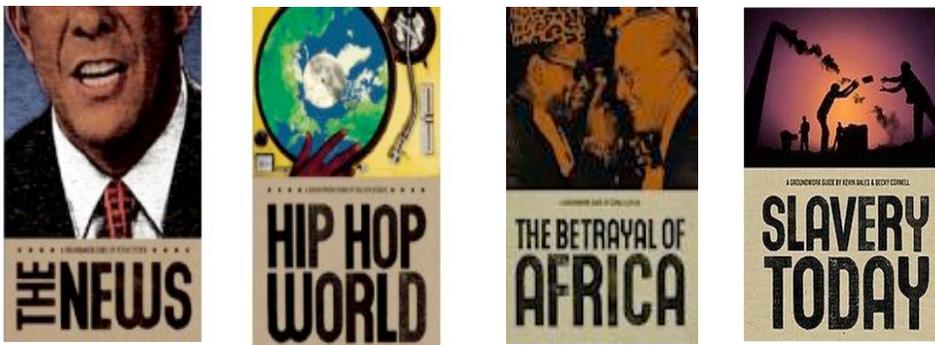




UNDER THE RADAR

A discussion of books from smaller publishers by four members of the ALAN Board: http://www.groundwoodbooks.com/gw_proding/9780888998248.jpg
Ricki Berg, Bucky Carter, Paul Hankins, and CJ Bott.



Groundwork Books (<http://www.groundwoodbooks.com>) was established in 1978 and publishes children and young adult books, fiction and nonfiction in Canada, the United States, and Latin America. In this column we will discuss titles from the Groundwork Guides series. Teachers guides for all of the books in this series is available at the following link: <http://www.groundwoodbooks.com/GWTeachersGuide> See the list of available Guides at the end of our discussion.

The Betrayal for Africa by Gerald Caplan (Groundwork Books, 2008)

Review by CJ Bott

Over three million years ago, the human race started on the continent of Africa, and human bones are still being found as recently as 2006 when a 3.3 million-year-old baby ape-girl was found in Ethiopia. Her finders named her Selam, meaning “peace” in the local language. But things have not been peaceful on the continent of Africa for a very long time, and it is impossible and

ignorant to talk about Africa as a single entity as it consists of 54 “independent” countries, several thousand ethnic groups and 2,000 languages. Caplan focuses on the forty-eight sub-Saharan countries (the six northern countries mostly border the Mediterranean Sea).

Similar to North America, historically European countries set up colonies and eventually governments with little regard or respect for the inhabitants. *In today's terms, every single European power in Africa was guilty of crimes against humanity.* (p 24)

A very poor continent, Africa is—the only region in the world where the total number of young workers living on less than a dollar a day increased, from 36 million in 1995 to 45 million in 2005. There is little to no health care: the four major causes of children's deaths are diarrhea, malaria, pneumonia and measles. Caplan reports the weekly breakdown of deaths from the following causes: AIDS--44,000, TB--8,000, Malaria--19,000, Unsafe water--14,000, Respiratory illness--18,000, Measles and tetanus (mostly children)--9,500. other--17,500, equaling 130,000.

The Africans who have prospered are the ones who aligned themselves with the Europeans. African presidents became very wealthy individuals through this partnership and they have stayed in power for very long times. The length of rule of Presidents in African countries ranges from 13 years to 39, only Nelson Mandela served for fewer than ten years--he was president of South Africa for 5 years. He had spent 27 years as a political prisoner in that country.

Though this book does not discuss Egypt, I couldn't help but apply so much of what I was reading to the present situation there. Egypt's Mubarak has served 30 years as of this writing (January 9, 2011) and the debate about his worth always focuses in the billions.

Discussion:

Ricki: CJ, Does The Betrayal for Africa portray the current situation in Africa as hopeful or hopeless?

CJ: I think both as the hopeless feel some hope in what is happening in several of the African countries, unfortunately not all of the government are reacting the same way.

Caplan said the creation the African Union, a kind of United Nations of Africa is a positive sign. The AU has sent *a military mission to monitor the crisis in Darfur*, but Caplan also says everything is dependent on the West for resources—that is where the support/power comes from.

Ricki: Does the author offer suggestions for improvements in our interactions with Africa?

