

## ARTICLES

# Reflections on the Development of African American Children's Literature

*Bishop reflects on her scholarship in the field of African American children's literature and the emergence of that literature as a cohesive body of work.*



As a doctoral student at Wayne State University in Detroit, I taught, along with a few other doctoral students, some of the undergraduate courses in children's literature. One year in the early 1970s, we graduate student-instructors were recruited as helpers at a book fair. Among the books to be displayed was a set of children's books, all related to African Americans, that the late Donald J. Bissett, director of the children's literature program, had named the Darker Brother collection after a line in Langston Hughes's (1932) poem "I, Too": "I, too, sing America. / I am the darker brother" (p. 76). Don encouraged me to read all the books in that collection and suggested that he and I should write an article together based on our assessments of those books from our differing perspectives: that of a White male children's literature expert and that of a Black female doctoral student in education. At the time, I was focused on my dissertation, and Don and I never got around to writing that piece, but the seeds of a scholarly vocation had been planted.

The exciting thing about the Darker Brother collection was that it was a sign that what Larrick (1965) had labeled the "all-White world" of children's literature was no longer all White. By the end of the decade, combined social, political, and economic forces had begun to propel the field of children's literature toward greater diversity. The numbers of contemporary children's books focused on Black characters and Black life and history were beginning to increase, offering opportunities for scholarly examinations of their content.

---

**Much of the scholarly attention to children's books featuring African Americans in the 1970s and early 1980s focused on critiquing the visual and verbal representations of Black characters in such books.**

---

Much of the scholarly attention to children's books featuring African Americans in the 1970s and early 1980s focused on critiquing the visual and verbal representations of Black characters in such books. One of the most frequently cited studies is that of Broderick (1973), who analyzed more than a century (1827–1967) of children's fiction featuring Black characters. Broderick's analysis revealed that those books reflected, with some slight variation, the same history of racist stereotypes and caricatures that had been identified in adult fiction 40 years earlier by Brown (1933). Many critics saw a continuation of those patterns in some award-winning contemporary children's books, such as the Newbery Medal winner *Souder* (Armstrong, 1969) and the Jane Addams Award winner *The Cay* (Taylor, 1969), which became centers of controversy. Although I contributed to the controversies with my review (Sims, 1980) of Ouida Sebestyen's novel *Words by Heart* (1979), my main focus was not searching out stereotypes and misrepresentations in individual books. My concern was how the growing body of literature featuring Black characters was taking shape.

### Differentiating Shadow from Substance

By 1980, I had decided to follow up on a variation of Bissett's suggestion regarding the Darker Brother collection. I set out to analyze as many of the existing contemporary Black-inclusive children's fiction books as I could find, with a view to describing the shape and content of what I was thinking of at the time as an incipient African American children's literature. I searched for books that had been published between 1965 (the year of Larrick's "all-White world" article) and 1979, the year before I started my study. I was curious about what stories were being told and whether I could discern any recurring thematic or stylistic features that might distinguish the literature as a cohesive body of work. I was able to locate 150 books, which was a substantial portion of the realistic fiction featuring Black characters that had been published during the period. My readings of those books became the basis of my first book, *Shadow and Substance*:

*Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction* (Sims, 1982).

My study was guided by three questions derived from my perception of the issues surrounding the publication and criticism of post-1965 children's books with Black characters. One question had to do with inferring the primary audience for Black-inclusive books. Broderick (1973) had concluded that as a general rule, the books she examined had been a means of imparting to White children what "the White establishment" wanted them to know about Black people. Many books published in the 19th century and the first two-thirds of the 20th present Black characters as objects of ridicule and generally inferior beings, representations not likely to have been created primarily for Black children to enjoy. My assertion was that there is a difference between writing *to* someone and writing *about* someone, and I was trying to learn whether such a difference manifested itself in these books.

