

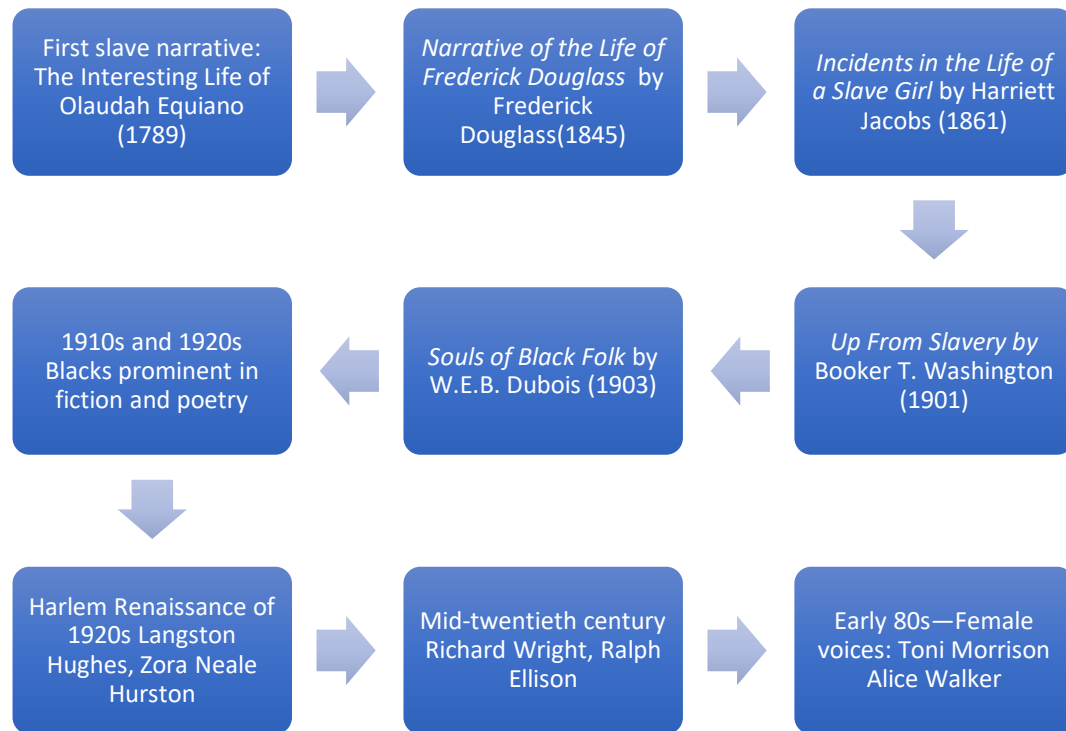


African Americans in Children's Literature

By La Toya Love
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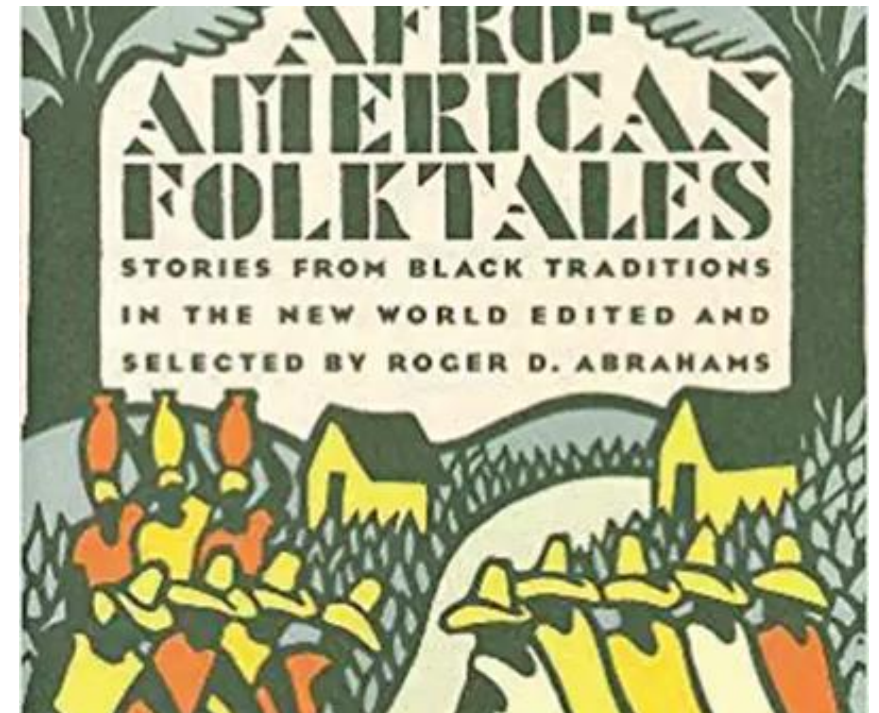
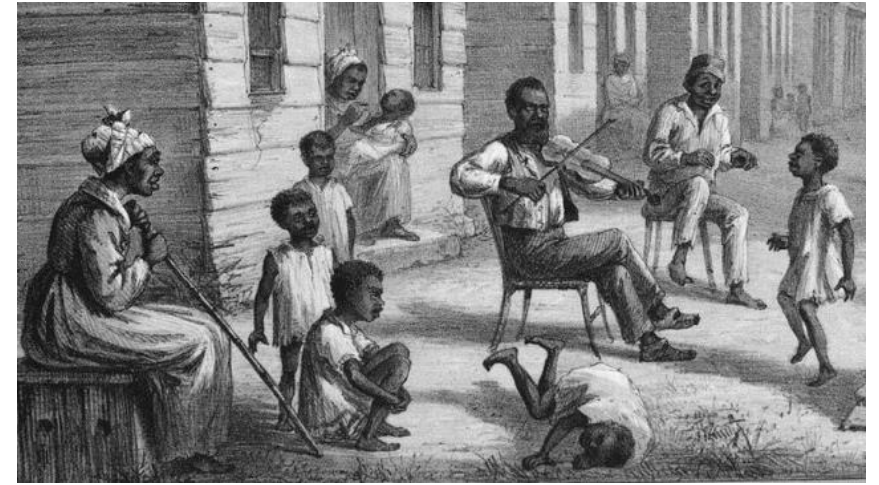
History of African American Literature

In 1985, Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin began documenting the number of books it got each year written or illustrated by African Americans and in the first year, there were roughly 2,500 books published in the United States and only 18 were from