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 **Advocating Multiculturalism: Migrants in Australian
Children's Literature after 1972**

John Stephens

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Advocating Multiculturalism:
Migrants in Australian Children's Literature after 1972**

John Stephens (bio)

The values espoused by a society and its supporting ideologies are often quite overtly expressed in the literature produced for its young people, and the ways in which major differences in social values are constituted in the literature at different periods are of constant interest for scholars. Major shifts in ideology and values usually occur slowly, and accordingly only gradually emerge as a thematic shared norm; occasionally, though, more dramatic shifts can be identified, and my concern in this paper is with one of these: within a decade during the 1970s Australian political and educational institutions underwent a palpable shift towards an ideology of multiculturalism, and Australian Children's Literature shifted with it.

After 1972, with the first change of federal government in Australia for a quarter of a century, declared government policy on the place of immigrants in Australian society was rapidly transformed from the ideology of assimilation/integration to that of multiculturalism. Such a move at government level is always made, of course, in response to complex pressures: some, in this case, came from within society, as, under the impact of post-war migration, the percentage of the Australian population which was of non-British origin began to approach 25 percent, and, at the more cynical level, political parties rightly or wrongly perceived the existence of an "ethnic vote" and believed that political power might ultimately depend upon capturing it; some pressure came from without, as attitudes towards minorities changed within the international community, and, more specifically, Canada's espousing of multiculturalism as a national policy in 1971 provided an exemplar at a time Australia was monitoring Canadian immigration policies in general. Government policy and rhetoric during the seventies didn't always entirely coincide, of course, and the passage of government back and forth between the two major political parties meant that policy itself was generally in a state of flux. This situation has recently been carefully expounded in Freda Hawkins's comparative study of immigration policies and practices in Australia and Canada (1989, Chapters 3 and 5). Both major political parties were also inclined to proceed cautiously, but nevertheless the rhetoric was in place, and

included, for example, calls for multicultural education programs in schools. Educational authorities, syllabus committees, and teachers themselves have, indeed, pursued such programs with considerable enthusiasm and vigor, and in so doing have envisaged and explored various ways in which the socializing capacities of fiction might be made use of. There is, however, a significant lack of a supporting critical discourse examining this fiction, and so far, with the exception only of Singh (1981), discussion has not progressed beyond brief introductions to annotated lists of appropriate works (for example, Orme, 1979; Burgess, 1980; Aitken, 1987).

Many works dealing with immigrant experiences had been written before the seventies, but only a minority espoused a multicultural ideology. Writers of children's fiction, however, are usually quick to appropriate current social issues, and so by the mid-seventies multiculturalism had become an "issue" in Australian books written for children, where it was strongly advocated as a desirable social value and one to be inculcated in child readers. The multiculturalism being advocated through this medium is loosely conceived as acceptance of difference and heterogeneity, and is in accord with the very general principles expressed in a 1982 paper issued by the Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs, which outlines four principles perceived as essential for a multicultural society: social cohesion; respect for cultural identity and awareness of Australia's cultural diversity; equal opportunity and access for **[End Page 180]** all Australians; and equal responsibility for commitment to and participation in Australian society (Hawkins 233).

Most of the mid-seventies books are novels whose target audience is secondary school children in years seven to ten; as often happens with issues books, the literary quality of many of them is rather meagre, and their actual grasp of the issues somewhat simplistic. This seems most apparent in one group of books which consists of spin-offs from telemovies or from TV mini-series. The putative audience is generally not the children of migrant families (and it...

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- Urquidí Mall, Cecilia B. English at Monash University is the author of *Seven Little Australians: The World of Ethel Turner and Mary Grant Bruce* (1979, Australia) and *The Looking Glass Children's Edition 1890-1891* (1994) and *Martin Boyd: A Life* (1988).

Advocating Multiculturalism: Migrants in Australian Children's Literature after 1972

by John Stephens

The values espoused by a society and its supporting ideologies are often quite overtly expressed in the literature produced for its young people, and the ways in which major differences in social values are constructed in the literature of different periods are of constant interest for scholars. Major shifts in ideology and values usually occur slowly and accordingly only gradually emerge as a literature shared norm; occasionally, though, more dramatic shifts can be identified, and my concern in this paper is with one of these: within a decade, during the 1970s, Australian political and educational institutions underwent a palpable shift towards an ideology of multiculturalism and Australian Children's Literature shifted with it.

After 1972, with the first change of federal government in Australia for a quarter of a century, declared government policy on the place of immigrants in Australian society was rapidly transformed from the ideology of assimilation/integration to that of multiculturalism. Such a move at government level is always made, of course, in response to complex pressures: some, in this case, came from within society, as, under the impact of post-war migration, the percentage of the Australian population which was of non-British origin began to approach 25 percent, and at the same cynical level, political parties rightly or wrongly perceived the existence of an 'ethnic vote' and believed that political power might ultimately depend upon capturing it; some pressure came from without, as attitudes towards minorities changed within the international community, and, more specifically, Canada's espousing of multiculturalism as a national policy in 1971 provided an exemplar at a time Australia was monitoring Canadian immigration policies in general. Government policy and rhetoric during the seventies often always coincided, of course, and the passage of government back and forth between the

two major political parties meant that policy itself was generally in a state of flux. This situation has recently been usefully explicated in Freda Huskins's comparative study of immigration policies and practices in Australia and Canada (1980) (Chapters 3 and 5). Both major political parties were also inclined to proceed cautiously, but nevertheless the rhetoric was in place, and included, for example, calls for multicultural education programs in schools. Education of immigrants by school committees and teachers (the teachers have, indeed, pioneered such programs with considerable enthusiasm and vigor) and in no time have investigated and explored various ways in which the socializing capacities of fiction might be made use of. There is, however, a significant lack of a supporting critical discourse examining this fiction, and so far, with the exception only of Singh (1981), discussion has not progressed beyond brief introductions to annotated lists of appropriate works (for example, Clark 1979; Burgess, 1980; Acker, 1987).

Many works dealing with immigrant experiences had been written before the seventies, but only a minority espoused a multicultural ideology. Writers of children's fiction, however, are usually quick to appreciate current social issues, and as by the mid-seventies multiculturalism had become an 'issue' in Australian books written for children, where it was strongly advocated as a desirable social value and one to be included in child readers. The multiculturalism being advocated through this tradition is loosely conceived as acceptance of difference and heterogeneity, and is in accord with the very general principles expressed in a 1982 paper issued by the Australian Council on Topicalities and Ethnic Affairs, which outlines four principles perceived as essential for a multicultural society: social cohesion, respect for cultural identity and awareness of Australia's cultural diversity, equal opportunity and access for



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