

# Dear Vivian: A Tribute to Our Academic Mother and Friend

PAUL RICKS & LAURA HUDOCK

**Editorial note:** *To honor our co-editor Dr. Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, we dedicate this space to her legacy through her students. We are grateful to Laura and Paul for sharing their remembrances with us.*

ON SEPTEMBER 30, 2021, Dr. Vivian Yenika-Agbaw was called home. In the days and weeks that followed, a collective grief traveled around the globe as the children's literature community learned of the loss of our remarkable colleague. While initially processing this loss over numerous phone calls and Zoom meetings, and in moments of quiet solitude, we (Paul and Laura) turned to children's literature. We repeatedly (and somewhat embarrassingly) asked questions like those from *Michael Rosen's Sad Book* (2005): "How dare [s]he go and die like that? How dare [s]he make [us] sad." As winter turns to spring, we find comfort in the whisperings of an anthropomorphized representation of death: "Cry, Heart, but never break. Let your tears of grief and sadness help begin new life" (Ringved, 2016).

In sharing these once-upon-a-window picturebooks that became unforeseen mirrors and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990), we hope our sadness continues to ease as we learn to inhabit a corporeal world without Vivian. While interpreting these texts in new and meaningful ways unique to our lived stages of grief, we also contemplated the following passage from C. S. Lewis's (1961) treatise on the subject of bereavement. In writing about the death of his wife, Lewis stated:

All reality is iconoclastic. The earthly beloved, even in this life, incessantly triumphs over your mere idea of her. And you want her to; you want her with all her resistances, all her faults, all her unexpectedness. That is, in her foursquare and independent reality. And this, not any image or memory, is what we are to love still, after she is dead. (p. 78)

In the tributes that follow, we recognize that our individual memories of Vivian are neither definitive nor absolute. We also acknowledge that presenting our rather personal thoughts and feelings about her might be perceived as an overstep, especially if we unwittingly undermine our own intentions and center ourselves. That said, we hope that sharing our experiences may unveil, at least in part, who she was to us as both an academic mother and a dear friend. Paul has penned the first anecdote and Laura the second, followed by our concluding remarks on how we may honor her in the days ahead.

## Warm Regards, Paul

Because I already had two children by the time I got to graduate school, and because our third was born a couple of years later while we were still living in State College, I was highly motivated to complete my studies and start earning those big professor bucks. Vivian, who also had three children by the time she earned her PhD, understood my motivations and stresses. She sometimes joked that the main reason she took me on as an advisee was because she knew she wouldn't have to worry about me for very long. At least I think she was joking. To be honest, I'm actually not so sure anymore.

Whatever the case, Vivian was more than willing to meet me halfway and get me through grad school in an expedited fashion. She once told me, "I don't have time to talk about the things you might be doing well, but I can help you do them better if you'll let me." Her tough-love mentorship dovetailed perfectly with my goals. She overlooked my lack of qualifications and allowed me to teach a wide range of courses to boost my resume. She also let me work with her on scholarly projects for similar reasons, though I now recognize she could have completed said projects much more easily by herself. And, when I was ready to head out on the job market, she produced letters of

recommendation that helped me believe in and want to live up to her confident words.

In the final months and weeks of my grad school experience, I was desperately sprinting to complete my dissertation before the university's summer graduation deadlines. I had already landed a job, thanks in large part to Vivian, but the position was contingent upon earning a few key letters that I did not yet have at the end of my name. I was becoming more and more stressed and less and less productive, and matters only seemed to worsen when Vivian took a vacation to Morocco with her husband. I didn't want to encroach upon her time with family and ask for help when she'd already done so much. So, rather than contact her—which I wasn't entirely sure was possible anyway—I just kept showing up at the office and hoping the writing gods would smile upon me.

They did not.

Instead, I became increasingly frustrated and worried, and at a certain point I had to face the fact that I was not going to be able to graduate until the next school year. I sent Vivian an email thanking her for all she had done, not really knowing when she would be able to read it or how she would take it. Then, feeling like I had let Vivian, my family, and myself down, I returned to my apartment and slept for the first time in weeks.

