The Sweat of Vicki Koob
(A Review of Braided Lives)

by

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Braided Lives, An Anthology of Multicultural American Writing Minnesota Humanities Commission, Minnesota Council of Teachers of English. St. Paul, MN, 1991.

In a University of Nottingham auditorium crowded with secondary school English teachers one chilly spring night in 1985, Terry Eagleton delivered a lecture entitled "The Bankruptcy of Liberal Human Values in Literary Studies." Looking a bit like a street fighter just in from the street, wearing baggy green trousers and a loose green jacket, he eased into his subject in a soft voice.

"(Literature) teaches us . . . to be—let me rehearse some of the cherished terms—sensitive, imaginative, responsive, sympathetic, creative, perceptive, reflective. Notice the resounding intransitivity of all of these familiar shibboleths. The task of the moral technology of literature is to produce an historically peculiar form of human subject who is sensitive, receptive, imaginative and so on . . . *about nothing in particular.* This notion would have been utterly unintelligible to Aristotle, St. Paul, Thomas Aquinas and Samuel Johnson. . . ."

The words "action" and "conflict" were prominent as he continued. All good liberal humanists desire a transformed society was his theme. "Experience in itself is blind and will teach you nothing; it's only by the political interpretation of experience that existence becomes fruitful," he told the teachers. Clearly a favorite and a leader among the politicized secondary school teachers in the audience, Eagleton was lecturing to the believers. Many of them had supported the coal miners in their recent strike, and the teachers campaigned openly in their classrooms against the Thatcher Government and on behalf of militant labor.

Some American observers who had flown the Atlantic to attend this National Association for the Teaching of English conference, expecting literary talk in the reverent tones of the Leavis tradition, were shocked by Eagleton's call for a literature to encourage political action. They were even less prepared to deal with the idea of literature as a classroom tool for social change.

Now comes *Braided Lives*, and we may be forced to think through our own beliefs on the matter. The British are always a few years ahead of us in such things. Perhaps we can learn from their experience.

"We dreamed of a strikingly beautiful collection of stories and poems that would reveal the abundance and diversity of American writing," write editors Deborah Appleman and Margaret Reed in their introduction to *Braided Lives*. ". . . over forty different voices, bringing their sounds and stories to high school readers. . . . We wanted it to include eloquent works that for one reason or another are often missing from classroom anthologies."

The poetry and prose in this book fulfill their dream with breadth and the richness of full color. It is a splendid selection of writing by American minorities: Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans. Many of the authors are women. Many of the individual selections are from among the very best of the best known writers' works: James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"; Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" from *The Woman Warrior;* the eagle passages from N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn.* Most of the selections from lesser known writers are just as fine: Donna Kate Rushin's "The Bridge Poem" ("I'm sick of filling in your gaps . . ."); Alberto Alvaro Rios' easy, artless "The Iguana Killer"; Bharati Mukherjee's tangled "Orbiting"; "Sure You Can Ask Me A Personal Question" by Diane Burns ("I don't know if anyone knows whether or not Cher is really Indian.").

This anthology was constructed by an editorial board made up of classroom teachers and by an advisory board that included representatives from the Minnesota Humanities Commission, the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English, and college and high school English faculties from around the state. The book goes well beyond the usual bland, conservatively safe products of institutional committee compromise to offer both rough and reassuring narratives and lyrics about American lives away from the privileged white center. In the American experience of this book, life away is often painfully hard, bitter, stretched to the point of rupture. It can also be joyous, spontaneous, and innocent, conditions rare in lives of the white majority if we are to believe many of its own literary chroniclers.

Some selections offer minority perceptions of the white middle class, people seen here as generally naive, tense, and foolish, at their worst hypocritical and brutal. "Your father says he heard his brother scream when the car rolled over him, and heard the wood of that guitar when it give and he heard them strings go flying, and he heard them white men shouting, and the car kept on a—going and it ain't stopped till this day," the narrator's mother tells him in "Sonny's Blues."

