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## The Portrayal of Blacks in Children's Literature

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## The Portrayal of Blacks in Children's Literature

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#### Abstract

With the current emphasis on civil rights and the equality of all people, much attention has been given to the minorities in this country. One such minority, the American Negro population, is beginning to demand the rights that they have been denied for centuries. Generations of black Americans have lived without recognition--almost invisibly--in America. They have been separated from whites socially and culturally.

As the Negro population has emerged from oblivion, and the attitudes towards these people have changed, educators have begun to evaluate the portrayal of blacks in literature. Literature has always been a mirror of the times, and children's literature also reflects the thoughts and attitudes surrounding the black people. As the attitudes toward the Negro has changed, the portrayal has changed in children's literature.

The librarian has a very important role as selector of children's materials. The books he makes available to children may influence their attitudes to blacks. Thus, it is important for the librarian to know the history of the portrayal of blacks and be aware of the racist elements in children's books. he must learn to evaluate materials based on their contribution to the development of positive attitudes toward black Americans.

THE PORTRAYAL OF BLACKS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
Department of Library Science  
University of Northern Iowa

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by  
Ilene Rewerts  
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## Introduction

With the current emphasis on civil rights and the equality of all people, much attention has been given to the minorities in this country. One such minority, the American Negro population, is beginning to demand the rights that they have been denied for centuries. Generations of black Americans have lived without recognition - almost invisibly - in America. They have been separated from whites socially and culturally.

As the Negro population has emerged from oblivion, and the attitudes toward these people have changed, educators have begun to evaluate the portrayal of blacks in literature. Literature has always been a mirror of the times, and children's literature also reflects the thoughts and attitudes surrounding the black people. As the attitudes toward the Negro has changed, the portrayal has changed in children's literature.

The librarian has a very important role as selector of children's materials. The books he makes available to children may influence their attitudes to blacks. Thus, it is important for the librarian to know the history of the portrayal of blacks and be aware of the racist elements in children's books. He must learn to evaluate materials based on their contribution to the development of positive attitudes toward black Americans.

## The History of the Portrayal of Blacks

A better knowledge and understanding of the way blacks have been portrayed in literature in the past will lead to understanding of the black people today. The portrayal of blacks has changed greatly in

the last century, yet this change was surprisingly slow. In 1861,

Jane Andrews described blacks:

"Their lips were thick, their noses broad, and instead of hair, their heads are covered with wool, such as you might see on black sheep. The wool is braided and twisted into little knots and strings all over their heads, and bound with bits of red string or any gay looking thread. They think it looks beautiful, but I am afraid we should not agree with them." (Seven Little Sisters Who Live on the Round Ball That Floats in the Sky, pp. 73-4)<sup>1</sup>

Considering the times, the war, etc. it is perhaps understandable that such a description should appear in literature. Less understandable is finding such a similarity to it written in 1946 by Eleanor Frances:

"Lovis' hair, cut close to his head, was curly as a lamb's fleece. But Julie's hair was braided so tight to curl. It was braided in many little braids, each tied with a bright ribbon, green and red and pink and gold." (Bayon Boy, pp. 17-8)<sup>2</sup>

The misrepresentation of the Negro was due to a great extent to the literature of the day. At this time there was very little contact between the races. Most authors of children's books of the early 1900's had no way of knowing anything about the Negro he was writing about. Yet, they often explained customs and ways of life not as they normally were, but as they came to be stereotyped. The generally accepted belief was that the Negro lived little better than he had in plantation days. He had nothing, wanted nothing, and looked like nothing that resembled other human beings.<sup>3</sup>

Very few children's stories were written about the American

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Broderick, "Lessons In Leadership," Library Journal, 96: (February 15, 1971), 699.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Dharothula H. Millender, "Through a Glass, Darkly," Library Journal, 92: (October 15, 1970), 4571.

Negro even through the 1920's and the Negro Renaissance. The books that were written were almost all of plantation life. Typical of the time was a picture in a story called "The Country Fair" by Nelson Lloyd. Although the picture had no connection with the text of the story, the reader was to think that the Negroes were going to the fair. The three grotesque, apish - looking, black people did have a somewhat normal looking small boy. The caption was: "Dey's somfin' goin' on."<sup>4</sup> It was typical that whites portrayed blacks as speaking in a dialect that no one could understand. Also, the Negro was portrayed as a caricature or joke, as afraid, lazy, docile, and always unambitious.<sup>5</sup> The news media planted this concept and the literature picked it up. Many articles were written at the time to prove the supremacy of whites.

