
October 2003

Changing the face of the Children's Literature Canon

Rose Casement

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

Recommended Citation

Casement, Rose (2003) "Changing the face of the Children's Literature Canon," *Michigan Reading Journal*.
Vol. 36 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol36/iss1/4>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Changing the Face of the Children's Literature Canon

BY ROSE CASEMENT

Every semester in my children's literature course, we begin our study of children's literature by bringing to class books students remember from their childhood, books they plan to share with their students, books they are likely to purchase as a baby shower gift for a friend, books they are anxious to share with their own children. In short, books that they have found special and endearing. Not surprisingly, some of these books are the books that their parents read to them or placed in their hands.

Picture books that I can expect to see include: *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) by Maurice Sendak; *The Snowy Day* (1962) by Ezra Jack Keats; *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1967) by Bill Martin, Jr.; *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969) by Eric Carle; *The Little House* (1942) by Virginia Lee Burton; *Goodnight Moon* (1947) by Margaret Wise Brown; *The Little Engine that Could* (1930) by Wally Piper; *The Cat and the Hat* (1957) by Dr. Seuss; *The Pokey Little Puppy* (1942) by Janette Sebring Lowrey; *Millions of Cats* (1928) by Wanda Gag; *Chicken Little* (1843) by John Green Chandler; and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) by Beatrix Potter.

Chapter books I can expect to see include: *Charlotte's Web* (1952) by E. B. White; *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932) by Laura Ingalls Wilder; *Winnie the Pooh* (1926) by A. A. Milne; *Pinocchio* (1925) by Carlo Collodi; *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll; *Peter Pan* (1906) by Sir James Matthew Barrie; *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) by L. Frank Baum; and *The Hobbit* (1937) by J. R. R. Tolkien. And there is usually at least one copy of Shel Silverstein's poetry book, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1974).

Because of their sustained popularity and continued publication, these books could possibly be regarded as part of a children's literature canon. The concept of a canon originated centuries ago as a set of sacred books that the then dominant Catholic Church approved. This definition and distinction has been broadened to represent books that contain some measure of excellence that sets them apart from the thousands and thousands of books that are published each year. Generally, rich literary qualities and endurance with readers are two prominent features of the books that come to be considered a part of the canon. In addition to these two characteristics, the books included in a canon of children's literature are also books that shape the imagination (Jussawalla, 1997).

In the case of the books that my students bring to that first class, many are award-winning books, although being an award winner does not ensure a place in this collection. Nor does absence from distinguished award-winning lists appear to necessarily diminish their chances. One thing is certain, though: This informal canon, as canons do, has influenced those who have read it, and these stories have become part of the

Rose Casement is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan-Flint where she teaches literacy and children's literature. She co-authored the children's literature textbook, Children's Literature: An Invitation to the World, with Diana Mitchell and Pamela Waterbury and has written and presented at state and national conferences on inclusive representation in children's literature.

shared discourse of our culture. We all know about the little wooden puppet boy whose nose grew when he lied, and about a chicken that, taking a rumor too seriously, fussed, "The sky is falling." I can't help but repeat the refrain, "I think I can, I think I can" when undertaking a task that stretches my abilities beyond where I can comfortably perform. And, how many of us, lost and confused, have told ourselves, "I'm not in Kansas anymore?"

The books presented in my class during that first session certainly don't constitute an exhaustive list of books that one might identify as a children's literature canon. There are many more. For some, the early works that came to us from England are more the stuff of a canon. *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe and *Gulliver's Travels* (1735) by Jonathan Swift are often identified as part of the children's literature canon in spite of the fact that they were never intended for a juvenile audience (Hoffman, 1999/2000). Interestingly, some favorite stories seem to reflect a particular region and don't hold the same status as one moves from east to west. For instance, *Make Way for Ducklings* (1941) and *Blueberries for Sal* (1948) by Robert McCloskey are well known in New England where I lived for a number of years, but my mid-western students look confused when I bring them up as possibilities for an "old favorites list."

At the end of our class trip down this literary memory lane, we look around at what we have gathered. At least 60 books have been shared. It has been a gathering of memories, of early reading fun, and of love of books and story. We now look at what these books have in common, what has led students to bring them to class and other students to share the love of the same books.

As with the adult literature canon, these books share characteristics that are engaging enough to have sustained them through the years, even as children's literature has become a major player in the publishing industry and competition is keen. Multi-dimensional

characters, solid plots, and realistic, authentic settings are among these characteristics. But probably the most important characteristic is that the author's style has set them apart from all of the rest.

