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INTERRACIAL BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

BULLETIN

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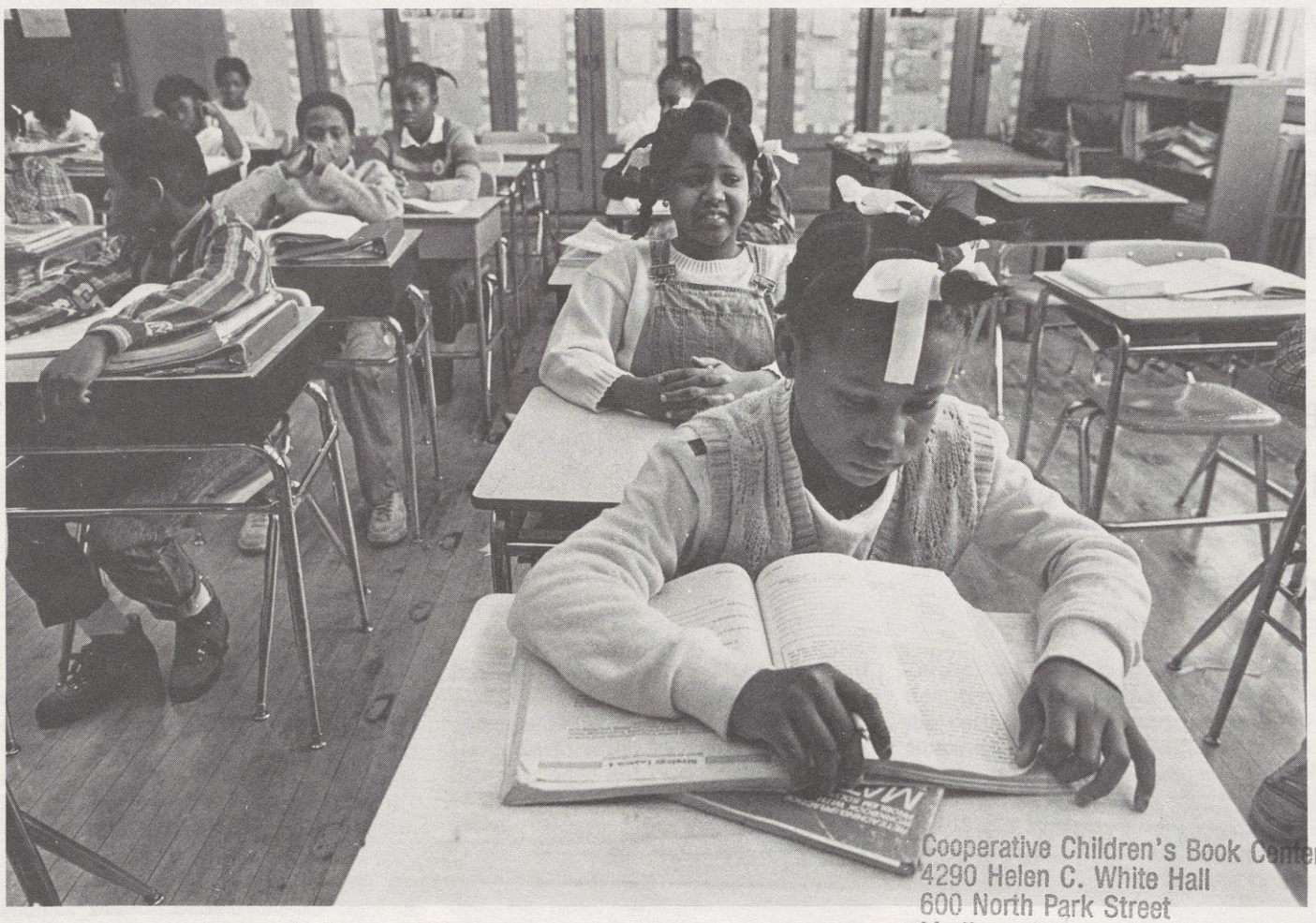

A Historical Quest for Literacy

Black Life in Children's Books

The Reluctant Reader

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COVER

Photo by Cindy Reiman

Indexed in
Alternative Press Index
Education Index
ERIC IRCD
Library Literature

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African-Americans are the only Americans who had to litigate for what all other Americans took for granted, decent schools. While waiting for "the wheels of justice to grind slowly," African-Americans continued the tradition of the quest for literacy begun by their slave ancestors.

A Historical Quest For Literacy

By Cecelia McCall, Ph.D.

The four million men and women freed by the Emancipation Proclamation and Civil War lost little more of their slave status than the chains that encumbered their bodies. In spite of the work of the Freedman's Bureau, private philanthropy and dedicated teachers, Black and white, in public and private schools, equal educational opportunity, access and resources would not become the right of Black people in the United States for almost another full century. It was not until the Brown decision of 1954, followed a decade later by Civil Rights legislation, that African-Americans could expect the law to abet their struggle.

African-Americans are the only Americans who had to litigate for what all other Americans took for granted, decent schools. While waiting for "the wheels of justice to grind slowly," African-Americans continued the tradition of the quest for literacy begun by their slave ancestors.

Though the majority of slaves remained illiterate, some defied the prohibitions that decreed education illegal for those who were only three-fifths of a person. The history of learning among African-Americans is as old as their roots in this country and runs parallel to the struggle for freedom. Too little attention to this history, however, has led to the perpetuation of distortions and misconceptions about its value in the Black community. There is a myth abroad that African-Americans do not revere learning and only attempted to gain access to schools during the Civil War and after Emancipation. Even though African-Americans are the only Americans who were deliberately, legally, and systematically prevented from having access to the book and to knowledge, slaves surmounted the prohibitions against learning to establish a proud tradition of literacy among African-Americans.

The Tradition

It is a tradition that can be traced to the seventeenth century. By the inception of the Civil War five percent of slaves could read. This information about those who found ways to master the alphabet and to learn to read, alone or with the aid of collaborators, is gleaned from both primary and secondary sources, including slave

narratives and oral testimonies and tales.

Learning was a dangerous thing and did undermine slavery. The slaveocracy understood the threat that reading posed for that institution. The motivation for some slaves to run away was their inability to educate their children. Isaac Riley spoke of Canada as the place where "my children can get good learning". Slaves who could read transmitted news of uprisings, escapes, and the abolition movement. Those who could write, forged passes and free papers for those determined to get to Canada. Susie King Taylor (1902), who when freed became a nurse, laundress and teacher in a Black regiment of the Union Army, was one of the forgers. She said, "I often wrote passes for my grandmother, for all colored persons, free or slaves, were compelled to have a pass; free colored persons having a guardian in place of a master." Linda Brent, born in 1818, was taught to read and write by her first mistress, with whom she lived until age twelve. Linda read to the other slaves from Northern newspapers accounts of the growing abolition movement. Harsh punishment, including the amputation of a limb, and even the threat of death, did not deter them from daring to explore print and discover its secrets and treasures and to decode its hidden meaning. Carrie Davis recalled that she could not leave the plantation without a pass and admonished that "you better not let 'em catch you wid a book." Again, Linda Brent was a teacher of other slaves. She recalls teaching an old man to read the Bible even after warning him that he risked a whipping or imprisonment for that crime. She first taught him the alphabet, then two-syllable combinations: finally, he spelled out words in the New Testament, which he completed reading in six months.

Lydia Maria Child, an outspoken feminist and abolitionist, in 1833 wrote *An Appeal in Favor of Americans Called Africans*. She reports that various laws were enacted to maintain illiteracy. For instance, South Carolina was the first state to order that any person caught instructing a slave be fined one hundred pounds. Virginia declared that schools established to teach either slave or free Black people should be disbanded and each pupil lashed twenty times. Anyone caught teaching slaves in Georgia was imprisoned for ten days and given thirty-nine lashes. By 1837, all states in the slaveocracy had enacted similar laws. At the same time in the free North, the property of "negroes" was taxed. Ohio, for instance, refused to educate "colored" children at the public expense or allow them to attend schools with white children. Throughout the North, beginning in Rhode Island in 1770, separate schools for Black and white children became the norm. Massachusetts repeatedly denied the petitions of Blacks for integrated schools. Even though the Boston school system was desegregated in 1855 after a prolonged struggle, de facto segregation became the practice after the Civil War and into the last half of the twentieth century.

Testimony and Accomplice

A rich source of information about the character of slave learning is the testimonies of ex-slaves gathered from 1936 to 1938 by members of the Federal Writers' Project (1941). This undertaking of the Works Project Administration predates contemporary oral history research techniques. Though the testimonies were not transcribed according to the systematic procedures required today, they are a valuable resource for those interested in the perceptions of former slaves. An analysis of the 3,428 responses of ex-slaves corroborates the five percent literacy figure mentioned earlier. Of those who had some instruction, 17% had learned only letters, another 22% could read, and 52% read and wrote (Cornelius, 1983).

Almost half of the literate ex-slaves had been able to use the skill to get work after emancipation, becoming ministers and teachers or employees of the state or federal government. The few citations here are representative of various means to literacy. William Adams, who was ninety-three when his testimony was taken, said that he learned to read and write by himself, having attended school only three months. Jennie Bowen was taught by the children for whom she was a nursemaid. Esther Casey was instructed by her mistress before Emancipation. She continued to live on the plantation until she was eighteen. Her school fees, fifty cents a month, were paid by her former mistress. Esther became a teacher in the public schools for colored children in Livingston, Alabama.

Though repression was strongest from 1837 to 1860, clandestine learning went on. "Slip and learn" secret schools operated on the plantations. Usually no more than an arbor of trees to shade the students, when discovered, they were abandoned and moved to other locations (Osofsky, 1969). On some plantations female slaves formed a room with wet quilts hung so that their voices would be muffled (Journal of Negro History, 1935).

