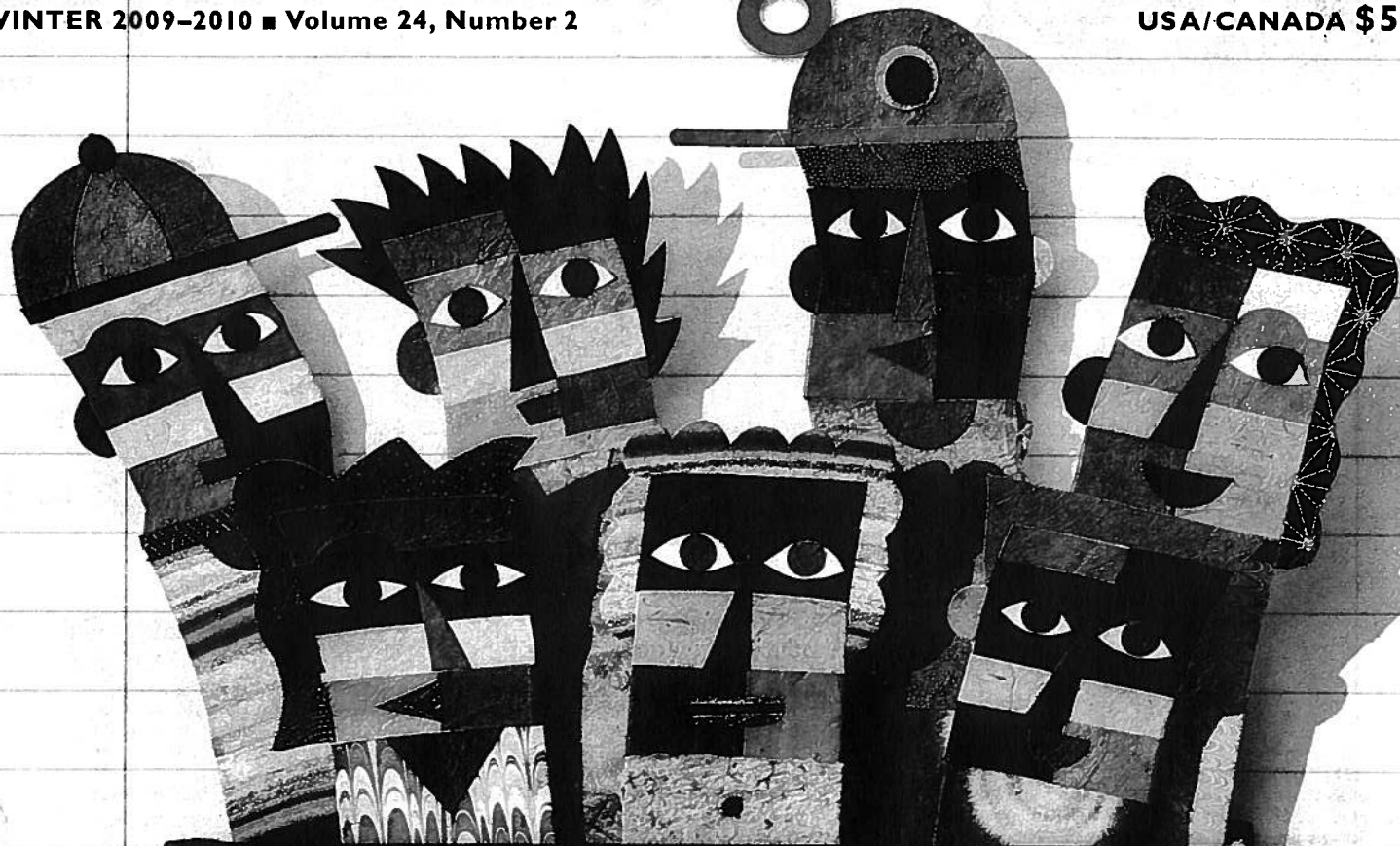


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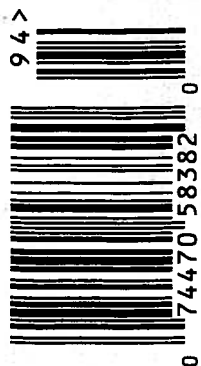
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READING
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Adding Salt to 'Class' Literature

Barbara O'Connor's books for young readers

■ BY STEPHANIE JONES

The day Sybil showed up at Paradise Trailer Park was about the hottest day anyone in Six Mile, South Carolina, could remember," begins chapter 18 of *Beethoven in Paradise*, by Barbara O'Connor. Paradise Trailer Park is where Martin lives with his mother and father, visits his lonely adult friend up the street to listen to classical music and play the violin, and looks forward to his grandmother—who he is required to call Hazeline—coming to pick him up every Sunday for a meal at the Howard Johnson's. Ashes fly and smoke swirls when Hazeline gets excited about something, like her son pushing Martin into playing baseball and away from playing music. But Martin finds inspiration in spunky Sybil, who teaches him a thing or two about living your dreams. He stalks a violin for sale in a pawnshop, then loses it in dramatic fashion. The title of the book is a clue to Martin's trajectory.

