African American Literature: Books to Stoke Dreams

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“African American Literature: Books to Stoke Dreams”

By Jane M. Gangi and Aimee Ferguson

The tragedy of life doesn’t lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn’t a calamity to die with dreams unfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not disgrace to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for.

—Benjamin Mays

Times have never been better for the quality and abundance of newly-published multicultural literature. Unfortunately, times have never been worse for getting that literature into the hands of children. In addition to market forces, unconsciously damaging trends in many textbooks for teacher education have resulted in classroom trade book collections that represent children who are primarily white and middle class. While all children—whether from Argentina, Afghanistan, or Algeria—deserve to see themselves and their families in books, the focus of this article is on new publications that depict African Americans.

The Bad News

There are hindrances in making multicultural literature available to students. School book fairs and book order forms limit children’s choices. While Scholastic, which has a near monopoly on book fairs, does publish some high quality multicultural literature, those books do not always find their way into the hands of children. McNair (2005) looked at Scholastic book order forms for a period of six months (September 2004 through February 2005) and determined that, “approximately 1,200 books were made available for purchase during this six month period and yet only two books written by Latin Americans were available for purchase. Likewise, there was only one book written by an Asian American and no books by Native Americans. Books written by African Americans were included more frequently than books about other racial groups, but the numbers were still small” (p. 8). Particularly disturbing is that McNair looked at the Firefly and Seesaw books—aimed at the youngest children, preschool through first grade. At the moment in their lives when they can be most engaged in learning, children of color often find themselves left out and irrelevant.

Similarly, Scroggins and Gangi (2004) looked at recently published children’s literature textbooks (books used in teacher education programs), where multicultural literature is often excluded or marginalized. One example is a chart of a number touchstone books from 500 years of children’s literature, in which there are two authors of color. This is not because authors of color are not plentiful—they are (see Appendix D in Gangi 2004 for a listing of authors and illustrators of color). In another children’s literature textbook there is a list of books on American Indians, yet none by an American Indian author. In addition, literacy textbooks most often default to whiteness (Gangi 2005). I invite readers to examine the most popular professional books on word study, vocabulary, guided reading and leveled books, writing process, writer’s craft, and the proficient reader research and ask themselves these questions: Where are authors and illustrators of color in these books? Where are authentic multicultural books used to demonstrate strategies and craft? I italicize “authentic” because, too often, inauthentic books like Knots on a Counting Rope—a book by white authors that purports to be about American Indians—are featured as model texts for teachers to use (see Oyate 2006 for a list of “Books to Avoid”). Even in literacy textbooks published during the early years of the twenty-first century, it is not uncommon to find long
lists of children’s literature which contain only a few, or no, authors and illustrators of color.

The proficient reader research has taught us that, to develop comprehension, children must be able to activate their prior knowledge. When trade book collections are primarily white collections, white children are distinctly advantaged. They have opportunities to make connections between the known and the unknown far more often than children of color, who are left behind because they do not have the privilege or educational right of seeing people who look like themselves in books nearly as often. In a scientific study that should satisfy the guidelines of Reading First, Bell and Clark (1998) established that culturally relevant reading material enhanced the reading comprehension of African American children. For children of color to grow as readers at the same pace as white children, they must have books that enable them to make text-to-self and text-to-world connections as frequently as white children.

In the spring of 2006, after discussion of these issues in our Emergent Literacy class at Manhattanville College, Aimee Ferguson decided to examine the classroom collection where she was student teaching in a diverse northeastern city of about 50,000 people. In a response paper she wrote, “I was shocked that most of the books featured white families. The only books that had black people in them were books about Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King.”

I asked Aimee if she would be willing to share with children recent books by and about African Americans, and she was more than willing. She made two visits with two very different populations.

**Aimee’s Report from the Field**

Both of my visits were with children who live in the same city where I did my student teaching. My first visit was with four African American boys in an elementary program called “Passages”. The teacher referred to the boys in this program as “emotionally disturbed.” I read aloud *Visiting Langston* by Willie Perdomo, illustrated by Bryan Collier, and *Max Found Two Sticks*, written and illustrated by Brian Pinkney. I was surprised that they were engaged and well-behaved throughout; the teacher had warned me that, because of their short attention spans, I would only be able to read one book. On the contrary, they wanted more books read to them. I was really surprised by how excited they were to hear the books and how much discussion there was.