At a time when arguments rage across the land over the guilt or glory of Western European culture, particularly the American experience with societies less technologically advanced than our own—do we observe the 500th anniversary of the landing of Columbus on American shores as the beginning of a harsh enslavement of peaceful people or the advent of civilization to the New World wilderness?—*Braided Lives* will almost certainly generate more debate about multiculturalists giving greater attention in classrooms to those things that divide us than to things that might unite

and even elevate us. But the diversity and intensity of experiences presented in this book and the craft of the writers are all so appealing as hopefully to mute objections in a rush of pure literary enjoyment.

Braided Lives is a bold book.

As a collection of pieces to be read for the pleasures of literary experience, the ironies, the moral dilemmas, the ambiguity of theme, the exploration of consciousness under strain, delight in the display of literary craft, the book is vividly rewarding. The shifting values and uncertain personal allegiances explored in a story like "Orbiting," for example, develop ironies that allow readers to experience ways talk about meaning in literature usually produces many meanings, the wonderful ambiguity of fictional reality that so closely resembles the mystery of living itself. And for those who maintain that the New Criticism is not dead, only resting, the book has selection that could easily serve as texts in the craft of short fiction. While the craft of the poets here may not be quite as careful as that of the prose writers, there is enough diversity in the forms of both prose and verse to hold the interest and even respect of most critical students.

It can be argued however that the delights of ambiguity and the pleasures of form are not enough. As Eagleton told the Nottingham teachers, these delights and pleasures can be clever diversions to distract us from literature's tougher responsibilities. *Braided Lives*, dealing with the experience of minorities, most of whom do not share in the economic prosperity and personal opportunities of the American majority, may be an appropriate text for a more socially active literary role.

In 1988, the Minnesota State Board of Education adopted a Multicultural and Gender—Fair Curriculum Rule that included a requirement that school boards in each district adopt a written plan to develop and put into place an "inclusive educational program . . . one which employs curriculum that is developed and delivered so that the students and staff gain an understanding and appreciation of . . . the cultural diversity of the United States. . . . The program must reflect the wide range of contributions by and roles open to Americans of all races and cultures."

There is ambiguity in the word "appreciation" in that paragraph. It is a slippery term.

In August of 1991, over the signatures of its president and the president of the MCTE, the Minnesota Humanities Commission sent a letter to every Minnesota English teacher saying, "The publication of *Braided Lives* provides a wonderful opportunity to begin a statewide discussion of multicultural literature."

In September, the MCTE *NEWS* told its readers a copy of *Braided Lives* had been sent to all high school English teachers in Minnesota "to make them aware of a resource which will enable them to better comply with the State Department of Education's multicultural, gender fair rule."

These are commendable goals. A painfully real need exists to develop tolerance and appreciation among cultures in our state, in our society at large. It would be ostrich innocence to assume that there are not now among us a large number of citizens (including students and teachers) with dark and unfavorable views of Hispanic Americans or Asian Americans or African Americans or white Americans. "We glibly assume people are being treated in an unbiased way," the director of Anishinabe Legal Services in Bemidji recently told a panel studying racial bias in Minnesota. "But Indians experience racism in a thousand different ways every day."

In this matter, Bemidji is not unusual.

Perhaps, so the reasoning goes, if we introduce into secondary school English classes stories and poems by minorities describing their experiences in America, the readings will effect a change of attitude. Perhaps reading about minority experiences will help members of the dominant culture develop an appreciation of minority cultures. Literature can serve a useful purpose.

It is an attractive thought, but one not without some traps. Here are some questions. Is there convincing reason to believe that reading fiction about cultures different from our own will necessarily make us more appreciative of those cultures? Do English teachers generally have sufficient training and preparation to discuss in their classrooms stories and poems from minority writers in a manner that will successfully promote racial harmony (appreciation) rather than arriving very quickly at economic, legal, political, and historical complexities beyond the scope of most teachers' training and experience? Is the promotion of understanding and appreciation among and between cultures a proper function of fiction and poetry? If literature is to be used in the classroom for the promotion of one type of attitude, in this case appreciation of cultural diversity, what would prevent it being used for the promotion of other attitudes that might appear attractive to some dominant group in the future? Disapproval of labor unions or approval of abortion come to mind as examples.

