

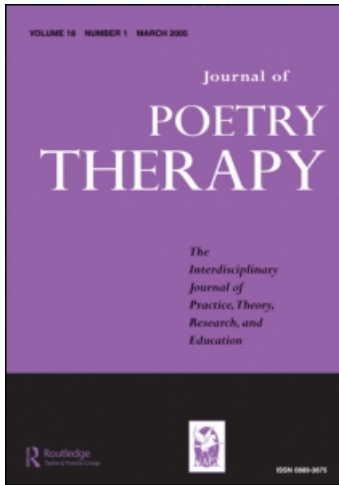
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Book Reviews

Rising Voices: Writings of Young Native Americans. Selected by Arlene B. Hirschfelder & Beverly R. Singer (first edition). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992, 115 pp., \$12.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 0-684-19207-1.

A Suitcase of Seaweed and Other Poems. By Janet S. Wong. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 1996, 42 pp., \$15.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 0-689-80788-0.

Red Hot Salsa. Edited by Lori Marie Carlson. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2005, 140 pp., \$15.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 0-8050-7616-6.

Words with Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art. Selected by Belinda Rochelle. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001, unpagged, \$16.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-688-16415-7.

Bronx Masquerade. By Nikki Grimes. New York: Dial Books, 2002, 167 pp., \$16.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 0-8037-2569-8.

In recent decades, multicultural literature has proliferated and, fortunately, an increasing proportion of it is actually being written by members of the nondominant cultures represented. Similarly with poetry, there is now available an abundance of material created by authors from traditionally under-represented cultures. So limiting ourselves to a few examples that met our goals of cultural authenticity and potential therapeutic value was actually quite a challenge, simply because there is more to choose from—a pleasant dilemma! This review considers five books of poetry that reflect some of the rich cultural diversity in contemporary US society; selected works address several nondominant cultural groups including Latino/a Americans, Black Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, and Native Americans. We searched for works accessible to pre-teens and early teens, which also means they are more accessible to older readers who may not be familiar with poetry. These collections were created with younger readers in mind, and are written by a mix of established authors and emerging young poets. They provide culturally authentic perspectives that can validate and/or expand on young readers' own experiences. The books address a range of topics and transitional issues, set within an array of cultural contexts. For clinicians who work with youth, the therapeutic value and applications are limited only by the creativity of the practitioner.

Editor's Note: The *Journal of Poetry Therapy* includes reviews of books of interest to poetry therapists. Of special interest are thematic poetry anthologies that deal with personal issues and experiences, as well as books about any aspect of the therapeutic use of literature and writing. Please note, however, that chapbooks and self-published poetry books will not be considered. To be considered for review, books should be sent to: Charles Rossiter, PhD, CPT, Book Review Editor, *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 705 S. Gunderson Ave., Oak Park, IL 60304, USA. E-mail: Charlie.Rossiter@poetrypoetry.org

Rising Voices: Writings of Young Native Americans (Hirschfelder & Singer, 1992), honors the oral and storytelling traditions of these cultures by collecting young peoples' own words about their experience as Native Americans. The writers range in age from elementary school students to young adults in their early twenties, and the 62 selections include poetry, short essays and testimonials. The works themselves, organized into thematic sections on family, identity, homelands, education, harsh realities, ritual and ceremony, provide a vicarious immersion into Native experience. The emotions elicited are strong—often painful, never humorous, yet still conveying pride and cultural identification—making these poems potentially valuable resources for counselors and young people. A brief biographical statement accompanying each work reveals that, although the authors come from many tribes, they share the struggles of defining identity and living “in a world that constantly rejects and attacks their Native cultures” (p. 3). The editors are well known scholars in the field of Native American literature; they provide brief, informative introductions to the book overall and to each section, explaining the significance of the themes for Native Americans, and providing context for the works that follow.

