

REmail: December 13, 2005

Subject: Be My Neighbor (ISBN: 1-57091-504-0)

Johanna Halbeisen (Northampton Friends Meeting) called our attention to significant problems of cultural and racial bias in Peter Spier's book People. It is probably still in many of our RE libraries. Below are some of Johanna's comments and a wonderful alternative she offers.

"Peter Spier's book *People* was published in 1980. It was the winner of many awards, including the Christopher Medal, the National Mass Media Award "for outstanding contributions to better human relations and the cause of brotherhood." It still shows up on an occasional multicultural bibliography."

"What messages is the book giving? First of all, most pictures of "us"(the reader) assume that we are pretty much all white. When comparisons of people's looks, dress, customs [are made], it is clear that white people are the "normal" ones. Pictures emphasize how different, "ugly", "ridiculous", "lazy", "strange" and "desperate" other people might be. (All these words are taken from the book's text.) Is this the way we want our children to think about people who are different from them?"

"What disturbs me the most, what led me to do this review is the way Black people are portrayed. When a number of people from many lands and cultures are shown in comparison, two-thirds of the Black people are scantily clad, frequently have some jewelry through the nose, are holding spears, and, I'm guessing, are supposed to be people from Africa. No countries are given. When the text talks about how people find other cultures strange, laughable, the examples are a group of Black people with bare feet, spears, bare chests and dramatic jewelry looking at a group of white people with shoes, pants and skirts, shirts."

Johanna is a librarian and recommended in place of People, Be My Neighbor (2004) by Maya Ajmera and John D. Ivanko with words of wisdom by Fred Rogers. This book sets the new standard for teaching Global Citizenship to preschool through third grade. The use of beautiful photographs rather than drawings eliminates much of the bias originally introduced through artistic interpretation. The spirit of the book celebrates childhood. The text emphasizes the common elements in children's lives, noting "we are much more the same than we are different." Spier's book was organized around a litany of comparisons that go awry and end up leaving the reader with a pejorative message. Ajmera's text is like a golden thread lacing together the illustrations. It is a look at childhood at its best. This book belongs in your RE library and would make a great Christmas gift.

Ajmera and Anna Rhesa Versola wrote a second book, Children from Australia to Zimbabwe: A Photographic Journey Around the World (ISBN 1-

57091-478-8) which I can also recommend. It's designed for a slightly older reader—third to fourth grade. The text creates an alphabet of countries and then hopscotches around the world showing a map, basic facts, and heartwarming pictures of children. The text is clear and accessible to young readers. It is, however, brief and gives only a glimpse into the life of children in each country. What it does offer is a broad context into which our children can place themselves. It is a good springboard from which to begin developing understandings of Global Citizenship. This book is another good gift suggestion. I would recommend it for home use and as a class resource. It wouldn't lend itself to First Day School lesson preparation.

In the light,

Beth Collea

CE Coordinator for NEYM

P.S. The next RE Bulletin Board with announcements comes out December 15.

Send any last minute entries!