A second issue was the extent to which a distinctive African American cultural experience was reflected in the books. Ellison (1972, p. 131) had argued that Black people share a "concord of sensibilities" through which Black Americans have come to constitute a distinctive subgroup within the general American culture. Baker (1980) argued that African American texts addressed to adults had from their beginnings communicated "culturally unique meanings" (p. xii). I was interested to see whether African American children's literature did the same. An alternative position was to assume that Black Americans had been homogenized into an American melting pot and were, at

---

**Many books published in the 19th century and the first two-thirds of the 20th present Black characters as objects of ridicule and generally inferior beings, representations not likely to have been created primarily for Black children to enjoy. My assertion was that there is a difference between writing *to* someone and writing *about* someone, and I was trying to learn whether such a difference manifested itself in these books.**

---

least in a literary sense, culturally interchangeable with all other Americans. My question was trying to determine the extent to which we were progressing toward a body of work that could be recognized as a distinctive African American children's literature, one component of the larger body of American children's literature.

The third issue that guided my analysis was that of the author's implicit cultural perspective and ultimately its effect on the treatment of the books' themes and characters. Some of the criticisms of controversial books asserted that their authors' knowledge of African Americans and African American culture was extremely limited, and the limitations were manifest in those books. In addition, some critics argued that the worldview of many White authors was influenced by their socialization in a racialized society that conferred privilege on them by virtue of their racial identity. The assertion was that the authors' life experiences restricted their knowledge of African Americans and African American cultural traditions, customs, values, practices, and so forth. Therefore, the representations of African American life were not necessarily accurate or reflective of the perspectives of those who had grown up immersed in an African American cultural community. The question, then, was from what cultural perspective the text appeared to have been created: whether that perspective appeared to be from outside or inside an African American cultural milieu and what difference it made in the texts.

Based on those questions, the 150 books fell into three categories. I labeled the first category "social conscience" books. I inferred that, with a few exceptions, the primary audience for those books is White readers who are being encouraged to develop a social conscience—an awareness of social injustice and of their responsibility to help make things right. These books mainly deal with racial conflicts between Blacks and Whites, centering on desegregating schools and neighborhoods, attempts to ensure equitable treatment for Blacks, and personal conflicts between Black and White children. This focus is not surprising given the time and the social context from which they were produced and published, mostly between 1965 and 1970. The characterization of Black people in some of these books left much to be desired. Black children and families are too often positioned as exotic or alien and too often tainted with some of the stereotypes lingering from past literary portrayals. The White protagonists are often vehicles for conveying messages about the need to be empathetic, sympathetic, or at least tolerant in their interactions with the Black children and families with whom they are coming into contact. Conflict is assumed to be inevitable

when Blacks and Whites find themselves in racially mixed social situations.

A second set of books, which I labeled "melting pot" books, focus on integrating literary Black children into the mainstream of American children's literature. The primary characteristic of the melting pot books, almost all of which are picture books, is that they choose to ignore anything, other than skin color, that might identify the characters as Black. Therefore, only the illustrations indicate whether the characters are Black or not. On the one hand, this was a step forward. Unlike the social conscience books, these books generally do not concentrate on racial conflicts. They tend to place Black and White characters on an equal footing socially or, in books with all Black characters, to portray them as having life experiences similar to many, if not most, White American middle class children. On the other hand, the refusal to acknowledge cultural differences may be a hint that such differences are undesirable or, at best, to be ignored. Like the social conscience books, most of the melting pot books were written by White authors. Many of the books were deservedly well received. Yet, they focus on only one aspect of the African American experience, ignoring Ellison's "concord of sensibilities" and Baker's "culturally unique meanings."

I labeled the third group "culturally conscious" books. I was trying to capture the idea that some authors set out to reflect both the distinctiveness of African American cultural experiences and the universality of human experience. These books are set in Black cultural environments, have Black major characters, are told from the perspective of those characters, and include some textual means of identifying the characters as Black, such as physical descriptions or distinctive cultural markers. Unsurprising, most of the authors of these books were Black, although about a quarter of them were not. The best of these books, then, constituted the beginning of contemporary (i.e., post-1965) African American children's literature, although it should be pointed out that not all the books in this category were successful; some authors were unable to write convincingly from the perspective of Black characters within a Black cultural context.

I also devoted a chapter to the works of five authors described as "image makers" because they had each published several books during the period and, in my view, were largely responsible for the literary images of Black characters that were typical of the culturally conscious fiction of the time. The five authors were Lucille Clifton, Eloise Greenfield, Virginia Hamilton, Sharon Bell Mathis, and Walter Dean Myers. These writers were the

frontrunners in the creation of late 20th-century African American children's literature.