CJ: The US hasn't been any better than the European countries--instead of sending aid, we reduce their debt to us.

Bucky: I can see China deciding to invest in Africa and using its investments to pull further ahead as the world's biggest super power. Did the book address this in any way?

CJ: China is very involved in Africa, its main preoccupation being Africa's raw materials however its two strongest connections are with Sudan and Zimbabwe. China gets oil from Sudan and gives them weapons to use against the people in Dafur. In 2007 after *the African Union denied Sudanese president al-Bashir his turn at the rotating presidency of the AU, a symbolic punishment for his deadly war against Darfur . . . Chinese president Hu Jintao visited Sudan and presented al-Bashir with an interest-free loan to build a presidential palace.* Earlier in 2006, China hosted a China-Africa Forum in Beijing, forty-eight of Africa's fifty-three countries attended. China is very interested in Africa and doing everything it can to secure strong relations.

This is a powerful book.

Hip Hop World by Dalton Higgins (Groundwood Books, 2009)

Review by Ricki Berg

Dalton Higgins, a music critic, gives a comprehensive history of hip hop and its roots while focuses on issues concerning hip hop. Each chapter concentrates on differing parallel issues including b-boying, graffiti, and fashion, as it is concerned with hip hop. The book spans the world, zooming in on several countries and the hip hop artists that are celebrated in each. He also delves into concerns such as: Is it okay to use the n-word? Is hip hop becoming more popular with whites than blacks? What issues do hip hop artists promote today and how are they different than those in the '80s? What are the motivations behind hip hop artists in other countries?

Higgins makes it clear that he believes the hip hop industry is in a downward spiral if its artists continue to focus on misogyny, getting rich, and drugs. He holds high esteem for the original hip hop artists who promoted political change over the money-driven artists who are more popular today. According to Higgins, the future success of hip hop lies in the artists around the world rather than those in the western world, as they seem to be more focused on change and social action.

This is a fascinating book that would be very successful amongst adolescents or adults wanting to learn more about hip hop and related issues. The writing is challenging, yet accessible to teens. Teachers would find great use in this nonfiction text, as it will appeal to teens, who will be forced to think critically about the hip hop music industry.

Discussion:

CJ: Ricki, does the author explain what the earlier hip hop artists think of the recent ones?

Ricki: He explains how critics view the current hip hop artists, but he doesn't ask the earlier hip hop artists that direct question. However, Higgins includes several interviews from hip hop artists regarding concerns of parallel issues. Additionally, he discusses how the public view of hip hop has changed throughout the years.

CJ: Was there a particular incident or hip hop performer who started that downward spiral?

Ricki: Based on Higgins's explanations, there wasn't one particular incident or performer, but more of a gradual morphing of the intent of hip hop. One interesting aspect that Higgins points out is that hip hop artists continue to create music about poverty, but many of them are no longer poor. They wear expensive clothes and lavish jewelry, while rapping about hard times. It seems to me that Higgins notices this irony, but the public doesn't consider it as much. Hip hop artists continue to be popular because people identify with the song lyrics. Higgins abhors the misogyny that is gradually growing. It used to be subtle, but he points out one music video where a Nelly, a hip hop artist, swipes a credit card down a female's butt crack. There is little accountability in the music industry, and Higgins doesn't just place the blame on the artists, but he also finds the record labels, radio stations, and television networks culpable, as they continue to air these lyrics and spectacles. All in all, he sees this as a shift that he doesn't prefer. I believe the book offers a sense of hope that the intent of the artists (and companies who support them) will shift their direction back to a focus on social justice.

The News by Peter Steven (Groundwork Books, 2010)

Review by Paul W. Hankins

From the dust jacket of Peter Steven's *The News*:

Citizens around the world rely on accurate, informed journalism in order to participate in society.

Unfortunately, the news millions of people get is unreliable, incomplete, insulting, or downright hazardous. Many of us have no choice in the news we receive. Many of us remain ignorant of major issues and diverse opinions because the news doesn't provide them.

In this 2010 offering from Groundwork Books, author, teacher, and media critic Peter Stevens explores and discusses issues related to the news media from how people receive news and how it is processed. In an early chapter of this work, "News is Power," Stevens discusses the power that comes from being aware of current events. Stevens attests that "reliable news helps us to maintain our civil rights" (9). Stevens goes on to write, "We recognize that knowledge about the world brings us status, or at least prevents us from looking ignorant" (11). Stevens sets up the rest of this work to talk about how power is drawn from the media and from the news we receive.

