

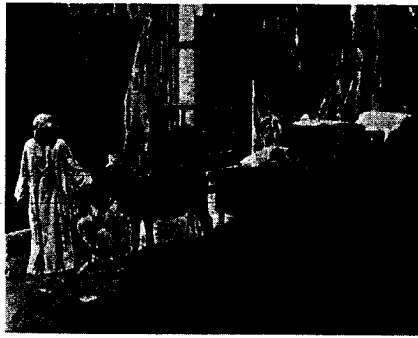
family structures, international economics, and the place of child labor within this cultural setting, we are not including all of our findings in this article. Because the information is too extensive, we have included only what is illustrative of what we questioned. Also, we have tied our personal reflections and experiential knowledge of Egyptian culture to questions and viewpoints of critical theorists (Creighton, 1997; Freire, 1970; Jongsma, 1991; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Yenika-Agbaw, 1996, 1997, 1998; Yokota, 1993) as we critique *The Day of Ahmed's Secret*.

With the concept of dialogue as a basis for critical analysis (Edelsky, 1999; Freire, 1970), comparing photographs against illustrations from the book as a form of visual dialogue revealed cultural and social issues embedded in the book. Teachers and students will find value in using a similar process to examine socio-cultural authenticity in books that they are studying. Here is our personal story.

Our critical analysis

In the opening pages of *The Day of Ahmed's Secret*, readers are introduced to Ahmed, the narrator, who says, "I have work to do in my city." The illustration shows him smiling. Does this then send a message of being happy about having to work? Or is he happy because he has a secret (as indicated in the title of the book)? While this page offers an invitation to discuss child labor and related issues, we wondered if readers would notice this invitation when the main character is depicted as a smiling, fresh-scrubbed boy? Or would they interpret his use of the word "work" to mean something different? Would readers have sufficient cultural familiarity to place Ahmed's behavior appropriately within Egyptian cultural norms? In an attempt to explore issues related to child labor, we examined the following photograph of a child laborer and adult taken on the streets of Cairo.

An analysis of the photograph of this child laborer and adult provoked



the following question: Does the fact that Ahmed ends his work day with clean clothes somehow trivialize and sanitize his social condition? In other words, does it make the work that he does seem less difficult and less messy? Why at the end of a work day of carrying dirty *butagaz* bottles are his clothes still spotlessly clean? *Butagaz* is bottled butane gas used for heating and cooking. *Butagaz* bottles are extremely heavy. They tend to be dirty and rusty, and they frequently leak an odorous gas that tends to cling to clothing.

While free public education is available to Egyptian children through grade six, at times family economic conditions prohibit some children from attending school. They enter the work force in roles that help to support the family economically. Often the jobs that they enter are apprentice-oriented toward learning a trade such as carpenter, plumber, painter, gardener, or vendor. Some children do attend school during the regular week but perform these apprentice jobs on weekends. Like Ahmed, there are children who drive carts throughout the city, often braving hazardous traffic flow, to perform their jobs.

Later in the book we noticed a double-page spread in which Ahmed is sitting in front of a wall of an old building. It is unlikely that any Egyptian child would sit directly on the ground. He might squat and lean against the building or place a piece of cloth on the ground and then sit on it. Islamic ritual demands that Muslims wash five times a day prior to prayer, and cleanliness is highly valued.

On the same pages, we noticed that the archway depicted in blue and white did not fit the other architectural forms portrayed in the book nor the varied architectural styles that we knew existed in Egypt. At first inspection, our knowledge of the area led us to conclude that the style was more characteristic of the Maghreb, a region of northwest Africa including Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. Upon closer examination and by looking at additional photos, the arch does indeed appear to be a gate into the Old City of Fez in Morocco. Other aspects of the illustration suddenly become understandable. The attire of many of the figures in the picture and the yellow Vespa-style motorbike are common to Morocco and are not to be found anywhere in Egypt. Does this mixing of North African architectural features, clothing, and transportation reveal something about the decision-making process of the artist? What view of the world does this mixing help to create or to maintain? Does this mixing of architectural styles and depiction of life support the idea that North Africa is monolithic and without cultural, political and social differences that distinguish one area from another? Does this mixing of images suggest cultural insiders' or outsiders' understandings of the world that the book is seeking to depict?

Kathryn Lasky (1996), Jean Little (1990), Violet J. Harris (1996), Milton Meltzer (1989), and Joel Taxel (1994) are among many writers involved in the current debate about insider/outsider perspectives in authoring and illustrating multicultural books. Authors or illustrators who have complex internal knowledge or deep understandings of the culture can represent a cultural insider's perspective. Those who do not have complex internal knowledge or deep understanding of the culture will not be capable of fully representing the insider's perspective. This surface level understanding of the culture will reveal itself in the form of inaccuracies within