

Field Notes

Reading Under the Midnight Sun: Implications of Worldview

BY DEBBY DAHL EDWARDSON

When I first took my oldest son into the idyllic Minnesota forest of my childhood, he sat rigidly by my side, eyeing the trees above him through veiled and suspicious eyes, as though we were surrounded by a host of super-sized aliens.

“Mom,” he whispered, “let’s get out of here.”

He was only three, so we may smile indulgently, but recently—over twenty years later—his college-aged sister echoed the same sentiment. I had wanted to show her a place I’d once lived, a heavily wooded spot in the heart of Alaska. We stopped by the side of the road to admire it.

“You lived in *there*?” she asked. “Mom, that’s like living in a cave!”

My children don’t know from trees. They grew up on the coast of the Arctic Ocean in Barrow, Alaska, the country’s northernmost community, a place where the tundra is vast and treeless and the winter ocean firmly ice-clad. It’s an Iñupiaq Eskimo community, and my children are, in fact, part Iñupiaq. They would agree with the elderly Iñupiaq lady who, while visiting her daughter in Arizona, commented that the view from the living-room window would be very nice if someone would just “get rid of that tree.” The daughter tried to explain that, in this foreign world in which they found themselves, the tree was valued as part of the view. It was a strange idea to both of them.

Such is the nature of worldview.

I think a lot about the implications of worldview. I first began pondering it when I was a foreign exchange student in Norway, immersed in a new culture and learning Norwegian as a second

language. I thought about it again, years later, when I started reading my favorite children's classics to my young children and found myself editing them as I read in order to create a contextual bridge between my children's world and the often-foreign world of the book. And again when I overheard two teachers talking in the hallway of my children's school, years ago, about the upcoming administration of the standardized Iowa Test of Basic Skills. "Well," said one, "I guess I need to make sure they know what a phone booth is."

When I learned that, under the terms of No Child Left Behind, over seventy percent of the children in this Alaskan school district (which covers a region the size of Minnesota) tested as English-language deficient—including my own younger children—I was shocked. And when I discovered that the test administered to make this determination expected my children to equate fireworks with the Fourth of July and come up with answers to questions that referred to things like sidewalks, I was irate.

My children grew up knowing nothing of sidewalks or phone booths. They couldn't imagine a world where the sky was dark enough in July to make it a reasonable backdrop for fireworks. When I told my nine-year-old son to expect dark nights on his first summer visit to his grandmother's house in Florida, he thought I was joking. After he arrived, he called home, terrified, in the mid-



Debby Dahl Edwardson's daughters enjoy a sunny day out on the tundra in northern Alaska.

dle of a dark, hot Florida night. Darkness so strangely paired with intense environmental heat was, to him, the stuff of nightmares.

When she was small, one of my daughters used to speak in terms of worlds. There was the familiar world of her Iñupiaq *aaka* (grandmother) and the puzzling world of her white grandma, accessible only by a long trip that always involved machines that flew above the clouds. Logical-minded, she sought to understand the parameters of both worlds.

"Are there geese in Grandma's world?" she would ask.

Her younger sister had a favorite picture book in those days—Maya Angelou and Margaret Courtney-Clarke's photo journey into the world of a South African Ndebele girl, *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken, and Me*. We read it over and over.

We lived in a place about as far removed from Africa as is possible on this planet, immersed in a culture equally distant from the Ndebele culture. Why did my daughter so love this book?

"Hello Stranger-friend," Angelou's Thandi called to us—and we were charmed. But when she told us that she rode into town with her mother, sisters, and aunts in a mule-drawn wagon and was always proud to see the city people stare at them because "the city folk have nothing so good as the Ndebele women," we were more than charmed—we were hooked.

Angelou led us into the worldview of this one child with calm certainty, no apologies, and no attitude adjustments made for the benefit of the majority culture reader. Come into my world, Thandi said, and we did, every time.

Angelou's book offered my daughter an open window into another world. And by the end of the story, we weren't peeking in, we were gazing out, *with* Thandi. It was the first book my daughter ever read that let her know it was okay to look at the world proudly from a viewpoint distinctly removed from that of the mainstream. It was clearly a message she needed to hear.

Perhaps many children who emerge from our educational system as nonreaders are those who, like my own children, seldom found their worldview accurately reflected in the books they read, and were also seldom handed a book like Angelou's that affirmed their right to an alternate view. More often they read books that took for granted a cultural context so foreign to their own that it served to alienate rather than engage, offering no recognizable entrance. If they were children from an indigenous culture, as mine are, they often found that the books written about them read as if written from the other side of a museum glass.