Throughout Steven's work, he cites the ability of the citizen to draw from multiple outlets for news, but Stevens also presents the salient pieces of what makes the news the news. The second chapter was most interesting wherein Stevens takes a look at the fundamental pieces of the news even as technology and a media-driven culture change the format, or even the delivery, of the news.

The bulk of Steven's work seems to be in the traditional news as offered by print, radio, and television as compared to, or in conjunction with, a changing landscape for news that includes the average citizen with a cellphone or camcorder who is now able to record news on the spot and deliver it themselves via a number of web-supported platforms.

The News would work well in courses focusing on journalism, mass media, or in English and Social Studies courses where a unit on current culture were being explored. While much has happened in the media by way of the demonstrations in Cairo and even more recently in Wisconsin, Peter Steven's work is timely with its allusions to culture and current web platforms.

Discussion:

Ricki: It seems that it is a positive aspect that we have more platforms and news outlets with recent technology. Does Steven's find the changing landscape of the news to be positive or negative? Does he see it as more or less reliable than the traditional news?

Paul: Stevens makes a claim that the "unofficial news" seems to be the preferred delivery system of the masses. He cites historical instances wherein the government was in control of what news was delivered and what news was withheld. Here is a quote from *The News*:

Real news, therefore, can be trusted when it's unofficial, and low-tech. To some extent the appeal of the Internet, with its blogs and citizen journalists, flows within this tradition. The search for alternative sources reflects a worldwide discontent with the dominant media. . . (33)

Stevens also presents this view of the changing landscape of news and the delivery of news, quoting Joan Connell of MSNBC, "Now anyone with something to say and access to the right software can be a publisher, and pundit and observer of events great and small" (75).

CJ: Does he discuss what the situations news people have put themselves in to cover the stories in Africa and who accepts responsibility for their safety?

Paul: Stevens addresses this in the chapter, War and International News. The focus, however, is more on how reporters might ingratiate themselves to military personnel in order to embed themselves into the story. The chapter does not speak directly to Africa or any specific war, but it does talk about how journalism/journalists can affect foreign policy, sometimes purposefully, depending upon the angle the reporter shares the story.

Slavery Today by Kevin Bales and Becky Cornell (Groundwood Books, 2008)

Review by James Bucky Carter

Slavery has been a part of the human experience since the formation of the earliest societies. Even today, 27 million people around the globe are in one form of slavery or another: human

trafficking, prostitution, debt bondage, or forced labor. Not even countries like the United States are without modern-day slaves, and laws to abolish all forms of slavery may not have been around in industrialized countries for as long as one might think. Depending on how one adds it, the work of slaves can account for anywhere from 13 to 31 billion dollars a year, and ending the condition isn't as simple as not buying goods with known links to slave labor. In our current moment, more people than ever recorded are enslaved, but less of the world's overall population is enslaved than at any other time in history. Bales and Cornell suggest that we are at a crucial moment in time, an exigency requiring specific commitments and actions, regarding how we deal with the issue of slavery as a global society. No longer are most slaves of a different race or culture than their enslavers, for example, and no nation resists the idea that slavery is immoral. Further, despite the billions earned through slavery, the overall economic imprint slave labor makes on the global economy is minute. No one can claim that any nation's economic well-being depends on slavery. As well, laws are already established prohibiting slavery, though they may not always be enforced. The authors of *Slavery Day* suggest it would cost less than \$11 billion to do away with worldwide slavery? But, how to do it? How to make the most of the contemporary elements of our exigency?

Discussion:

Ricki: Which countries do Bales and Cornell cite as being in the most critical condition? Are most of these slaves used for labor or for sexual purposes?