After I read *Visiting Langston* (Perdomo 2002), one student noted that he liked the book because it brought up things such as Harlem and hip-hop—things that he enjoys. The other students agreed they could connect with it. They really liked the artwork. The artwork was amazing and they were even more amazed with the collage technique used. I then read *Max Found Two Sticks* (Pinkney 1994). They discussed how they could relate to Max. Two students noted that they sometimes use certain objects to make music, such as sticks.

They asked me to come back. The teacher pulled me aside and thanked me for doing this. She even said that Scholastic has a limited number of multicultural books. She was upset with this because all of her students are African American boys. She said that maybe if there were more books that she could access with African American representation it would be better for her classroom. She wants to include these books and the books that I showed her from Dr. Gangi’s collection to her classroom library.

On my second visit, I went to a homeless shelter in the same northeastern city. I was invited to read to twelve children, ages nine to seventeen. This was too broad an age range, but I had no choice. The audience did not react to *Visiting Langston*, although, when I asked if they liked the illustrations, they said that they did. With the second reading they responded more. I read poems from *In Daddy’s Arms I Am Tall*, collected and illustrated by Javaka Steptoe. After I had read five poems I asked each of them to volunteer to read a poem. I noticed that they were more interested in this book than in the first book that I read to them and had more to say.

After the reading the children seemingly could not wait to get out of the room. The majority of the children, especially the boys, acted as though they thought that the entire experience was funny. All of the students had a hard time expressing themselves and connecting with the two texts I read to them. The sad reality of my second visit
was that these children were not readers. Then I asked them, “What types of books do you like to read?” The majority of children said things relating to their lives, such as football and basketball. All of the children who read the poems aloud struggled with reading.

Because of my visit the people at this center seemed to become more aware of the issue, and want to begin a summer reading program. They explained that they hoped that the room where I read to them (which contains only couches) will one day be a library with books and comfortable seating.

**The Plight of African American Boys**

We cannot continue to ignore the serious risk a young African American boy faces simply by being born black and male. The most recent statistics (Eckholm 2006) show that the chances are one in three that a black boy will spend time in prison. While educators alone cannot ameliorate contributing factors such as a lack of health care, unemployment, underemployment, and low wages, they can ensure that black boys see themselves in books, and introduce them to “mentors on paper” (Thompson 1996). Black boys, perhaps more than any other group of children, need access to what Rudine Sims Bishop calls “mirror” books. Their growth as readers depends on their ability to make connections with what they read. Currently, children of color have far too many “window” books into an all-white world, and far too few books that mirror who they are. Conversely, white children have far too many mirror books, and not nearly enough window books into worlds beyond their own. That fifty percent of black boys drop out of high school in urban areas (Eckholm 2006) is a tragedy. Surely the highly Eurocentric, classroom book collections, which children experience from their first day of school to their last, contribute to that statistic.

**Towards a Gregarious Literacy**

Boys also need active, interactive, and gregarious ways to share these books. Newkirk (2002) has described the problems with an “ungregarious” literacy. Gurion and Stevens (2005) report troubling trends concerning boys in schools: They make up 80 percent of discipline problems, 70 percent of identified learning disabilities, 80 percent of behavioral disorders, 80 percent of high school dropouts, and 80 percent of children on Ritalin (p. 22). Among other suggestions to teachers for helping boys, Gurion and Stevens recommend using music to help them retain knowledge, the visual arts for expression, brainstorming, and kinesthetic learning. They suggested that:

> The physical body is not separate from the brain. The physical body can be a strength center for boys, and in fact for any child’s brain. The male brain has more spinal fluid in the brain stem than does the female. This is one of the reasons boys are ‘so physical.’ (p. 150)