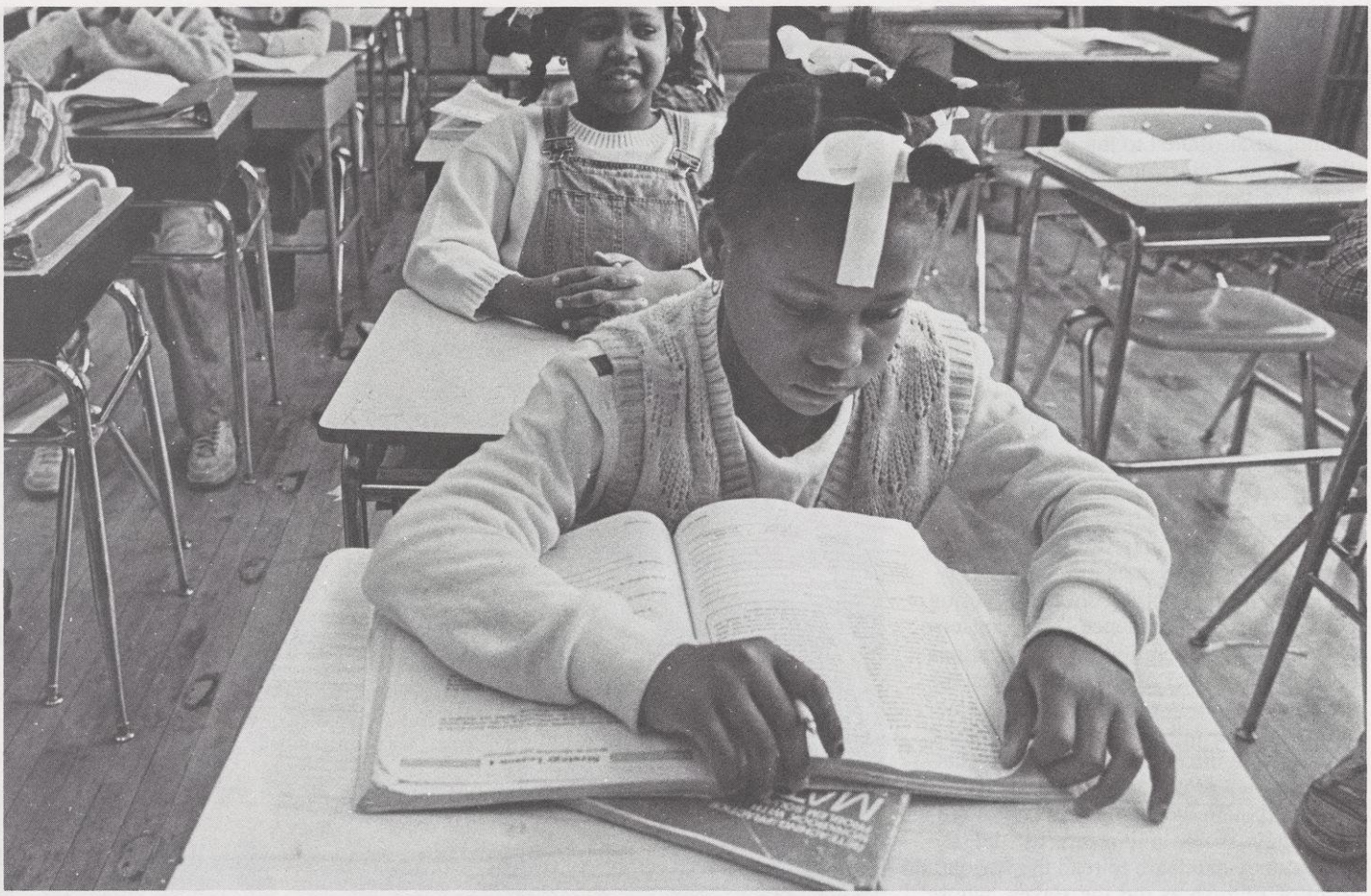
It was not unusual for free people of color to assist their slave brothers and sisters. African-American women, using their kitchens as classrooms, taught in the underground literacy movement throughout the South. Walking to and from their teachers' homes, slave children had to conceal their books in wrapping paper so that the authorities would not seize them (Taylor, 1902). The "private schools" continued into the twentieth century. Septima Clark, born at the turn of the century in Charleston, South Carolina, mentions that her first teacher was a woman of color who conducted a private school in her home (1962).

Slaves stole books, copied the lessons of the masters' children, and used tree bark for paper and a knife for a pen to carve letters. Redpath (1859) recounts the story of a slave who had schoolboys teach him a letter at a time in exchange for nuts, while another's eight-year-old master taught him during the daily trips to and from the schoolhouse. There are countless stories of slaves who relied upon their strong memories to aid their learning. A butler learned to read by looking at the words as his unwitting master read aloud. Botume (1893) attested to the method one maid-in-waiting devised. She memorized letter-by-letter words that the master spelled out to his wife. Later, she had her literate uncle decode the messages for her. At Emancipation, her children were among the first to attend the Freedman's Schools.

Slaves had other accomplices. Reverend G.W. Offley had several. The first was an old slave who taught him his letters on Sundays and in the evenings so that he could read a section of "Genesis XXV," a discarded remnant of the Old Testament. With the son of a poor slaveholder, he exchanged boxing and wrestling lessons for reading instruction, and gave baskets of food to a gambler's son at the St. George Hotel in Delaware for additional instruction.

The Book

Until 1837 a slave's learning depended upon the character and attitude of the owner. Those who admitted the humanity of their chattel did not object to the clergy teaching their slaves. A few owners also gave lessons. But before any learning was allowed in the Northern or Southern colonies, the Bishop of London abrogated the ruling that Christians could not be slaves, thus absolving the colonists from freeing their chattel. Missionaries taught the slaves and urged the plantation mistress to do likewise so that the catechism



Cindy Reiman, Impact Visuals

could be read. In any event, ministers carried into the slave quarters the book that was to become the major learning tool, the Bible. Slaves desired to read the real Bible, not just versions that admonished them to be obedient to their masters.

Frederick Douglass's mistress was typical of the women who attempted to heed the exhortations of their pastors. She intended to instruct him to read the Bible. Her husband made it clear to her that it was both unlawful and unsafe to teach slaves since it would make them unfit for their low estate and unhappy and disconsolate. Undaunted, Douglass waylaid and bribed his former white playmates to teach him from Webster's spelling book, which he always carried in his pocket. He used his errand time and playtime for lessons. He paid his accomplices with biscuits. By the age of thirteen, he was a good enough reader to purchase books with earned money and to prove his master correct. The more he read about freedom, the more determined he was to have it. He wrote, "Once awakened by the silver trump of knowledge, my spirit was aroused to eternal wakefulness. Liberty! the inestimable birthright of everyman, had, for me, converted every object into an asserter of that right." He then taught himself to write by scribbling on fences and the pavement with chalk and rewriting the lessons in his master's copy (note) books.

In 1836 Douglas established a Methodist Sabbath School for twenty to thirty slaves who met on Sundays under the plantation trees where they used their young master's and mistress's discarded spelling books. When the school was forcibly closed, he conducted another Sabbath School for twenty free and bound children at the home of a free colored man in St. Michael's village, on the Chesapeake Bay, south of Baltimore. The school was disbanded after one session, and he was warned that if he continued he would receive the same treatment as Nat Turner, a hanging. Nevertheless, throughout the winter he hid with slaves in barns and woods three nights a week to instruct them.

The Quakers

Not only did the Quakers pursue freedom and education for Black people in the North where they established some of the first and best schools for Black children, but they were equally zealous in the South. Throughout the slave-holding states Quakers performed a heroic role and were persecuted for their belief in the fellowship of man. As early as 1672 the slave states began passing laws to interfere with their efforts. Virginia declared that Quakers could not take Blacks to their meeting, and in 1678 North Carolina asserted that they could not have schools for slaves. Nevertheless, they continued to that by 1731 some slaves could read and write.

In 1833, the Quaker, Prudence Crandall, opened a school in Connecticut for young Black women that attracted girls from Providence, Boston , and New York. However, the school was denounced as being a place to train Black women for marriage with New England bachelors. Her neighbors smeared her home with excrement and set it on fire, and shopkeepers refused to sell her provisions. Connecticut passed a law making it illegal to educate colored persons who were not residents of that state. Though arrested twice, tried and convicted, this gentle Quaker kept her school open as long as possible. Her young women were among the first Black teachers (Sillen, 1955).

Consequence

A legacy of this historical quest for literacy is that contemporary problems in urban education have antecedents that cannot be attributed to the indifference of the African-American community. Many variables can be enumerated to account for the failure of ghetto children to learn to read at the same rate as other children, but they are as much rooted in the socioeconomic environment of the classroom as the educational system is influenced by the social, political, and economic dynamics of the country. John Ogbu (1983), an anthropologist, has proposed that learning problems of inner-city children are related to their caste-like status in American culture. He suggests that this has led to inadequate schooling and survival mechanisms that are incompatible with school requirements.

An inevitable consequence of ignoring both historical evidence and misunderstanding the debilitating ramifications of being a member of a caste has been the development of various theories to account for the failure of Black children, who speak a dialect, to learn to read standard English proficiently.

Even though the majority of Black children may speak a dialect, as did the slaves, they can learn to read the standard form of English as did the slaves, whose speech was less closely related to standard English than contemporary inner-city language. As a matter of fact, it is evolving to more closely approximate English.

If they deserve credit for little else, the media is homogenizing American English and presenting all children with a standard reference. This standard incorporates much of the colloquialisms of the inner-city, which indicates the reciprocal relationship between its language and that of Madison Avenue. Though inner-city children may not speak English "correctly," they listen to it, respond to it, recognize it in print, and affect it.

To suggest that disadvantaged Black children do not understand or respond to standard English and cannot learn to read it not only underestimates their linguistic capability but is as absurd as proposing that another child must learn Black English before he/she can appreciate a poem by Langston Hughes or Margaret Walker.

