

Twenty Years of Multicultural Publishing

A publisher of award-winning multicultural titles discusses diversity in children's books and the challenges and rewards of risk taking. **By Jason Low**

Looking back at the books Lee & Low has published over our 20-year span of publishing is like leafing through a family album. Each and every book has a story behind the story.

Our story started with our mission, which was a simple one: to publish contemporary multicultural stories for children. While searching for these stories, we steered clear of folktales since they tended to be about people who lived long ago. We also avoided talking-animal stories since we felt that there was nothing new that we could bring to this genre. Lastly, we made a special effort to work with new authors and authors of color.

These simple editorial parameters would seem limiting to some, but for us, they helped guide our project choices for years to come. The result

has been a tight collection of hundreds of books that show the multicultural experience in a realistic way and help define who we are today.

In our debut season, spring 1993, we published Ken Mochizuki's *Baseball Saved Us*, which became our seminal book. *Baseball Saved Us* takes place in an internment camp for Japanese Americans during WWII. The Japanese internment camps were a dark stain on American history and were not readily talked about in social-studies classes or by Japanese Americans who were incarcerated during the war.

A 32-page picture book could never reveal all the underlying layers behind this complex subject, but what it could do was significant. *Baseball Saved Us* personalized the experience, letting people see the history through the eyes of a child. It was also

a dialogue starter, allowing people to discuss and understand what happened during the war and why it was wrong, and it let us see what was possible in terms of the kinds of stories that could be told in a picture book. *Baseball Saved Us* gave us permission to take risks.

The risks extended to altering our original idea of focusing only on books set in the U.S. Would stories that took place in regions around the globe appeal to an American audience? The strong manuscripts that we received depicting fascinating people in other countries made us rethink our U.S.-centric position.

This change of heart led to the emergence of one category that has become a prominent staple for us: biographies. The best part about these biographies was that they were often about people unfamiliar to us, but the very thing that fascinated us so much about these trailblazers also represented a risk in publishing books about them. Would American readers who, like us, had never heard of these people actually buy books about them? We decided that the meaningful contributions that these individuals had made would captivate others, just as they had convinced us to believe in them in the first place.

Ken Mochizuki's *Passage to Freedom*, set in Lithuania, tells the story of Chiune Sugihara, known



