

SCHUBERT CENTER FOR CHILD STUDIES

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AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: Examining the Genre in Childhood

TRACING A GENRE OF RESISTANCE: Books play a critical role in healthy child development.¹ The role of multicultural literature is well established in developing children's motivation to read and success in building literacy skills. Literacy is enhanced for children of color when there are culturally relevant characters and stories reflected in their books.² Beyond gaining literacy skills, children can engage with difficult situations and learn about the perspectives of others.³ However much of children's literature remains a reflection of a society with ongoing racial biases. In 1965, Nancy Larrick published "The All-White World of Children's Books," highlighting the lack of racial diversity in children's literature, finding in a survey of over 5,200 children's books, only 6.7% included a Black character.⁴ In a recent follow up study, a review of new books showed that only 10.5% of all new children's books published in 2013 depicting human beings include a person of color.⁵

During early childhood, children begin to develop an understanding of themselves and their place in their communities, forming an identity separate from their parents. Research shows that children begin to recognize their own ethnicity and other ethnicities between the ages of 3 and 8, with recognition of Black and White

ethnicities developing before recognition of other ethnicities in U.S. children.⁶ Young children rely particularly on illustrations to decode the meaning of picture books, making the inclusion of characters of color especially important for young children of color to see themselves reflected in the books they

are reading.⁷ In studies of educational programs, multicultural education plays an important role in teaching minority children the strengths and achievements of their own culture, as well as reducing prejudice in majority group children.⁸ It is essential that picture books depict the true diversity of children's worlds, as a corrective to the majority White literature currently available.^{9,10}

HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN PICTURE BOOKS

In *Brown Gold*, Michelle Martin, the Augusta Baker Chair Professor in Childhood Literacy at the University of South Carolina, describes this general trajectory of depictions of Black children in picture books: for them, by them; for us, by us; and for everyone, by us.¹¹

Students participate in Camp Read-a-Rama with Michelle Martin, the Augusta Baker Chair Professor in Childhood Literacy at the University of South Carolina.



For Them, By Them: In the late 1800s through the 1940s, depictions of African-American children in picture books were written by White authors for a White audience and heavily featured racist depictions. Books such as *Struwwelpeter*, *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, *The Coon Alphabet*, and *Ten Little Niggers* show imagery of Black characters as "buffoons, mummies, Sambos or savages"¹¹ to a largely White audience.

Through the 1950s, many Black authors, including Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, struggled to get their works published, while White authors continued to publish texts featuring African-American characters, often still as racist caricatures.¹¹

The **SCHUBERT CENTER FOR CHILD STUDIES** in the College of Arts and Sciences at Case Western Reserve University bridges research, practice, policy and education for the well-being of children and adolescents. Our focus is on children from infancy through adolescence in local, national, international and global settings.



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Beginning in the 1940s and beyond, books by white authors started to depict equality of African-American and White children, such as Lorraine and Jerrold Beim's *Two is a Team* (1945) and Ezra Jack Keats' *The Snowy Day* (1962), the first picture book featuring an African-American child to receive the Caldecott Medal.¹¹

For Us, By Us: Beginning in the 1920s, African-American authors began to slowly gain traction in their efforts to publish works for Black audiences directly challenging racist depictions of African Americans.¹¹ One of the earliest examples of this is *The Brownies' Book Magazine* published by the NAACP beginning in January 1920.^{11,12} Though not a picture book, this periodical featured positive representations of African Americans to help Black children develop pride in their history and prepare them for the future by focusing on prominent Black literary figures such as Langston Hughes, resisting racist depictions of Black life.¹¹

Following the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, Black authors began to find success in publishing children's books about the Black experience in the early 1960s.¹¹ As authors felt the impact of the Civil Rights Movement, they depicted themes of positive everyday Blackness, Black history, prominent Black figures and African folk tales and history throughout the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹ Authors during this period provided Black children with positive images of themselves and their history, discussing historical events and role models often not covered in mainstream history and resisting previously racist depictions of African Americans.¹¹

In the 1970s, books such as Muriel L. and Tom Feelings' *Moja Means One* (1971) introduced children to their African heritage while interest in Africa spread throughout the Black American community.¹¹ Books published during the 1980s and 1990s often included retellings of previously published racist children's books, as well as depictions of the everyday lives of Black children.¹¹ Even as Black authors toward the end of this period began to move away from writing primarily for Black audiences, the work of some continued to diverge from and resist themes of traditional picture books by depicting sometimes harsh realities of Black history and Black life, including accurate depictions of slavery, poverty and incarceration.¹¹

For Everyone, by Us: In the 1990s and 2000s, Black authors began to move away from writing for Black audiences and toward writing for general audiences.¹¹ Books during this period focused on themes such as everyday Black life, celebration of Black appearances and depictions of diversity among all children.¹¹ Still, during this period, authors continued to produce books resisting White superiority, such as those focusing on positive depictions of Black appearance and Afro hair.¹¹ Many books during this period went beyond just depicting Black characters; they engaged with Black culture, such as *What a Truly Cool World* (Julius Lester, 1999)¹¹ in portraying African-American church and religious culture.