Salt of the earth people. That's what I've heard folks call the kind of people reflected in O'Connor's characters: salt of the earth. The phrase originated in the Bible, but it has become a secular catch phrase for working

people who do not have control over their means of production and are providing taste and moral preservation in their own ways—people like Martin's family and friends. In a society where the cleanliness of one's workplace and one's income level shape a skewed perception of intelligence, abilities, and ambitions, working-class folks are rarely "gotten right" in literature. They are more often exoticized as admired rebels or pathologized as bumbling idiots. Dorothy Allison, acclaimed novelist and essayist, reflecting on her childhood in a poor, white family in the rural South, wrote, "I had been a child who believed in books, but I had

never really found me or mine in print. My family was always made over into caricatures or flattened into saintlike stock creatures. . . . Outside my mother's stubbornness and my own outraged arrogance, I had never found any reason to believe in myself" (1988).

This continues to be a problem in books for younger readers; working-class and poor lives are often caricatured, pitied, or simply nonexistent. O'Connor is part of a solution, providing enough portraits of diverse characters living rich, complex, nuanced working-class and economically strained lives that readers have many opportunities to recognize parts of themselves or people they know.

O'Connor, with a keen sense of language and setting, produces intricately woven stories that place working-class and poor lives front and center. Her books are not stories *about* class struggle, poverty, homelessness, strict gender roles, food scarcity, work, extended families, disabilities, and orphans. They are stories about children, adolescents, and adults figuring out life as they move through it. Universal themes, one might say, set in richly textured relationships, homes, and communities that are not typical of books written for a younger audience (2nd through 6th grades). Her beautifully written narratives present tattooed motorcycle riders as gentle and respectable, outspoken smoking grandmothers as proud and self-

Stephanie Jones is an associate professor in the Department of Elementary and Social Studies Education at the University of Georgia, where she teaches about and studies social class, gender, race, and education for social justice. She is the author of Girls, Social Class and Literacy: What Teachers Can Do to Make a Difference and The Reading Turn-Around: A Five-Part Framework for Differentiated Instruction.



HEIDI YOUNGER

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sufficient, aluminum-can-collecting fathers as dedicated and predictable, and “broken” families as places where people can and do flourish.

In *Fame and Glory in Freedom, Georgia*, O'Connor introduces one of many of her strong and perceptive girl characters, Bird. Bird describes the new kid in town:

Harlem Tate hadn't been in Freedom, Georgia, more than three days before it was clear that nobody wanted anything to do with him. Nobody except me, that is. I had a burning desire to be his friend. All everybody else saw in him was a silent, glaring kid who didn't smell too good. Me? I could tell by his scowling face that Harlem Tate didn't get many chances to see the good in folks. Like me. And something about his hunched-over way of walking told me Harlem Tate's insides were churning up with needing something. Like mine.

Never shying away from controversy among characters, O'Connor uses dialogue to get to the heart of matters. For example, when Mrs. Eula Thatcher learns that Harlem Tate is living with Mr. Moody, she “. . . let[s] out a big ‘Pffft’ that sen[ds] spit and gravy flying every which way. ‘What’s he living with that sorry sack of misery for?’” Readers learn that for Harlem Tate, who “didn’t get many chances to see the good in folks,” such insults are pulled in, kept quiet, and added to the mountains of evidence that society treats some folks well and other folks a whole lot less than well. In the end, those put-downs and doubting comments don’t keep Bird or Harlem from finding fame and glory in Freedom, Ga.

Don’t get me wrong. O'Connor isn’t a writer who preaches the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” meritocratic mantra. Bird and Harlem don’t end up being lawyers or changing their families’ financial woes through their

hard work. O'Connor is smarter than that. Instead, she illuminates structural challenges, race and class discriminations, and even small town politics, while painting powerful moments of agency, resilience, intelligence, creativity, and perseverance.