From the 1900's to the 1940's little was known about the Negro except that he lived on a plantation 50 years ago. Negro authors could not get their material published, thus the white's stereotype of the Negro continued. In the late 1930's a few publishers and writers began to recognize the frustrations of the Negro child in trying to find an identity through literature. A few writers saw that it was time for elementary histories on the Negro for children. Several books of photographs of Negro life appeared. In 1939, a book was published that should have been a landmark book. Tobe, by Stella Sharpe, presented the year-round life of a Southern, black, rural, farming family. The photographs by Charles Farrell gave grace, beauty and dignity to

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<sup>4</sup> Millender, p. 4571.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

the black characters. It failed to make a big impact because of the less than ecstatic reviews.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1940's more books on Negro life were published. Most of these were biographies, with some fiction. With the arrival of Negro biographies many myths and stereotypes were dispelled. The few fictional works that were published were often objectionable in that they insulted the average Negro. People wanted to read about the Negro who had little to eat, fought off rats and rodents, froze in unheated, decaying, overcrowded tenements, turned to dope and the cut-throat life of the streets, had no father figure, and came from large families.<sup>7</sup> It seems to be accepted even today that fiction about Negro life must be lewd, low-down, and lustful. Stories of violent actions, broken homes, and street life capture the publisher and the public.<sup>8</sup>

As the end of World War II approached, "the age of brotherhood" arrived in children's books. Since black people were basically believed to be unattractive as blacks, then draw them white and color them sepia.<sup>9</sup> This philosophy can be seen in DeAngeli's Bright Morning where people with typically Caucasian characteristics are painted brown. After many years of the black man being caricatured, the "color me brown" but "act, look, and think white," portrayal came into existence.

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<sup>6</sup> Broderick, p. 700.

<sup>7</sup> Millender, p. 4574.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 4576.

<sup>9</sup> Broderick, p. 701.



Perhaps in relation to stories about other kinds of children, the number of books about Negro life for children was still small, but the fact that publishers were now willing to accept a different kind of story about Negro life was a giant step forward. In 1941 only two dozen books could be called acceptable. By the end of the decade there were over two hundred.

By the 1960's, there was a deluge of stories by and about the Negro, more about the Negro, however, than by the Negro. The stories by black authors were a little more realistic than those by white writers. Dialect and derogatory stories were meeting disapproval from all sides. Still, the very young child was neglected in books that he might select for free reading. On the upper elementary and junior high level, there were many good stories.<sup>10</sup> Although late, it seems that publishers and writers realized the need for Negro and interracial books.

Today there are many kinds of books about Negroes with whom readers might make an acquaintance. We have much physical contact today, but the races are still miles apart in understanding. The illustrations in books are mostly good. The customs and modes and ways of living are being described more or less normally, and stereotypes are gradually disappearing.

#### Racism Perpetuated in Children's Books

If America is the melting pot that social studies teachers

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<sup>10</sup> Millender, p. 4576.

traditionally teach children, then one of the basic ingredients has been left out of the soup. All blacks have grown up looking at white faces in their school books and picture and story books. Whenever anything black was shown, it was something either to be laughed at, ridiculed, or had otherwise unfavorable connotations.

The portrayal of blacks in children's books has done nothing to close the rift between the races. The Negro author seems to have been unacceptable to the publisher, and the white author did not know much about the Negro life. Because there were no books to reveal the true life and aspirations of the Negro, progress in race relations was set back years. Those who chose to promote the inferiority of the Negro went unchallenged by the masses who had no way of finding out for themselves.

Implicit racism becomes apparent in many ways. Reflecting society in general, children's stories symbolize black and white as evil and good respectively. This is evident in the story The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids, in which the specific point is made that the wolf's black paws reveal his evil intent, for the mother's feet are white. Many of the favorite children's stories have a similar damaging effect.

