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Their Own Story: Literature for African- American Children

Jeanne McGlinn

The literature that African-American children read has the power to transform their vision of themselves and their culture. According to a report issued by the National Black Child Development Institute (1991), "Children's books that present accurate and realistic images of Black people and our culture are a major vehicle for generating high self-esteem and a positive self-concept in Black children" (p. 5). If the literature also focuses on the experiences of the child, then African-American children will be more likely to choose to read it. As stated by Carlsen (1971), "... young people want to read about people like themselves, with whom they can identify" (p. 208). This motivation is very important to a child's development as a reader. To become willing readers, children have to see that they have something to gain personally from reading. If this recognition never occurs, then it can have a detrimental effect on their reading ability: "If children are provided reading texts which do not elicit favorable responses their attention may dwindle and their comprehension may suffer" (Mathewson, 1976, p. 672).

Even though the importance of children being able to read books that reflect their experience is widely recognized, too few books reflect the contemporary experiences of African-

American children today. Less than two percent of the children's books published each year are about African-Americans (Bishop, 1991). Reimer (1992) surveyed trade books and basal reading programs for third graders. She found that although basal readers include ethnic diversity in their stories, there is not much diversity represented in the trade books. The great majority of trade books published for children do not reflect the experiences of ethnic minorities. Some see this as indicative of racism in the United States:

Children's books are not merely frivolous entertainment. They are part of a society's general culture. U.S. culture is white-dominated and racist. Children's books in the U.S. reflect our society while at the same time reinforcing and perpetuating its racism (Slapin and Seale, 1992, p. 2).

Candy Dawson Boyd (1991), an African-American author of children's books, asserts the need for authentic depictions of the lives of African-American children written with the "richness and power of ethnicity" (p. 50). She says of her own childhood experience on the south side of Chicago that, although enriching, it was not enough for her to read the usual literary fare for children:

I never saw myself or my mama or my daddy in books. But as children, we blew bubbles on sunny summer mornings on the back porch, played school, worried about doing well on the long division test, and avoided broccoli and spinach and liver... We lived rich, vibrant lives despite all of the adversities. I never saw any of that in books. Did I notice? Yes. Did it make me feel bad? Yes. (p. 52).

Although currently more African-American books are being published, much of the literature available to children

does not show characters who are part of the mainstream of American society, living in relatively secure home situations, and engaged in the normal activities of children. The African-American literature in school libraries is often limited to reading African or American folktales, histories of life during slave times, or else contemporary stories that focus on the problems that children face such as poverty and racism. No one would deny the importance of folk literature which reflects the accumulated wisdom and mores of a people, but folktales by their nature put the reader in another world outside of the ordinary time and place. Characters in folktales are stereotyped and the emphasis is on a quick, decisive resolution of the plot. Readers do not get a sense of a complex person engaged in working out a real life situation. So too with historical fiction which emphasizes the struggles of a person or group during a particular crisis. As authentic expressions of African-American history and culture there is much of value in these works for young children. However, if the coverage of African-American life is limited to these kinds of subject matter then this literature does not really meet the needs of children to see images of African-Americans in ordinary life. But research shows that many teachers are unfamiliar with the wide range of children's literature and choose some "standards" whenever they are looking for a multicultural text (Thompson and Meeks, 1990).

The need for teachers to make available a wide selection of African-American literature is described in Eleanora Tate's (1990) recent novel, *Thank you, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.!* Mary Elouise, a fourth-grader at Gumbo Grove Elementary School in Gumbo Grove, South Carolina, feels nervous whenever her white teacher, Miz Vereen, begins to talk about blacks as those "wonderful Negro Americans" who have risen "from such lowly beginnings." Mary Elouise, busy with the typical concerns of any nine year old — fitting in with the

popular girls and looking like the images which she sees on television — is embarrassed by references to blacks. She doesn't want the teacher to draw attention to how she is different. She says:

February is when almost everybody in school and at church and on TV pulled out stuff about Black History. Black, Black, Black everywhere! And then we don't hear hardly anything about it until the next February. That stuff is okay with me if it's about us doing what everybody else does... But sometimes Miz Vereen shows pictures of real poor Black folks with great big teeth sitting on old broken down front porches with their hair messy, eating watermelon and grinning... I want to crawl under my desk when stuff like that comes around... It makes me think there's something wrong with those Black people in those books and on TV to make them get such a lowdown deal... and then I get scared. Does that mean there is something wrong with me? Will bad things happen to me too? (p. 49-50).