LITERATURE AS POLITICAL: TEACHING AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Michelle Martin's work (2004) has highlighted the political role of African-American children's literature. African-

American children's literature speaks to two kinds of dual audiences: Black and White, and children and adults.¹¹ Black children's literature is in conversation with both the White and Black literary canons.¹¹ Some books, like *Sam and the Tigers* (Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney 1997), reimagine racist narratives and remake stories from the White literary canon by using modes of Black discourse to reclaim them.¹¹ This remaking speaks differently to adults, who are presumably more aware of the racist history of the stories than are children, who are frequently experiencing the re-crafted narrative for the first time.¹¹

Teaching African-American children's literature in the classroom, the library, and in other community settings, in addition to the home, has key value for children of all races and backgrounds.¹¹ Historical accounts of prominent Black Americans provide role models and validate the importance of these figures to children.^{11,12} Texts with Black protagonists teach children the importance of diversity and normalize positive depictions of Black characters.¹¹ Picture books also prepare Black children for Black adulthood, by for example, reinforcing the value of key conversational styles in the African-American community, through texts such as *Nappy Hair* (Carolivia Herron and Joe Cepeda, 1997).¹¹ This can be double edged, especially for Black boys who are often depicted in both literature and the media as miniature adults rather than children.¹³ **Highlighting African-American children's literature in the classroom, the library, afterschool programs and camps, also teaches children that Black cultural knowledge is valuable and worthy of being shared and recognized.**¹¹ ■

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MICHELLE MARTIN'S "TOP PICKS" in African-American Children's Literature

Dr. Martin offers the following beginning resource to teachers, early care providers, parents, youth development specialists and librarians in guiding their selection of children's books. The discussion questions in Neal Lester's *Once Upon a Time in a Different World*¹⁴ can help guide classroom discussions on race in children's literature. This list, organized by themes described more fully below, includes some older and some newer children's literature that represent African-American children positively. Some are written by black authors; others are not. Some are for younger children; some are middle grade and a few are for older youth. This list is presented by publication date and is by no means exhaustive. All of the books included in this list are available through the Cleveland Public Library, and many are available through the Cuyahoga County Public Library system as well.

BOOK RESOURCE KEY:

- Early Childhood Picture Books
- Kindergarten through Middle Elementary Picture Books
- ▲ Chapter Books

EVERYDAY BLACKNESS

These books examine everyday experiences of Black Americans. They document diversity in daily life. Within this category is a subgenre of books focused on celebrating Black families.

- ■ *The Snowy Day*, Ezra Jack Keats, 1962
- *My Daddy is a Monster... Sometimes*, John Steptoe, 1980
- *The Patchwork Quilt*, Valerie Flournoy and Jerry Pinkney, 1985
- *Mirandy and Brother Wind*, Patricia McKissack, 1988
- *Aunt Flossie's Hats... and Crab Cakes Later*, Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard and James Ransome, 1990
- *Let's Count Baby*, Cheryl Willis Hudson and George Ford, 1995
- *In Daddy's Arms I am Tall: African Americans Celebrating Fathers*, Javaka Steptoe, 1997
- *DeShawn Days*, Tony Medina and R. Gregory Christie, 2001
- *Visiting Day*, Jacqueline Woodson and E. B. Lewis, 2002
- ▲ *One Crazy Summer; P.S. Be Eleven; Gone Crazy in Alabama*, Rita Williams-Garcia, 2010, 2013, 2015
- *The Hula Hoopin' Queen*, Thelma Lynne Godin and Vanessa Branley Newton, 2014
- *One Word From Sophia*, Jim Averbeck and Yasmeen Ismail, 2015
- *How to Find Gold*, Vivian Schwartz, 2015
- *Little Robot*, Ben Hatke, 2015
- *Little Dee and the Penguin*, Christopher Baldwin, April 2016

BLACK HISTORY & IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Books in this category provide children with knowledge about African-American history and examples of prominent Black Americans. Books depicting the harsh realities of slavery can serve to introduce children to the truth of the past and counter images of "happy slaves." Biographical picture books can provide children with African-American role models and reinforce their importance in American history.