Tom Tit Tot by Jacobs and illustrated by Evaline Ness, creates the image of the malicious and physically repulsive creature by repetition of the phrase "little black thing." Like the Negro American male, Tom Tit Tot is not even human, referred to not as "he" but as "that."<sup>11</sup> A child may not consciously identify with these racist

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<sup>11</sup> Judy Werner, "Black Pearls and Ebony," Library Journal, 93: (October 15, 1968), 3899.

concepts, but in moments of anger, the final insult among Negro children is to call each other black.<sup>12</sup> Color is important in a child's life and developing an appreciation for color becomes a major element in children's books. Over and over again black is the representation of evil, bad and dirty, while white represents the good, pure and clean. "This is racism, not by evil intent but because of the way these concepts are assimilated by both white and black people and transferred to human relations in a very subtle way."<sup>13</sup>

Some of the children's books and stories that have become classics can be considered racist today. A prime example is Doctor Doolittle by Hugh Lofting, a 1923 Newbery Medal winner. It includes such words as "darker," "coon" and "nigger." In the book, Prince Bumpo, the king of Jolliganki's son, sighs, "If only I were a white prince!"<sup>14</sup>

Although some books were innocent when they were written, like Little Black Sambo, the connotation is now bad. The name "Sambo" is today a derogatory name for Negro. The argument has been offered that children don't know the background of a name, but it has been proven and experienced that when this story, or a similar one, is read to an interracial group of children, there is a certain amount of discomfort and inferiority feelings for a black child when white classmates look at him and giggle, later teasing him by calling him Sambo.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Werner, p. 2091.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret G. Cooper, "Newbery Racist," Library Journal, 93: (October 15, 1968), 3899.

<sup>15</sup> Jessie M. Birta, "Portrayal of the Black in Children's Literature," Top of the News, 26: (June, 1970), 397.

Publishers, reviewers and readers wanted to perpetuate the racist attitudes toward Negroes in children's literature. When black characters were depicted with thick lips, kinky hair (boys) or hundreds of tiny pigtails(girls), when they had protuding eyes, ape-like jaws, and angular bodies, people thought of them as representatives of that marvelously quaint and curious group of "colored folk." But, when Negroes were depicted with charm and dignity, they were "pleasant," but lacking in "gaiety and spontaneity."<sup>16</sup> In Epaminadas and His Aunty, by Sarah Cane Fryant, the characters are objectionable both to Negro children and their parents. The main characters are a stupid, trifling, big lipped black boy and his equally worthless aunty. Books that portray the black child as equal or superior to the white child are too few, though the reverse can readily be seen.

The exclusion of Negroes in history has tended to leave Negro children and other children with the impression that the Negro had no hand in building this nation; that no Negro heroes lived or died here; that no Negro culture flowed into the American melting pot. Such bookish racism has been responsible for what James Baldwin called, "a feeling (in black children) of no past, no present and no future."<sup>17</sup>

Generations of blacks were brought up believing that their only place in American history was as slaves. In studies made as recently as four years ago, it was found that black people did not exist in American history books widely used in schools and libraries. The

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<sup>16</sup> Broderick, p. 701.

<sup>17</sup> Richard G. Hotcha, "The Library and the Black Revolt," Illinois Libraries, 52: (March, 1970), 237.

black man was considered only as a slave before the Civil War and as a problem since then.

It is obvious that the practical erasing of the black people from the record of the past had serious effects on the self-concept of the black child. Personal health depends to a great extent on group self-esteem. The spirit withers and dies if it is deprived of the opportunity to feed on the deeds of great men and the ideals of great movements. It is also bound to have had its subtle effect on white attitudes. In general, the history books of the past have reinforced notions among whites of their superiority and among blacks of their inferiority.<sup>18</sup>

It is regrettable that our textbooks and library books have made the black population invisible; that they have created an image which typifies black people as artless, unsophisticated and spineless creatures. In failing to see that they were party to the continued degradation of the black people by helping perpetuate attitudes formed during slavery, and by accepting stereotypes instead of demanding human beings, they added fuel to the fire of racism.

#### Selection of Children's Literature Portraying Blacks

After a century in which 20 million Americans were invisible, now the scene is rapidly changing. With black awareness penetrating the national consciousness, blackness is selling well, and the pub-

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<sup>18</sup> Hotcha, p. 237.

lishers are pouring forth books. This is vitally important to librarians seriously trying to relate themselves to the black revolt, because books and other learning materials filled with half-truths, evasions and distortions are disastrous to both white and black Americans. Many new books, written and published in haste to meet demands for black literature, do little more than take away one stereotype and replace it with another. This makes it most important that librarians set up selection policies and goals that are relevant to the needs of black and white children.

