

In October, a couple of us attended the Iowa Library Association Conference, held in Coralville this year. One of the keynote speakers was Mitali Perkins, who has written books for children, teens, and adults. We have three of her books - *Tiger Boy*, *Between Us and Abuela*, and *Forward Me Back to You*. Still in processing (but available soon) is her adult nonfiction title *Steeped in Stories: Timeless Children's Novels to Refresh Our Tired Souls*. Her keynote focused on this last book, challenging us to look at seven children's classics with fresh eyes. She provided insight into how a person might choose to deal with challenged literature considered problematic because it contains "old" ideas that today are seen as backward or offensive.

As a safeguard against simply banning books, Perkins introduced the idea of the "many-storied child," or a child who reads a wide variety of books from different eras, cultures, and perspectives. By being widely read, she said, a child can do three important things: create an intentional life narrative for themselves, become a virtue seeker, and learn to see the flaws in stories, people, and time periods. Seeing those flaws does not mean dismissing imperfect stories, people, or eras. In her view, stories are more dangerous the fewer that we read. Reading a lot of different stories has the capacity to provide us with a more realistic view of life. As she so aptly put it, in *Steeped in Stories*, "The mystery of a beloved story is that it intersects with the reader's particular hero's journey, so we can empower young people to forage freely and find their own favorites. The more stories they choose, the less a single one commandeers the power to form their souls."

As a former teacher, while listening to Mitali Perkins, my mind immediately leapt to language development. Ideally, the lives of young children are steeped in language(s) through speaking, listening, reading, and writing to help them become fluent communicators. Perkins' thoughts on the "many-storied child" extend very naturally from this model of a language-rich environment. By reading from a wide variety of perspectives, children can become fluent in the universal language of empathy and also learn to distill meaning from complex narratives. This distillation will hopefully lead them to find common ground with all kinds of characters, which can translate to their interactions with real people. Perkins reminded those of us at the conference that no one person or culture or time period has a corner on virtue. The more that kids read, the more context they build. Better yet, parents and caregivers can read alongside children in order to add their own lived experience to conversations about the stories being read. If you think children's books have nothing to offer an adult, come check some out at the library. It bears repeating that children's books are not just for children.

On that note, please contact me if you have any interest in joining an all-ages book club that reads juvenile and young adult fiction. I've also been considering starting a multi-generational storytime. If you have input about these programs or any others, my email address is kbrommel@wipl.org. I work Sunday through Thursday at the library. Stop in and say hi!