Jim MacLean

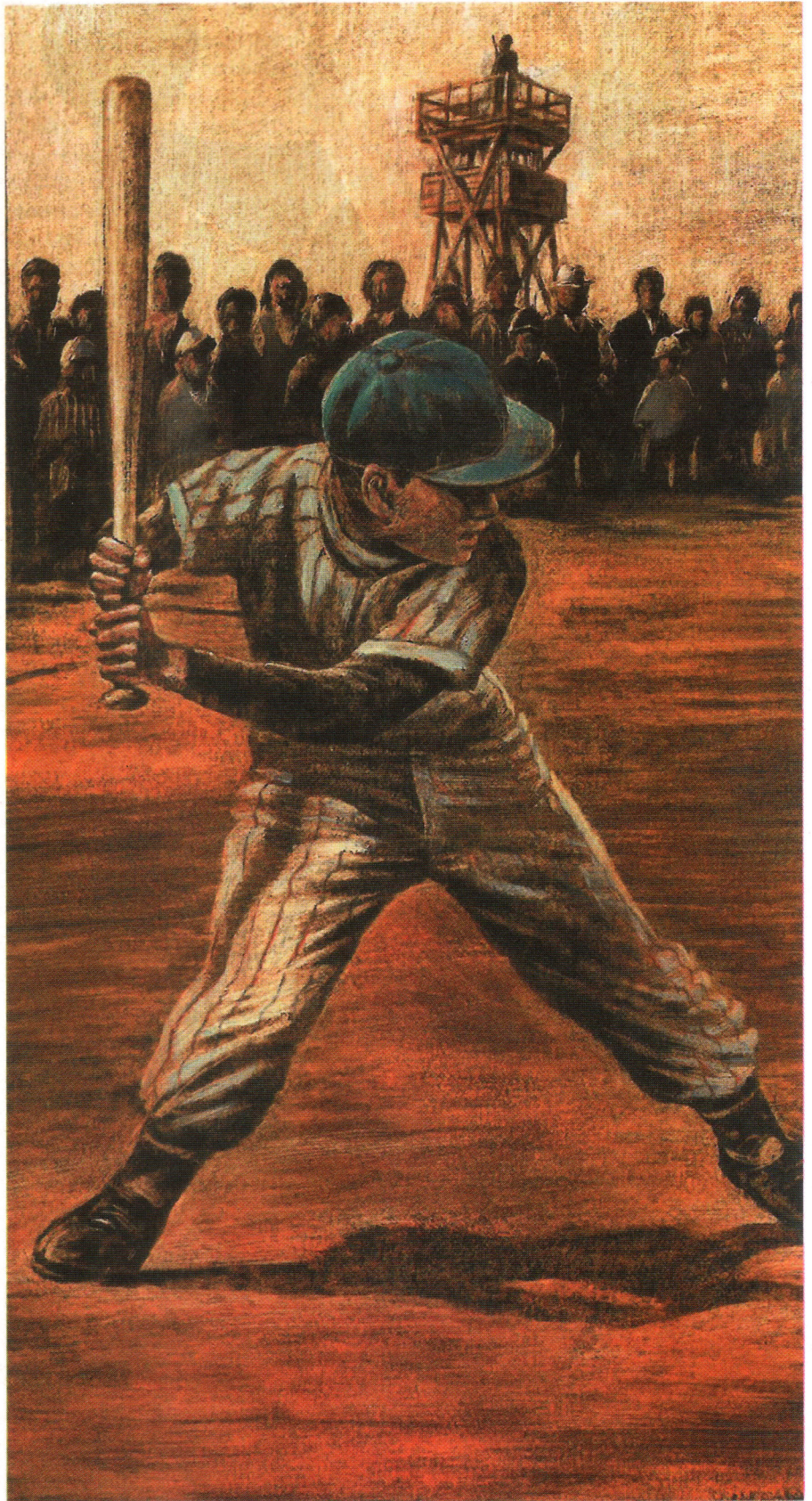
“Had we limited ourselves to U.S.-based stories, we would have missed out on some groundbreaking titles. By not limiting ourselves, the mission became more inclusive and drove home the point that messages of cultural tolerance and understanding are a worldwide trend.” —Jason Low

as the “Japanese Schindler,” who saved 6,000 Jewish refugees from the Nazis. Matthew Gollub’s *Cool Melons—Turn to Frogs!*, a book of haiku, tells of the poet Issa’s life growing up in Japan. *The Pot That Juan Built*, by Nancy Andrews-Goebel, is a picture-book biography told in verse and prose about Mexican potter Juan Quezada, who revived the local economy with his pottery. *Brothers in Hope*, by Mary Williams, tells a true story of the lost boys of Sudan. Jesse Joshua Watson’s *I and I*, a biography told in verse, focuses on the life of Bob Marley, the Jamaican reggae musician and activist. The picture-book biography *Seeds of Change*, by Jen Cullerton Johnson, introduces Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. And Susan L. Roth’s *The Mangrove Tree* focuses on Dr. Gordon Sato and his efforts to make a small African village self-sufficient by planting mangrove trees in the sea.

And there have been many others! Had we limited ourselves to U.S.-based stories, we would have missed out on some groundbreaking titles. By not limiting ourselves, the mission became more inclusive and drove home the point that messages of cultural tolerance and understanding are a worldwide trend.

Inclusiveness and multiculturalism go together like milk and cookies, but there have been exceptions when we have consciously made the decision to be exclusive for the sake of furthering the mission.

As I previously mentioned, one of the main goals of the company was to discover and nurture new authors and particularly authors of color. This aspect of the mission has proven challenging and required a more proactive approach. In 2000, we decided to sponsor our own writing contest to attract more minority authors. We called the contest the New Voices Award and determined that only unpublished writers of color were eligible.



Under an internment camp watchtower, a boy takes the plate in Ken Mochizuki’s *Baseball Saved Us*, illustrated by Dom Lee.