This study was undertaken to ascertain how the world of children's literature had responded to the charges that the world of children's books was all White and that too many of the relatively few books that were available were flawed. One positive conclusion was that the number of books with Black characters had greatly increased by the end of the 1970s, although the overall percentage of such books in relation to the total number of children's books published annually was still quite small. This good news was tempered by concerns that some of the books with Black characters that were published between 1965 and 1979 appeared to perpetuate some misrepresentations from the past, and others represented Black characters and Black life as they might be seen and understood from an outsider's perspective. In my view, the most promising development was the emerging body of children's fiction that reflected African American cultural traditions, sensibilities, and worldviews.

It appears that one unanticipated contribution of *Shadow and Substance* was the framework of the three categories of books. They were not preset categories; rather, they emerged from my reading of the books, and I had originally thought they were specific to the group of books I examined. A number of other scholars, however, have found the framework a useful tool for examining literature by and about other parallel cultural groups or groups who feel themselves marginalized in the larger American society. For example, Leu (2001) used the framework in her dissertation to examine literature featuring Asian Americans. Quiroa (2004) adapted the culturally conscious concept for her dissertation involving young Latino/a children. Recently, Cart and Jenkins (2006) adapted the framework for use in their study *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004*. That the framework is useful across these diverse bodies of work suggests that the history and development of these literatures reflect similarities between the journey of African Americans and that of other marginalized groups across what Hamilton (1993) called the American hopescape. Children's books from underrepresented groups may tend to follow a pattern: from stories in which they are the exotic Other, to stories in which they are assimilated into the larger American culture, to their own stories, told by their own group members and reflecting their perspective on the world and their experiences in it.

#### Focus on Readers: Searching for Books as Mirrors

*Shadow and Substance* was published at a time when scholarly interest in reader response was high, as was

attention to qualitative or naturalistic research. "Strong Black Girls: A Ten Year Old Responds to Fiction about Afro-Americans" (Sims, 1983) reported on an exploratory case study that I conducted with the young daughter of a friend, who was a faculty member at a college in New England. Having argued for nurturing a growing body of African American children's literature, I was interested in whether African American child readers would express a preference for such books and how they would respond to those they read.

Over the years, Osula's mother had frequently asked for recommendations of books with Black characters for her daughter, who was an avid reader. Osula and I also had occasional conversations about her reading, and in one such conversation, she informed me that she was interested in books about Black girls. Subsequently, we got together to talk about her reading.

Osula's primary preference was for books about "strong Black girls." Aware of the variation within Black experiences, she noted that she enjoyed reading not only about Black girls like herself but also about those whose lives and circumstances were different from her own, such as girls living in the South. She was able to identify a few elements that were especially enjoyable to her: spunky, active female characters; experiences similar to her own; humor; lyrical language; and attractive illustrations. She also identified some elements that displeased her: easily predictable plots, unrealistic characters, and maltreatment of Black characters. However, the primary criterion for her and her friends in choosing their reading back then—strong Black girls who know what they are doing—confirmed that they were indeed seeking their own reflections in the books that they read.

The piece about Osula also raised some questions about the factors that might have influenced her preferences and suggested possible avenues for further research. For example, I presumed that Osula's preference for reading about strong active girls—not boys—was likely related to her developmental level or stage. I wondered if her preference for Black characters was manifest at a point in her development when identifying with a particular cultural or ethnic group was especially important. She had informed me that a few months before our conversation, she had been into science fiction, a genre in which she was unlikely to have found strong Black girls. Osula's search for books in which she could see reflections of herself also raised a concern about the relative lack of availability of such books and the effects of their scarcity on those whose searches were unsuccessful.