Selection of children's books that reflect the black experience is not easy. In fact, even a librarian with good intentions may become confused. Jessie BIRTHA, a black librarian, sets up guidelines for selecting black literature. The librarian should begin by asking two general questions: (1) "How would I feel upon reading this book if I were a black child?" and (2) "If I were to borrow this book from the library, would I return to get another book like it?"<sup>19</sup> In asking these questions, the librarian may destroy the myths and stereotypes that have plagued Negro children for generations.

A great deal can be said concerning the selection of non-fiction, yet inaccuracies in non-fiction are more readily recognized than in fiction. Library books in this area should be selected that will reveal the tremendous contributions that black people have made to its building, considering the austere conditions under which they lived, the violence

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<sup>19</sup> BIRTHA, p. 400.

that has always been a major part of its fiber, and the hypocrisy, prejudice, arrogance, and bigotry that are part of the foundations upon which this country stands.<sup>20</sup> In building collections, the folklore, proverbs, moral stories, and myths of Africa which have come down to twentieth century America through the Africans brought here as slaves should be as much a part of the library as European folklore.

The selection of fiction becomes a bit harder. There are many books that deal explicitly with Negro life in America. Among these are several novels about the Harlem experience. These should be considered with caution as some authors and publishers are inclined to exploit sensational aspects in treatments that have little educational or literary merit.<sup>21</sup> Other novels with racial themes are pedestrian, superficial and didactic, especially those written for the teen-age reader. The plot often concerns a black or white youth who comes into contact with another racial group and after initial difficulty establishes comfortable relationships and learns that all people are the same underneath.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, stories and poems offer a chance to develop healthy racial concepts. For example, instead of the racist use of black for evil (mentioned above), books may develop a warm feeling toward black and

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<sup>20</sup> Carrie Robinson, "Media for the Black Curriculum," A.L.A. Bulletin, 63: (February, 1969), 243.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Peters, "The Black Experience in Books," Top of the News, 25: (June, 1969), 385.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

brown. Wanda Gag's Millions of Cats includes "a kitten which was black and very beautiful." Tico, in Leo Lionni's books does not find happiness until he is all black; his reward for giving away his precious golden feathers in a replacement with "real black feathers, soft as silk."<sup>23</sup> Perhaps this is a subtle point, but subtle means can be effective in helping create better human relations, based on a black child with a healthy self-image and a white child with a healthy image of the black child.

It is agreed that on subjects as critical as race, authors must follow one of the first rules of writing, "Write what you know about." White authors have permeated the field of black literature with books written out of guilt. But, good intentions are not enough, for imbred racist attitudes continue to negate the black image and experience.<sup>24</sup> These books cannot be called a representation of the black experience, but a white interpretation of the black experience. While some critics feel that such a book might be good for the white child, Jessie Birtha does not. She states: "If it contains material inappropriate for a black child, it is also unsuitable for a white child, for the white child would derive from this book a distorted picture of a black child, his emotion, his behavior, his background."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Werner, p. 2101.

<sup>24</sup> Binnie Tate, "In House and Out House; Authenticity and the Black Experience in Children's Books," Library Journal, 95: (October 15, 1970), 3596.

<sup>25</sup> Birtha, p. 400.



In selecting material that reflects the black experience, it should first meet all of the essentials of good literature: plot, content, theme, characterization, style and format. After this five points must be evaluated:

1. Approach - Does the author really know black people? Is he unbiased? Does he use the "color them black" slant?
2. Style of Writing - Does the book arouse resentment in manner it is told? Are there canned expressions like "flashing white teeth," etc.?
3. Characterization - Are the blacks offensively or realistically portrayed?
4. Language - Is the language natural and convincing? If dialects are used, are they believable?
5. Illustrations - Are the old stereotypes used or are the characters natural and dignified?

With increasing demands for black literature from both blacks and whites, the librarian may have difficulty in finding enough material that meets all of these points. The final rule of selection is to buy multiple copies of a few good books rather than numerous books without consideration to quality.

#### Blacks Portrayed in Children's Literature Today

While children's books are portraying blacks much more realistically today, there is still a variation in the quality of these books. Also, as with any literature, there is no general agreement as to the worth of black literature. A very brief survey of books found in the Youth Collection of the University of Northern Iowa Library gives an indication of several types of books that are now being published.