***Seeds of Change*, by Jen Cullerton Johnson and illustrated by Sonia Lynn Sadler, introduces the Kenyan activist who became the first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize.**

The exclusivity of the award has been a point of contention for white authors, who felt excluded. But our parameters did accomplish what the contest set out to do, which was to draw more authors of color into the fold. The reason this was so important is that publishing is still an extremely racially homogeneous business. The statistics on how many books contain multicultural content has hovered around 7 percent for the two decades in which we have been publishing. Contrast this with demographic figures of the census that show 36 percent of the U.S. consists of minorities, and you can see the disparity.

There was also a perceived risk in publishing new authors. The belief is that unknown authors with no publishing sales histories are a gamble because the lack of name recognition creates a hurdle that may keep the book from finding its audience—hence the tendency to publish the same famous names over and over again.

Several New Voices books have disproved this sales theory, and two in particular have risen to the top: Paula Yoo's *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds* and Zetta Elliot's *Bird*. *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds* is a picture-book biography about Sammy Lee, the first Asian American to win an Olympic gold medal. This testament to perseverance tells how Lee managed to become an Olympic-class diver despite growing up in a period of racism so overt that he was prevented from using the town pool to train. Lee also had a sense of obligation to fulfill his father's wish for him to become a doctor. Dr. Lee had to postpone his Olympic dream for 16 years, but finally, in the 1948 Olympics in London, England, he got his chance to perform a dive that would last just 16 seconds and change his life forever. *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds* received starred reviews from *Booklist* and *Kirkus Reviews* and was selected for the Texas Bluebonnet Award

Masterlist, which sealed its success commercially.

Bird is a picture book that depicts real-world problems almost too difficult to bear. A young boy named Mekhai, better known as Bird, copes with his brother's drug addiction and the death of his beloved grandfather through drawing. The story is hopeful, as Mekhai finds comfort and solace in his art and from his supportive family. *Bird* was named an ALA Notable Children's Book and received an Ezra Jack Keats Award for illustration and a Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for New Talent in Illustrations. This New Voices Honor Book title sold well despite being created by an unpublished author and illustrator.

Even though the New Voices Award only results in a couple new books a year at most, it has helped infuse new blood into the children's book community. This small contribution also lets us keep our original promise to develop new talent.

Our multicultural collection continued to grow each season with the release of new titles. But we felt the mission itself needed to expand into other areas, and we found that there was a need for more diversity in the country's school system. One specific area was in guided reading and intervention settings. We discovered classrooms filled with children who were just learning to read and were struggling for multicultural themes.

In 2000, we decided to fill this void by launching the imprint Bebop Books. Mining our existing stable of authors and illustrators, we were able to produce quality multicultural books for the classroom. We had to overcome a substantial learning curve in order to become knowledgeable about what educators needed, but the investment was worth it.

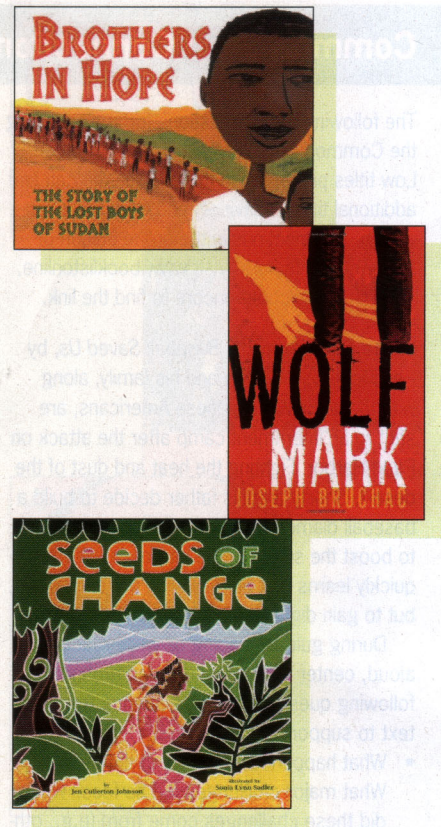
Twelve years later, we have produced hundreds of books consisting of English and Spanish editions that are leveled, great for assessment purposes, and correlated for the Common Core State Standards and

ELL/dual-language curricula. The books have been wildly popular with reading specialists, teachers, principals, and librarians.