Unfortunately, the general editors of *Braided Lives* do not do much to assist readers in answering these kinds of questions. Perhaps they did not know what uses were in store for their book. Even though they are classroom teachers themselves, they confine their introductory remarks to a series of rather inspirational generalities about conviction, commitment, motivation, and the abundance and diversity of American writing, saying these are reasons for introducing the stories to students. They add that they hope the literature will "inspire lively discussions in classrooms throughout Minnesota," but they stop short of suggesting those discussions be shaped specifically to effect changes in student attitudes towards minority cultures.

Each of the four sections in this book is introduced by a preface written by a person of the culture represented in that section. Each section ends with an excellent short bibliography. The section introductions are more direct in

their expressions of hope that stories and poems will somehow make readers more appreciative of the ways of other cultures, but even these prefaces offer no real clue about how literature might function successfully in the classroom as a force for multicultural harmony. ". . . a tragic feature shown in some of these writings is the violence that poverty, racism, and ethnocentrism inflicts on the lives of people," writes Juanita Garciagodoy in her high spirited wake up introduction to the Hispanic American section. "Don't recoil from the sorrow in these pages. It is part of this world in which you live, in which you were born and raised and which, if you allow yourselves to be courageously open and free of prejudice and indifference, you can help change in you lifetime."

Good as this anthology is, it will not achieve much in the way of effecting better understanding among cultures if we just put it in the hands of well meaning English teachers and say, "Go forth and teach. Hope for the best."

We all need to think this thing through.

I asked several English teachers I know what they thought about teaching literature in their classes with the object of developing appreciation of minority cultures. My survey was small and its results may not be significant. But the results were interesting because they revealed a kind of innocent anxiousness to get on with it.

"If you get emotionally involved with the people being black, it will help your understanding," one teacher told me when I asked what she thought about having her students read "Sonny's Blues." "I don't have any evidence but I think it will work." "We have to begin somewhere," another teacher said. "We haven't been doing anything in my school up to now. We may as well start with literature and see what happens."

Well, maybe.

Such vague optimism is perhaps encouraging, but if these responses are typical, the shortage of hard fact may mean trouble. Knowledge and understanding of new things, whether different cultures or new technologies, do not automatically produce approval. Not all people who spend a year in Kuala Lumpur come away with an increased tolerance or appreciation of Malay culture. A Netherlands Institute for Consumer Research study last year showed that increased knowledge of biotechnology by the public does not necessarily lead to increased public acceptance of the products of biotechnology. Increased knowledge often leads to increased resistance. And besides, literature as a way of knowing presents some very special difficulties.

The theme of many of the stories in *Braided Lives* goes directly contrary to principles or beliefs that American schools have traditionally endorsed.

While this fact is in no way an objection to the book as a classroom text, it can raise serious problems for an innocent teacher who would hope to develop multicultural appreciation through its use. Without a rather wide knowledge of historical and social backgrounds of the subject and without a careful examination of the fiction and lyrics within a broad context, without a teacher's sympathetic understanding of the subtle and opaque values and traditions of Asian or Spanish American cultures, the book may easily produce results in the classroom exactly opposite to the ones intended by its sponsors.

Some of the difficulties arise from the nature of literature itself. Fiction is affective, subjective, personal. It is not a good vehicle for the transfer of information on which to base larger judgments. While a narrative may strike readers as having some sort of universal application, it ordinarily will not provide an adequate historical or social or economic context for the action it portrays and therefore is often not evidence sufficient by itself on which to base a judgment or conclusion about complex questions or guilt, responsibility, or justice. This is especially true of short stories and poems, the kinds of writing that make up *Braided Lives*. Individual experience alone is not a good base on which to ground larger moral judgments, generalizations, especially when the individual experience is fictional, related by a narrator sympathetic to a sufferer.

Louise Erdrich's "American Horse," first story in the book, is an example.

"American Horse" is a sad and sentimental story with a theme of love versus the law, the heart against the head, freedom versus confinement. The theme is developed not through debate or abstract argument but through action, the police and a social worker coming to take a Native American boy away from his defiant mother, the law "kidnapping the boy" some readers might characterize the action.