My conversations with Osula affirmed my belief that children have a right to books that reflect their own images and books that open less familiar worlds to them. That was the argument that I tried to make in “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” (Bishop, 1990). Some critics argue that children do not necessarily need to see their physical selves reflected in books as long as the characters are believable and the story rings true. It is true, of course, that good literature reaches across cultural and ethnic borders to touch us all as humans; in the right light, a window can also be a mirror. I argue, however, that for those children who historically had been ignored—or worse, ridiculed—in children’s books, seeing themselves portrayed visually and textually as realistically human was essential to letting them know that they are valued in the social context in which they are growing up. Near invisibility suggested that books and literature, while often pleasurable, were in some sense apart from them. At the same time, I argued, the children whose images were reflected in most American children’s literature were being deprived of books as windows into the realities of the multicultural world in which they are living, and were in danger of developing a false sense of their own importance in the world. My assessment was that historically, children from parallel cultures had been offered mainly books as windows into lives that were different from their own, and children from the dominant culture had been offered mainly fiction that mirrored their own lives. All children need both. I also recognized that a window could be a barrier, allowing children to look in but not be a part of the observed experience—hence, the sliding glass door of the title, a way to suggest that a book can offer what Rosenblatt (1978) called a lived experience for a reader. Over the years, the mirrors and windows metaphor has turned out to be a useful, if imperfect, metaphor for a number of scholars who write about the need for diversity in children’s books.

### Focus on Multiculturalism in Children's Books

By the 1990s, much attention in the children’s literature world was focused on multicultural children’s literature. Responding to the perceived interests of its members, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) decided to add to its set of booklists an annotated bibliography of this literature. I was invited to edit the booklist, which was annotated by a committee of NCTE members. The result was *Kaleidoscope: A Multicultural Booklist for Grades K–8* (Bishop, 1994).

The basic issue that has received the most attention related to multicultural literature has been how to define multicultural literature, or who gets to be included under the multicultural umbrella. The concept of multicultural

children’s literature is an outgrowth of the multicultural education movement, which seeks to transform schools so all students can reach their full potential as learners. Closely tied to ideologies of social justice, educational equity, and critical pedagogy, it is aimed at helping students learn to function effectively in a pluralistic society and become advocates for social justice. Part of the move toward educational equity was a focus on making space in school curricula for multiple voices and multiple perspectives, particularly those that had historically been excluded, marginalized, or disenfranchised. Given the focus on social justice and equity of the multicultural education movement, our first concern was the voices that had been underrepresented or misrepresented in the traditional canon, although we also recognized the global aspect of multiculturalism. The NCTE committee decided, therefore, to include books in *Kaleidoscope* that related to people of color—African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, Asian Americans—mainly in the United States but also in Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean. We also included books set in Africa, Asia, and South America. Although some critics would argue that the implicit definition of multicultural literature in *Kaleidoscope* was too narrow, we felt that we had found the right place to start, and we hoped that it would be a useful resource for teachers looking to incorporate multicultural literature into their classroom curricula.

### African American Children's Literature Revisited

Multicultural children’s literature aside, my main scholarly interest has continued to be African American children’s literature. Published 25 years after *Shadow and Substance*, my most recent book on the topic is *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature* (Bishop, 2007). It traces the progress of African American children’s literature, defined as that produced by African Americans, from its historical roots through the end of the 20th century.

The body of work that we recognize today as African American children’s literature did not begin to come into its own until the late 1960s. One goal of my study was to try to explain why this development took so long. The first third of the book, therefore, focuses on historical developments. It begins by tracing the seeds of a written African American

**The body of work that we recognize today as African American children’s literature did not begin to come into its own until the late 1960s.**

children's literature to the life experiences of African Americans during the era of slavery and tracing its roots to 19th-century Black publications, such as church periodicals, newspapers, and magazines. The book then chronicles the evolution of the literature through the first five and a half decades of the 20th century, beginning with the 1920–1921 publication of *The Brownies' Book*, a magazine for Black children published by scholar/activist W. E. B. Du Bois. *Free Within Ourselves* describes the developments of the next few decades prior to the 1960s as Harlem Renaissance poet Arna Bontemps almost single-handedly led African American children's literature into the children's literature mainstream, and a few other African American authors and artists found opportunities to publish their children's poetry, picture books, and novels. It also describes some of the caricatured and racist depictions of Black people in children's books of the period that were an important incentive for African Americans to develop a literature to contradict those representations and offer more positive, realistic characterizations and images. The final segment of the historical section of *Free Within Ourselves* discusses some of the social movements, issues, and events that were influential in opening the field to increasing numbers of books by African American writers and artists.

