Images of Blackness in American Children's Picture Books, 1899 – 1999: Selections from the UW Children's Literature Collection

Suzzallo-Allen Library, University of Washington, Februrary – March 2006

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The combination of visual and verbal messages makes the picture book a powerful tool for communicating society's visions and values to its youngest members.

This display presents messages about African Americans that American society deemed appropriate for our children during the 20th century.

These books tell a story that begins with casual racism, condescending portraits, and inauthentic cultural representations, and ends with black children's writers gaining wide acceptance among literary critics and readers alike. Their words and images document African Americans' struggle to be allowed to speak for themselves and to present their children with images of themselves and their people of which they could be proud.

1899-1939: Ridicule and Response

In the early days of American children's literature, with the publishing industry controlled by whites, black characters in picture books were largely portrayed as childlike, stupid, greedy, and subservient. Black parents who wanted to buy books with black characters for their children had largely unflattering portrayals from which to choose.

Three popular turn-of-the-century tales, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899), the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Niggers," and Heinrich Hoffmann's "Story of the Inky Boys" from *Struwwelpeter* illustrate this point.

The Harlem Renaissance saw the first concerted attempt by African Americans to reply to these books by furnishing more positive representations of black life for their children. *The Brownies' Book* magazine (1920-21), though short-lived, featured articles for children by prominent writers like W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Subsequent efforts by black writers and librarians made some inroads into the publishing industry.

By the end of the 1930s, a few positive portrayals of African American characters had joined *The Story of Little Black Sambo* on the shelf , among them Eva Knox Evans's *Araminta*, Arna Bontemps' *You Can't Pet a Possum*, and Stella Gentry Sharp's groundbreaking *Tobe*. However, the stereotypical images common forty years earlier still persisted, exemplified in books such as *Epaminondas and His Auntie* and the *Nicodemus* series.

Books Displayed:

"The Story of Little Black Sambo," (1899) in *The Jumbo Sambo*, by Helen Bannerman.
New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1942.

"Ten Little Niggers," in *Mother Goose Rhymes and Jingles*. Chicago : W.B. Conkey Co., [1905?].

"The Tale of the Young Black Chap," ["The Story of the Inky Boys"] in *Slovenly Peter or, Happy Tales and Funny Pictures*, [*Der Struwwelpeter*]; translated by Mark Twain from the German text by Heinrich Hoffmann, illus. by Heinrich Hoffmann. New York: Harper & brothers, 1935.

Nicodemus and His Little Sister, by Inez Hogan. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1932

You Can't Pet a Possum, by Arna Bontemps, illustrated by Ilse Bischoff. New York, W. Morrow and Company, 1934.

Araminta, by Eva Knox Evans, illustrated by Erick Berry. New York: Minton, Balch, 1935.

Epaminondas and His Auntie, by Sara Cone Bryant, illustrated by Inez Hogan.
Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938.

Tobe, by Stella Gentry Sharpe, photographs by Charles Farrell. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939.

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1940-1969: "The All-White World of Children's Books"

In 1965, Nancy Larrick's scathing essay "The All-White World of Children's Books" appeared in the *Saturday Review*, pointing out "the almost complete omission of Negroes from books for children." When black characters did appear, the books were, more often than not, authored by white writers. Stereotypes established in earlier decades lingered on. ***Parasols Is for Ladies*** (1941) is marred by the exaggerated illustrations and uneducated speech of its main characters. The 1946 Caldecott Medal winner ***The Rooster Crows***, which for the most part portrayed attractive white children, included illustrations of black children with "great buniony feet, coal black skin, and bulging eyes" (Larrick) until, under criticism, the publishers elected to eliminate those pages entirely in the 1964 edition.