black authors or illustrators and by 2001, it was estimated that 99 out of 5,000 books published were from black authors and illustrators (Mckissack, 2016). We have come a long way from the first slave narrative, but not only do we need more black authors, but more diverse characters in children's literature. In order to understand why there is a need, we must understand the past, what we have seen in children's literature in the way of black people, and where the future is headed.



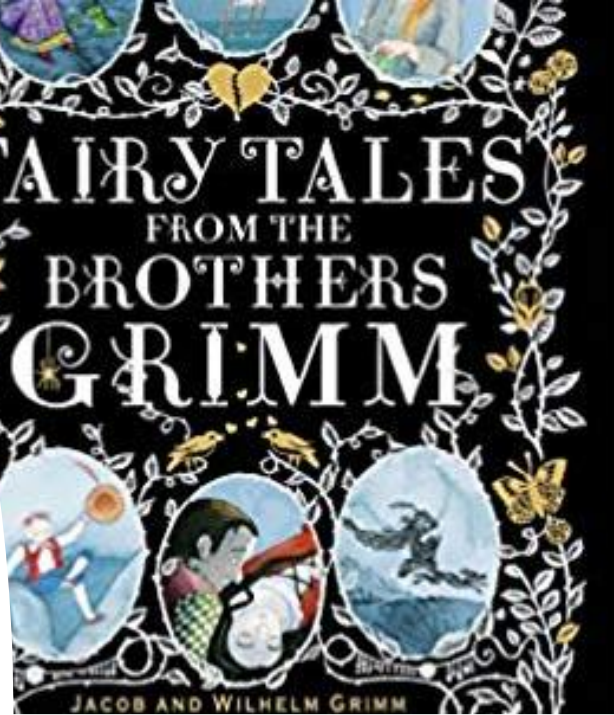
In the Beginning.....