Independent reading is often a centerpiece of the Reading Workshop, yet to ask boys to sit quietly and alone to read a book independently may not be in the realm of possibility. Literature can be encountered in ways that promote joy, including pantomime, choral readings, readers’ theater, mask-making, puppetry, storytelling, and improvisation (Gangi 2004, Rasinski, 2003). In addition to being kinesthetic and visual, these arts approaches also tap into the social aspects of literacy. Heath (1983) found in her now classic work, *Ways with Words*, that literacy is more socially experienced in African American communities than in white communities. White audiences have seen captured on film and television the joy and verve of African American churches; imagine the child who has had such adventures in Bible-reading and hymn-singing (literate experiences) showing up at school only to be asked to sit quietly and alone either with paper-and-pencil tasks or independent reading. Simply put, the literate experiences they are offered in school are too boring and too isolated in comparison to what they have experienced in their communities. Heath (2004) determined that, “Those within literacy research will best serve the interests and integrity and the future of learning if they attend to those points where the arts and literacy meet. Those points are abundant: drawing in collaboration with writing, creative writing for production or complement to the visual arts, and dramatic renderings of children’s literature and young adult publications.” Heath’s research, which consistently affirms the role of the arts in literacy achievement, should also satisfy the demands of Reading First.

**James Ransome, Bryan Collier, Javaka Steptoe, R. Gregory Christie, E.B. Lewis, Jerry Pinkney, and Brian Pinkney**

Some of the most exciting visual art in the world is being created in contemporary children’s picture books because of these brilliant African American men: Ransome, Collier, Steptoe, Christie, Lewis, the Pinkneys (and others). I’ve met most of them, and they are not only superb artists, they are inspiring human beings as well, with
powerful, positive messages for children. For example, Collier (2006) thinks of collage art as a metaphor for life. Using his own work, Collier shows the back of collage art; it seems like random pieces that don’t fit together. Turning it over, you see the pieces fit into an artistic whole. Collier urges his audiences to “hang on to the pieces of their lives,” that eventually the pieces will come together, citing his childhood experiences growing up in Pocomoke, Maryland. His seven years of rejection slips before any success also point to persistence, a necessary trait for achievement. Visit Collier’s and other artists’ web sites; invite them into your classrooms in person or virtually (see webliography and bibliographies at the end of this article).

An enormous opportunity exists to build pride and hope in black children in books by black artists. Jacqueline Irvine (2004) tells this story:

Several years ago, I was sitting on the steps of my church, located in a poor Atlanta neighborhood, waiting for the locksmith to open my car, when an inquisitive little boy spotted me and jumped on his bike to get a closer look. After he was persuaded that he did not have to break into my car to retrieve my keys, I asked my newly made friend, Darius, to sit down to talk. I asked him the usual boring questions that adults ask children: What’s your name? How old are you? Where do you go to school? What’s your teacher’s name? And finally, I asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” After responding quickly to the other questions, he stalled on the last, and then said, “I don’t wanna be nothing.” “Oh, come on,” I coaxed. “There are so many wonderful and exciting things to dream about being: a teacher, an astronaut, a businessman, a mechanic, a policeman. Just close your eyes and let me know what you see yourself doing when you get to be all grown up.” Darius hesitantly followed my directions. He closed his eyes, folded his arms over his chest, and lifted his head toward the sky, as if he needed divine inspiration for such a difficult task. After 15 seconds of what appeared to be a very painful exercise, I interrupted Darius’s concentration. “What do you see?” I asked impatiently. “Tell me about your dreams.” The young man mumbled, “Lady, I don’t see nothing and I don’t have no dreams.” Stunned by his remark, I sat speechless as Darius jumped on his bike and rode away.

Darius, this bright, energetic, handsome young man, is not likely to end up in a college or university. In fact, statistical data predict that Darius has a better chance ending up in a state prison. (120-121)