That evening I received an email from Vivian asking me to call her at a number she used when traveling internationally. I imagined she would probably want to discuss what the next year was going to look like now that I wasn't graduating, but when she answered the phone, I quickly realized Vivian wasn't having any of it.

"Paul, what is happening?"

I'm stuck, Vivian. There's no way I can finish in time.

"Where are you?"

At my apartment. I felt like I needed to rest.

"Stop talking nonsense! Get in your car and drive back to the office. You have a family. You have a job. You don't get to quit!"

For those who have never had the privilege of experiencing Vivian's reprimands, reading this short exchange will perhaps make it seem like she pushed people too hard and didn't care about their feelings. But nothing could be further from the truth. Vivian stayed on the phone with me for hours. She listened to my concerns. She assured me all was not lost. She helped me see what I had not been able to on my own. When I later calculated the time difference between State College and Marrakesh, I realized that Vivian hadn't hung up until around four o'clock in the morning her time.

Now, the fact that I am relating this experience in a scholarly journal is probably enough of a giveaway to know that things eventually worked out. However, it is not my

intention to simply provide an anecdote about dissertation anxieties that others may find relatable. Rather, my purpose is to help us consider what I believe to be Vivian's greatest legacies—her compassion toward others and her willingness to enact positive change within her circle of influence.

I often tried to let Vivian know how much she meant to me, but she always found a way to shift the focus away from herself. In one of our last exchanges, she told me, "I appreciate your kind words, but please stop. Everything you've seen me do, someone else has done for me. Just promise me that you'll pay it forward." Vivian was an accomplished creative writer and scholar, but what she gave us extends well beyond her published words. She quietly and humbly went about the business of letting people know they were seen, heard, loved, and understood. May we all do the same.

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### Warm Regards, Laura

To share my heartfelt appreciation for Vivian, I must rewind the past decade. That's when my life intersected with hers, and where our story begins. In summer 2012, I eagerly anticipated the next course in my MEd program at Penn State's World Campus—Cultural Pluralism in Children's and Adolescent Literature. I had become an educator through a nontraditional pathway after leaving law school, so graduate studies nourished my appetite for professional and personal growth. That summer I was on the precipice of rethinking the prevailing forms of my language arts instruction. I had noticed gaps and omissions in the curriculum at my metropolitan Title I school. Certain texts were privileged. A narrow definition of literacy overlooked the cultural and linguistic diversity of my first graders and their families. But these observations had not yielded action. I yearned to make sense of why this was happening and how to better foster an inclusive, affirming elementary classroom alongside curricular changes to promote the many dimensions of literacy (Kucer, 2014).

That summer Vivian became my teacher and mentor, and I was an engaged learner-practitioner. Vivian introduced me to theories of postcolonialism, reader response, and critical multiculturalism, and I relished applying such lenses to our explorations of children's and young adult literature. From behind a computer screen, she guided my emerging critical consciousness and stirred the struggle for social justice. Her direct comments to discussion board posts modeled and pushed me to embrace a deeply reflective stance. While she respected my willingness to undertake this transformative process of reading multiculturally, her lofty expectations challenged me to reconsider readers' responses, both my own and those of my future students. Vivian valued readers becoming text analysts (Freebody & Luke, 1990) and the critical pedagogies that facilitated such stances.

In my marginal notes from my first reading of Vivian's (1997) article "Taking Children's Literature Seriously: Reading for Pleasure and Social Change," I had scribbled "Teaching → Change" followed by "why" and "how" next to the following passage:

In a society that sanctions inequality, it is the teacher's responsibility to show children how reading the word can affect how students read the world. Teachers can do this first, by having children visualize, and attempt to understand the challenges and possibilities that exist in their society. Children should know that unless readers are able to read for social change and justice, they will find themselves confirming existing meanings determined by others' ideologies (Zipes, 1993). (Yenika-Agbaw, 1997, p. 452)

