

The Rainmaker's Dog by Cynthia Dresser. New York: St. Martins, 1994. xvii + 309 pp.

Reviewed by Tanya Stivers
University of California, Los Angeles

Cultural differences are one of many factors which lead to multiple text interpretations. Socio-economic status, gender, age, and personality, for example, can also shape the way people read and interpret a text. In teaching reading to ESL or EFL students, all of these variables shape the individual's understanding of any particular text. This makes the choice of materials a difficult one—one which the instructor must handle with a great deal of sensitivity and self-reflection. The materials used must avoid stereotypes, but they must also make students aware of the potential for differing text interpretations which may result from their culture. *The Rainmaker's Dog* builds on the similarities as well as the differences between cultures to create a highly communicative, multi-skill reading textbook.

The Rainmaker's Dog is intended for high-beginning to intermediate ESL or EFL students. The book is divided into six chapters each of which focuses on a particular geographical region: Central Africa, West Africa, East and Southern Africa, Haiti, Aboriginal Australia, and Asia. Within each chapter is a short introduction to the region which includes basic cultural, historical, and geographical information. Also included are several exercises designed to encourage students to relate their own heritage and beliefs to those of other students and to the readings. Each chapter includes exercises (e.g. designing a family tree) and discussion questions about the regions represented in the text.

For each chapter, the main readings are five to eight folktales chosen for their universal appeal. These short fiction pieces are brief (averaging only two pages) but charming and of interest to individuals of many cultural backgrounds. Although they were gathered and written by the author for the purpose of this book, the stories did not feel at all contrived, and I found myself avidly reading them. The folktales are prefaced by pre-reading exercises and/or discussion questions and are followed by post-reading activities. The activities for each tale vary but may include group discussion questions, jigsaw exercises, information gap activities, and note-taking practice. The variety keeps both the student and the teacher interested, and while many instructors might feel comfortable working directly from the text, the stories lend themselves well to creative development. For the

instructor who wishes to expand on a particular theme, the stories offer a playful introduction to more serious issues. For example, one tale tells of a black-handed monkey and a frog. The frog asks the monkey to wash his hands until they become white, and the monkey asks the frog to sit up straight. Since neither animal is capable of doing as his friend wishes, their friendship ends. Thus, this tale could be used individually or supplementally as a segway into a unit on conflict resolution or the demands of relationships.

Each chapter concludes with comprehensive exercises designed to help readers make connections between the folktales of that region and their themes. The section on East and Southern Africa, for example, has an exercise on cause and effect based on the stories of the first three chapters. This activity not only builds on earlier stories with which the students are familiar, but also integrates a new skill which can be further developed by the instructor either with later stories or with separate exercises.

The Rainmaker's Dog deals with cultural differences and similarities by focusing students' attention on specific personality traits and beliefs in their native cultures. Because it is designed for general discussions about culture and communication, it would be appropriate in non-American (e.g., British or Australian) as well as American ESL classrooms. Additionally, it would be appropriate in a variety of EFL settings since it allows students to draw upon their own cultural and content schemata to recognize similar universal issues (e.g., grief and friendship). From there students can move to a discussion of different approaches to these issues as seen in different cultures.

It is important that we, as instructors, recognize that for many individuals the similarities found among different cultures may be just as numerous and just as important as the differences. By using materials such as those presented in *The Rainmaker's Dog*, classroom discussions can encompass all sides of these complex issues. I would recommend this text for instructors of ESL or EFL intermediate classes who are searching for brief in-class readings to practice skills such as predicting, vocabulary building, and comprehension, or for the instructor who would like readings which spark student interest and lead into group discussions and activities.

Tanya Stivers is a graduate student in the department of TESL and Applied Linguistics at UCLA. Her research interests include the study of talk and interaction in institutional settings particularly between professionals and their clients. She also has experience teaching ESL students.