Rather than a collection of works by different authors, *A Suitcase of Seaweed and Other Poems* (Wong, 1996) offers one woman's perspective on living within multiple cultures. The author's mother is Korean, her father Chinese, and she was born and raised in America. Each aspect of this complex heritage is reflected in a section of the book, introduced by a short piece of autobiographical prose. Her poems are largely free verse, and subjects are suitable for children eight years and up. This might be considered lighter fare with some humorous pieces, yet also demonstrates sensitivity to the difficulties of reconciling diverse cultural expectation—a creative, therapeutic balance. Everyday events have a deeper meaning, as in the poem about cross-cultural friendship, “Albert J. Bell.” With the growth of multi-heritage populations, this book is a great resource. The poems in this slim volume offer the skilled practitioner highly accessible discussion starters for children facing cultural diversity within their own family.

One of the distinctions of the *Red Hot Salsa* poetry collection (Carlson, 2005) is its bilingual format. Most of the poems are authored in English and translated into Spanish—often by the original poet—but a few were originally written in Spanish. Several of the English versions include Spanish vocabulary; however, a glossary makes this collection accessible to all whether their first language is English or Spanish. Indeed, the collection offers many opportunities for young readers to process how they must often navigate between two worlds. For example, in “Spanish,” Gary Soto asserts, “Spanish is seeing double. The world is twice the size” (p. 4). Authors include well-known names as well as emerging writers, including high school students. Brief biographical notes are provided for the authors who come from Argentinean, Bolivian, Chilean, Columbian, Cuban, Mexican, Peruvian and Puerto Rican backgrounds. Over 35 poems reflecting various emotions are loosely organized into the themes of language, identity, neighborhoods, love, family moments, and victory. Many poems will resonate with tweens and teens who face the challenges of “being young and Latino in the United States” (subtitle of the book).

Rochelle's (2001) *Words with Wings* assembles a rich collection of 20 poems by notable contemporary and historic Black/African Americans. The poems are

enriched by the inclusion of an equal number of colorful, full-page artistic works, representing diverse styles, by Black American artists. Poems address a range of experiences, from the excruciating cut of prejudice (Countee Cullen's "Incident"), to the validation of family connection (Langston Hughes' "Aunt Sue's Stories"), and offer opportunities to young readers to both embrace and expand their awareness. Brief biographical notes on both poets and artists are appended and enhance this work, echoing the book's themes of hope and dignity.

The content of *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002) makes this collection more suitable for teens, with discussion of such weighty issues as abuse, death, prejudice and body image. Eighteen fictional teens each offer a brief autobiographical monologue followed by a poem created for the 'open mike' sessions in their English class at school. Running throughout is the commentary of the character Tyrone, who finds hope for himself through creating poetry and who learns to see beyond his first impressions as the poems reveal the real people and feelings behind the facades. Lauded by their classmates, and even the local media, the student poets also learn to see themselves in a more positive light. This is powerful and compelling reading for anyone, and the variety of cultures represented in the characters makes this book a unique resource for working with culturally diverse clients.

Many nondominant cultures in the US have valued oral or written stories and verse as a way to preserve their cultural traditions, pass along the wisdom of past generations or to teach their children important life lessons. In the worst instances of our cultural domination, we have often forbidden dominated peoples to read or write or even speak their own language, so words became an even more precious commodity. For some cultures, stories, prayers, songs and other spoken words were considered sacred. Grandparents and other respected family members chose their words with care as they talked to the young people who represented the future of their culture. The same could be said for poetry in general, that is, words are chosen carefully and rarely wasted.

Developing an ethnic, cultural and racial identity is an essential task, especially for our young clients who live in this increasingly pluralistic society. Identity formation for those belonging to nondominant cultures is especially challenging because they often see themselves portrayed by the dominant culture as "less than." From a therapeutic standpoint, authentic poetry specific to younger clients' cultures has been found to provide unique benefits, such as validating ethnic identity and helping the young person focus on appropriate ethno-cultural ideals. Conversely, quality multicultural literature, including poetry, has been found to increase empathy for and understanding of the lived experiences of cultures other than one's own. These five books of poetry offer rich possibilities for therapeutic and developmental work with young people, serving as both windows into cultures and mirrors to reflect cultural experience.

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