About the Author

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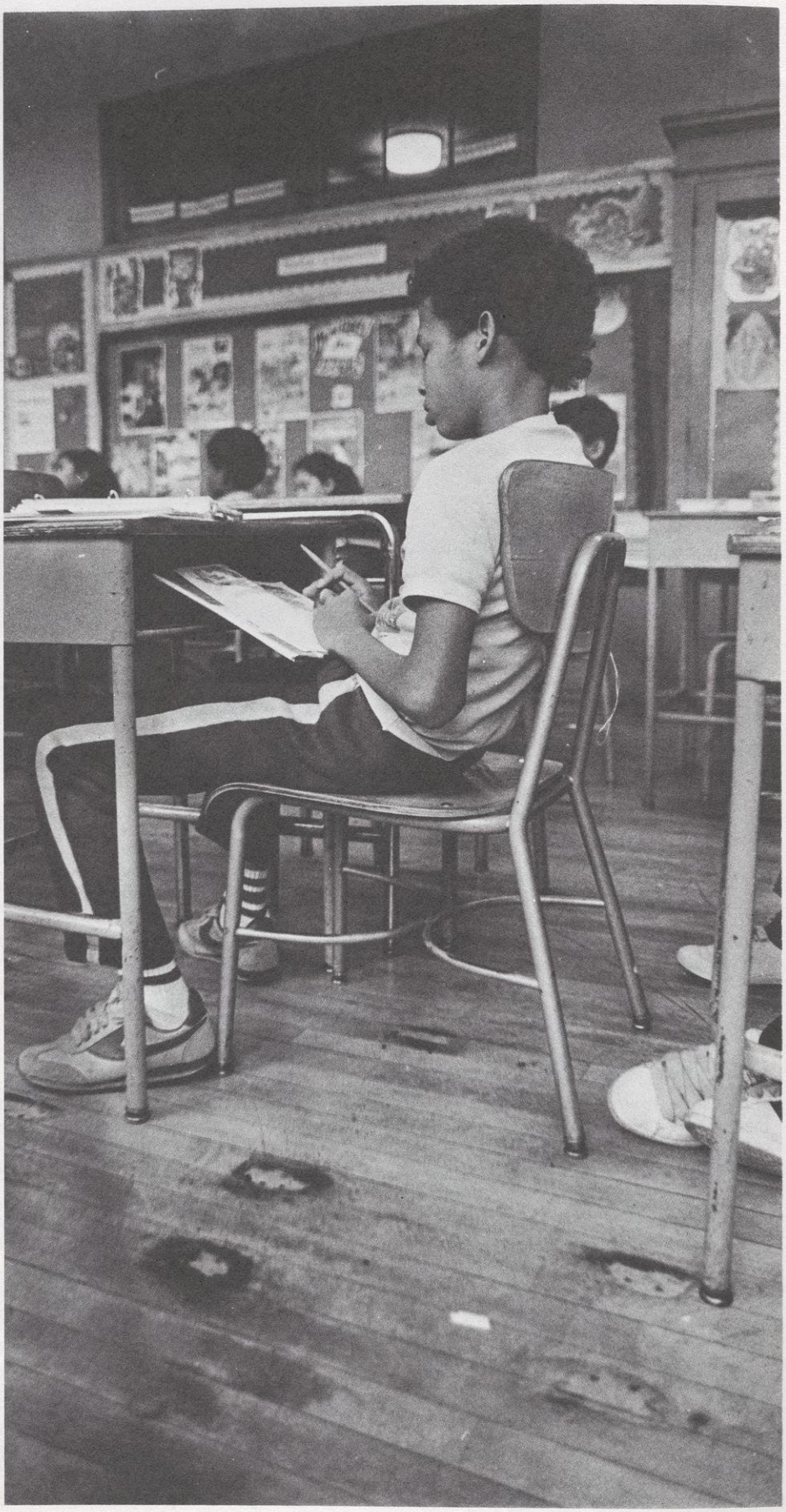


Cindy Reiman, Impact Visuals

"Much is still being said today about the damage the early books about Black life for children have done to foster misunderstanding between the races."

Recreating Black Life in Children's Literature

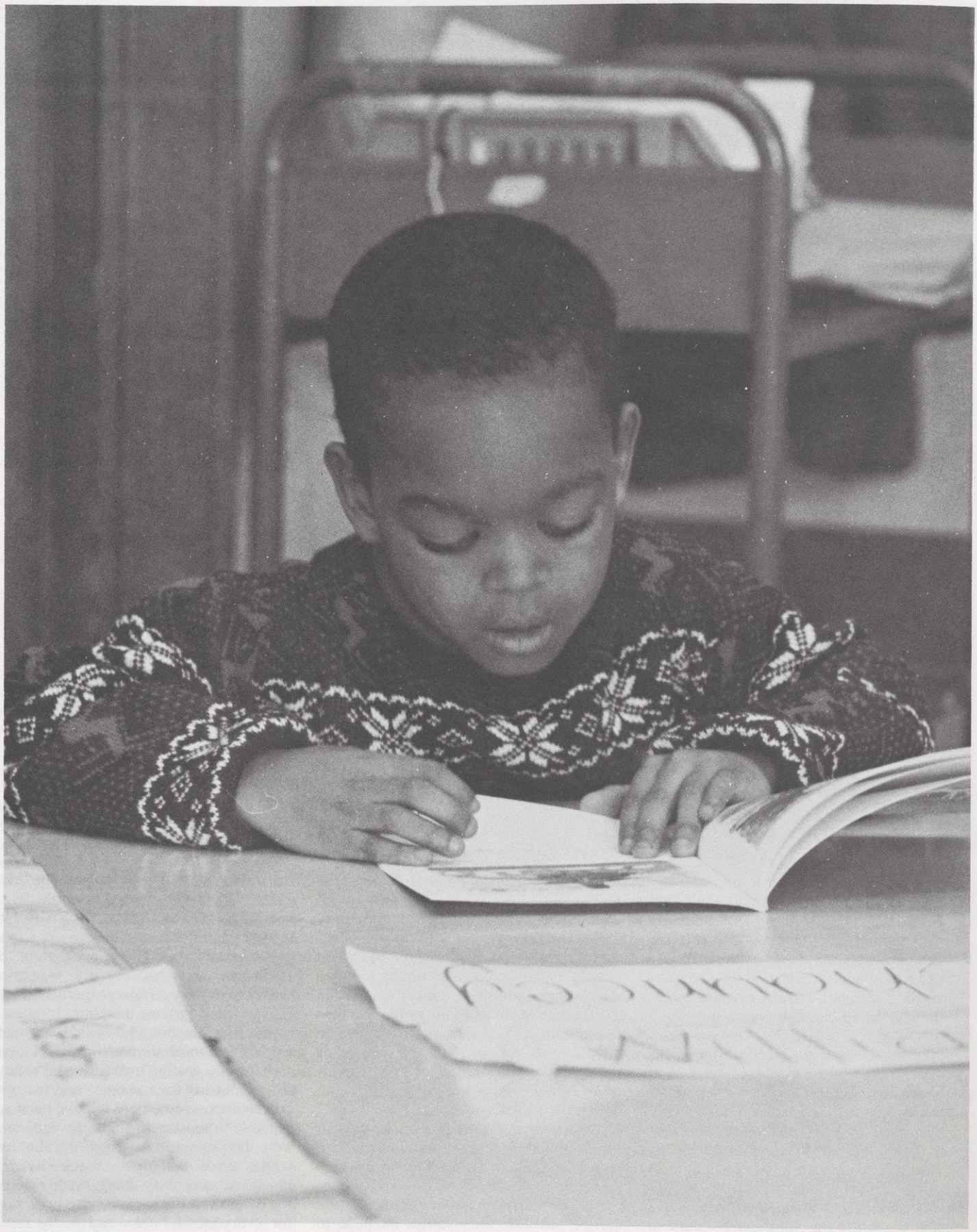
By Jean St. Clair

This article is excerpted from a speech given by Jean St. Clair in Durham North Carolina on April 16, 1988, at the Annual Charlemae Hill Rollins Colloquium sponsored by the School of Library and Information Sciences at North Carolina Central University and the Carolina State Library.

For hundreds of years, the value of literature has been to introduce readers to each other. Books tell us what other people are like. They explain how people live and also vividly illustrate how others are supposed to look. Unfortunately, books have too often left false images in readers' minds. Much is still being said today about the damage the early books about Black life for children have done to foster misunderstanding between the races. With little or no contact between Black and white people in the early 1900s, books were the only means of introduction. They frequently described people and their customs not as they really were, and often showed grotesque stereotypes in illustrations as faithful representations. They introduced readers to people, but certainly not real people or true life situations. Unfortunately, the authors seldom knew the Black life about which they wrote.

We must remember that books present life as it is interpreted by authors who can convince publishers that they have something that will sell. In books for children, these authors wrote all sorts of plantation stories and little ditty stories intended to show publishers that they knew the African American of whom they wrote. They knew him because they played with him in their childhood or met him on a relative's plantation. Thus, even into the 1930s we still had mainly plantation stories to portray African American life to the boys and girls of the United States.

The Black author who could have made a valuable contribution to human relations at that time, writing truthfully and believably about his own people, and his own experiences, seemed not to have been acceptable to most publishers. So separated were the races in the early 1900s that few whites knew that many Blacks lived in much the same way that they themselves lived. How different life may have been for everyone if books had really repre-



Jeffrey High

sented the times, and the outside world could have found in literature the struggle of Blacks to survive under extreme odds always moving forward with hope, even when doors were closed to them. Without books to reveal the true life and aspirations of Blacks, progress in race relations was set back years. Those who chose to promote the inferiority of Blacks went unchallenged by the masses, who had no way of finding out for themselves.

Fortunately, it was the African American author who was most frustrated during this period. He or she created books, but publishers rejected these stories, claiming that they had little value for the market of that day.

Finally, African American authors found ways to publish their own materials. Dr. Carter G. Woodson, who promoted the study of Negro History, started an Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and formed the Associated Publishers, still in existence today, so that authentic books about African American life and history could reach the reading public. After that, more books about the true history and culture of African Americans were published. Among the first books for children was ABC's of Great Negroes, a series of alphabet pictures of outstanding individuals.

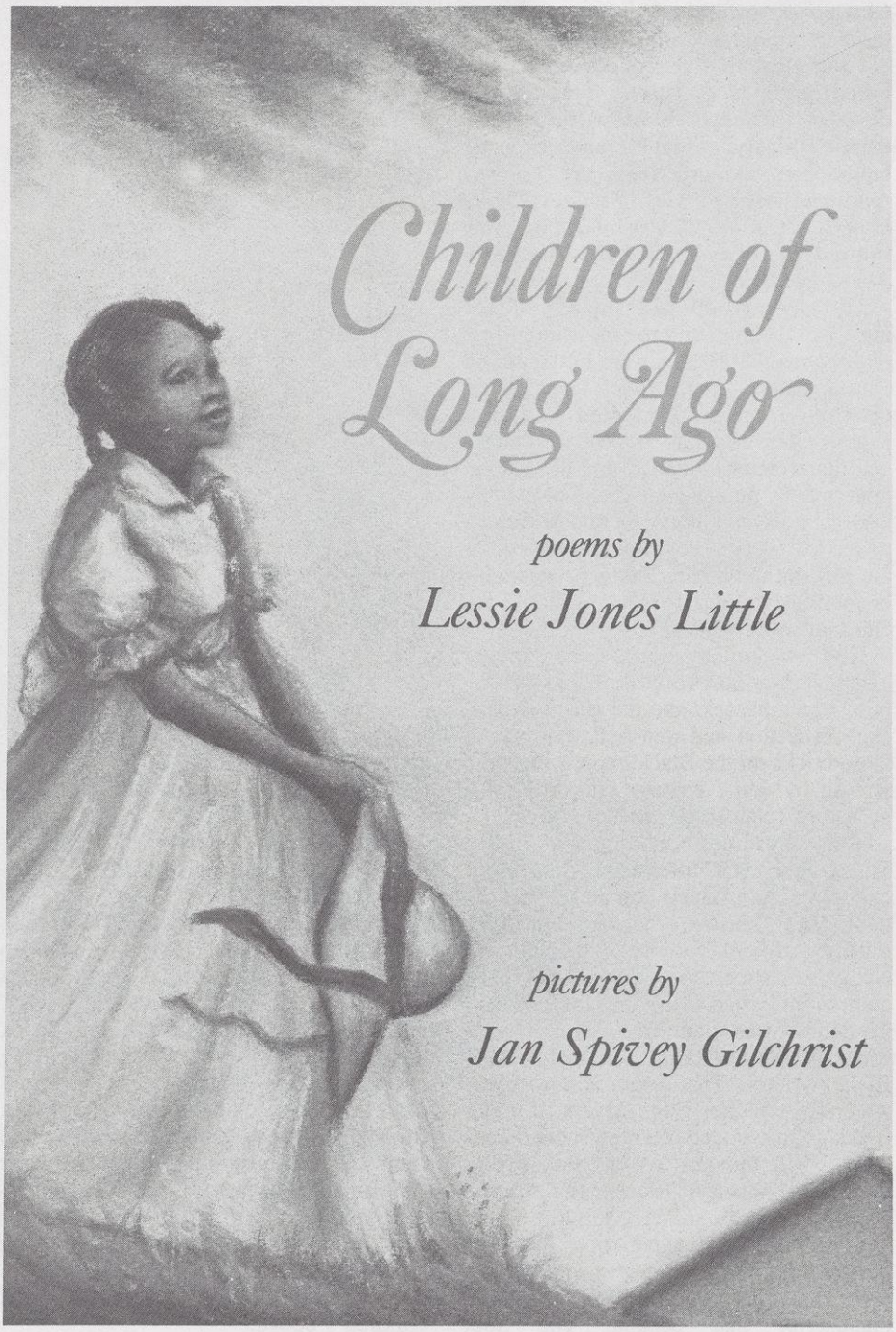
To relieve the frustrations of Black children in trying vainly to find books about their people, the need for elementary histories for children was realized by writers and teachers, and Jane Shackelford's Child Story of the Negro filled that great need for young people. Later, Mrs. Shackelford, a teacher, published My Happy Days, which showed through photographs and text that some Black families could live much the same as any other family.