- ▲ *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry; Let the Circle Be Unbroken; The Road to Memphis*, Mildred Taylor, 1976, 1981, 1990
- *Li'l Sis and Uncle Willie: Story Based on the Paintings of William H. Johnson*, Gwen Everett, 1991
- *Coming Home: From the Life of Langston Hughes*, Floyd Cooper, 1994
- *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree*, William Miller, Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu, 1994
- *The Middle Passage*, Tom Feelings, 1995
- *More than Anything Else*, Marie Bradby and Chris K. Soentpiet, 1995
- *Ebony Sea*, Irene Smalls and Jon Onye Lockard, 1995
- *Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman*, Alan Schroeder and Jerry Pinkney, 1996
- ▲ *Nightjohn and Sarny, A Life Remembered*, Gary Paulsen, 1993, 1997
- *Richard Wright and the Library Card*, William Miller and R. Gregory Christie, 1997
- *Through My Eyes*, Ruby Bridges and Margo Lundell, 1999
- *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Doreen Rappaport and Bryan Collier, 2001
- *Love to Langston*, Tony Medina, 2002
- *Ellington Was Not a Street*, Ntozake Shange and Kadir Nelson, 2004
- ▲ *A Wish After Midnight*, Zetta Elliott, 2010
- *Martin & Mahalia*, Andrea Davis Pinkney & Brian Pinkney, 2013
- ▲ *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jacqueline Woodson, 2014
- *Marvelous Cornelius: Hurricane Katrina and the Spirit of New Orleans*, Phil Bildner and John Parra, 2015
- *Trombone Shorty*, Troy Andrews, Bill Taylor and Bryan Collier, 2015
- ▲ *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement*, Carole Boston Weatherford and Eku Holmes, 2015

AFROCENTRIC PICTURE BOOKS

These books introduce children to African cultures and can provide a grounding for discussions of African-American heritage.

- *Moja Means One: Swahili Counting Book*, Muriel L. and Tom Feelings, 1971
- *Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti*, Gerald McDermott, 1972
- *Jambo Means Hello: Swahili Alphabet Book*, Muriel L. and Tom Feelings, 1974
- *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears: A West African Tale*, Verna Aardema, 1975
- *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*, Margaret Musgrove, Leo and Diane Dillon, 1976
- *Afro-Bets ABC Book*, Cheryl Hudson, 1987
- *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale*, John Steptoe, 1987
- *The Talking Eggs: A Folktale from the American South*, Robert D. San Souci and Jerry Pinkney, 1989
- *Aida*, Leontyne Price and Leo and Diane Dillon, 1990
- *Africa Dream*, Eloise Greenfield and Carole Byard, 1992
- *A is for Africa*, Ifeoma Onyefulu, 1993
- *Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella*, Robert D. San Souci and Brian Pinkney, 1998
- *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken, and Me*, Maya Angelou and Margaret Courtney-Clark, 1994
- *Pretty Salma: A Little Red Riding Hood Story from Africa*, Niki Daly, 2007
- *Beauty and the Beast*, H. Chuku Lee and Pat Cummings, 2014

CELEBRATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN BEAUTY

These books challenge White supremacist beauty narratives by celebrating African-American physical appearance. They can be used as a starting point for discussions with children about physical appearance.

- *Black is Brown is Tan*, Arnold Adoff, 1973
- *Cornrows*, Camille Yarbrough, 1979
- *An Enchanted Hair Tale*, Alexis De Veaux and Cheryl Hanna, 1991
- *Something on my Mind*, Nikki Grimes and Tom Feelings, 1995
- *Sam and the Tigers: A New Telling of Little Black Sambo*, Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney, 1996
- *Nappy Hair*, Carolivia Herron and Joe Cepeda, 1997
- *No Mirrors in My Nana's House*, Ysaye M. Barnwell and Synthia Saint James, 1998
- *Happy to be Nappy*, bell hooks and Chris Raschka, 1999
- *Shades of Black*, Sandra L. Pinkney and Myles C. Pinkney, 2000
- *I Love My Hair*, Natasha Anastasia Tarpley and E. B. Lewis, 2001
- *Be Boy Buzz*, bell hooks and Chris Raschka, 2002
- *Bippity Bop Barbershop*, Natasha Anastasia Tarpley, 2002
- *Please, Baby Please*, Spike Lee & Tony Lewis Lee, 2002
- *I Like Myself*, Karen Beaumont, 2004
- *Mixed Me*, Taye Diggs & Shane Evans, 2015

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