The narrator, an omniscient presence with sympathy for the boy, his mother, and their good Uncle Lawrence, offers description, detail, and conversations so carefully weighed in favor of the hapless mother and her loving child, so prejudicial toward the heartless representatives of the law of the dominant society, that the reader's sympathy is caught from the very first words and bound into an affectionate alliance with the wayward mom and her child. The narrator of this story doesn't give the law a chance. The narrator controls our view of the action and allows us only facts that support her/his message which appears to be that the legal representatives of the dominant culture unfairly restrict the freedom and the family relations of this Native American mother and her son.

Albertine American Horse and her young son Buddy are hiding in a woodshed on Uncle Lawrence's North Dakota reservation farm. At six in the morning two male police officers (one is a Native American) and a female social worker arrive with a court order to take Buddy away, presumably to an environment the courts consider more appropriate for a child than the

rather wild and unstructured life he is apparently now living with his free spirited mother. " I want to find that boy and salvage him," the social worker tells one of her companions, her use of the word "salvage" suggesting a kind of commodity recycling, the reclamation of cardboard or aluminum cans.

The story provides us with no information on the legal proceedings that have led to the court's decision. "Those two white people in the car came to get him for the welfare," the Indian policeman explains, but we have no way of knowing what this rather vague statement really means. We do know Albertine is a strong woman. "Harmony knew that Albertine was a tall strong woman who took two big men to subdue her when she didn't want to go in the drunk tank. She had hard hips, broad shoulders, and stood tall like her Sioux father. . . ." Like the word "salvage," the words "stood tall" create a certain response in the reader. Who can reject a character described by the narrator as standing tall? We do not know if Buddy goes to school. We do not know if he has been in trouble before now. We do not know if efforts have been made previously to persuade Albertine to provide a more acceptable life for her child. We do know that Buddy loves his mother. Albertine loves Buddy. Their love is instinctive, innocent, natural, at times more like that of comrades than mother and son. Their talk of it is spontaneous, appealing, and without self consciousness.

"*You* are the best thing that ever happened to me," Albertine tells Buddy.

"There were times he felt like hugging her so hard and in such a spirited way she would say to him, 'Let's get married,'" the narrator tells us.

They cling to each other, hiding from the law. They are every legendary pair of hounded innocents in every sentimental tale of two against the world we've ever read. Heads together, side by side, they are loveable and brave, vulnerable but strong, and there is no way we can want them to be separated by the law.

"Okay," she said. ('Lay low. They're outside and they're gonna hunt.')

"She touched his shoulder and Buddy leaned over with her to look through a crack in the boards."

Albertine's Uncle Lawrence, a veteran with war medals, a glass eye, and recently cracked ribs (his face with its scars and hollows is affectionately described as "like a damaged but fierce little cake") on whose farm they are hiding is no help for these fugitives. The police have handcuffed him to their patrol car door.

The narrator will not let us like these cops. They are authority, a neurotic social worker and two police officers, cold, clumsy, without compassion or sensitivity or a capacity for love. They offend nature. They scare the dogs with their guns. The social worker, Vicki Koob (the name alone is enough to produce a jeer), awkwardly flirts with Officer Brackett while they walk

around inspecting the clutter (there are empty beer cans) in Uncle Lawrence's cluttered house. She coyly writes in her perfect—bound social worker notebook, "Officer Brackett displays an undue amount of interest in my person." Officer Brackett, who is already having troubles with his own emotional life ("He was a short, hopeful redhead who failed consistently to win the hearts of women.") is excited "to the point of discomfort" by Miss Koob's tiny pen attached on a retractable line to an ornamental clip on her blouse. These are hopelessly inadequate police people, up-tight, inhibited, objects of the narrator's scorn, not the kinds of people to do anything good for a healthy, loving child like Buddy.

Vicki Koob's antiperspirant can't contain her sweat. She smells. Not the good healthy smell of a human freely working in the sun, but the urine stink of nervous tension. "She was sweating now as though she'd stored an ocean up inside her," the narrator tells us. After Buddy is caught and put in the car, Albertine (who experiences a kind of religious vision of her dead father before she is knocked unconscious by one of the policemen) lies senseless on the ground. Buddy, we are told, "was caught and held in the sour tin smell of the pale woman's armpits."

