

Multiculturalism in the Hands of African-American Authors from Alabama

Teacher: Kim Ledbetter

Grade: 6

Introduction to Lesson

For many years, literature about African-Americans has been written by Caucasians. Even Caucasian authors like Harriet Beecher Stowe, who supported the cause of African-Americans, still wrote from outside the African-American culture. There has been, therefore, a dearth of literature for or about African-Americans written by African-Americans. A growing number of African-American authors have tried to answer this need, to give an authentic sense of what it was and is like to grow up black in America and to give a literary base of role models to young African-Americans. Alabama has played a unique historical role in the history of African-Americans, and now Alabama can brag that several of her African-American children have become respected multicultural writers, helping to document the history of African-Americans and shine a light on the path of their future.

Objectives

6th Grade Language Arts Objectives from the Alabama Course of Study:

#1: Students will interpret and construct meaning by applying appropriate strategies to materials across the curriculum. Examples: setting purposes for reading, interpreting author's meaning, correcting or confirming author's message, identifying main idea and supporting details.

#6: Students will determine the author's purpose: to persuade, to inform, or to entertain.

#7: Students will recognize the characteristics and cultural influences of works of literature representative of various eras.

#8: Students will be aware of writing and speaking styles that incorporate dialects, idioms, and intonation patterns.

#9: Students will become aware of the etymology of language: for example, cultural and regional expressions.

#10: Students will recognize linguistic and cultural diversity: for example, geographic or ethnic diversity.

#11: Students will recognize the power of language as it evokes emotion: expands thinking; and influences problem solving, decision making, and action.

#12: Students will develop general listening behaviors for different purposes and situations.

#14: Students will use study processes to manage information.

#15: Students will demonstrate an awareness of the research process. *(This overlaps the Information Literacy objectives in that examples given for this objective are: locating and using multiple sources, accomplishing a variety of purposes, and documenting, and presenting findings.)*

#16: Students will respond with understanding and empathy to information read, viewed, and heard.

#20: Students will demonstrate effective listening and speaking behaviors for varied situations and purposes: for example, during whole class situations, group discussions, and public speaking.

#24: Students will use self-monitoring and feedback from peers and teachers to evaluate reading, writing, listening, viewing, studying, and research skills: for example, use rubrics.

#30: Students will express personal feelings, opinions, and information in formal, informal, and interpersonal situations.

6th Grade Social Studies Objectives from the Alabama Course of Study:

#9: Students will identify changes in the American home front during World War II, for example, describing the changing role of African-Americans in society.

#13: Students will describe the role of major civil rights leaders and significant events occurring during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

#14: Students will identify cultural and economic changes throughout the United States from 1960 to present.

#15: Students will explain major political events from the Nixon Administration to the present by, for example, describing the changing role of minorities in society from 1970 to the present.

6th Grade Information Literacy Objectives from Literacy Partners:

Access: Students will use online information tools for research and problem solving.

Evaluate: Students will summarize a book or production. Students will infer information from material read, viewed, or heard.

Use: Students will develop a web in analyzing a topic.

Time Frame

Days 1 and 2, in class: Teacher introduces lesson and students complete Activity #1.

Two weeks, outside of class: Students complete Activity #2.

Week 3 (in-class): Groups work on Activities 3, 4, and 5. (Allow time for in-group discussion and planning as well as for actual group presentations to the class.)

Last Day (in-class): Students complete Activities #6 and #7.

Ideas for Activities

Individually:

#1: Read about several African-American authors for young readers who are listed on the *This Goodly Land* Web site: James Haskins, Angela Johnson, and Sonia Sanchez. Complete a graphic organizer for each author. Transform the organizers into a Venn Diagram to compare and contrast the authors. (Ideas for author information to include: date of birth, Alabama connection, titles for younger readers, types of books the author writes, literary awards, education, how/why this person became an author, other interesting facts.)

#2: Choose, obtain, and read at least one of the books written by James Haskins, Angela Johnson, or Sonia Sanchez. (The teacher should probably pre-select a few of the books that are age-appropriate from which students could choose, or the teacher should at least make sure there are a few students from each class who select the same book so group activities will be possible. A list of suggested titles follows.)

Groups:

3: Discuss and tell how the author's own life experiences may have played a role in the writing of the book—maybe how some experience led the author to consider the topic very important or how the plot may have actually been a little autobiographical.

Then, choose either Activity #3 or Activity #4. Groups' presentations will be videotaped by classmates for later reviewing.

#4: Prepare and give an oral summary of the book you selected, including further reporting on the book's plot, characters, themes, setting and/or tone. If the book is an informational book, report instead on the book's topic and how the author portrayed it.

#5: Plan, practice, and dramatize a scene from the book that you see as particularly important to the African-American culture.

Class:

#6: After all groups have presented, whole classes should view videos of presentations (especially those taped during other classes) and then discuss together how the authors' being African-American, and perhaps specifically from Alabama, added to the impact of the books.

Individually:

#7: Draw from materials read, discussed, and viewed to write personal opinions as to how the authors' being African-American (and/or Alabamian) added to the impact of the books.