Bucky: They focus specifically on cases in Japan, Brazil, Mauritania, The United Arab Emirates, India, and the United States. In Japan, it's the sex industry that fuels the slavery, along with trafficking. In Brazil, it's labor like cutting down the forests. People still own people in Mauritania, making it similar to the slavery most well-known in terms of the history of the United States. Many slaves are not actually legally owned like they were in the US and still are there, by the way. Indeed, the general definition Bales and Cornell apply to the term is such: "a social and economic relationship in which a person is controlled through violence or the threat of violence, is paid nothing, and is economically exploited." In the UAE, slavery is described as something like indentured servitude: people from other areas pay a fee to other people come to UAE to find jobs, then can't find what they're looking for and find themselves in debt. This is common in a lot of trafficking/smuggling instances across the globe, apparently. The sex industry in UAE also is connected to forced labor. In India there seems to be all of these things along with forced marriages and debt bondage. Some of this slavery is connected to the caste system there, and the authors estimate that there are 10 million slaves in India. Trafficking is a problem in the US, where the number of slaves is minuscule compared to India's, but still alarming. Bales and Cornell say 50,000 slaves work in the United States, many trafficked and tricked into manual labor. Regarding your first question specifically, they say that countries with high international debt often have problems with slavery, but clearly it is a global issue.

CJ: Are there group, global or in individual countries that are having success in dealing with this problem.

Does the book discuss how former slaves are treated in any of these countries?

Bucky: Wow, that last questions is a very good one. The book does give some profiles of former slaves and mentions how organizations helped them out of slavery, but the text does not do as good a job as it might in terms of mentioning how former slaves are treated. It does say that a lot of slavery today is different from slavery in the past in that the slaves and traffickers or slaveholders are typically of the same race now. Success in dealing with the problem will come from a wholesale global commitment. The authors make that very clear. Organizations like Free the Slaves, Rugmark, and Anti-Slavery International are doing their part. No country recognizes slavery as a legal practice anymore, so what is really needed is for countries to pay more attention to it and to work within the global community to end slavery for good.

ANNOTATIONS of other Groundwork Guides.

Empire by James Laxer (Groundwood Books, 2006)

Annotation by James Bucky Carter

Historically, all it has taken is a little surplus food, and the seeds of empire are sewn. Throw in the enslavement of a given “other” to till the fields and grow the crops, and the always-present relationships between slave labor and regional or global (depending on the size of the known world at any given time) influence are set. An empire is established and ready to grow. James Laxer details the history of empire and focuses on specific ones such as the Egyptian, Roman, British, and, yes, the American empires. Specific focus is given to the concept of “empire” as it relates to American values, morals, language preferences, and influence. Written in 2006, the book hints at the rising Chinese empire and how it will soon challenge the global presence of the “Pax Americana.” Those of us living in 2011 know the “will” is now the “is,” but this text adeptly covers the phenomena leading to the establishment, thriving, and eventual decline of empires since humans first started gathering together to the “almost” contemporary moment.

Being Muslim by Haroon Siddiqui (Groundwood Books, 2006)

Annotation by CJ Bott

After 9/11 Bookstores were filled with people wanting to educate themselves about the Muslim world, this title would be a good place to start. Though the book begins with the backlash of the 9/11 bombings, the book’s best chapters simply educate the reader about the Islamic faith which has five fundamentals: declaration of faith, daily prayers, charity, fasting from sunrise to sunset for one month every year, and a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina once in one’s lifetime.

Muhammad, born in AD570, is believed to be Allah’s last prophet and messenger and it is through him that the Qur’an was delivered. Throughout this book there are quotes from Muhammad in contemporary language that deliver gentle wisdom and some references to Jesus and/or Christian people.

The book provides an open and honest look at the Muslim faith and the Islamophobia currently seen in the USA and elsewhere; but also holds to the hope that the crisis in the Middle East is leading us to a greater understanding and acceptance.

Groundwork Guides currently or soon-to-be available.

BEING MUSLIM by Haroon Siddiqui

THE BETRAYAL OF AFRICA by Gerald Caplan

CITIES by John Lorinc

CLIMATE CHANGE by Shelley Tanaka

DEMOCRACY by James Laxer

EMPIRE by James Laxer

THE FORCE OF LAW by Mariana Valverde

GANGS by Richard Swift

GENOCIDE by Jane Springer

HIP HOP WORLD by Dalton Higgins

THE NEWS by Peter Steven

OIL by James Laxer

PORNOGRAPHY by Debbie Nathan

SEX FOR GUYS by Manne Forssberg

SLAVERY TODAY by Kevin Bales

TECHNOLOGY by Wayne Grady