I hope that every child in the state of North Carolina has read the story To Be by Stella Sharpe, (University of North Carolina) a large photographic picture book about a little Black boy who lives on a North Carolina farm. Although published in 1939, it still gives a positive image of African American home and family life and church and holiday celebrations in an isolated rural community, without stereotyping.

As publishers began to accept some of the many manuscripts presented to them, African American authors and others kept trying and in the 1940s more books for children on Black life reached the public.

It was about this time that the first edition of the invaluable bibliography, We Build Together, A Reader's Guide to Negro Life and Literature for Elementary and High School Use, came into existence. It was published by the National Council of Teachers of English. The distinguished booklist committee was chaired by Charlemae Rollins, whom we honor with this colloquium. It was intended to fill the need often expressed by teachers, librarians, and parents for a list of really good books for children and young people that would present Blacks as human beings and not as stereotypes. One of this reference tool's most valuable features was the criteria used by the committee for judging the acceptability of books about Blacks. Such subjects as appropriate language, illustrations, theme, and treatment of characters were clearly delineated with examples of what was acceptable from various books generally popular with teachers and librarians.

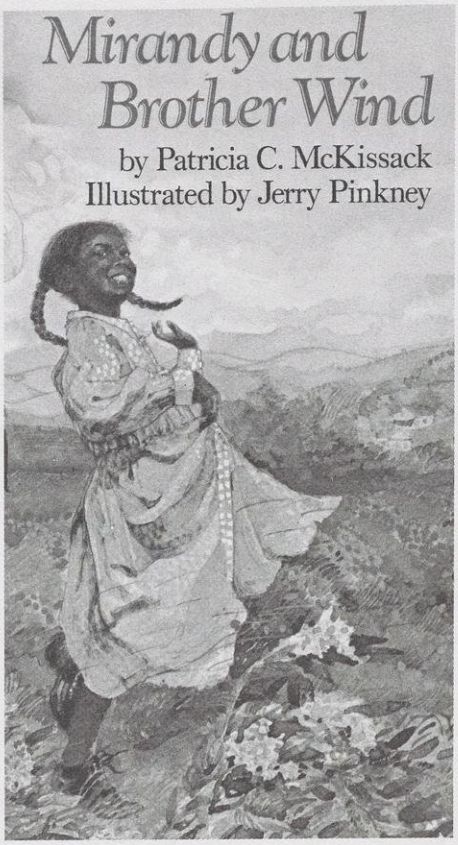
The vast changes that have occurred in the role of Blacks in literature for youth can be attributed to the commitment of



Charlemae Rollins and other dedicated teachers, librarians, and writers. Not only did Mrs. Rollins fight for a true and dignified portrayal of Blacks, but she also devoted her talents to the writing of authentic, highly readable, and inspiring biographies. Among them are *Famous American Negro Poets, Famous Entertainers of Stage, Screen and TV, They showed the Way,* and *Forty American Negro Leaders.*

The 1960s promised a new way of seeing Black people, and the most important reason was that Blacks were in the public consciousness. Angry Black faces glared out from our television screens and front pages of our newspapers. We were news and therefore marketable, and the federal government pumped all kinds of money into schools and libraries under various poverty titles and programs. By the end of the 60s the publishing industry was talking seriously about the need for books for children about Blacks.

Needless to say, publishers quickly contracted authors to write books on Africa, Black heroes, and the Black experience in fiction and non-fiction. Most of these books on the Black experience were written by white writers. But in 1965 a group of concerned writers, teachers, editors, illustrators and parents formed The Council on Interracial Books For children. The Council demanded that the publishing industry generate more materials by Black authors. The industry claimed that there were simply no Black authors interested in writing for children. To counter this claim, the Council sponsored a contest offering a prize of $500 to Black writers. The response was overwhelming. Walter Dean Myers, a major Black author, stated in a New York Times article, ''I thought we would revolutionize the industry.'' For the first time he had actually been solicited to write something about his own experience. That year Kristin Hunter, a fine writer, won the prize in the older children's category for a manuscript that became The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou. Walter Dean Myers won the picture book category for Where Does the Day Go? Subsequently, other winners of the contest as Sharon Bell Mathis (Side Walk Story) and Mildred Taylor (Song of the Trees) have gone on to create books that not only have won national recognition, but have made impressive profits for their publishers. In addition to Mildred Taylor's Newberry Award for Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, several Council Contest-winning books have been runners-up. The illustrations for another CIBC winner, Margaret



Musgrove's From Ashanti to Zulu (Dial), won the 1977 Caldecott medal for Leo and Dianne Dillon.

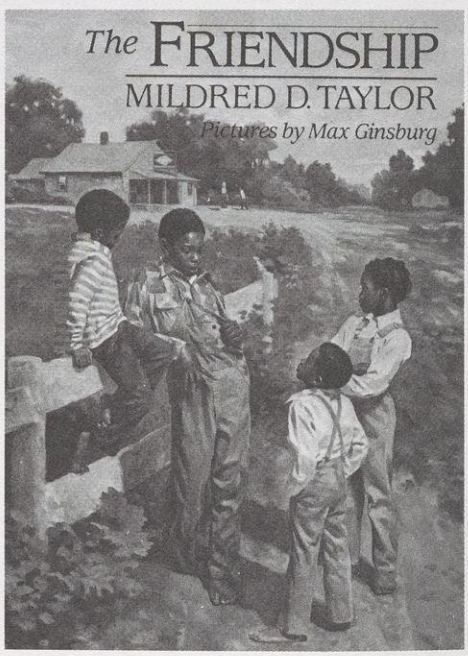
In admitting their error, the publishing industry announced that it fully intended to correct the situation, and it did for a period. We all in the book field felt the excitement of this new beginning. Black authors and illustrators were weaving rhythm, language, movement, and pictures into the recognizable fabric of Black life. We all believed that our children and future generations would not only escape the demeaning images we had experienced from books. The quality and dimension of the books written by Black authors in the 70s was so outstanding that they could have raised the standard for all children's books.

But we all know what happened. The programs financed by President Johnson,s administration were being dismantled and the ''Days of Rage'' had ended. Blacks were no longer a political issue. Libraries, the major market for Black children's books, began to suffer cutbacks. It was books on the Black experience that were affected most.

But there will always be Black artists and illustrators recording the multicultural Black experience in rich and varied hues. They will twist and smooth their lives and ready them for the new generations of children who pass along the way and the Council on Interracial Books for Children will continue to review and analyze their works, seeing to it that not only minority children but all children grow up with strong, positive images.

In analyzing the content of books, we should be especially concerned about the portrayals of Third World people. Do those portrayals reflect assumptions of white superiority? In other words, are they racist? Here, we get into a very controversial area. Some people are confused, others are angered by a strong condemnation of books that contain elements of racism. They feel that racism is an idea which, however invalid or repugnant, should have free expression. The position of the Council is that to put a person down because he or she has an opinion one doesn't approve of is one thing, but to put someone down, overtly or subtly, because he or she is a different color is another thing entirely. Children who are Black cannot turn white because someone has told them that Black is inferior. Therefore, we say that the ''right'' of an author to depict characters in children's books in a racist manner is superseded by the birthright of all children to encounter images of themselves in children's books that are unbiased and non-stereotypical.

It is also important to also determine whether books promote certain other values, such as elitism, materialism and conformism. Our concerns have evolved to embrace these other ''isms'' because they contribute to the overt oppression endured by Third World people as well as hinder the full realization of many white chil-



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dren's potential. We examine whether competition, an environmentally conditioned behavior, is depicted as being natural and always legitimate or whether it is shown as being productive in some situations and dysfunctional in others.

To continue to serve up discredited myths to children is to miseducate them. To continue to serve up stereotypes rather than fully drawn characterizations of Third World people is to damage self-images of children of these groups. Those same myths and stereotypes also harm the self-images of white children in that they give them a false sense of superiority, which is increasingly dysfunctional in the world we live in.

We must foster a children's literature that turns the diverse raw material of life into artistic products which, among other things, celebrate the dignity and worth of people and their cultures. But in addition to books that are non-biased, there must be some books that are positively anti-bias, that expose destructive practices such as racism and sexism for what they really are. To explore and comment on, in artistically rich ways, the realities of human experience and human potential is to empower children to feel that through understanding and commitment they can impact on the society in which they live.

About the Author

JEAN ST. CLAIR is a vice-chairperson on the Board of Directors of the Council for Interracial Books for Childrenm. She is also a retired children's librarian.