We have been set up for Vicki Koob's bad smell. Earlier in the story, the narrator told us about the way Buddy experienced Albertine's smell. "He felt his mother's heart beating beneath his ear so fast it seemed to push the satin roses in and out. He put his face to them carefully and breathed the deep, soft powdery woman smell of her."

Then Buddy eats a candy bar given to him by Miss Koob and opens his mouth to say thank you "as his mother had taught him" but instead begins to scream, the screams ripping out of him like pieces of his own body.

There is Albertine unconscious on the ground, fetid Vicki holds the screaming Buddy while she continues flirting clumsily with Officer Brackett. The police car rolls away. We want to scream along with Buddy, "Don't let these awful people take that kid away from his mom!!!"

If a high school English class has talked much at all about reading fiction critically, the teacher is going to need a great deal of skill to use this story to increase students' appreciation for Native American culture. This is a limited narrative and initially we will most probably sympathize with Albertine, Lawrence, and Buddy. Yet with only a little reflection we'll know there is something wrong about this sympathy we are feeling; it will not stand scrutiny, our hearts seduced for the moment to rule our heads. We've been cheated, manipulated.

It is not that the facts we've been given are necessarily wrong or improbable. (A case might be attempted that the entire story is just a kind of record of the Native American *perception* of the action, maybe Buddy's perception. But the presence of an omniscient narrator negates this as a possibility, at least within the generally accepted practices of fiction reading.) But out of all of

the thousands of details a narrator could have chosen, this one appears to have chosen only those that would contribute to a certain emotional response with social and political overtones the narrator wants to create in the reader.

As readers, we need to ask a lot of questions here. We don't have enough facts about Buddy or his mom or even Miss Koob to make a reasoned judgment about the lives of these people or the justice and legality and wisdom of what Miss Koob and the law are doing. "American Horse" is an old fashioned melodrama, a propaganda piece with all our sentiments manipulated against the unpleasant victors. The narrator gives us no context for the action, no larger picture of causes. (Why did the court order Buddy taken away? how many times has the court or its representatives tried before to arrange some mutually acceptable life for Buddy and his mom? why isn't Albertine doing what the law says is required for Buddy's well being? what *does* the law say about Buddy's well being? how are such laws made? who else has been consulted about Buddy's fate? Further, we might benefit from knowing a little more about Vicki Koob. What happened to her that made her so limited and so emotionally stunted? What kind of history does she have with kids like Buddy once they get to know her? and on and on and on.) The narrator gives no broader picture of consequences if Buddy goes and if he doesn't go. What really happens to Native American children like Buddy if they are left to grow up unschooled on the farm? What happens to them if they go with the social workers? Was Uncle Lawrence once a Buddy who went on to succeed as a soldier? Is that good or bad?

How will our sympathy transfer from Albertine and Buddy's individual difficulty to Native Americans in general? Can we realistically expect students to generalize from this one dramatic and sentimental episode narrated by a voice so strongly prejudiced in favor of one side?

If anything, the story should teach students the need to be very suspicious of the narrator in a piece of fiction.

Assume a high school class reads "American Horse" and the teacher who earnestly wants to develop appreciation of Native American culture through the use of fiction asks for comments. A girl answers, "This story says Indians don't care whether their kids go to school or not. It says Indians want to fight and live in shacks and drink beer. And they don't respect the law. That's what my dad says about Indians, too. He read this story with me last night and he said this is just the way Indians are." What is wrong with this girl's interpretation? Is her reading a valid reading of the story? What should the teacher say to her?

In order to salvage some appreciation for Native Americans, the teacher may consider doing some things literature teachers have long been trained to avoid. The teacher might consider becoming judgmental, directive, pointing out to the class a "proper" interpretation. How many English teachers are prepared or willing to do that? How successful would such a directive

technique be in promoting appreciation, especially in light of our imaginary girl's imaginary father? What is a "proper" interpretation of this story, anyway?

Much the same kind of alternate reading could be offered for other stories in this collection, Linda Hogan's "Making Do," for example, or Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," or Bharati Mukherjee's "Orbiting." The stories will not necessarily alienate students every time from the culture they appear to promote, but there is a chance the stories will alienate often enough to prove difficult, especially if the readers already have formed opinions before they began reading. Reader response is a major part of fictional reality.