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**The significance of her words still resonates...[as] heightened politicization and attempts at banning children's books that feature diverse representations of social identities continue to vex educators and librarians. I find inspiration in Vivian's steadfast belief that child and adolescent readers have not only the capacity and right to equally participate in an interpretive community, but also the agency to negotiate new meanings, new worlds grounded in equality.**

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The significance of her words still resonates. Twenty-five years after this publication, heightened politicization and attempts at banning children's books that feature diverse representations of social identities continue to vex educators and librarians. I find inspiration in Vivian's steadfast belief that child and adolescent readers have not only the capacity and right to equally participate in an interpretive community (Fish, 1980), but also the agency to negotiate new meanings, new worlds grounded in equality. To Vivian, teaching children's literature requires open-mindedness—an active exploration of text in conjunction with readers' constructed knowledge.

Shortly after that online course concluded, Vivian and her co-editors (and dearest colleagues), Ruth McKoy Lowery and Laretta Henderson, encouraged me to coauthor a chapter for *Fairy Tales With a Black Consciousness: Essays on Adaptations of Familiar Stories* (Yenika-Agbaw et al., 2013). That invitation became a watershed moment. From our initial collaboration on Rachel Isadora's reimagined fairy tales to the moment when Vivian placed a doctoral hood over my head, she has been my champion. In a handwritten thank-you note slipped into a copy of the published book, Vivian wrote:

I look forward to many more collaborations in the future. You have a tremendous spirit and I know we were brought together for a reason...

Since then, her note has been pinned to my bulletin board. It has been my north star, especially in those times of doubt when imposter syndrome rears its ugly head—a reminder of her constant belief in me, herself, and the many others she mentored.

My fondest memories during my doctoral studies are the innumerable times I pored over the pages of newly published or discovered picturebooks alongside Vivian. Her long pauses of contemplation stretched my thinking about trends and issues related to power. She appreciated my unquenchable curiosity to explore all genres of children's literature and would stoke that fire. Her casual mention of favorite reads (e.g., *Lyddie* [Paterson, 1995], *Parrot in the Oven* [Martinez, 1996], *The White Giraffe* [St. John, 2008], *Akata Witch* [Okorafor, 2011], *Chicken in the Kitchen* [Okorafor, 2015]) as well as her creative writings often became my future reading lists. I can still hear the interjections of her hearty laughter reverberating down the office corridors as the pleasures of storytelling were revealed between us. As minutes often stretched into hours, our conversations usually segued into life—our lived experiences, our families, our passions.

In my first semester of teaching a children's literature course to elementary teacher candidates, I posed a rhetorical question to Vivian in the confines of her office: Why do students reflexively position fiction and nonfiction children's literature as opposites, with one anchored in a so-called make-believe and the other in unquestioned truths? Expecting to share with her my instructional plans to challenge this dichotomous thinking, I had unintentionally planted the seed of a loftier, multifaceted inquiry into nonfiction children's literature. That pondering blossomed into another collaboration, the co-edited book *Does Nonfiction Equate Truth?: Rethinking Disciplinary Boundaries Through Critical Literacy* (Yenika-Agbaw et al., 2018).

While Vivian believed in the possibilities of what reading and readership, writing and authorship might be but are not yet, her vision extended to that of her doctoral advisees. She regularly counseled and celebrated our scholarly endeavors, professional accomplishments, and career trajectories. For Vivian had the greatest of confidence in us and our perspectives, a conviction that we do not hold lightly, but continue to hold ourselves accountable to and treasure dearly.

Vivian, I thank you. And I miss you.

### Parting Thoughts

Though we are but two voices among the many students, practitioners, and scholars Vivian engaged with and welcomed into the field of children's literature, we hope that these tributes convey a fraction of our immense gratitude.

For those who have studied under or collaborated with Vivian, we invite you to reach out. We remain an ever-supportive community of scholars and practitioners. Just as she modeled for us, let us become each other's champions. Let us advocate for children's literature studies across the globe. Let us embark on various service opportunities to promote our beloved field. And let us ask questions in our critical pedagogies and research. May we live by Vivian's example, for that is what we know, and how we honor her beautiful life. ■

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