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:


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


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


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 bunyony 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 Angell’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:


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


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.

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 to 1.6% in 2000, while the latest census figures put the African American population at 13%.

Books Displayed:


For Further Information:


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


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– Kathleen Collins, Feb-March 2006