O'Connor shows the complexities of what happens when characters internalize insults and anger piled on by society and even family members. In *Me and Rupert Goody* (2003), Jennalee is forced to face the injuries she inflicts on Rupert, an endearing and simple man who is said to be mentally challenged. Jennalee’s anger and envy lead to a traumatic event surrounding Rupert and his biological father, and readers may find themselves rethinking various stereotypes.

Anger and envy circulate in *Moonpie and Ivy*, too, as well as empathy, pride, and love. Pearl lives with her Aunt Ivy because her mama got up in the middle of the night and left without telling anyone where she was going or how long she would be gone:

Don't cry, she told herself. Not in front of Ivy. Not in front of that spooky boy. She blinked hard to keep the tears from coming but it didn't work. She sat on the steps and buried her head in her arms and heard herself sobbing to beat the band. She felt Ivy's arm around her. Then she heard Moon sit next to her and felt his spooky white hand on her shoulder and she wanted to disappear down that dusty road to nowhere.

Even as Moon does his best to soothe Pearl, he is fighting his own battle to remain living with his grandmother, whose health is failing. Moon does a great deal of the caretaking, which is exactly what the state social workers don’t want to be happening: a youngster taking care of an adult. Ivy’s loving and protective relationship with Moon is an emotional obstacle for Pearl, who has grown a hardened exterior to fend off the pain

of unpredictable relationships.

Moonpie and Ivy doesn’t have a happy ending. The same goes for the rest of O'Connor’s books: You won’t find a revelatory lesson as the books wind down, but rather the assumption that life goes on beyond these pages. For O'Connor, life doesn’t have happy or sad endings—just endings. She inspires readers to contemplate the complicated nature of things introduced in the previous pages. The untidy loose ends left dangling reveal O'Connor’s insights about life: In situations where it’s easy to see how money and access might fix a couple things, there are no fairy godmothers hanging in the margins ready to swoop down and drop the extra cash, or job, or apartment, or car that would make a whole lot of difference in the lives of the characters. This is one way O'Connor keeps it real, and many readers will find at least a teensy bit of their own full, happy, fun, sad, complicated, entangled, content lives.

In one of O'Connor’s latest books, *How to Steal a Dog*, Georgina, Toby, and their mother go to school and work each day and come home to live in their car, which they park in various places around town so as to not attract attention. Stealing a dog becomes Georgina’s mission. She wants to use the reward money for a “missing” dog to help her mother get an apartment, but carrying out the plan places Georgina in the middle of an ethical dilemma. Georgina’s mama comes to life as an always-on-the-brink-of-losing-it-while-also-trying-to-love mother with plenty of reasons to be angry, resentful, hopeless, and tired. Georgina and Toby confront characters in their school lives and in the community who both believe—and actively defy—assumptions about money and its correlation to one’s value as a human being. Readers won’t be disappointed in the end, and yet they won’t necessarily be happy, either. Problems are resolved and problems linger, requiring further

contemplation about the world we live in and how we interact with one another.

Barbara O'Connor provides much needed expansion to the literary offerings available to youth in our society. The gritty, lively, funny, tragic, tender underbelly of mainstream privilege is exposed through engaging, even addictive, stories that pull on your heart and head from page one until the end. Perhaps the salt of the earth characters she brings to life will not only help preserve the dignity and pride of children from working-class families, but also lend piquancy to the bland diet of normalized families leading idealized lives in too many books written for elementary school readers. Barbara O'Connor has already done a lot to restore our saltiness, and I'd hedge a bet there's much more seasoning coming down the pike. ■

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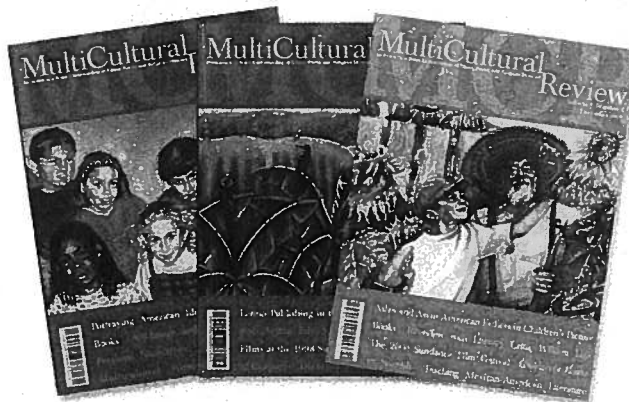
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