Extensions

1. Write a one page author report using at least three different sources for your information. One of the sources must be the *This Goodly Land* Web site (<http://www.alabamaliterarymap.org>). One source must be available through the *Alabama Virtual Library* (www.avl.lib.al.us). You may choose your third source and use others if you wish. Include biographical information, why the person became a writer, types of writing the author enjoys, awards the author has won, and at least one reason why you find this author interesting.

2. Write a poem or descriptive narrative that tells one of the following:

- a. what you learned from reading his or her works
- b. how you felt while reading one of his or her works

(Be sure to name the author.)

Materials

Computers with Internet access

Books, provided by teacher as class sets or by students

Suggested nonfiction titles by James Haskins:

[Black Eagles: African Americans in Aviation](#)

[The March on Washington](#)

[Outward Dreams: Black Inventors and Their Inventions](#)

Black Music in America: A History Through Its People

Suggested titles by Angela Johnson:

Heaven

Wind Flyers

Other Side: Shorter Poems

Gone From Home: Short Takes

Suggested titles by Sonia Sanchez:

It's a New Day: Poems for Young Brothas and Sistuhs

The Adventures of Fathead, Smallhead, and Squarehead

A Sound Investment: Short Stories for Young Readers

Graphic organizers for gathering author information

Teacher-made rubrics for:

Peer evaluation of group work

Peer evaluation of video presentations

Self-evaluation of project

Teacher-evaluation of individual writings

Brief annotations on suggested titles

These nonfiction books by James Haskins can easily be used to show contributions and struggles of African-Americans during the time frame of American History covered in the Alabama Course of Study: 1877 to the present.

Black Eagles: African Americans in Aviation shows the achievements of African-American aviators from the beginning of the 20th century and the racial barriers they overcame to pursue their dreams. This book covers much more than the Tuskegee Airmen.

The March on Washington is about the 250,000 person strong march in 1963 to raise awareness for the need for racial equality and job opportunities for African-Americans. Haskins tells how the event was organized all the way through to how the clean-up was accomplished. Haskins also writes about the people surrounding the march: the organizers' efforts, the press coverage, and the politicians' responses.

Outward Dreams: Black Inventors and Their Inventions has "crisp, brief biographical sketches blended with social history [which] bring to light little-known facts about African Americans whose inventions have made lasting contributions to life in America" (*Horn Book Guide*, 1991). An appendix lists patents of black inventors from 1834 to 1987.

Black Music in America: A History Through Its People places "major musical figures of black American music in a social and historical context" (Jeffrey Cooper, *KLIATT Review*, May 1993 (vol. 27, No. 3). Cooper goes on to state that Haskins "tells as much about the evolution of American culture as he does about the remarkable men and women who shaped America's music".

Angela Johnson has written so many good books; this list is in no way intended to negate the worth of using other titles by Johnson. The suggested titles by Angela Johnson were partly chosen simply because they offer a variety of genres: poems, short stories, novels.

Heaven is a novel about a young African-American teenager, Marley, whose “perfect” world is temporarily shattered when she discovers that her parents are really her aunt and uncle. Through Marley, readers learn that love, more than blood, make a family and that life is okay even though nobody’s life is perfect.

Wind Flyers is a picture book about the Tuskegee Airmen; it would be a great pairing with Haskins’ Black Eagles: African Americans in Aviation.

The Other Side: Shorter Poems is a book of poems which wonderfully characterizes the people and places of Johnson’s childhood in rural Shorter, Alabama, during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Angela Johnson’s Gone From Home: Short Takes is a collection of twelve troubling short stories which make readers aware that everyone has a story to tell and that every person needs to give and receive kindness. These stories are not for every student, but they could lead to great classroom discussions on mature topics that, unfortunately, are all too real in the lives of many sixth graders.

Sonia Sanchez writes mostly for adults, but her three books for young audiences are appropriate for this lesson because she writes from the perspective of an African-American woman and she often uses black dialect in her poems. These books are hard to obtain, however.

Resources

Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies, Bulletin 2004, No. 18; Adopted 2004; Effective 2005-2006 School Year; Grades 5-6. (Added to Alabama State Department of Education Web site on August 6, 2004).
http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/doc_download.asp?section=54&id=2072&sort=5

Alabama Department of Education. (1999). *Literacy partners*. Montgomery, AL: Alabama Department of Education.

Alabama Virtual Library. <http://www.avl.lib.al.us>

Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database. <http://clcd.odyssi.com>

This Goodly Land: Alabama’s Literary Landscape. Alabama Center for the Book and Auburn University. <http://www.alabamaliterarymap.org/>

Other Curriculum Connections

See Social Studies objectives listed above. Selected works could be read as they fit into the specified eras of American History. The author bios from *This Goodly Land* and their books could be used to show events and feelings from the African-American viewpoint.

Assessment

Teacher will compile rubric scores from a variety of sources: self-, peer-, and teacher-evaluated rubrics of lesson results as described in Materials List above.