By the end of the 1960s, contemporary African American children's literature had begun to blossom, and by the end of the century, dozens of writers and artists were being published in a variety of genres. I found it difficult to maintain what had been a mostly chronological presentation of 20th-century developments up to that point because the number of books and authors and the variety of genres in which they were writing had all increased significantly. I chose, therefore, to organize the discussion of post-1965 African American literature around genres: poetry, picture books, contemporary fiction, and historical fiction, with two chapters devoted to the work of Black artists. Within genres, except for historical fiction, discussions are arranged loosely by decade. Each chapter describes landmarks or groundbreaking books and their contents as well as the work and contributions of major writers or artists who came into prominence or first started publishing in the genre during the decade being discussed. I also discuss comments that those writers and artists have made about their work, in an effort to understand how they viewed their work and its potential. Following are some of my observations and conclusions.

### A Literature of Purpose

African American children's literature has been and continues to be a literature of purpose, seldom art for art's sake, although it most certainly also aspires to literary artistry.

It was created in part as a response to the social, political, and economic circumstances in which Black people in the United States have historically found themselves—a part of and yet apart from American society. This literature reflects Black people's journey across Hamilton's American hopescape, with all its struggles and triumphs.

Modern African American children's literature, published since 1965, was created in part to fill a void, to ensure that Black children would not continue to be virtually invisible in children's books. It was also created to counteract the popular misrepresentations of Black people that had been prevalent in children's books for most of the 20th century. Moreover, it was created because Black writers and artists had a strong desire to tell their own stories and create their own images.

Although African Americans share much common ground with all other Americans, African Americans also share with one another that “concord of sensibilities,” molded in part by our responses to the racism to which we have all been subjected. This collective cultural worldview has also been shaped by the values passed from one generation to the next to preserve past history with a view to preparing the next generation to meet its own challenges. Additionally, it is this worldview that has influenced and informed the topics and thematic emphases that are prevalent in African American children's literature.

Beginning in 1920 with W. E. B. Du Bois and his children's magazine, many Black writers have been forthright about their goals and purposes and the ways they hoped their art might affect children. Du Bois's expressed goals for *The Brownies' Book*, in addition to entertainment, were to affirm Black children's self-worth, educate them about Black history and achievements, introduce them to the worthwhile things in life, inspire them to a life of service, and prepare them to cope with the challenges of living in a racialized society. More than 50 years later, Greenfield (1975) articulated a very similar set of purposes for her own writing, with the addition of a focus on appreciating and celebrating the strength of the Black family. Comments by other authors suggest that these are shared goals that continue to underlie much of African American children's literature and provide a certain cohesiveness to the body of work.

Given these shared goals, African American creators of children's books have tended to focus on a few thematic emphases that are common enough to be considered typical of African American children's literature. Although these thematic threads appear across genres, some receive greater emphasis in one genre or another. In picture books,

for example, there is an emphasis on family love, particularly relationships between young children and elders; on Black heritage, history, and heroes; and on fostering self-love and self-esteem. Poetry echoes those themes and adds a special emphasis on love as a fundamental need, binding tie, and source of richness in one's life. Contemporary fiction for older readers also echoes the picture book themes with some variation and greater complexity: Friendships become almost as important as family, and growing up is an added theme, especially in terms of what it means to grow up both Black and American. Historical fiction, much of which is set in the era of slavery, not only emphasizes Black history and heritage but also focuses on humanizing enslaved Blacks and destigmatizing slave ancestry. It generally celebrates the courage of enslaved Blacks and their determined fight for liberation, whether psychological or actual. Across genres, then, these writers have used their craft to create works that would meet some of the perceived needs of Black children living in a sociocultural environment in which they tend to be devalued and, at the same time, provide much needed insights to all child readers, whether African American or not.

Because of my focus on African American book creators, picture books presented a complication. Not every African American picture book is both written and illustrated by African Americans. My solution was to arbitrarily examine picture books with texts written by African Americans and then the work of African American illustrators. In examining the creations of these illustrators as well as their commentary on their work, I looked for common threads. Given the variety of individual styles and media among African American artists, it was difficult to find common traits across their illustrations, but there were a few shared aspects. For example, at least two images appeared quite frequently in illustrations by various artists: the image of a grandmother embracing her grandchild and the image of a mother or other adult family member braiding a child's hair, even in books that focus on a topic other than hair. Both are images of family bonding and reinforce the thematic emphasis on family so frequently found in African American picture books. In the comments that the artists made about their work, and in the art itself, I discerned three thematic threads: an emphasis on rhythm, fluidity, or movement; a focus on conveying emotion; and references to the improvisational nature of many African American art forms. I concluded that these artists have set out, at least in part, to dignify the images of African Americans in children's books, to challenge old stereotypes and replace them with depictions of African Americans in all their diversity.