Mary Elouise's question could be echoed by many school children in the United States today who come from ethnic, cultural, religious or regional subgroups. Instead of developing an appreciation for their unique cultures, many children are receiving the message that they are different and somehow inferior to the dominant white culture. Sometimes teachers send this message in spite of their best efforts not to do so, because of lack of understanding of the attitudes and feelings of their students — like Mary Elouise. Teachers choose books without thinking about the wide range of experiences of African-Americans. Not all African-Americans are in crisis; their lives encompass all social and economic strata in contemporary American society (Banks, 1991, p. 214). Multicultural literature, like all quality literature, should

create a complex view of the individuals who are members of a particular ethnic group, showing their various aspirations, socio-economic levels, occupations, and human characteristics. The problems of poverty and racism do exist, but images of African-Americans enjoying life in the United States should also be available to children. A balanced choice of literature will be a vehicle to convey the history, culture, diversity and richness of human life.

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- Tate, E.E. (1990). *Thank you, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.!* NY: Franklin Watts.
- Thompson, D.L., & Meeks, J.W. (1990). *Assessing teachers' knowledge of multi-ethnic literature*. Paper presented at the 11th annual meeting of the American Reading Forum, Sarasota Florida. (ED 328 916)

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This annotated bibliography is offered to teachers as a guide to some of the books which show African-Americans engaged in a wide variety of activities and reflects the richness of their family life and culture.

Contemporary fiction

- Bang, M. (1983). *Ten, nine, eight*. NY: Greenwillow. This father and daughter number book deals with aspects of getting ready for bed.
- Bonsall, C. (1980). *Who's afraid of the dark?* NY: Harper & Row. This book helps children consider bedtime fears (multicultural illustrations).
- Bradman, T., & Browne, E. (1990). *Wait and see*. London: Methuen. Jo and Mum go shopping while Dad stays home to make lunch. Illustrations show a racially-mixed family.
- Cameron, A. (1981). *The stories Julian tells*. NY: Bullseye. Recommended in *The read-aloud handbook* by Jim Trelease and an ALA Notable Children's Book, these stories are about all the things that happen to two little boys — Julian and his brother Huey.
- Cameron, A. (1986). *More stories Julian tells*. NY: Bullseye. Here are more adventures for Julian, but sometimes his "big mouth" gets him in trouble.
- Cameron, A. (1988). *Julian, secret agent*. NY: Random House. Julian, Huey and Gloria are super sleuths who find their way into lots of trouble.
- Cameron, A. (1990). *Julian, dream doctor*. NY: Random House. Julian wants his father to have the gift of his dreams for his birthday.
- Carlstrom, N.W. (1987). *Wild wild sunflower child Anna*. NY: Macmillan. Anna enjoys a day in the outdoors.
- DeVeaux, A. (1987). *An enchanted hair tale*. NY: Harper & Row. Sudan learns to accept himself.
- Flournoy, V. (1985). *The patchwork quilt*. NY: Dial. Tanya's grandmother is making a patchwork quilt using bits of cloth. When her grandmother becomes ill, Tanya finishes the quilt by herself.
- Greene, B. (1974). *Philip Hall likes me, I reckon maybe*. NY: Dial. Beth Lambert, 11 years old, growing up in rural Arkansas, deals with the emotional ups and downs of a first crush. Greene creates a portrait of a loving and strong family and community.
- Greenfield, E. (1975). *Me and Neesie*. NY: Crowell. Neesie is an invisible friend of Janell's. Things change when Aunt Bea comes to visit.
- Greenfield, E. (1981). *Daydreamers*. NY: Dial. Greenfield's poetry is illustrated with portraits of African-American children.
- Greenfield, E. (1988). *Grandpa's face*. NY: Philomel. Tamika loves her grandfather, who is an actor, but is frightened that she may lose his love when she sees him rehearsing an angry face. Her grandfather discovers what is troubling her and soothes her fears.