- “Two decades ago only about nine percent of children’s books published in the U.S. were about people of color,” wrote Leah Donnell in 2017. Let that sink in. Think of all the children’s books that have ever been written. What color was the main character? Was there character diversity in the story? Most likely not. The history of African Americans and children’s stories were not written but rather told as folklore. This tradition started when slaves arrived in the Americas in the 1700s and 1800s. These oral traditions included singing and storytelling, and often involved passing coded information for meeting places or escape plans between slaves. The oral traditions were often enriched with tales of the world’s creation, heroic deeds, and magic. The stories taught the listener ideas, morals, and cultural values. Some how we have gotten away from those traditions, making it difficult for the youth to hear or read of their legacy, as well as learn values of importance culture, and appreciation of the world around them.



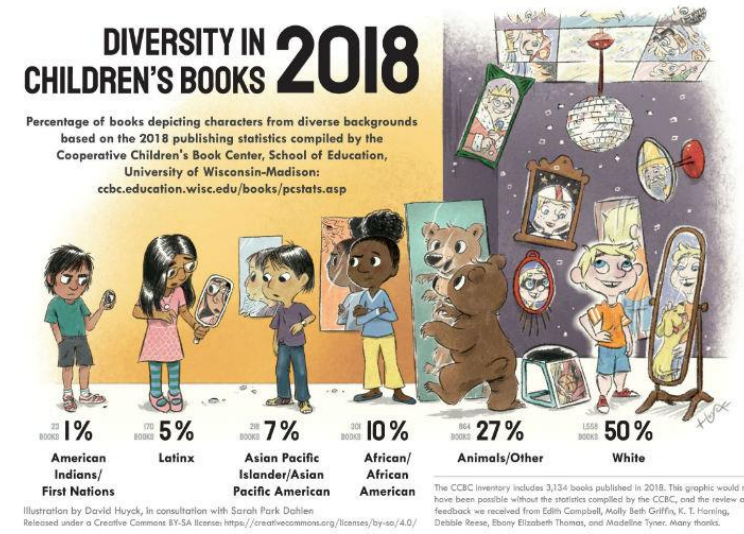
Racism in Children's Literature

- Remember some of your favorite authors from childhood that you loved to read? Dr. Seuss, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Roald Dahl), and *Grimm's Fairy Tales* just to name a few? According to Philip Nel, a scholar and professor of children's literature, some characters in our favorite children's books, like the Cat in the Hat "were based on racial stereotypes and inspired by traditions of blackface minstrel entertainment---and that dozens more children's books of decades past are brimming with insidious, racist themes (Fattal, 2017)." The favorite Oompa Loompas from the classic *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* were based on African pygmies, happy slaves content to leave their native land and work in a factory (Begley, 2017). Color symbolism and associating black with negative attributes or situations was an ongoing theme in Grimm's fairy tales. Black is the color of punishment and demonic forces, "black dwarves can be either helper figures ("The Blue Light) or diabolical helpers-turned-tormenters ("The King of the Golden Mountain"). (Schmiesing, 2016). How are children of color supposed to be uplifted or learn the lessons these stories should teach when they are reading and seeing negative portrayals of their skin color and heritage?



What can we do?

