

American Family Album: 28 Contemporary Ethnic Stories

TuSmith, Bonnie, and Gerald W. Bergevin, eds.
Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000.

Reviewed by Melissa Hamilton Hayes

This concise anthology is an excellent starting point for teachers who are looking for a text that will introduce students to multicultural literature. There is a tendency in textbooks that focus on multicultural readings to be too prescriptive, especially when it comes to a focus on American multiculturalism. Many multicultural texts focus first on the writing of early Americans, the Puritan consciousness, Native American mythology, the immigrant's story, and slave narratives to the Harlem Renaissance, followed by Latino and Asian writing. Usually, such texts read multicultural literature in the context of American history and politics.

TuSmith and Bergevin approach multicultural writing about the American experience from a different angle, which is not to say that they ignore either history or politics. In fact, their book—organized around the concrete, central theme of family—raises a variety of issues. The book is divided into sections that explore familial relationships: grandparent/grandchild, father/child, mother/child, siblings, couples, and adoption. In a section entitled “Family Ties,” TuSmith and Bergevin push the boundaries of multicultural literature by addressing the issue of gay marriage and parenting as part of a mixed ethnic relationship. This is an often-overlooked aspect of multicultural literature and the editors should be commended for incorporating this section in their volume.

As part of their textual apparatus, TuSmith and Bergevin offer the cultural context for each story. They also include authors' biographies and discussion questions. In addition to introducing students to multicultural writing, the volume aims to help students with writing. Included is an expansive glossary of literary terms and prompts for writing about literature. The text also encourages writing about personal experience by challenging students to think about their lives in a broad cultural context.

Overall, this is an excellent introductory text for use in college freshman or high school courses. TuSmith and Bergevin include some of the most accomplished modern American writers, such as Alice Walker, Tillie Olsen, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Sandra Cisneros. Although it could be argued that some of these writers have been “overly anthologized,” such as Toni Cade Bambara, there seems no better story to represent sibling love than “Raymond's Run.” In contrast, it is refreshing to encounter such writers as Bharati Mukherjee or M. Evalina Galang, whose work is well worth reading in this wide context of multiethnic literature.