Rare books like ***Two Is a Team*** (1945), ***The Snowy Day*** (1962), and ***What Mary Jo Shared*** (1966) counteracted those stereotypes by presenting pictures of African American children in everyday middle-class settings, with no mention of the characters' ethnicity in the text. Meanwhile, the social struggles of black citizens were presented, however obliquely, in ***My Dog Rinty*** (1946), ***Lonesome Boy*** (1955), the poetry collection ***Bronzeville Boys and Girls*** (1956), written by the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize, and Marguerite de Angeli's ***Bright April*** (1946), one of the first picture books to address the topic of racial discrimination. Strangely, the most prominent debate about black characters featured a book whose characters weren't even human – Garth Williams's ***The Rabbits' Wedding***.

By the end of the 1960s, spurred on by the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements, publishers had begun to produce more books authored by African Americans and directly addressing black experiences. Jacob Lawrence's ***Harriet and the Promised Land*** (1968) presented a courageous heroine ("I'll be free or I'll be dead") and John Steptoe's ***Stevie*** (1969) was a landmark book that used a realistic ghetto setting with black characters and authentic urban black dialogue.

Books Displayed:

Parasols Is for Ladies, by Elizabeth Ritter, illustrated by Ninon MacKnight. New York: Junior Literary Guild, 1941.

The Rooster Crows: A Book of American Rhymes and Jingles, by Maud and Miska Petersham. New York: Macmillan, 1945.

Two Is a Team, by Lorraine and Jerrold Beim, illustrated by Ernest Crichlow. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945.

Bright April, by Marguerite de Angeli. Garden City, N.Y.: Junior Literary Guild & Doubleday, 1946.

My Dog Rinty, by Ellen Tarry and Marie Hall Ets, illustrated by Alexander and Alexandra Alland. New York: Viking Press, 1946.

Lonesome Boy, by Arna Bontemps, illustrated by Feliks Topolski. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955

Bronzeville Boys and Girls, by Gwendolyn Brooks, illustrated by Ronni Solbert. New York: Harper, 1956.

The Rabbits' Wedding, by Garth Williams. New York: Harper, 1958.

The Snowy Day, by Ezra Jack Keats. New York, Viking Press, 1962.

What Mary Jo Shared, by Janice May Udry, illustrated by Eleanor Mill. Chicago: A. Whitman, 1966.

Harriet and the Promised Land, by Jacob Lawrence. New York: Windmill Books, 1968, reissued 1993.

Stevie, by John Steptoe. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

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1970-1999: Black Voices Emerge

The 1970s saw milestones such as the first black winners of the prestigious Caldecott and Newbery awards and the establishment of the Coretta Scott King Awards for excellence in African American children's authorship and illustration – awards which drew media attention to children's books by black authors.

Although white authors continued to produce picture books featuring black characters – sometimes successfully, as with Rachel Isadora's well-received ***Ben's Trumpet*** (1979), and sometimes less so, as with Margot Zemach's ***Jake and Honeybunch Go to Heaven*** (1982) – the last three decades of the 20th century saw the emergence of a new generation of African American authors who brought new richness and depth to the picture-book portrayal of black life.

Exploring themes of everyday life (***Some of the Days of Everett Anderson*** (1971), ***Black is Brown is Tan*** (1973), ***Abby*** (1973)), family history (***The Patchwork Quilt*** (1985), ***Tar Beach*** (1991), ***Working Cotton*** (1992)), folklore (***The People Could Fly*** (1985), ***Mirandy and Brother Wind*** (1988)), African origin (***Africa Dream*** (1977), ***Cornrows*** (1979), ***The Middle Passage*** (1995)), self-image (***Nappy Hair*** (1999), and fantasy (***Sam and the Tigers*** (1998)), these authors provided children with a nuanced portrait of the different aspects of the black experience in America.

Despite the gains of the last few decades, though, black authors still face barriers in their attempts to get their work published. The Cooperative Children's Book Center, which tracks minority publishing statistics, calculated that in 1985 only 0.7% of children's books were written and/or illustrated by African Americans. A decade later, that number had risen to 2.0% before falling to1.6% in 2000, while the latest census figures put the African American population at 13%.