As a reaction against the invisibility of the Negro people in past years, non-fiction books have been written with the specific

intent of portraying blacks in modern American society. These books are written with the dual purpose of informing white people about how black people live, and giving the black people a chance to relate to others of their own race. Two outstanding examples of this type of non-fiction are Uptown by John Steptoe and I Wish I Had an Afro by John Shearer. In Uptown two black boys take a walk through Harlem and try to decide what to be when they grow up. They see junkies, cops, Brothers and hippies and consider the lives of each. They view Harlem not as visitors, but as boys at home in their own neighborhood. Uptown is a powerful and realistic book which meets all the criterion stated above.

John Shearer's book depicts a similar environment but with a slightly different slant. Candid black and white photos illustrate the story of a poor black family. The son Little John, his mother Rena, and his father John, each talks about his life, his hopes, and his dreams. The book gives an honest appraisal of the problems faced by a black family. Both of these books fulfill the function of informing the reader about a way of life. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of these books is that they present a story without an ending. In Uptown, the boy's day is concluded: "'I really don't know what we're gonna be,' said Dennis. 'Guess we'll just hang out together for a while, and just dig on everythin' that's goin' on.'" Little John, in I Wish I Had An Afro, poses many questions to himself. He finally says, "'Maybe when I be twelve I'll know.'"

Up to ten years ago one would have believed to look at the shelves, that there were no black leaders in America. This is now being remedied with new biographies that depict the accomplishments

of great black leaders. One such book is Harriet And the Promised Land by Jacob Lawrence. This is the story of Harriet Tubman, a slave who was instrumental in helping over 300 people to freedom. The pictures combine with the verse to give the reader a vivid impression of slavery.

"A runaway slave  
With a price on her head,  
'I'll be free,' said Harriet,  
'Or I'll be dead!'"

The integration of schools has led the writing of many books on this subject. Many writers, getting on the bandwagon of popularity of Negro books, turned out stories of varying degrees of quality. Two typical examples are New Boy in School by May Justus and The Empty Schoolhouse by Natalie Savage Carlson. In May Justus' book a Negro boy enters an all - white grade school. "It all seemed so strange to him. Most of the faces about him were friendly - Miss Baker's and those of the children - but they were white faces. 'There are so many of them,' said Linnie, 'and only one of me.' Yes, Linnie was the only Negro boy in the room." (p. 12) This book in no way depicts a black child's experience in a white school. Instead it gives a white authors interpretation. Linnie has his problems and his white teacher and friends help him to solve them.

The Empty Schoolhouse is more realistic in that a great deal of trouble occurs when a Negro girl tries to enter a white parochial school. The Negro girl's white friends turn against her, and yet the prejudice exhibited seems only to be token prejudice. The real hate that combines with prejudice was absent. There is a long list of books available in this mode. Most of them have happy endings in which the blacks and whites come to understand each other. It is interesting to note that most of these books are written by white authors.

In contrast to these novels that portray a shallow image of the Negro is a book by Mary Hays Weik which gives a realistic interpretation of a black child's experience. The Jazz Man is a story about a black boy named Zeke. Zeke is confronted with, hunger and fear when his parents desert him. This book reveals all the terror of a child left alone in Harlem.

The final group of books were selected because they deal not specifically with Negro children and black experience, but Negro children and childhood experience. Two excellent examples are Evan's Corner by Elizabeth Starr Hill and City Rhythms by Ann Grifaloni. While both of these books have a Negro boy as a main character, neither boy is concerned with his color. Yet, the Negro way of life is a part of the story. Both stories take place in the city. In Evan's Corner, Evan lives in a small apartment with a family of eight. His concern is finding a place that is all his own. In City Rhythms Jimmy becomes aware of the sounds, smells, sights and rhythm of the city. These books are about black children - but mostly they are about children.

This small sampling does not begin to cover the many books that are written about blacks today. There are now more and more books, while not with a black theme, that include characters that are black. A growing majority of the new children's books are interracial in nature. As this void is being filled a child can now see the world reflected in the books he reads.

## Conclusion

There has been a great deal of soul searching recently out of which has come the realization that only the inhuman brutalize. Having been a party to the brutalization to which America has subjected black people, we have decided that it is imperative that we respect individual worth and cease to maintain futile attempts at being superior simply because America has a white majority.

It is the librarian's job to help destroy the myths and stereotypes that have plagued Negro children for generations. Literature must be made available to black children that will give them pride in and an awareness of their heritage. Our hope for the future is that books about Negroes for children will cease to require "priority status." Then these books will simply appear as a normal part of the publishing world, and will be acceptable to their readers on the same bases as other good books for children.

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