

Why African-American Children's Literature?

By Lynnette C. Velasco

In today's world, where the word "diversity" spins the common, inclusive denominator for all race, class, gender, and religion, why do we still discuss the need to evolve the specific genre of African-American children's literature?

Simply answered, Martin Luther King Jr. did help us scale the mountain, but we just haven't reached the top. Furthermore, in our current repressed economy, mainstream publishing houses who— as a matter of profit formula—placed general children's literature and poetry at the bottom of the pile are not about to further endanger their erosive profit margin by aggressive promotion of African-American children's books.

In William Ryan's classic sociological discourse *Blaming the Victim* (1971), he claims that we have an inherent social problem due to a seriously and historically flawed social structure. Today, in our twenty-first century, with the rampant increase in black as well as Latino gang violence, with random youth-on-youth violence, this flawed structure begs to be addressed and corrected.

Evolving the genre of African-American literature may be just a little piece of solving this perplexing phenomenon that daily maims and claims the life of our young. It is my personal passion, as well as that of many writers and illustrators dedicated to the craft of creating children's literature. We are beginning to make our voices heard, and in some small way, help our young people believe in hope, possibility, and in some cases, to reclaim their lives.

Our country is crafted in the ideology of capitalism; and in order for capitalism to survive you must produce profit. Profit necessitates a product. Production of a product requires labor. With labor, you get into who produces and who controls or who owns. Cheap labor produces big profits and thus capitalism reigns.

In America, cheap labor was attained through slavery. In order to keep the slaves in line, they needed to be kept ignorant and docile. This was achieved through mental and physical brutality. It was a crime to teach slaves to read. And for many years after slavery ended, black people, as so vividly depicted in author Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, could not even take out a library book in some parts of the country. (In fact, a fictional account of Wright's experience provides the backstory for the children's book *Richard*

Wright and the Library Card, written by William Miller and illustrated by Gregory Christie; Lee & Low Books, 1997.)

So even before we research the theory set forth by Ryan of blaming the victim, we have to understand that for decades the victim (black folks) have undergone institutionalized dehumanization due to a social structure based on a capitalist ideology that was systemically flawed.

The genre of African-American literature seeks to empower children at the earliest stages of their development, portraying them in 360 degrees of “positivism.” Bold illustrations fill pages depicting positive self-imagery, environment, family structure, and themes flow with the idea of possibility, positive choices dealing with challenge, hope, love, and strength.

In reading *Black Children’s Literature Got De Blues: The Creativity of Black Writers and Illustrators* by Dr. Nancy B. Tolson (Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), I read about the genesis of African-American children’s literature with great enthusiasm. Tolson forcefully attacks the mainstream formula set forth by traditional publishing houses as to what concepts should be incorporated into literature for African-American children, stating: “Black children’s literature cannot just be classified as an aesthetic literary work but has to be looked upon as a literary vehicle in understanding the historical, political, spiritual, and sociological experiences of being black in the United States.”

Tolson also points out that critics outside of the world of black literature, caution black authors of children’s literature about being too didactic. This is also part of the publishing formula philosophy of traditional publishing houses. However, I believe that we must incorporate stories of self-esteem, self-reliance and possibility against all odds to help empower our children.

The fire that fuels my dedication to writing and evolving the genre of African- American children’s literature is reinforced through the aggressive dedication of those who came before me. Tolson describes the uphill battle for mainstream recognition of creative, uplifting, and empowering literature depicting the experience of being blacks in America; and more importantly, being a black child in America.

In *Black Children's Literature Got De Blues*, Tolson further states: "Few black writers in the 1930s were given the opportunity to publish children's books through mainstream publishing houses. In a 1933 article in the *Wilson Bulletin for Libraries* titled "The American Negro: A Bibliography for School Libraries," 27 books were suggested "for inclusion in all school libraries," four books on the list were written or edited by blacks. The four books included Arthur Huff Fauset's *For Freedom: A Biographical Story of the American Negro* (1927), Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes's *Popo and Fifina* (1932), Myron T. Pritchard and Mary White Ovington's edited collection *The Upward Path: A Reader for Colored Children* (1920), and Carter G. Woodson's *African Myths: Together with Proverbs* (1928).

My resolve about the indisputable importance of African-American children's literature was reinforced by the stewardship of Augusta Baker (b. 1911–d.1998), a remarkable librarian and storyteller. Baker exhibited a revolutionary zeal in her lifelong commitment to provide positive knowledge and nourishment for the hearts and minds of black children. In 1937, as a librarian at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem, now called the Countee Cullen Library, Baker began her new job by clearing the shelves of books that did not depict black children and the black experience with dignity, integrity, and productive possibility. She worked with colleagues to develop booklists for black children, paying very close attention to theme, tone, illustration, and overall content.

Her biographical sketch in the New York Public Library archives states that "In 1957, she developed the influential booklist *Books About Negro Life for Children*...The work has been updated many times since then and is currently titled *The Black Experience in Children's Books*, the most recent being produced by the library in 2004. Today, Baker's early trailblazing research now serves as a guide for librarians, teachers, and parents around the country."

In closing, I found teaching the craft of creating children's books to young people under the auspices of the Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College, in Brooklyn, New York, to be one of my most rewarding experiences. When you go before young minds, always listen for they have much to learn from you, and you have much to learn from them. It is a mutual exchange.

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