Books Displayed:

Some of the Days of Everett Anderson, by Lucille Clifton, illustrated by Evaline Ness. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

Abby, by Jeannette Franklin Caines, illustrated by Steven Kellogg. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

Black is Brown is Tan, by Arnold Adoff, illustrated by Emily Arnold McCully. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

Africa Dream, by Eloise Greenfield, illustrated by Carole Byard. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1977.

Ben's Trumpet, by Rachel Isadora. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1979.

Cornrows, by Camille Yarbrough, illustrated by Carole Byard. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1979

Jake and Honeybunch Go to Heaven, by Margot Zemach. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982.

The Patchwork Quilt, by Valerie Flournoy, illustrations by Jerry Pinkney. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1985.

The People Could Fly: The Book of Black Folktales, told by Virginia Hamilton, illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. New York: Knopf, 1985.

Mirandy and Brother Wind, by Patricia C. McKissack, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. New York: Knopf, 1988.

Amazing Grace, by Mary Hoffman, illustrated by Caroline Binch. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1991.

Tar Beach, by Faith Ringgold. New York: Crown Publishers, 1991.

Working Cotton, by Sherley Anne Williams, illustrated by Carole Byard. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.

The Middle Passage : White Ships/Black Cargo, by Tom Feelings. New York: Dial Books, 1995.

Sam and the Tigers: a New Telling of Little Black Sambo, by Julius Lester, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1996.

Nappy Hair, by Carolivia Herron, illustrated by Joe Cepeda. New York: Knopf, 1997.

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For Further Information:

We Build Together: A Reader's Guide to Negro Life and Literature for Elementary and High School Use, by Charlemae Rollins (Chicago, Ill., National Council of Teachers of English, 1941). Revised ed, 1948; 3rd ed, 1967.

Books about Negro Life for Children, by Augusta Baker (New York: New York Public Library, 1961).

"The All-White World of Children's Books," by Nancy Larrick, *Saturday Review* 48, 37 (September 11, 1965): 63-85; reprinted in *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, edited by Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard (Metuchen, N.J., Scarecrow Press, 1972).

The Negro in Schoolroom Literature: Resource Materials for the Teacher of Kindergarten through the Sixth Grade, by Minnie W. Koblitz (New York, Center for Urban Education, 1967?).

"Adventures in Blackland with Keats and Steptoe," by Ray Anthony Shepard. *Interracial Books for Children* 3,4 (1971):3

The Black Experience in Children's Books, by Barbara Rollock and the New York Public Library's Black Experience in Children's Book Committee (New York: New York Public Library, 1974). Subsequent editions in 1984 and 1989.

Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction, by Rudine Sims (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982)

"Jake and Honeybunch Go to Heaven: children's book fans smoldering debate," by Susan E. Brandehoff et al. *American Libraries* 14 (March 1983):130-132.

"Books on African American Themes: A Recommended Book List," by Beryle Banfield, *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* 16, 7 (1985), pp. 4-8.

"Children's Books About Blacks: A Mid-Eighties Report," by Rudine Sims, *Children's Literature Review*, 8 (1985), 9-13.

"Images of Blacks in Children's Books," by Jesse M. Birtha, in *Images of Blacks in American Culture: a Reference Guide to Information Sources*, edited by Jessie Carney Smith (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 191-233.

"African American Children's Literature: The First One Hundred Years," by Violet J. Harris, *The Journal of Negro Education* 59, 4 (Autumn 1990), pp. 540-555.

"Images of African-Americans in Picture Books for Children," by Judith V. Lechner, *Journal of African Children's & Youth Literature* 3 (1991/1992), pp. 59-73.

"Insiders, Outsiders, and the Question of Authenticity: Who Shall Write for African American Children?" by Nina Mikkelsen, *African American Review* 32, 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 33-49.

Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature, edited by Dana L. Fox and Kathy G. Short. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2003.

Brown Gold: Milestones of African-American Children's Picture Books, 1845-2002, by Michelle H. Martin (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance, by Katharine Capshaw Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

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– Kathleen Collins, Feb-March 2006