In 2010, the mission expanded once again when we acquired the imprint Tu Books, which focused on diverse sci-fi, fantasy, and mystery novels for middle-grade and young adult readers. Tu's editorial director, Stacy Whitman, is a die-hard fan of all things related to the geek subculture. It was Whitman who noticed the lack of diversity in her favorite genres and decided to do something about it. For us, Tu Books was a way to bring multicultural stories to older readers.

As of this writing, Tu Books has notched a few seasons under its belt working with established and first-time authors. Included in Tu's debut list was Joseph Bruchac's *Wolf Mark*, a Native American thriller—a *Burn Notice* with werewolves. On the 2012 fall list was Guadalupe Garcia McCall's sophomore effort, *Summer of the Mariposas*, which was much anticipated. McCall's first novel in verse, *Under the Mesquite*, won the Pura Belpré Author Award and was named a William C. Morris Debut Award Finalist. *Summer of the Mariposas* is a Mexican American retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*, but it also makes the compelling argument that girls are long overdue for a quest of their own.

What is refreshing about Tu Books is that the stories are like nothing we have ever published. It is intriguing to see people of color in novels who are not relegated to being peripheral or supporting players. Instead, they are fully drawn main characters with their own adventures. Potentially, Tu Books offers a blank canvas with infinite creative room in which authors can play. And who benefits from this grand experiment? The readers! Readers can immerse themselves in characters, perspectives, and worlds different from or familiar to their own experiences—and the stories may take place 150 years in the future! Imagine Latino starship captains, African



American time travelers, and biracial mutants. Anything is possible.

The risk that we learned from starting imprints from scratch is that they take a long time to build. Significant care and effort goes into making the books, and just as much energy goes into connecting the books with readers. So the investment of time is always a commitment in years. I refer to this commitment as “publishing time,” and success in this industry is always measured in publishing time.

As I have outlined above, the possibilities for growth in an independently run, family-owned business have taken many forms over the years. What you have read here are the broad strokes. What I have omitted are the books that did not sell, the risks that did not pay off, and the lean years we endured. Throughout, we did our best to make decisions and deliberate actions that we felt would help us grow. But business is not just about being smart; it is also about being in the right place at the right time.

The following are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with Lee & Low titles presented in this article. You can find additional titles, activities, and Common Core connections in the online edition of this feature. Visit www.booklistonline.com/commoncore to find the link.



In the Classroom: In *Baseball Saved Us*, by Ken Mochizuki, Shorty and his family, along with thousands of Japanese Americans, are sent to an internment camp after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Fighting the heat and dust of the desert, Shorty and his father decide to build a baseball diamond and form a league in order to boost the spirits of the internees. Shorty quickly learns that he is playing not only to win, but to gain dignity and self-respect as well.

During guided reading or while reading aloud, center student discussion around the following questions, citing evidence from the text to support their answers:

- What happened to Shorty in the story? What major challenges did he face? Where did these challenges come from (e.g., other people, society, himself)? Cite evidence from the text to support your answers.
- How did Shorty respond to the events and challenges in the story? What choices did he make? How did he change and grow as a character? Cite evidence from the text to support your answers.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.3.** Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.1.** Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 1 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

In the Classroom: Based on Hiroki Sugihara's own words, Ken Mochizuki's *Passage to Freedom* is the first fully illustrated children's book to tell Sugihara's heroic Holocaust story, highlighting his courageous humanity and the importance of a child's opinion in his father's decision. Read another story of Holocaust rescue, Marcia Vaughan's *Irena's Jar of Secrets*, together with *Passage to Freedom*, and ask students to compare and contrast the choices made by Irena Sendler and Chiune Sugihara on behalf of the Jews during WWII. How did each choice impact the leaders' communities?

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.9.** Compare and contrast the most important points and key details presented in two texts on the same topic.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.1.** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 3 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

In the Classroom: In *Cool Melons—Turn to Frogs! The Life and Poems of Issa*, Matthew Gollub poignantly combines a rendering of Issa's life with more than 30 of his best-loved poems, all illustrated with Kazuko Stone's sensitive and humorous watercolor paintings. With authentic Japanese calligraphy, a detailed afterword, and exhaustive research by both author and illustrator, this is also an inspirational book about haiku, writing, nature, and life. Ask students to respond to the following questions, citing evidence from the text to support their answers:

- Choose three poems from the text. Why do you think the author chose to include those poems? How did they enhance your understanding of Issa's life story?
- Think about how the illustrator chose to illustrate each poem. What details did she include? What details did the illustrator choose to add from her imagination? How did the illustrations help enhance your understanding of Issa's life story?