- Greenfield, E. (1992). *Koya Delaney and the good girl blues*. NY: Scholastic. Koya Delaney is the class comedienne; her classmates all know about her laughing fits. But when her cousin Del, a rock singer, comes to town Koya has to deal with a fight between her sister, her best friend, and some unhappy fans who won't leave Del alone. Koya learns how to express anger in a healthy way.
- Hamilton, V. (1967). *Zeely*. NY: Dell. An ALA Notable Book. Eleven year old Geeder Perry, who lives in a fantasy world, spends the summer at her uncle's farm. She makes up stories about Zeely, the hog farmer's daughter, imagining her to be a great queen. Zeely teaches her that royalty has everything to do with what is inside and not with appearances.
- Hamilton, V. (1976). *M.C. Higgins, the Great*. NY: Collier. (Newbery Award winner). Fifteen year old M.C. lives near a strip mine in Ohio where his family struggles to make a good life.
- Hamilton, V. (1990). *Cousins*. NY: Philomel. Cammy faces her grandmother's death and other family trials — cousins that are hard to take for a variety of reasons. When a tragedy occurs, Cammy learns about the power of family love.
- Hamilton, V. (1992). *Drylongso*. NY: Harcourt. A mysterious boy named Drylongso comes to Lindy's family during a time of drought. He shows them where to plant and renews their hope.
- Hayes, S. (1986). *Happy Christmas, Gemma*. NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard. Gemma and her family celebrate Christmas.
- Hoffman, M. (1991). *Amazing Grace*. NY: Dial. Grace refuses to let others' expectations keep her from being all she wants to be.
- Howard, E. (1988). *The train to Lulu's*. NY: Bradbury. Two sisters travel on the train to their great aunt's home in Baltimore.
- Howard, E. (1991). *Aunt Flossie's hats (and crab cakes later)*. NY: Clarion. Aunt Flossie shares family stories with her two nieces.
- Hudson, W. (1993). *Pass it on: African-American poetry for children*. NY: Scholastic. A collection of poems selected by Wade Hudson which includes poems by Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, and Elouise Greenfield.
- Keats, E.J. (1962). *The snowy day*. NY: Viking. A story about a small boy's adventures in the snow.
- Keats, E.J. (1972). *Pet show*. NY: Collier. It's time for the neighborhood pet show, but Archie's cat is missing.
- Mathis, S.B. (1975). *The hundred penny box*. NY: Viking. Michael loves his great-great-aunt, Aunt Dew, who lives in her memories. He tries to explain to his mother why she can't replace Aunt Dew's old hundred penny box even though it is all beaten up and always under foot.
- Mendez, P. (1989). *The black snowman*. NY: Scholastic. Jacob learns about the *kente's* magic. *Kente* is a brightly colored cloth which brings magic to the people of the Ashanti tribe.

- Pinkney, G.J. (1992). *Back home*. Ernestine Avery Powell returns to Lumberton, North Carolina — the place where she was born — to visit her Uncle June and Aunt Beula's farm and to become friends with her cousin Jack.
- Sebestyen, O. (1979). *Words by heart*. NY: Little, Brown. Lena tries to get her white classmates to notice her and not her skin.
- Spier, P. (1980). *People*. NY: Doubleday. This book illustrates all the infinite variety of people in the wide world.
- Tate, E.E. (1987). *The secret of Gumbo Grove*. NY: Franklin Watts. Raisin Stackhouse lives in Gumbo Grove, South Carolina, "The Number One Family Vacationland." When she helps old Miss Effie Pfluggins clean up the old church cemetery, she discovers a mystery about the past which leads her in search of the true history of Gumbo Grove.
- Tate, E.E. (1990). *Thank you, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.!* NY: Franklin Watts. Mary Elouise learns about her heritage with the help of her loving grandmother and a storyteller who teaches her about African history.
- Thomas, J.C. (1986). *The golden pasture*. NY: Scholastic. Carl Lee, 13, finds a wild Appaloosa horse that he tries to tame.
- Walker, A. (1988). *To hell with dying*. NY: Harcourt. The love and attention of children revives Mr. Sweet when he feels near death.
- Williams, S.A. (1992). *Working cotton*. NY: Harcourt. Based on the author's memories of childhood experiences in the cotton fields of Fresno, this is the story of Shelan who is not yet old enough to pick her own cotton. The story describes a day in the fields.
- Yarbrough, C. (1979). *Cornrows*. NY: Coward McCann & Geoghegan. This story explains the hairstyle of cornrows and the heritage of African-Americans.