Becoming a reader

Cindy Reiman, Impact Visuals

Jeffrey High

"In order to help other children read more easily, psychologists and educators studied children who had learned to read before they started school. They found that:

1. the common factor marking the early readers was having had positive experience with books;

2. they all were read to a great deal;

3. they all loved books and had favorite books which they asked for over and over again;

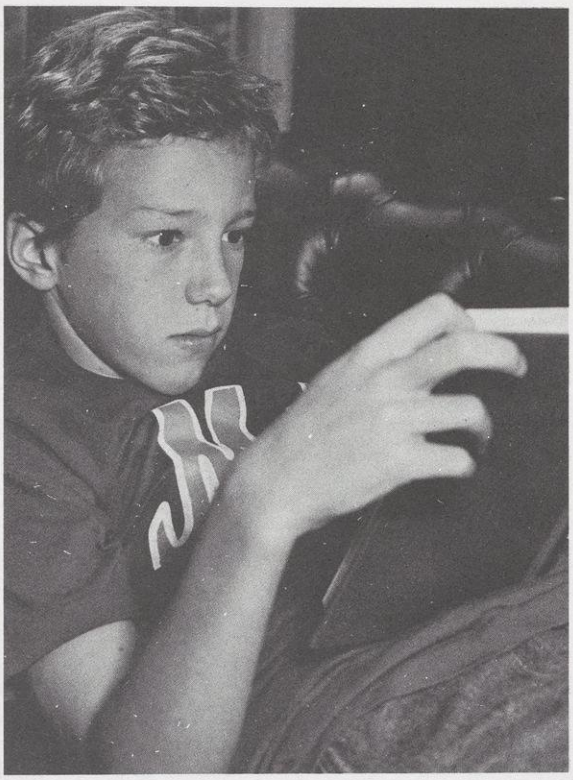
4. they had all listened to a variety of books with interesting stories, not boring ones;

5. they asked for books to be read to them and were interested in reading themselves;

6. they knew books well and joined in enthusiastically, playing at reading the books on their own, using their own words and very few as printed in the book."

Babette Brown

Hildegard Adler



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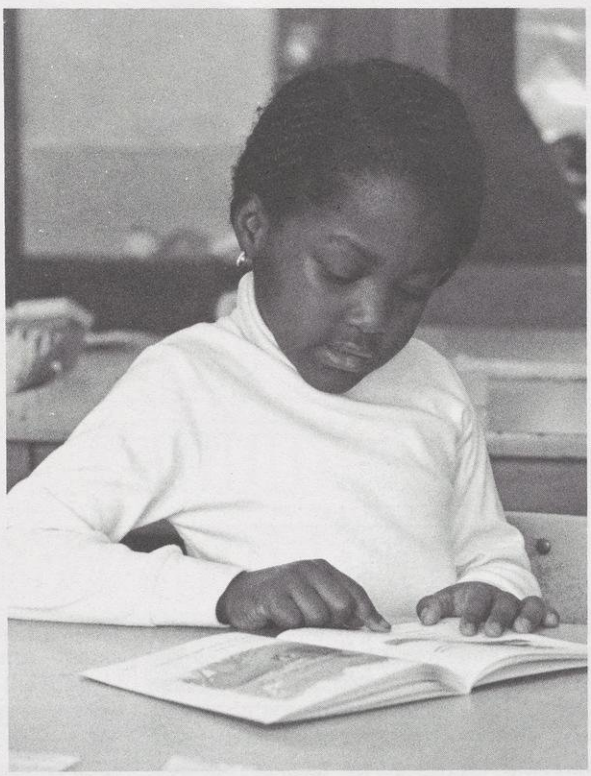

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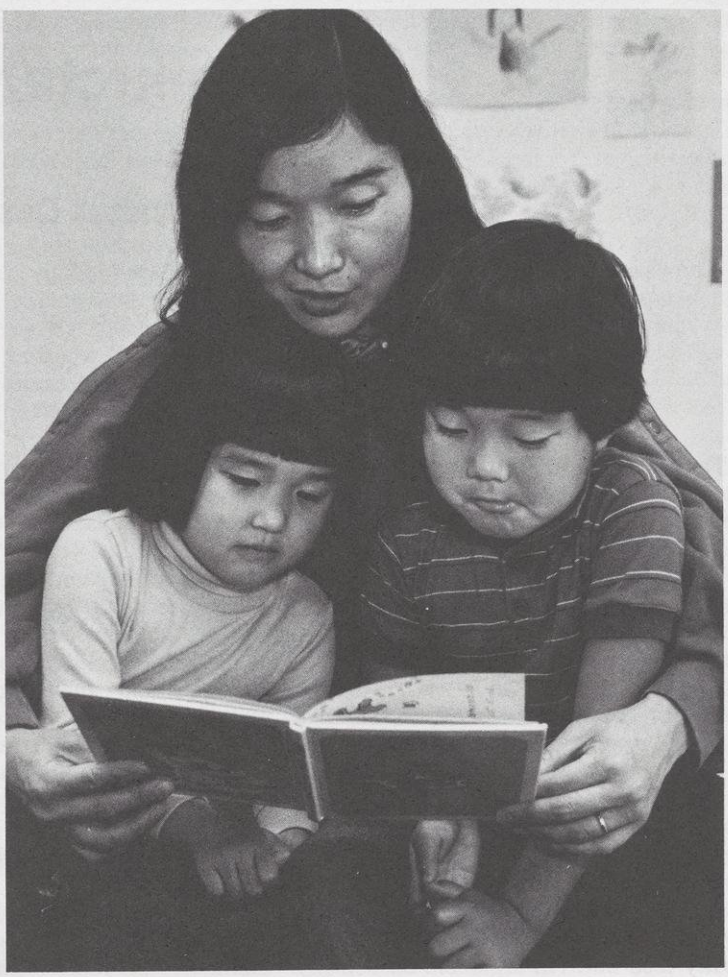


Hildegard Adler

The Reluctant Reader

By Walter Dean Myers

The writing workshop was going well. The group of teachers I had in the class were, in the main, responding with enthusiasm. I had assigned a writing project in which the writer was supposed to demonstrate character traits by either action or dialogue. The teachers read their works aloud and I, along with the other teachers, offered criticism.

One of the teachers was part of our bilingual program. He was Vietnamese by birth and relatively new in our public school system. He read a story about a young man walking with his father along a river bank. The father mentioned that there were many fish in the river. The young man replied that this was no longer true, that since the war the fish had mostly died out. An argument ensued in which the father adamantly insisted that his version was true and that he remembered fishing from the banks as a young man.

At the conclusion of the piece the other teachers made their comments. They concluded that the piece was well-written and showed that the older man was rigid in his character and unwilling to accept the realities of the war.

The Vietnamese teacher was surprised at the reaction to his story. He said that the story was about the younger man's disrespect for his father. This interpretation took me by surprise and I didn't comment further.

Some of the teachers, however, continued their comments, arguing the point that it was the father's character that was aberrant. Although I stopped the discussion as quickly as possible the discomfort of the Vietnamese teacher was obvious. He never brought a story to class again.

In thinking about the incident and how to prevent it from happening again, I wondered if what had made the teacher a reluctant writer might well be a contributing factor to the reluctant reader.

What happened in that class was that a factor had been introduced to the writing process for the Vietnamese student that was not present for the American-born students. The factor was the cultural difference between his people and those of the United States. When he was given an assignment, therefore, he was assuming the additional burden of translating cultural material, a burden which he decided

not to engage.

The immediate question is whether or not a cultural burden is placed on some readers, thus forming an interference with the reading process? A clue may be taken from the way in which we try to induce young people to read. Most often we try to assess the student's interest to use that interest as the conduit to the reading process. Another way of interpreting this is that we are engaging the recognition factor in reading. We recognize that the youngster who enjoys sports will take to a sports book faster than a general book. The familiarity of both language and subject matter makes it easier for the reader to deal with the materials at hand. But while the increased facility is here recognized it seems to me that little attention has been paid to the possibility that a lack of familiar language and subject matter might be an actual hindrance to reading.

In this regard let me make it clear that I am speaking only of the reluctant reader. A reader who had demonstrated the ability to approach a wide range of books comfortably and with enthusiasm has also demonstrated a flexibility with language and ideational materials. But the reader for whom reading is at best a chore has not. In the past we have sought to control vocabulary, often restricting it to specific lists of ''familiar'' words. What I am suggesting is that we do not restrict material available to the reluctant reader but rather pay special attention to such material as might facilitate reading. That is, a stronger emphasis on material that is culturally familiar or which considers more specifically the social milieu of the reader.

I broached this subject at a recent American Library Association conference symposium. The immediate reaction from one of my colleagues was that a ''good story'' was sufficient to attract the reader. This was, I suppose, in response to the inference that cultural content should be especially considered in recommending books for non-white and non-Anglo reluctant readers. I don't think that the response would have been the same if I had merely recommended sports books for boys and romance books for girls. This concept, of using books heavy in peer acceptance or superficial interest, has been used with some degree of success for years and has been accepted by both teachers and librarians. But the idea that Black books might facilitate reading by some Black readers, or that books with a Spanish or Asian background might be more suitable reading material for Spanish or Asian children who are also reluctant readers, seems to have struck a sore point. Let us consider the basic approach to books. In the reluctant reader there is often a basic feeling of discomfiture when formal reading is approached. I believe that this is due in part to the fact that the difficulty of decodification is compounded by the anxiety of having to interpret materials often more foreign to the student than a teacher or librarian might realize. Thus both the book and the process are rejected.

What would happen if we took a child, reading at grade level, and offered that child the chance to read a series of books whose subject matter was completely foreign and in which the child had little interest? Would we really be surprised that the child passed up the opportunity? Would we, by extension, be surprised if the child passed up reading entirely if the books are the full extent of the material offered? I think not. Why, then, do we not expect the same to happen to reluctant readers who are constantly offered books which do not deal with their social situations, with their problems, or with their culture? Should we be surprised to find that reading is easier for a child when seventy-five per cent of the book is recognizable both in language and situation that when only ten to fifteen percent of the book is familiar?

What about the idea of the universal in literature? Am I suggesting that it doesn't exist? No, it exists, but it is actualized in the specific context of time and place and realized only through the exercise of individual experience.

What I think transpired in the writing workshop was that the teacher/student was made uncomfortable and anxious by the unfamiliarity of the cultural differences. He then rejected the situation in which he felt ill at ease. What I think happens in the reluctant reader, to some extent, is that the reluctant reader becomes uncomfortable and anxious in a situation in which he or she has additional burden of interpreting different lifestyles and cultures, and rejects the material.

In public school systems which are increasingly non-mainstream, can we do anything except increase the number of reluctant readers when we neglect cultural and interest content from books? I suspect not.