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.7.** Explain how specific aspects of a text's illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting): Explain how specific aspects of the text's illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting).

In the Classroom: With vibrant illustrations by Caldecott Medal winner David Diaz, *The Pot That Juan Built*, by Nancy Andrews-Goebel, is sure to enlighten all who are fascinated by traditional art forms, Mexican culture, and the power of the human spirit to find inspiration from the past. Ask students to identify new vocabulary words they learned from the text (e.g., *adobe*, *impoverished*, *prosperous*, *manure*, *black manganese*, *red iron oxide*,

fashioned, *burro*, etc.). Ask students the following questions: What does each word mean? How did you determine the word's meaning? What strategies did you use? What clues came from the author? What clues came from the illustrator?

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.4.** Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 3 topic or subject area.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.4.** Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 3 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

In the Classroom: In *Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match/Marisol McDonald no combina*, by Monica Brown, a young girl with flaming red hair and nut-brown skin loves polka dots and stripes. She prefers peanut butter and jelly burritos in her lunch box. To Marisol, these seemingly mismatched things make perfect sense together. A mestiza Peruvian American of European, Jewish, and Amerindian heritage, renowned author Brown wrote this lively story to bring her own experience of being mismatched to life. Her buoyant prose is perfectly matched by Sara Palacios's mixed media illustrations. After a read aloud, center student discussion around the following questions, citing evidence from the text to support their answers:

- Who was the main character in the story (i.e., who was the story mostly about)? Who were some of the other characters in the story?
- Where did the story take place? Was there just one setting or did the story happen in more than one place? When did the story take place? Use examples from the story to support your answers.
- What happened in the story? What was Marisol's problem? How did her problem get solved? How did the story end?

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.3.** With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in the story.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.K.2.** Confirm understanding of a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media by asking and answering questions about key details and requesting clarification if something is not understood.

Last year, we expanded dramatically in the most unexpected way. At the beginning of 2012, we acquired the first independent multicultural publisher, Children's Book Press (CBP). To call CBP a competitor, though technically accurate, feels untrue. CBP was run from the West Coast for 36 years, while we were focused on our business in New York.

When hard times fell on Children's Book Press and the company sought a buyer, our name came up. CBP specialized in bilingual books, a category with which we had little experience. It published the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award winner *i see the rhythm* and Pura Belpré Honor Award winners *Family Pictures / Cuadros de familia* and *Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match / Marisol McDonald no combina*, which was CBP's final book before ceasing operations.

I see no risk with this "new" imprint because all the risks were taken when CBP swung their doors open for business more than three decades ago. For us, our job is straightforward: we paid off their debts and will steadily bring their award-winning list back into circulation. We will publish new books under the CBP imprint, and we will return the CBP name to its former prominence. Over time, we will become intimately familiar with the books, and little by little, their stories will become as second nature to us as our own. Their prestige as a pioneer in multicultural publishing will combine with our reputation as a risk taker. And the mission will continue to grow.

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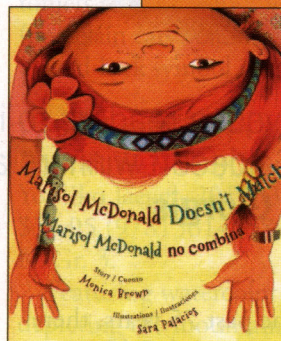
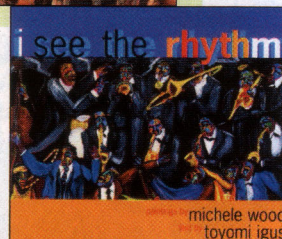
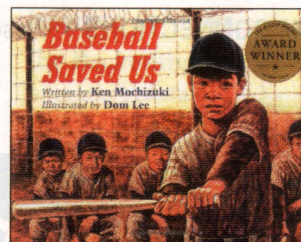
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
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Jason Low is publisher and co-owner of Lee & Low Books, an independent, family-owned children's book press that specializes in award-winning books featuring diversity. For more information, visit leeandlow.com.