One has to step through the glass and leave the museum altogether if one is to write books for these readers, books that will



give *all* readers an insider's experience of a different culture, as Angelou's book does. Such books have the potential to be life-altering. Or at least world-broadening.

PERHAPS AN EXAMINATION of how books engage young readers would be useful—particularly since I would guess that the numbers of children emerging from the educational system as nonreaders may be reflective of a rather obvious failure of engagement on levels we've never really considered. I think of the books that first engaged me as a child and come to the conclusion that books for young readers must first offer mirrors of recognition if they are ever to become windows into new worlds.

I remember well the first book I was able to "read" as a child. It wasn't a classic, but I had it memorized by the age of three: *Debbie and Her Nap*. It's not hard to figure out what attracted me. It was all about Debbie! Debbie took me by the hand and became my first navigator on what would become a lifelong voyage of reading.

I show the cover of this book to a group of librarians and then I show them a picture of myself as a young child. Anyone can see the resemblance. Debbie looked like me. Her house looked a lot like my house. And her yard, like mine, had mown grass and flowering trees.

Then I show the librarians a picture of my young nephew, out hunting on the ocean ice, and it's clear that his world is as remote as the moon from the world of *Debbie and Her Nap*.

The implications are clear, but I have to admit that it took me a while to connect the dots. Even though I knew that their earliest books offered my children few mirrors of recognition, I was puzzled by the fact that my oldest daughter did not take easily to independent reading. After all, she lived in a home filled with books, and I had always read to her. When she scored below average on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, I despaired. I had always scored in the 99th percentile. What was wrong?

Then I heard those teachers talking in the hallway about phone booths and I thought about it—the *Iowa Test of Basic Skills*. The name had a significance I had never considered. I remembered taking this test as a child and even recalled, distinctly, how it referred to things like silos. The proverbial light clicked on. *Well, shucks*, I thought. *Why wouldn't I do well on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills? I grew up in Minnesota, for heaven's sake! Silos were part of my childhood landscape.*

My oldest daughter remembered a teacher in elementary school who'd spent weeks preparing them for the Test, but when it came to the topic of idioms, the students were stymied. They spent endless hours trying, unsuccessfully, to understand the saying (somewhat bowdlerized from the original Aristotle), "One swallow does not a summer make."

What was a swallow, and what did it have to do with the making of summer?

Did it occur to this teacher to translate the imagery and syntax into what we, in rural Alaska, call Village English—a blanket term used to describe the many English dialects spoken by Alaskan Natives of differing tribes? No, not likely. Teachers tend to view Village English as broken English, something they are charged with fixing. It took me twenty years to realize that Village English has some very sophisticated roots in the Iñupiaq language. When one person accidentally knocks over a glass and another person says, "You let it fall!" for example, they are not misstating the event. In Iñupiaq there is a very real difference between actively making something fall and passively letting it fall. The arm moved, creating one situation, and the glass fell, creating another. The two events may or may not be related. The speaker is not making an overt accusation.

It's a distinction we aren't inclined to make in English, but it is one that is embedded in Iñupiaq to such a degree that even the

children who no longer speak the language reflect this nicety in the way they speak English.

"Each language is a unique tool for analyzing and synthesizing the world, incorporating the knowledge and values of a speech community," writes linguist James Crawford in *The Bilingual Research Journal*. "To lose such a tool is to 'forget' a way of constructing reality."

Worldview—a way of constructing reality.

At a recent annual library conference, publishers were showcasing their latest releases. This being Alaska, one publisher's booth proudly displayed a new book on Eskimos. The publisher's representatives seemed quite pleased by the fact that every Eskimo in the room (and there were many) was drawn to this book as though it were a magnet.

They weren't admiring its craft, I'm afraid. Most wanted to see if it contained photos of anyone they knew, as such books generally do. Others no doubt wanted to gauge the accuracy of its perspective. I know I did.

My college-educated and, by this time, world-traveled eldest daughter glanced at the book's lofty title—something that purported to be definitive about "The People of the Arctic." As we walked away from the booth, she whispered, rather loudly, "I think they should do one on 'The Men of Wall Street.'"

Indeed.

As Thandi says, "I have two hopes. One is my name, Thandi, which means hope in my language . . . the other . . . is that at the end of this book I can say 'Good-bye friend,' not 'Good-bye stranger-friend.'"

That's my hope, too—that more and more books for children will welcome readers into alternate worldviews.

*Debbly Dahl Edwardson's foray into writing from a worldview distinct from the mainstream began with the publication of *Whale Snow* (Talewinds/Charlesbridge, 2003), named to the International Reading Association's Notable Books for a Global Society list. Her new novel, *Blessing's Bead* (Kroupa/Farrar), is due out in fall 2009. She graduated with an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College.*

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