About the Authur

WALTER DEAN MYERS is the author of 27 books for young people and one of the first winners, in 1968, of the Council's Annual competition to encourage African American writers

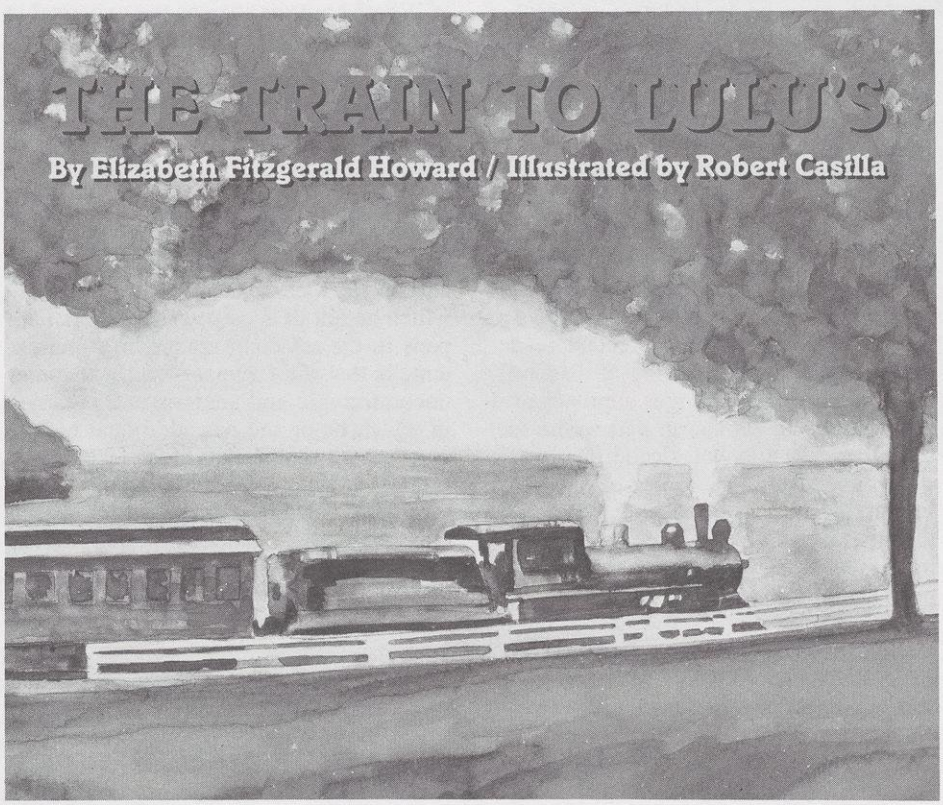
In the BOOKSHELF, a regular *Bulletin* feature, all books that relate to minority themes are evaluated by members of the minority group depicted.—Editors.

The Train to Lulu's

by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard,
Illustrated by Robert Casilla.
Bradbury Press, 1988. $13.95, 32 pages, ages 4-7.

Two sisters travel alone from Boston to Baltimore in *The Train to Lulu's*. Beppy, the "big girl," and Babs, with her teddy bear, are excited and apprehensive about the 9-hour trip. Do they have everything they need for the whole summer? The checklist is positive. At the station their parents make final arrangements and the train pulls off in a lovely watercolor wash of emotions.

Passing scenery, lunch box meals, trips to the bathroom, and in-seat activities all provide adventures to help pass the time. After a few tears and a nap or two, they arrive safely in Baltimore and are met by a family of aunts, uncles, and cousins, and finally, wonderful, white-haired Lulu. Their trip confirms that families are branches of a strong tree, separated by distance but united by love.



Although readers know from the fine print copywrite material that Lulu is the sister's great-aunt, we never know from the rest of the story just who she is. We also have no idea of the time period of the story—which stands well enough on its own— except for a disconcerting introductory note about the train. There we learn that it was the late 1930s when the sisters took the 2-railroad journey between Boston and Baltimore. Unfortunately, the introduction raises more questions than it answers, distracting unnecessarily from the themes of self-reliance and responsibility that are at the heart of this timeless story. [Barbara Sommers]

The Latchkey Kids

by Susan Terris
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986,
$10.95, 167 pages, grades 3-6

As the working mother of a school-aged and as a professional who works with after-school programs, I looked forward to reading *The Latchkey Kids*. Now I am sorry. For no discernible reason, after-school programs get a very bad rap in this book.

Eleven-year-old Callie Hovelor must watch her younger brother after school. She doesn't like to do it and does it poorly, but she would rather die than go to the available after-school program. She doesn't want her younger brother to go either, even though they are not allowed to leave the house once they return from school. No reason is given for her very strong antipathy.

The book is depressing, providing problem after problem with little understanding. We learn that Callie's father suddenly began suffering from depression, but we learn little more, other than how hard it is on the family. We read that Callie's mother must go to work instead of staying home "cooking, singing, and making pots"; the family is no longer "like the TV families" and Callie's mother is now unrealistically strict and brusque, putting unrealistic burdens on Callie. In addition, the family has recently moved and Callie is having some trouble at school, and, of course, there is

no sympathetic adult to whom Callie can go for help. So, as might be expected Callie, her brother and her friend do dangerous things. Callie is hurt rescuing her brother and then things begin to work out.

There is a major twist to this book: Callie becomes friends with Nora Chen, who recently came from China with her family. The presentation of the Chen family is an interesting mix of stereotypes and anti-stereotypes; Nora, for example, is sensitive and mischievous (and intelligent), a real friend; Nora's grandmother is the personification of every stereotype about older Asian women (she is petite, hardworking, has a strong preference for male children, doesn't go out in the world, etc.).

Although the relationship between Callie and Nora is a good one, there is little else to recommend in this "soap operaish" book. [Patricia B. Campbell]

Up With Hope: A Biography of Jesse Jackson

by Dorothy Chaplik.
Dillon, 1986, 128 pages,
$11.95, grades 5 and up

This book is of interest, as the saying goes, to children of all ages. Perhaps the negative attention Jesse Jackson has received by and large in the "mainstream" press has obscured some of the more basic facts about this important figure. He is not only largely of African descent but also has Cherokee and Irish blood in his veins, a walking "Rainbow Coalition." As a youth he acted in church plays as early as the age of four and was known as a wit and comedian.

It is easy to see what shaped his consciousness. At five he came face-to-face with the ugly visage of racism in a local store in his hometown of Greenville, South Carolina: "He whistled to catch the grocer's attention. Suddenly Jack wheeled around, reached under the counter for a gun, and pointed it at Jesse's face. 'Don't ever whistle at a white man again as long as you live,' he said." Blacks there "attended all-black schools with double sessions. . . . They read old textbooks that white students no longer used. When he attended the predominantly white University of Illinois, the racist football coach sought to bar him from playing quarterback. When he tried out for professional baseball, the New York Giants sought to sign him for $6,000 while giving a lesser white player, Dickie Dietz, $95,000.

But Jackson was not deterred and went on to become a top aide to Martin Luther King and build his own organization, Operation PUSH, which brought thousands of jobs to Black workers and numerous contracts for Black businesses under his leadership. The author in simple prose recounts all this in a text that is graced with numerous photographs of often fascinating quality. Moreover, she apparently had access to close Jackson associates and family members, which brings forward a number of revelations.

Unfortunately there are certain errors littering this book. Affirmative action was not initiated by John F. Kennedy (Franklin Roosevelt or even Abraham Lincoln should receive this honor). She refers to the "Russian" and not the Soviet government (p. 107), which is akin to referring to the New York government led by Ronald Reagan.

Yet, this should not obscure the fact that this is a worthy book certain to be of interest to both children and adults. As such, the author merits our thanks for a job well-done. [Gerald Horne, Ph.D.]

The Saddest Time

by Norma Simon,
Illustrated by Jacqueline Rogers
Whitman, 1986, $10.25, 40 pages,
grade K-3

Children see many "deaths" on TV and in movies, but usually have little experience with the death of someone close to them. *The Saddest Time* presents this experience in three different situations that could touch a child's life. In the first, Michael learns that his Uncle Joe is terminally ill. Joe dies, family and friends gather at Joe's family's house, and Michael observes all the people who loved his uncle. The next story opens at an elementary school as the principal tells the students that their eight-year-old classmate Teddy has been killed in a car accident. Later, Teddy's teacher helps his class talk about their feelings, and the children decide to write letters to Teddy's parents about their memories of Teddy. The last story is about Emily's grandmother, who dies in a hospital with her family around her. After the funeral Emily is both saddened and comforted by remembering the good times she and her grandmother shared. Emily grows older and "still misses her grandma, but the missing doesn't hurt as much. When she bakes oatmeal cookies, she always eats one, hot from the oven, and remembers Grandma with special love." The books ends by reaffirming that beginnings and endings are both a part of a life, and there is a one-page afterword addressed to adults with information and suggestions on helping children deal with the death of someone close to them.

I was quite impressed with this book, as were the other teachers and adults who read it. In its simple sentences is a wealth of information about death and its effect on others' lives. It covers the reality of the grieving process from a child's point of view—a home visit, a funeral, a class discussion, a family's reminiscing around the dinner table about the one who has died. In times of death, children closely observe behavior and reactions. A death can be a frightening time for a child, not so much in terms of their own mortality, but in seeing adults around them show sadness and loss. Roger's illustrations contribute a great deal toward this book's success in capturing the feelings of the people portrayed. The realistic pencil drawings also convey the warmth and life of the people who are being mourned—Uncle Joe's enjoyment of kite-flying, Teddy's quiet pride in his spelling trophy, and Grandma's exuberant bowling style. Although the book's characters are predominantly white, Teddy is Black and his school is racially integrated, with a Black woman principal and a white male teacher.

There are other good books for early elementary age children about death, particularly about the death of pets (*The Tenth Good Thing About Barney,* by Judith Viorst, *The Accident* by Carol Carrick). However, I strongly recommend *The Saddest Time* for inclusion in all children's library collections, even those that already contain other books on this subject. [Christine Jenkins]

Eat Up, Gemma

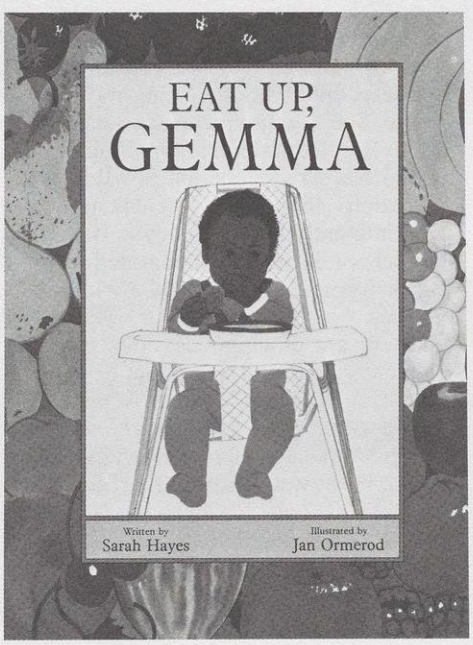
by Sarah Hayes,
Illustrated by Jan Ormerod.
Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1988,
$13.00, 13 pages, grades p.s-2.

