

Voices in Literature

Mary Lou McCloskey and Lydia Stack. 1993. Boston: Heinle & Heinle. pp. iii-211.

*Reviewed by Sherry K. Rasmussen.*²

"Good literature is about the human experience," authors McCloskey and Stack write in the introduction to *Voices in Literature*. It "is meaningful to students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds." According to this definition, McCloskey and Stack have compiled a selection of very "good literature" which will be appreciated especially by adolescents and young adults. (The book was piloted in a variety of public schools in the U.S.) While *Voices in Literature* might be more meaningful to ESL students, as it includes texts about moving to another culture, EFL students would also enjoy becoming familiar with the variety of cultures represented in U.S. society and included in this book.

And what variety this book offers! The editors of *Voices in Literature* extend the definition of literature to include songs, speeches, and essays in addition to poetry, drama and short stories. The authors of the literature in this book come from several different North American cultures, such as African-American, Navajo, Chicano, and Chinese-American. In addition, McCloskey and Stack clearly wanted women authors represented as well as men. A small sample of the literature includes poems by Sandra Cisneros, Adrienne Rich, and Leroy Quintana; a play by Arthur Miller; stories by Bette Bao Lord and Langston Hughes; a speech by Martin Luther King; and a song by Paul Simon. Often a short profile of the author is included after the text.

The texts in *Voices in Literature* are organized into five thematic units: *Beginnings*, *Origins*, *Friendship*, *Wishes and Dreams*, and *Generations*. All of the texts are authentic. The editors have selected works which include vocabulary that students will use in other settings. Certain words are glossed in the text, and there is a glossary at the end of the book.

Before reading a text, students activate their schema through a variety of questions or activities related to its theme. After each text, in addition to answering comprehension questions, students examine various literary elements found in the text (such as compare and contrast, or cause and effect). Students are encouraged to share their ideas about the text and relate it to their own lives through discussions, drawings,

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writings, or other activities. Finally, the end of each unit includes a short bibliography of works related to the theme.

Voices in Literature is extremely appealing visually and represents a variety of cultures through artwork. We find drawings, paintings, lithographs, batiks, murals, and photographs by artists such as Keith Haring, Georgia O'Keefe, Grandma Moses, and Edward Hopper. Images vary from girls jumping Double Dutch rope to an Ojibwa family trekking near Lake Winnipeg, and from a turn-of-the-century New York street to a baking Arizona desert. In addition, the book uses brightly colored borders and illustrations which make it user-friendly as well as attractive.

While McCloskey and Stack clearly wanted females represented in their book, we still find few selections where the female is the major character or hero in the text. In many texts, such as various songs and poems, gender is not mentioned at all, and several other texts include both female and male major characters. Still the number of texts in which the male is the main character or hero outnumbers the female. The unit *Origins*, which includes myths from a variety of cultures, is notably male-centered, where leaders and heroes are male, while females are either caretakers or they are simply invisible. Granted, in some of these myths, animals work with the males and are also true heroes (in one myth, Earth is saved by a female muskrat), and McCloskey and Stack ensure that the animals get due credit in the post-reading activities. However, the editors otherwise do not deal with the question of male dominance in these myths (though teachers using this textbook may wish to do so). Similarly the *Wishes and Dreams* unit includes a tale with unfortunate stereotypes of the old woman as an evil witch, the princess as someone easily fooled, and the husband as the hero, but the editors do not address these stereotypes in the post-reading section. Nevertheless, *Voices in Literature* does offer several selections with strong bright female characters, and that is refreshing.

Voices in Literature is well-organized and well-written. It challenges students, and both teachers and students will find the book interesting, fun and educational. A Teacher's Manual and Activity Masters are available to supplement the textbook.