The importance of reader response should not necessarily discourage us from using literature as a form of social or moral instruction. But it does cause enough good questions to force us to pause and think a while before hurrying into such an effort.

English teachers in the U.K. have had a good deal of experience with the use of literature as a social force. English teachers in London and other cities with large foreign populations face strong racist feelings among students in their classes, not only between whites and other ethnic groups, but also among the other ethnic groups themselves. For a number of years, those teachers have been experimenting with literature (mostly prose fiction) as a tool of what some of them call "moral technology" in their campaign against racism.

Some of their efforts have led to recommendations that might prove helpful in our effort.

A recent edition of *The English Magazine*, a quarterly for English teachers published at London's The English Center, assessed the UK experiment, "A central concern of these courses has been to investigate further the linking of literature and information so as to illuminate key questions about the nature of racism." Citing difficulties of combatting racism among teaching staffs as a first hurdle, the editors observe, "Most forms of curriculum change involve teachers in transitional periods of reduced confidence and vulnerability as a result of new relationships with pupils, fellow teachers and sometimes parents. Dealing explicitly with racism is likely to heighten this vulnerability; so is the introduction of a knowledge base with a political dimension. . . ." and goes on to observe that problems of racism are often related to the unequal distribution of wealth in society. It observes that many serious literary people would question whether fiction can produce a meaningful understanding or awareness of another experience because it does not offer an explanation for the reality. "One cannot rely on literature alone for social and political knowledge," it concludes and this translates into a need for a great deal of factual background information and a widely informed teacher if fiction is to affect attitudes. The treatment of racism and literary study concludes with some propositions that it suggests may be useful for discussion. I quote from four of them:

- Explicit anti-racist teaching needs to be planned into the curriculum from first year up

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- Treatment of racism needs to be sustained to be effective. ("English teaching has a tendency merely to air topics, to dabble in them only for so long as they seem to capture the interest of the class and then to let them go.")

- Work on racism needs to make use of factual information and evidence. ("Any discussion of racism is likely to be calmer and more fruitful if it has facts to go on; in particular, the provision of information can take racism out of the arena of purely individual behavior.")

- Teachers can't act neutral. ("While English teachers in general train themselves to respect different points of view and not to close debate by imposing their own, a stance of neutral is inappropriate when dealing with racism." [*English Education*).

These thoughts may not translate into action very well from one part of the world to another, but they can offer us an excellent starting point for discussion.

This fall the MCTE and MHC sponsored a series of seven meetings around the state to acquaint teachers with *Braided Lives* and ways it might be used in the classroom. I attended one of those meetings. The organizers distributed a packet of readings about literature and cultural diversity. While many of the selections in the packet seemed to me thin, essentially cheerleader pieces to urge us on, some few probed in depth. This is from the Preface to *Asian American Literature* by Elaine H. Kim: "The problem of understanding Asian American literature within its sociohistorical and cultural contexts is important to me because, when these contexts are unfamiliar, the literature is likely to be misunderstood and unappreciated."

Unfortunately, the speakers at the meeting I attended confined themselves largely to a kind of text explication and praise for individual selections in the book. The speakers encouraged us to go back to the classroom and try them out. Commendable as those presentations were, they did not even touch on more fundamental issues like those raised by the preface in Ms. Kim's work. If we are really serious about wanting to use literature in the classroom to bring about a specific kind of attitudinal change, one with heavy social overtones, we need to begin discussing some of the underlying issues, some questions about the nature of literature, the use of literature as propaganda, the role of the teacher in these efforts. Frankly, up to now, very few teachers I know have thought much about such questions.

Braided Lives is a fine collection of literary pieces. We need to address the problem of racial intolerance across our state and nation and it may be that schools are the proper places to begin. But using *Braided Lives* to promote appreciation of cultural diversity is not a promising way to go unless we first

spend time talking about the rationale, planning, learning from others, exploring the difficulties such a project may encounter.

There are more meetings scheduled. If we are really serious about this undertaking, with the best of intentions and a very fine text, we should begin by educating ourselves.

Works Cited

"Teaching against Racism." *The English Magazine* 13. Summer, 1984: 4—14. The four propositions and the material inside the quotation marks were taken from this source.