Baby Gemma has a problem. She won't eat, and worse, she makes a mess of her food. Despite everyone's encouragement to "eat up," Gemma throws her breakfast on the floor, squashes grapes, bangs her spoon and generally behaves like the willful, adventurous, loveable toddler she is.

Her family—including her parents, grandmother and older brother, who tells the story—are patient folks. But they reach their limit when Gemma tries to pull the decorative fruit of a lady's hat in church. We see surprise but no punishment. In fact, due to this last crisis, Gemma's brother has a breakthrough idea.

In one of the books's most affecting illustrations, he stands on tiptoe to whisper an idea to his grandmother. He devises a plan to tempt Gemma to eat. By turning a bowl upside down on a plate and surrounding the dishes with grapes and bananas—thus imitating the church lady's had—his piques her curiosity. Soon she is eating the fruit, even trying the banana skins.

Eat Up, Gemma is full of brightly colored fruits and warm, brown-skinned smiles. But it is also an acknowledgement of the tiny tensions that can cloud the sunniest of families. Big brother's solution to the baby Gemma's "problem" is a gentle reminder of children's valuable insight. *Eat Up, Gemma* proves to be a jewel. [Barbara Sommers]



Children and Books

by Zena Sutherland and
May Hill Arbuthnot,
Scott and Foresman, 1986,
$28.95, 751 pages, High School Text

This is the seventh edition of the textbook originated by May Hill Arbuthnot in 1947 and since revised periodically by Zena Sutherland. Earlier revisions were radically different from the original, particularly in their sensitivity to racism and sexism. This edition seems headed in the conservative direction of Arbuthnot's original work.

The opening chapter, "Children and Books Today," acknowledges concerns of feminists and people of color but paints a far rosier picture than is warranted. For example, the text notes that books "by, for and about Black people have constituted one of the most significant trends in children's books" and that books "about other minority groups are also growing in number, although demand still exceeds supply." In fact, the number of books on African-American themes is diminishing, as are the titles on Puerto Ricans (see Vol. 17, No. 2). Nor has there been a noticeable increase in the number of good books about Native Americans or Asian Americans.

More significantly, the text gives what may kindly be called mixed messages about the seriousness of racism in children's books. Consider, for example, its comments on *Little Black Sambo,* which appear in the section on censorship:

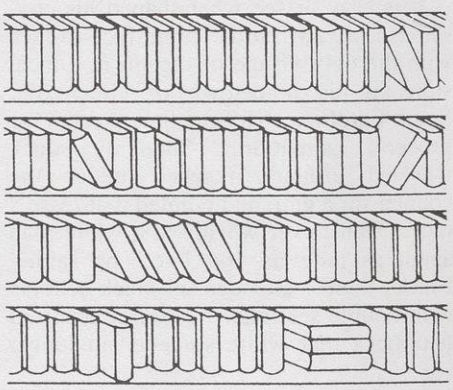
> So it is not surprising that controversies exist over what is and is not acceptable in children's books. The result is that Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* is seen by some as a funny, delightful story, while [it] is intolerable to others.

Sutherland's text is replete with the white perspective; one illustration will do. Of Ronald Syme's *Columbus, Finder of the New World,* she writes, "Christopher Columbus is a difficult character to present in a full biography, since the drama of his life rises grandly to the successful conclusion of his first voyage. After that failure and tragedy take over." One understands she doesn't mean the tragedy that befell the Native Americans. There is no mention of the Native American point of view on books like this, which talk about the "discovery" of a "new world" in which their people had lived for thousands of years.

Matters related to sexism are handled in the same superficial manner. For example, Kohlberg's stages of moral development are included but there is no mention of Carol Gilligan's critical study, "In a Different Voice: Women's Concepts of Self Morality" (*Harvard Educational Review,* Vol. 47, No.4), which discusses the male-bias of Kohlberg's work. Gilligan found that the "feminine voice" of morality differed significantly. (See *Psychological Theory and Women's Development,* Harvard University Press, 1982.)

It is certainly sympathetic to the books' attitude toward equity issues that the Council is nowhere mentioned in these pages, even though there are pages of "Books Selection Aids" and "Adult References." (Are readers to consider the 1968 "Negro Literature for High School Students" the last word on this topic?) Given the book's focus on censorship as a major issue in children's literature, it is interesting to find ourselves completely omitted. Considering that several years ago the Council was invited to contribute an essay to an earlier edition, this makes a telling comment about the concerns of this edition.

I am afraid that teachers of children's literature and library science will have to look elsewhere to a good basic textbook. [Albert V. Schwartz]



Thank You, Jackie Robinson

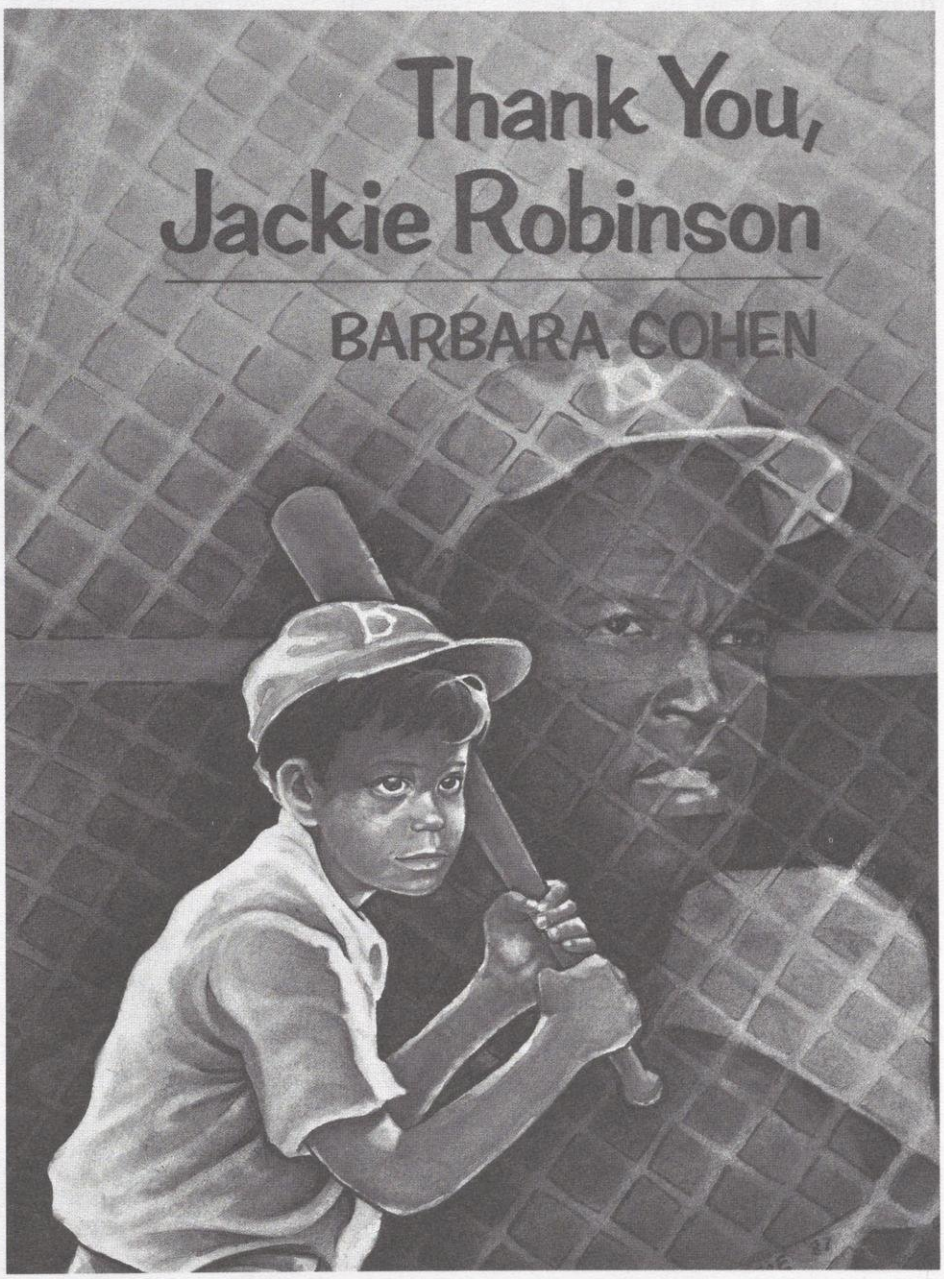
by Barbara Cohen,
Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1988,
$11.95, 125 pages, grades 4 to 6.

The spring of 1947 was like no other in the history of the United States. Baseball, the national pastime, was no longer a white-only sport. The previous year Branch Rickey, general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, had signed Jackie Robinson as the first Black player in major league baseball. This single act, the culmination of numerous civil rights battles, meant that certain sectors of white American society were now willing to admit African Americans into some of their circles. The arrival of Jackie Robinson and other Black players to the major leagues signaled more than just a sociological change. It also meant a change in the way in which the game was played. Blacks, it was observed, were the more aggressive players, and they brought a flair and playing style that the audience found more exciting and entertaining. Prior to Robinson's arrival, for example, stealing home plate was a very rare occurrence, but for players in the Negro Leagues this was a regular part of their offensive strategy.

Thank You, Jackie Robinson is the story of a Winter Hill, New Jersey, teenager, Sammy Greene, who develops an obsession for the Brooklyn Dodgers and follows them in every game from 1945 through 1950. He would amaze his friends by giving a play-by-play recounting of any Dodger game during that period. In his quest to keep up with the Dodgers, Sammy encountered Davy, a cook, who worked in his mother's motel. Their mutual passion for the Boys of Summer led to a friendship that lasted until Davy's death. These two aficionados of the game would drive to every national league city in the Northeast to see their beloved Dodgers play.

During a trip that took them as far away as Pittsburgh Sammy discovered the real difference in the way that Blacks and whites were treated in this society. On several stops along the way, Sammy had to buy the gas and get the refreshments from the service areas. Blacks were not served at those places during the 1940s. For many people it was a strange sight to see Davy, a middle-aged Black man, and Sammy, a Jewish teenager, spending so much time together. As far as Sammy was concerned there was no difference. They both loved the Brooklyn Dodgers, and that was all that mattered. For Davy, the arrival of jackie Robinson was a source of inspiration and pride. He finally was able to see Blacks play in the major leagues. It also made him feel good to see how one player's arrival could so change the character of the game. For Sammy, on the other hand, Jackie Robinson was just another player, actually more than another player, he was the heart and soul of the team. Race did not seem to matter much to him.

