First and foremost, it is important that any book chosen for use with children be of high literary quality. Given the limited quantity of multicultural literature, this basic requirement may be even more important to remember because "there may be a greater tendency to accept poor literary quality just to have something in the classroom or library."1 Coupled with an emphasis on quality, the following guidelines may be useful in evaluating literature that depicts individuals or members of a particular culture and may move readers beyond only a superficial approach to diversity and difference.

1. **Diversity and range of representation.** In portraying any cultural group, a collection of books should show a wide range of representation of that particular race or ethnic group. Some African-Americans live in urban settings; others, in rural areas. Some live in upper-class areas; others, in middle-class suburbs or small towns. Some Hispanic Americans make a living in migrant camps; most hold jobs that have nothing to do with seasonal crops. Only when a collection of books about a particular group offers a wide spectrum of occupations, educational backgrounds, living conditions, and lifestyles will we honestly be moving away from stereotyping in books and offering positive images about minorities.

- What cultural group(s) does the book portray? Is the portrayal positive, negative, or mixed? Explain your answer.

- Does the book offer a wide range of representations when portraying members of a particular racial or ethnic group? How so?

2. **Avoidance of stereotyping.** Literature must depict the varieties of a particular culture or ethnic group. Illustrations should portray the distinctive yet varied characteristics of a group or race so that readers know they are looking at a people of, for example, Sioux, Jamaican, or Vietnamese descent. The portrayal of stereotypical articles should be avoided, such as the sombrero and poncho, feathered headdress and moccasins, or "pickaninny with a watermelon" so often pictured in children's books from earlier decades. Literature should avoid implying that specific occupations (such as computer expert), recreational pastimes (such as soccer), family organizational structure, or values are descriptive of any particular race or ethnic group. (For further discussion of stereotypes, see the sections in Chapter 5: "Picture Books," Chapter 9: "Contemporary Realistic Fiction," and Chapter 11: "Nonfiction Books").

- How do the illustrations convey the specific ethnic identities of the characters?

- How do the illustrations reinforce or resist stereotypical images?

- Does the author place characters in stereotypical occupations, family structures, or settings? How? Does the author avoid such typecasting? How?

3. **Language considerations.** Historical or contemporary terms that can be interpreted as derogatory to particular racial groups should not be used in stories about minorities unless these are essential to a conflict or used in historical context. Even then, it should be made clear that the use of these unacceptable terms casts aspersion on the speaker, not on the one spoken about or to. The characters' use of language should accurately reflect their historical and
contemporary speech patterns. Some recent books about African-Americans make a conscious effort to reproduce the cadence and syntax of certain language patterns without resorting to phonetically written spellings or stereotypical dialect. Books that incorporate the language of a minority group, such as Spanish, do not need to translate a word if context defines it. **Children need to understand that all languages adequately serve their speakers and that no one language is better than another.**

- How does the book deal with dialect or syntax?
- Does the author address racially sensitive terms? How?
- Does the author include words in a language other than English? If so, are the terms adequately defined by context, or are they translated? Are any terms unclear or confusing?

**4. The perspective of the book.** In evaluating a book about a particular culture, we need to ask if it truly represents that group's experience. This is a difficult guideline to define because we don't want to suggest there is only one sort of African American experience, for example. Who solves the problems in the story? Does an African American or a person with a disability take the initiative in problem solving, or are solutions provided by paternalistic adults? Are racial pride and positive self-image apparent in the story? Do *the details of the story authentically portray the experience of the represented minority? Is the experience of the protagonist interpreted by someone from the dominant culture?* No one is free from his or her particular bias or background. Teachers or librarians in specific school settings might want to add other criteria to this list as they select books for children. **It is essential to provide books about many cultures for all children and to choose variety, not merely to reflect the population served by the specific school.** Books can help develop children's appreciation for and strategies for critiquing our ever-changing pluralistic society. Tyson notes: "A factor often overlooked in all the discussion of literacy instruction for children has been using the social realities of children's lives as strategies to facilitate vision and develop a critical framework for personal, communal, and civic social action."2 More detailed criteria for specific cultures can be found in books listed in the Related Readings section at the end of this chapter.

- Does the book accurately represent the group experience of a particular culture? How?
- What details does the author use to portray members of a given culture? Are the representations varied or limited?
- Who solves the problems in the story? Is the problem solver a typical or atypical choice?
- How does the book express racial pride or positive self image?
- Does the protagonist interpret his or her own experience, or does someone from the dominant culture interpret the character's experience?
- What biases are evident in the book?