To Teach Darius to Dream:
- to be an astronaut, share Black Stars in Orbit: NASA’s African American Astronauts (Burns and Miles 1995)
- to be a businessman, share Uncle Jed’s Barber Shop (Mitchell 1993, illustrated by James Ransome)
- to be a dancer, share Savion: My Life in Tap (Glover and Weber 2000)
- to be an activist, share Rosa (Giovanni 2005, illustrated by Bryan Collier)
- to be a singer, share A Band of Angels: A Story Inspired by the Jubilee Singers (Hopkinson 1999, illustrated by Raúl Colón)
- to be a jazz player, share Duke Ellington (Pinkney 1998, illustrated by Brian Pinkney)
- to be a minister and leader, share Martin’s Big Words (Rappaport 2001, illustrated by Bryan Collier)
- to be a chef, share George Crum and the Saratoga Chip (Taylor 2006, illustrated by Frank Morrison). Crum also shared American Indian roots.
- to be a mathematician or astronomer, share Benjamin Banneker: Mathematician and Stargazer (Blue and Nadeen 2001)
- to become compassionate, share Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan (Williams, 2005, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie)
- to experience courage and beauty in the life of African Americans in Nashville in the 1950s share Goin’ Someplace Special (McKissack 2002, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney)
- to be writers, poets, playwrights, storytellers, and visual artists, share the wonderful multicultural books available, and show who is on the back flap of the book jacket so that black artists become mentors for children.

Create a Different Future

If we do not consciously diversify our classroom collections, historic injustices will continue unabated. White children will continue to be unfairly privileged, which
Brings its own set of problems for white children, who can become narcissistic. Children of color will continue to be unfairly disadvantaged, the consequences for which, as prison rates rise, have never been more disturbing. Irvine, who notes the sad irony of the parallel between prison costs and college tuition, concluded that, “We will not and cannot achieve our vision of providing all children with an education and a future by ignoring children who have none. It is not enough to think of a child such as Darius as a research subject, a service project, or just another child who is doomed to fail. Somehow we should start to think of him and our future as inextricably linked. I am convinced, however, that eager, well-educated, committed teachers can and do make a difference.” Teachers who are committed to learning all they can about multicultural literature and culturally and gender relevant pedagogy become agents of change.

Irvine is right; our futures are inextricably linked. Children need teachers who help them find stars to reach. Thankfully, there is a star-studded cast of books from which to choose.

References


Collier, B. (April, 2006). Saturday symposium. Presentation at the Rabbit Hill Festival of Literature, Westport, CT.


McNair, J. (December, 2005). Innocent though they may seem ... A critical race theory analysis of Firefly and Seesaw Scholastic book club order forms. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Reading Conference, Miami, FL.


Resources


Multicultural Children’s Literature Bibliography

Resources for Children’s Literature: Links to awards and other resources are easily followed. Also, information on Oyate, which is the best source for American Indian criticism. For example,

African Studies Association Children’s Book Award: <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/cm/africana/award.htm>

American Library Association CorettaScottKingAward: <http://www.ala.org/ala/srt/coretascottking/coretascott.htm>

Children’s Africana Book Award: <http://www.africanstudies.org/asa_childbook.html>

Resources for Reading and Language Arts


Lewis, E. B. <http://www.ebew.com/>


Small Publishers with a Multicultural Focus


Has teacher’s guides and lesson plans related to standards. Readers theater scripts available.

Cinco Puntos – <http://www.cincopuntos.com/> Has teacher resources with lesson plans.


Has a teacher resource center.


Select Bibliography: Children’s Literature

That Picture Children of African Descent

Picture books and novels are annotated. Ways of teaching about the ‘Writer’s Craft’ are presented throughout this article and are contained in parentheses. Not annotated are poetry, drama, folklore, informational books, and chapter-length biographies; the titles themselves often serve as annotations. Thanks to Mary Ellen Levin, who helped annotate the picture books.

Picture Books

Biographies


Hopkinson, Deborah. 1999. A Band of Angels: A Story Inspired by the Jubilee Singers. Illustrated by Raúl Colón. New York: Atheneum. In post-Civil War days a band of freed slaves, now music students, keep open their school (later Fisk University) by singing spirituals or “jubilee songs” in concert all over the world. (Writer’s Craft: story within a story)


(Writer’s Craft: sensory images, and when one sentence paragraphs are effective)


Ryan, Pam Muñoz. 2002. When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson. Illustrated by Brian Selznick. New York: Scholastic. The inspiring story of a singer who, though hurt by racism, did not let injustice keep her from doing what she was born to do. Denied performing in Constitution Hall because of the color of her skin, she sang instead in front of the Lincoln Memorial to a crowd of over 75,000.