### More Common Threads

In addition to the recurring thematic emphases, many African American authors pointedly highlight specific aspects of African American culture, exemplifying the idea of communicating distinctive cultural meanings. One of the most common devices is the use of African American discourse patterns in the characters' dialogue, the narrator's voice, or both. In many cases, this means not only syntax but also oral discourse modes such as call-and-response, or stylistic elements such as inventive metaphors, creative imagery, proverbial statements, and naming. Some authors also sprinkle their texts with references to African American cultural values, customs, beliefs, attitudes, and manners. Some authors also drop into their texts references to events in African American history, African American achievers, or African American music. Motifs from traditional African American oral culture, such as flying or trickster characters, also appear from time to time. In describing his own sense of his responsibility as a Black writer, Walter Dean Myers (1986) asserted that being a Black writer meant

understanding the nuances of value, of religion, of dreams. It meant capturing the subtle rhythms of language and movement and weaving it all, the sound and the gesture, the sweat and the prayers, into the recognizable fabric of Black life. (p. 50)

Despite these common threads, it should not be inferred that African American literature is monolithic. It is not. It reflects the diversity within and among African Americans. Not all of it foregrounds African American cultural distinctiveness. Not all of it includes African American vernacular speech patterns, for example. Many African American authors focus on middle class African Americans who mainly speak Mainstream American English, and embrace middle class American values. Nevertheless, the important thing about African American literature, in all its diversity, is that it is grounded in the particulars of specific African American cultural settings.

### Continuity and Change

The post-1965 era began with the work of a few outstanding writers and artists, such as Virginia Hamilton, Walter Dean Myers, Eloise Greenfield, Jerry Pinkney, and Leo and Diane Dillon. They and a few very significant others are the ones whose work, in the main, gave shape to contemporary African American children's literature over the past four and a half decades. They are the premier creators of African American children's books, and most of them continue to garner awards and recognition. (Sadly, a few, such as Virginia Hamilton, Tom Feelings, and Lucille

Clifton, have passed away.) As they moved into the 21st century, they expanded the range of their work by exploring new topics, new media, and new styles.

By the end of the century, especially during the 1990s, there was also an influx of newer writers and artists, whose work is shaping the African American literature of the 21st century. Writers like Jacqueline Woodson, Angela Johnson, and Rita Williams-Garcia and artists like Kadir Nelson, Christopher Myers, and Bryan Collier are broadening the scope of African American children's literature. They are, for example, addressing topics that had rarely been addressed in the literature before, both controversial ones such as homosexuality, and contemporary life experiences such as teenage parenting. These artists and writers are also exploring innovations in format, pushing at genre boundaries, and using newer media and new artistic styles. They, too, are garnering much recognition and many awards.

*Free Within Ourselves* does not concentrate on fantasy as a genre because historically it was not prevalent except in some folk stories. There has been, however, increased attention to picture book fantasies in the last decade or so. Some are literary folk tales, such as Jerdine Nolen's (2000) *Big Jabe* and Patricia C. McKissack's (1986) *Flossie and the Fox*. Others are unique tales, such as Brian Pinkney's (1997) *The Adventures of Sparrowboy*. African American fantasy novels continue to be rare. Although fantasy has not been a major component of African American children's books, both fantasy and humor are important elements in the literature.

Because African American children's literature reflects Black Americans' journey across the American hopescape, history has always been an important focus in the literature. In the last decade or so, there has been a particular focus on telling stories from past times. This occurs in nonfiction genres such as biographies and illustrated histories. Yet, historical fiction has also been important, and numerous picture books recall and recount stories of families growing up in earlier times, such as Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard's stories of earlier generations of her family, exemplified by *Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys*

---

**Because African American children's literature reflects Black Americans' journey across the American hopescape, history has always been an important focus in the literature.**

---



---

**Assuredly, African American children's literature will continue to evolve and change as American society changes. But to this point, it appears to have been created to tell stories that have not been told before, stories that need to be told. Stories are a way of knowing as well as a way of teaching.**

---

(2000). These stories are an attempt to let children know where they come from and to help them appreciate how far we have come.

