS
FROM BOTH MINDS AND HEARTS
-PRESERVICE TEACHERS-**

The responses of preservice teachers represented the most diversity within one group. The most frequent category of response dealt with the sadness of a child living "not being noticed." As one preservice teacher said:

My heart goes out to Andrew. He's so young and he realizes the importance of "not being noticed" and not having a home. He knows an awful lot for his age and has had to grow up fast. It's sad

to see him being robbed of his childhood and enjoying childhood things and a normal upbringing.

Statements concerning the responsibility of the Dad also reflected mind-and-heart response. Several class members admired the Dad for trying to keep the boy and himself together and improve their situation.

I liked how the families stuck together and the kids were more than willing to try to help. The father sounds like he is really trying to change their situation and cares for his son.

One individual shared how Andrew's dad reminded her of her own father during a time when he kept up a "front" that everything was alright, although the family knew that extreme financial problems existed.

In contrast, two students mentioned the father's responsibility not to subject Andrew to the situation. One said:

This story showed irresponsible parents who are selfish wanting to be with their children when they should think of the child and use social services. The child should be put in a foster home for proper care and put in school until the parents can take care of him.

Other contrasts in responses dealt with the story being told from the child's perspective. Some felt their hearts going out to Andrew and realized they had never thought of homelessness from the point of view of a child. Another student said that the author kept a depressing topic from being too sad by showing it through "the hopeful eyes of a child." Although the majority of students recognized the reality of homelessness in our society, several felt the depiction was not very realistic in this book. Another felt that the situation shown was too happy and enjoyable and almost made one want to be in the shoes of the characters.

While most responses showed concern that this situation could possibly exist as well as enlightenment in the non-stereotypical presentation of homelessness, a few of the responses to the book indicated that they were unsure as to how this particular story would be used.

I thought the story was good but I really wonder sometimes if very young children's books need

to address such serious issues. When I think of reading with a child, I would like it to be a good, happy time, not to burden a first grader with the worries of the homeless.

In considering the ability of children to experience other cultures and the events that shape their lives, one must acknowledge that within the aesthetic response is often the issue of "protection versus perspective" (Short, 1993) in which adults assume that childhood is an age of innocence. Adults frequently deny what children and young adolescents know and underestimate what they can mentally process to make sense of their world. Literature allows children to process issues with which they are daily confronted and sometimes confused.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT LITERATURE -EDUCATORS-

The teachers who were participating in the conference session responded as nurturing adults and educators whose focus was on the involvement of children within this troublesome context. Through aesthetic response they tried to understand the characteristics of childhood within the homeless culture, extending their thinking beyond stereotypical images from the media or other ways of knowing. In considering the idea of homeless children, one teacher said:

The almost hopelessness of the homeless is brought to light through the eyes of an optimistic little kid who seems to realize adult reasons for things to make sense.

To go beyond the stereotypical cultural characteristics and try to understand the individuals whose lives are influenced and affected by their own experiences, values, surroundings, and heritage, is a purpose of literature representing a diversity of people. As one reader said:

In simple language, we have all the myths about the homeless exploded. We see that even when working and clean every day you can still end up homeless. And, in our society being unnoticed is how most people want the homeless.

Often times, the relevancy of such literature is through connections to a theme or central idea. One teacher applies the notion of not being noticed, a recurring theme in **Fly Away Home**, to

the middle school children with whom he works:

even discernment has ownership if it fits the forms,
 follows the conventions,
 matches the modes & means,
 if it isn't noticed because it blends,
 and fades,
 and fits,
 and fakes,
 if it doesn't disturb, disrupt, stand out,
 then despair can pass as making do, or getting by,
 or even succeeding,
 but no one stops to care about it —
 there is safety in not being cared about ...
 middle school is like that too.

(Anonymous, 1993)

Because of many shared life experiences among cultures, the possibilities of culturally relevant literature go beyond merely a match in ethnicity, language, geographic location, age, gender, religion, or other cultural communities.

An understanding of the influence of culturally relevant literature to response is also seen in the response of Native American educators who brought some very different experiences and perspectives on the issue of homelessness. In particular, their discussion began with a negative comment, "I don't like the story. It gives me a bad feeling." As dialogue continued, consensus was reached among the Native American person who made the statement and several others from three different reservations that the book was inappropriate for their children in that they did not have homelessness among their people. Even if immediate family were not available, someone within a

person's clan would always take them in if needed. Family ties, both immediate and extended family, did not allow homelessness to be a problem on a reservation. Consensus among several of the Native Americans was that this was not something about which to presently create concern for their children.

As we contemplate the implications of the varied aesthetic responses to literature of a diverse culture, I encourage preservice teachers to consider the learning community he[*she*] is creating in the classroom as well as the literature that supports this community. Is the classroom culture conducive for both cognitively and affectively responding to literature and to life, itself, both within and outside the classroom? Is the atmosphere one in which the home culture is easily integrated and used as a resource? Is the environment one which enhances aesthetic response and values the experiences and contributions of all? Only when we can answer "yes" to these questions will readers share their responses, dialogue about the responses of others, and realize the powerful nature of aesthetic response to multicultural literature.

REFERENCES

- Bunting, E. (1991). **Fly away home**. New York: Clarion Books.
- Mathis, J. B. (March, 1994). **Fly Away Home: A diversity of response**. Paper presented as part of a symposium entitled, Beyond Reader Response: Developing Social Consciousness Through Literature Discussion. National Council of Teachers of English Conference, Portland, Oregon.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1983). **Literature as exploration** (4th ed.). New York: Modern Language Association.
- Short, K. G. (1993). Personal communication.