- We need to keep striving for positive representation of people of color. In this instance I speak of African American Children. Authors such as Michelle Martin, the Beverly Cleary Endowed Professor for Children and Youth Services at the University of Washington's Information School, worries that "the lack of children's books about African American kids enjoying nature could send the message to young readers that with an interest in the outdoors, like she herself once was. 'that black kids and black families don't belong outdoors...'" (2019). We want to encourage the youth to get outdoors and explore their world, but we also want our kids to love themselves and their culture. Frederick Mckissack, Jr. wrote in a 2016 article about the importance of black representation in literature; "Telling the true stories of the role black people played in building America...driven by the notion that generations of American children would grow up not believing that black people contributed little beyond slavery, music and athletic accomplishment." "We do not have to replace white characters with black ones, just allow for a diversity of characters in a variety of settings and stories to exist for a child to discover", Mckissack went on to write. Having diversity in children's literature will help positively effect how children see the world around them. A character can become that child's own, a reflection of themselves.



Annotated Bibliography

- “A Brief History of African American Literature.” n.d. Accessed January 31, 2020. <https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/a-brief-history-of-african-american-literature>.

This blog gave the history of African American literature and the many important authors of each century from slavery to the postmodern era. Although it touched on many great authors, there were many that contributed to the great history of African American literature which is noted in the text.
- “African American Folktale | Literature | Britannica.” n.d. Accessed February 4, 2020.

The encyclopedia offered a great source of history about African American folktales and how important they are in African tradition, and how these folktales taught life lessons and were a huge help to slaves to communicate with each other. These folktales were ultimately the basis for African American children's literature.
- “Lack of Black Children’s Books Are Still a Problem — The Undefeated.” n.d. Accessed January 29, 2020. <https://theundefeated.com/features/lack-of-black-childrens-books-are-still-a-problem/>.

This article talked about the importance of African American representation of outdoor adventures. The article talks about how there is a lack of black children in outdoor adventure stories, and how that is important to young black kids to get them out there in the world exploring and learning.
- “Once Upon a Time | The New Yorker.” n.d. Accessed February 5, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/23/once-upon-a-time-3>.

This article discusses the Grimm's fairytales and their racist tendencies in their work. The representation of women in their stories was also discussed in this article. The article also talks about how their stories are very violent and were not initially meant for children to read.
- “Opinion | Where Are the People of Color in Children’s Books? - The New York Times.” n.d. Accessed January 29, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html>.

This article talks about the rise of African American and Latino population in the educational system and how the need for their representation in literature is extremely important. It also talks about how it is important that black children know that their history is more than slavery and racism.

Annotated Bibliography (cont.)

- “People Of Color Accounted For 22 Percent Of Children’s Books Characters In 2016.” n.d. NPR.Org. Accessed January 29, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/02/17/515792141/authors-and-illustrators-of-color-accounted-for-22-percent-of-children-s-books>.
This article talks about how there is a need for more books to be written or illustrated by people of color. We need more stories about people of color for people of color and others to have characters that reflect their experiences in literature while also helping them to learn and look beyond their own personal experiences.
- Schmiesing, Ann. 2016. “Blackness in the Grimms’ Fairy Tales.” *Marvels & Tales* 30 (2): 210.
This article discussed Grimm’s’ fairytales and how their use of color symbolism was negative regarding the color black, with some exceptions to that when "the three colors of poetry" are discussed in "Snow White." There is discussion of how the color black is associated with the night, the underworld, death, and moral/physical impurity.
- “The Hidden (and Not-So-Hidden) Racism In Kids’ Lit.” n.d. Time. Accessed February 4, 2020. <https://time.com/4876091/racism-childrens-books-kids-lit/>.
This article talks about racism in some of our favorite children's books. Discussed were "The Cat in the Hat" and "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." The article discusses how the portrayal of the characters in these books can affect how children interpret their value in the world.
- “Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute.” n.d. Accessed February 5, 2020. <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/1993/2/93.02.08.x.html>.
This article talks extensively about the use of folktales by Africans and slaves in order to keep the memories and habits of the worlds they were torn from to come to America. Slaves were able to create tales about freedom and the misadventures of slaves by using various animals to tell the tales.