Assuredly, African American children's literature will continue to evolve and change as American society changes. But to this point, it appears to have been created to tell stories that have not been told before, stories that need to be told. Stories are a way of knowing as well as a way of teaching. At the end of *Free Within Ourselves*, I conclude that as a general rule, the body of African American children's literature

- (1) celebrates the strength of the Black family as a cultural institution and vehicle for survival;
- (2) bears witness to Black people's determined struggle for freedom, equality, and dignity;
- (3) nurtures the souls of Black children by reflecting back to them, both visually and verbally, the beauty and competences that we as adults see in them;
- (4) situates itself through its language and its content, within African American literary and cultural contexts; and
- (5) honors the tradition of story as a way of teaching and a way of knowing. (p. 273)

These functions have grown out of concern for the welfare of Black children, and indeed all children. The African American story is one of struggle and triumph. It is, in a sense, the story of a search for social justice. As such, it offers an opportunity for readers to examine our past history, raise questions about where we are now, and think about where we would like to be in the future.

*Rudine Sims Bishop* is professor emerita at The Ohio State University, where she taught courses in children's literature. She is the author of *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature* (2007). Email: [bishop.77@osu.edu](mailto:bishop.77@osu.edu)

## References

- Baker, H. A., Jr. (1980). *The journey back: Issues in Black literature and criticism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), ix–xi.
- Bishop, R. S. (Ed.). (1994). *Kaleidoscope: A multicultural booklist for grades K–8*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Bishop, R. S. (2007). *Free within ourselves: The development of African American children's literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Broderick, D. M. (1973). *Image of the Black in children's fiction*. New York, NY: R. R. Bowker.
- Brown, S. A. (1933). Negro character as seen by White authors. *Journal of Negro Education*, 2(2), 179–203.
- Cart, M., & Jenkins, C. A. (2006). *The heart has its reasons: Young adult literature with gay/lesbian/queer content, 1969–2004*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow.
- Ellison, R. (1972). The world and the jug. In *Shadow and act* (pp. 107–144). New York, NY: Vintage.
- Greenfield, E. (1975). Something to shout about. *The Horn Book Magazine*, 51(6), 624–626.
- Hamilton, V. (1993). Everything of value: Moral realism in the literature for children. *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*, 6(4), 363–377.
- Larrick, N. (1965, September 11). The all-White world of children's books. *Saturday Review*, 63–65, 84–85.
- Leu, S. (2001). *Struggles to become "Americans": Historical and contemporary experiences of Asian Pacific American immigrants in children's and young adult fiction, 1945–1999* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Myers, W. D. (1986, November 9). 'I actually thought we would revolutionize the industry.' *The New York Times*, sec. 7, p. 50.
- Quiroa, R. E. (2004). *Literature as a mirror: Analyzing the oral, written, and artistic responses of young Mexican-origin children to Mexican American-themed picture storybooks* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader the text the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press.
- Sims, R. (1980). Words by heart: A Black perspective. *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, 11(7), 12–15, 17.
- Sims, R. (1982). *Shadow and substance: Afro-American experience in contemporary children's fiction*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Sims, R. (1983). Strong Black girls: A ten year old responds to fiction about Afro-Americans. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 16(3), 21–28.

## Children's Literature Cited

- Armstrong, W. H. (1969). *Sounder*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Howard, E. F. (2000). *Virgie goes to school with us boys*. (E. B. Lewis, Illus.). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Hughes, L. (1932). *The dream keeper and other poems*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- McKissack, P. C. (1986). *Flossie and the fox*. (R. Isadora, Illus.). New York, NY: Dial.
- Nolen, J. (2000). *Big Jabe*. (K. Nelson, Illus.). New York, NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Pinkney, B. (1997). *The adventures of Sparrowboy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Sebestyen, O. (1979). *Words by heart*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
- Taylor, T. (1969). *The cay*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.