Contemporary Realism

Gunning, Monica. 2004. A Shelter in Our Car. Illustrated by Elaine Pedlar. San Francisco: Children’s Book Press. Expressionistic art combines seamlessly with a moving narrative of a homeless Jamaican mother and her daughter. (Writer’s Craft: writing in the present tense. Also, Manhattanville student Emily Traycheff has written a lesson plan on Nettie’s varied emotions, helping children make text-to-self connections; contact <gangij@mville.edu> if you would like a copy of this lesson plan)


Williams, Mary. 2005. *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan.* Illustrated by R. Gregory Christie. New York: Lee & Low. Written by the founder of The Lost Boys Foundation and based on a true account, this book tells of orphan refugee boys fleeing a homeland torn by civil war. The boys face illness and starvation as they travel, but remain loyal to one another and to their dream of a better life. In order to survive, they organized themselves into smaller groups with some of older boys “adopting” a younger child. Written by Mary Williams, founder. (Writing: metaphor, simile, and word pictures)


**Historical Fiction**


McKissack, Patricia. 2000. *Goin’ Someplace Special.* Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. New York: Atheneum. In Nashville, Tennessee in the 1950s, the library was one of the few public places African Americans were allowed. A young girl endures racism to go there.

Pace, Lorenzo. 2001. *Jalani and the Lock.* New York: PowerKids. Jalani is captured in Africa, enslaved in America, and loses everything except his memories and his hope. When free, he keeps the lock that had bound him, and passes it to his children. This is a true story from the life of author/illustrator. (Writer’s Craft: Story starters of family heirlooms, and symbolism)

Tingle, Tom. 2006. *Crossing Bok Chito: A Choctaw Tale of Friendship and Freedom.* Illustrated by Jeanne Rorex Bridges. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos. A Choctaw girl helps an enslaved African American boy and his family escape to freedom by leading them on a path of stones just under the surface of a river that only the Choctaw know. (Writer’s Craft: metaphor and simile)


---. 2005. *Show Way.* Illustrated by Hudson Talbott. New York: Putnam’s. The family heirlooms are the quilts that served as maps for the Underground Railroad.

**Poetry and Song**


Poetry By Children


Screenplay/drama


Folklore


Egypt


Liberia


Nigeria


Tanzania


North America


Informational Books


Biography and Autobiography


Glover, Savion, and Bruce Weber. 2000. *Savion: My Life in Tap*. New York: Morrow. (Writer’s Craft: varying sentence length, when one word sentence and sentence fragments are acceptable—see last paragraph)


Historical Fiction Novels and Novellas

(For text sets grouped around specific time periods, see the Comprehensive Children’s Literature Bibliography at <http://faculty.mvilledu/gangij/bibliographies.htm>.)


---. 1988. *Out from This Place*. New York: Walker. The sequel to *Which Way Freedom?*, which takes place during Reconstruction when those with whom Obi has formed family ties seek to be reunited.

---. 1986. *Which Way Freedom?* New York: Walker. Obi escapes to join the Union during the Civil War. Like many other enslaved Africans, he finds family with those he is not biologically related to.


Robinet, Harriette Gillem. 2003. *Twelve Travelers, Twenty Horses*. New York: Atheneum. Jacob and his mother, both enslaved, become involved in a plot to stop the South from seceding from the Union.


Contemporary Realistic Novels and Novellas
(For books grouped around theme and topic, see the Comprehensive Children’s Literature Bibliography at <http://faculty.mville.edu/gangij/bibliographies.htm>.)

Draper, Sharon. 1994. *Ziggy and the Black Dinosaurs*. Orange, NJ: Just Us. (series) This is one of the few transitional series by an African American author about African American children.


Hansen, Joyce. 2001. *One True Friend*. New York: Clarion. Two friends, one orphaned and living in Syracuse, the other living in the Bronx, cement their friendship and help each other grow through letters.


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Aimee Ferguson graduated in May 2006 with a B. A. from Manhattanville College, where she majored in Childhood Education and Psychology. In the fall she will begin studies towards a Master’s Degree in Speech-Language Pathology at New York Medical College, in Valhalla, New York.

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