



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“We are convinced that books for children can assist in the quest for the peace and social justice in our world. We wish for children everywhere to be able to know the power of story and feel its transformative effect in their lives. We see good books as vital elements in forging a just society.”

-From Beverly Vaughn Hock's "Welcome to our Seventh Reading the World" (2005).

I recently attended the *Reading the World* conference, at the University of San Francisco. The subtitle for this event was: "A Conference Celebrating Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults," and that is really a perfect description. There were two days of speakers, workshops, book signings and conversations, and it was much more than I anticipated.

As I read the introduction to the program, I could see the influence of the social justice awareness aspect of this year's conference - what Barbara Hock calls "a community which encourages the exchange of various views and perspectives." I appreciate this approach to any kind of discussion and I certainly heard some strong opinions being expressed.

For example, at one point, one of the speakers, poet and anthologist Arnold Adoff, made a comment about a publication. Someone in the audience objected, shouting out

"No!" But Adoff simply repeated his own remark, and then added with a smile, "It's not the first time I've heard the word 'no.'"

Other speakers included author Nancy Garden, whose numerous writings include *Annie on My Mind*, which became the subject of a First Amendment lawsuit; Nikki Grimes, a poet, singer and writer, who wrote such books as the Coretta Scott King Author Award winner *Bronx Masquerade*; and Patricia McKissack, who has won countless awards for her books about the African American experience. Suzanne Fisher Staples, author of *Shabanu*; Ruthanne Lum McCunn, author of *Thousand Pieces of Gold*; and writers F. Isabel Campoy, Jaime Adoff, Alma Flor Ada, and Ibtisam Barakat also spoke.

Ibtisam Barakat, who is described in the program as "an award-winning Palestinian-American writer, poet, educator," was part of an onstage

conversation with Suzanne Fisher Staples. During that conversation, she talked about being a young child in Palestine, and then being forced to leave her home and find refuge in Jordan. As she was telling her poignant and moving story, she stopped and commented that she was telling her own story, but no one's story should erase another's. Instead, she explained, they should stand side-by-side.

I loved this comment – it seems to me that if all of us were able to tell our stories without feeling like we are competing with each other, the world could be a more peaceful and accepting place to live. Nikki Grimes made a related comment when she talked about having multicultural reading materials at schools that are predominantly one group, such as white or African-American. “One of the purposes of artists or writers,” she said, “is to

show the viewer or the reader that we are all alike beneath the skin.”

Ruthann Lum McCunn spoke to us about using books to give a feeling and depth to events that may be unknown to the reader. “You can be taken out of your world into another time and place and still feel the feelings,” she explained. She also emphasized the importance of telling everyone's story – if you don't, she said, it is the same as a misstatement.

It was inspiring to hear these writers talk about their commitment to create literature for all children and I am glad I went. I came away with an expanded appreciation for the power of children's literature and the writers who create it.