The author, Barbara Cohen, who regularly writes children's literature, has been able to capture the mind of a teenager who is not corrupted or tarnished by the racism that still exists in U.S. society. In *Thank You, Jackie Robinson* she has been able to present a moving but simple tale about an aspect of American society. Our children will benefit greatly by reading it. [Fadhilika Atiba-Weza]



Africa in Crisis: The Causes, the Cures of Environmental Bankruptcy

by Lloyd Timberlake,
Edited by Jon Tinker
New Society Publishers, 1986.
$9.95, 232 pages, High School Text

That a book promising what this title suggests is necessary goes without saying. The fact that it won the $10,000 Hunger Media Award for "Best Book" dealing with hunger issues suggests that it should be widely circulated. Alas, this work promises more than it delivers.

The author is sufficiently wise to deem famine in Africa the "biggest disaster to strike the planet since World War II devastated Europe." Naturally, he observes that the problem is much larger than famine. "Archly," he notes that "European and U.S. consulting firms charging as much as $180,000 for a year of an expert's time" are not necessarily helping things. Some of his harshest words are reserved for the indigenous bourgeoisie of Africa, whom he refers to as the "Wabenzi" because of their penchant for Mercedes automobiles. And here one begins to understand a major problem with this work: the author does not look at the continent in historical perspective. It is as if African history began in 2960. The references to the colonial past are just that fleeting. A more comprehensive examination would have underscored that the oppressive colonial tax system forced some off the land (as in Southern Africa) and engendered undue reliance on cash crops (tobacco, sisal, etc.) and monoculture generally

Also missing is a discussion of the "terms of trade," i.e., the fact that prices for the raw materials that disproportionately provide foreign exchange for African nations are not escalating as rapidly as the cost of finished goods that they must buy from the advanced capitalist countries. Nor does the author address some of the sound solutions put forward by the Non-Aligned Movement and their allies, for example, reducing the bloated military budget in nations like the U.S. and applying those funds to African development. Like so many U.S. writers on foreign affairs, the author misrepresents the foreign aid posture and actions of the socialist countries, suggesting that they have done little or nothing to solve the ongoing crisis. (He does touch upon the groaning burden of debt, but basically offers nothing new.)

One can tell that the author does not want to accept thoroughly discredited Malthusian notions about over-population and resultant resource scarcities, though he comes dangerously close to doing so (p.41). He is fashionably critical of Ethiopia's socialist regime while adding it would be "unfair to single out the United States" (p. 37). He attempts to adopt a patently untenable agnostic position on the question of the efficacy of private ownership or what Reagan termed the "magic of the marketplace." Similarly, a U.S. audience deserves what many in other nations already know, i.e., an analysis of how food donations can complicate problems by driving small and large peasant-run farms out of business.

These are not just theoretical discussions. People are perishing in Africa at this exact moment. The $10,000 that went to the author for writing this book could have been better spent on another means for solving Africa's "crisis." [Gerald Horne, Ph.D.]

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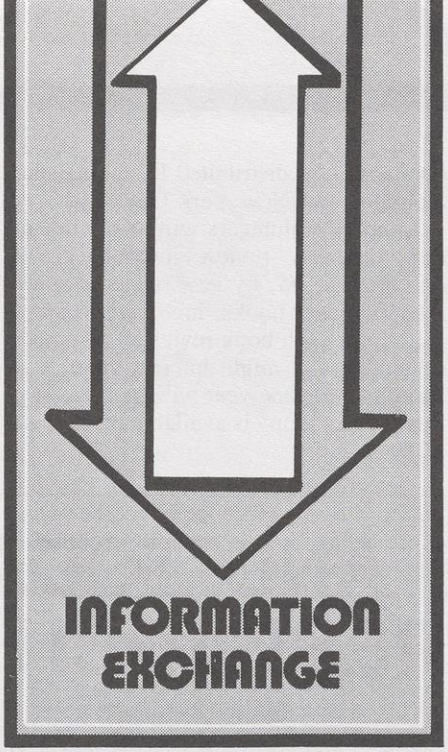
See new subscription rates in next issue, Volume 19, Numbers 5 & 6.



Three Children's Books Published by the Vermont Migrant Education Program

Three new paperback children's books, commissioned by the Vermont Migrant Education Program, tell about the lives of children of dairy migrant workers:

The Bird at Bear Mountain by Janet Lind, illustrated by Kathleen Kolb-Fisher, is a picture book that tells about Raymo, the son of migrant workers, who spots a rare bird near Bear Mountain but has trouble convincing his new classmates of his finding.

The Smallest Cow in the World by Katherine Paterson, illustrated by Jane Clark Brown, is an easy reader that tells about five-year-old Marvin who is inconsolable when Rosie, the meanest cow in the herd, is sold and he and his family move to another dairy farm.

The Godmother Tree by Ruth Wallace-Brodeur, illustrated by Ed Epstein, is a novel for young people that tells about ten-year-old Laura who discovers, on her family's move to yet another farm across the county, that home is a feeling you carry inside you.

The need for books to deal with the experiences of children of migrant workers was recognized and championed by Robin Ulmer, formerly special projects coordinator for the Vermont Migrant Education Program—an agency providing Vermont's estimated 1,200 children of migrant workers with tutoring and summer recreation activities. (There are several thousand more children of migrant workers in the Northeastern states. Beyond this, today, nearly every agricultural product in the United States is handled by migrant workers.)

"I was horrified that the children were not reading," Ms. Ulmer recalled recently, explaining how she got the idea for the project. She searched children's literature and found that there was precious little that reflected the experiences, problems and lifestyles of these children. Most of the books dealing with agriculture presented a romantic and antiquated image of a family farm. While the migrant children have a strong personal connection to the natural environment in which they live, their social reality is often harsh, wih families relocating frequently, "traveling the stream." In addition to the changing seasons, through oral histories it has been found that among "hands" today are individuals whose families were farm owners a generation or two ago.

Funding for the book project, which cost $21,000, came from the Vermont Council on the Arts, a substantial grant from Ben & Jerry's, as well as local businesses and programs for children of migrant workers in neighboring states. The authors and illustrators of the books were selected by Ms. Ulmer from several who were invited to submit their work. The one requirement of the commission was that they spend time with migrant families to become acquainted with their world. In addition to their modest fee, when the initial printing of two thousand books is sold, the copyright for their work will revert to the authors and illustrators. The books were edited by Susan Bartlett Weber and designed by Laughing Bear Associates.

The books—$5.00 each, including postage and handling, payable to VT Migrant Education Program—can be purchased from:

VT Migrant Education Program
Rural Education Center
500 Dorset St.
So. Burlington, VT 05403 [Naomi Danis]

Literacy Volunteers of New York City Publishes Its Own Books

Literacy volunteers of New York City, which draws its students from an estimated one million illiterate adults, is tackling one of its greatest problems, a lack of suitable high-interest, easy-to-read teaching materials, by publishing its own books. Nancy McCord is the director of publishing for the organization.

WRITERS VOICES is a new series of paperback books, each focused around a selection or selections from the work of a well-known author. Background material in each volume includes a biography of the author, notes on how to use the book, and maps of important place names in the texts. A section of suggested activities reinforces reading skills, heightens appreciation and understanding of the selection, and connects the contents to the reader's experience. Reading level for the selections varies from grades three through six. Books in this series include:

SELECTED FROM *KRAMER VS KRAMER* by Avery Corman

SELECTED FROM *BLESS ME ULTIMA* by Rudulfo A. Anaya

SELECTED FROM *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRDS SINGS* and *THE HEART OF A WOMAN* by Maya Angelou

SELECTED FROM *ONE MORE TIME* by Carol Burnett

SELECTED FROM *FATHERHOOD* and *TIME FLIES* by Bill Cosby

SELECTED FROM *LOVE MEDICINE* by Louise Erdrich

A second series, *NEW WRITERS' VOICES,* writings by adult new readers for one another, includes autobiographical material as well as short fiction. *SPEAKING OUT ON HEALTH* contains selections by thirteen students about health-related experiences ranging from sickle cell anemia to depression. The book contains an introduction telling how the book came to be, as well as a directory of organizations where readers can get more information about subjects discussed in the text. A second anthology, *SPEAKING OUT ON HOME AND FAMILY,* will be available in the Spring. *CAN'T WAIT FOR SUMMER* is a work of short very easy-to-read fiction by Theresa Sanservino about the adventures of a group of friends at the beach. It contains

the author's, and her tutor's, insights into the writing process.

Schools, libraries, prisons, and the military will be the primary market for the books. All the elements of printing— production, color separation, and paper, as well as the authors' and publishers' rights—were donated to facilitate the project, helping to keep the price for the 64-page paperbacks to $2.95 each. The books will be distributed by the Literacy Volunteers of New York City.

Literacy Volunteers will also publish a new quarterly review journal, *VIEWS AND REVIEWS*, by new readers for new readers, about books, including a sample page from each book reviewed so readers can judge if it might interest them. Subscriptions for one year will cost $6.50. A free preview copy is available on request.

For further information, contact:
Literacy Volunteers of New York City, Inc.
666 Broadway
New York, NY 10012
(212) 475-5757
[NAOMI DANIS]

BIAS AND TODAY'S RESEARCH

Five excellent brochures that acquaint people with bias in research are now available through the Council on Interracial Books for Children.

"Today, bias and its impact on research may be more subtle than they have been in the past, but a look at current "research" conclusions finds biases about people of color and women of all races still exist and influence researchers. For example:

An analysis of studies of African Americans found that most researchers (82%) "blamed the victim" concluding that any differences experienced by African Americans were due to shortcomings of the individuals rather than other possible explanations such as racism or other social factors. Programs based on such biased conclusions will be inherently flawed.

Sex differences in achievement and attitudes toward mathematics result from superior male mathematical ability.

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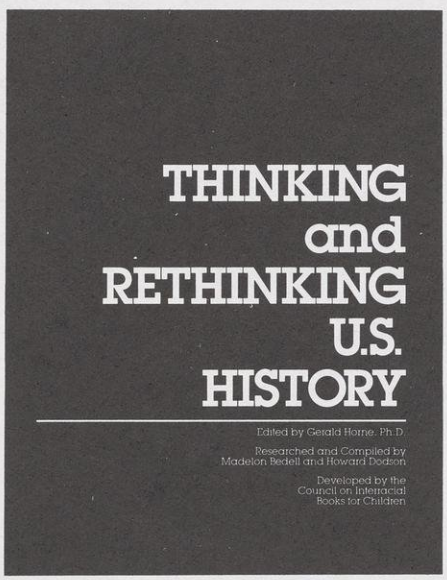

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