However, there is another characteristic that these books share, a characteristic that my students frequently don't notice. I point it out in question form. Where are people of color in these stories? Who are the authors and illustrators of the stories and how many of them are people of color? Students are surprised. They hadn't thought of that. In our collective wisdom, we know that within the implications of what we are seeing, something is fundamentally flawed.

And thus begins a new journey, a journey into what it means to have a "canon" in children's literature. What are the implications of having such a canon? What are the implications of the exclusivity of such a selection?

And what can we do, if indeed we need to do anything?

By its very nature, the canon of children's literature reflects the history of children's literature. Until Nancy Larrick wrote "The All White World of Children's Books" for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1965, the absence of diversity in the representations presented in children's literature had been largely ignored by major publishers. Larrick's "three-year study of over 5,000 juvenile books ... revealed that less than one percent of these books had any reference in text or in depiction—to contemporary African Americans" (Evans, 1994, p. 683). Of black authors and illustrators who were published prior to the 1960s, only a few were represented in popular biographical sources or library reference books (Rollock, 1987). Whiteness was the pervasive perspective, the lens through which the reader viewed story, author, and illustrator

After the sixties, our collective awareness was raised, and we began to expect that racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity would be part of the offerings in the publication of children's literature and that multicultural authors and illustrators would be represented. This change has not only given us some of the richest story

*Where are people of color in these stories?
Who are the authors and illustrators of the stories and how many of them are people of color?*

and greatest artistic talent that we have in children's literature today, it has given all children a deeper sense of understanding the world around them. For children of color this inclusion was profound. In an interview (Casement, 2003), author Jacqueline Woodson describes her childhood delight at finding the works of Virginia Hamilton and Mildred Taylor. Once she found out that "there were books written by people of color, I always looked for them and devoured them" (p. 85).

In spite of the increase in the number of multicultural books published and in spite of their high literary quality, issues remain that we need to consider when we think about a canon of children's literature. Some of these issues are the same issues that surround the adult literature canon: devotion to literature that we have been taught to regard as classic, maintenance of a cultural heritage through a traditional canon, and disagreement as to what literature will be included in the curriculum.

"I sometimes feel like a heretic to the canon into which I was born" (Barbieri, 1996). Looking at the books with which we were raised can be an emotional experience. We are thinking of the people who held us and read to us as well as the stories that we found funny or exciting. It is not unusual for students to defend some of the most racist representations in the books that they once loved.

When a student asked me where she could find a copy of *Little Black Sambo* (1900) by Helen Bannerman, I suggested that she look at Julius Lester's *Sam and the Tigers: A New Telling of Little Black Sambo* (1996). No, she wanted the original story that she had grown up with. She wanted it for her grandchildren.

Our conversation moved from the classroom into my office with her arguments that *Little Black Sambo* is a cute story about a very brave and quick-witted little boy. We looked on the last page of Lester's book at his explanation for why he had retold the story. He

acknowledges that the story itself has captivated readers for more than a century but that, unfortunately, the rendition published in 1900 had features that detracted from its heroic main character. "Intentionally or not, *Little Black Sambo* reinforced the idea of white superiority through illustrations exaggerating African physiognomy and a name, Sambo, that had been used negatively for blacks since the early seventeenth century" (Lester, 1996, n.p.). Did she really want her grandchildren indoctrinated into looking at race stereotypically? No. I explained that children are not likely to understand the concept of stereotypes or be able to deconstruct the text even if she tried to explain the issues that the text presented. As she left, though, I was pretty sure she was unconvinced about the negative implications of her original choice.

The second concern, maintaining a sense of cultural heritage, has resulted in "culture wars" in the academic curriculum of high schools and universities (Barbieri, 1996; Lewis, 2001; Templin, 1995). Although I do not believe that the battle lines are drawn as clearly with regard to the canon of children's literature as with the adult literature canon, there are many teachers and parents who can not imagine growing up without particular books that they regard as classic. Attacks on the inclusion of multicultural literature have described such inclusion as "cultural illiteracy" and the abandonment of our cultural heritage (Stotsky, 1999).

The emotional arguments of heritage, history, racism, sexism, voice, oppression, inclusion, and exclusion create a discourse that is complex and, at times divisive, partly because the canon feels like an old friend and changing it seems like a threat to the world we have known. In the end, of course, we are left with the reality that there is only so much time in our school days and so many financial and spatial resources that we have. I believe that it is important to take that time and provide the resources to make the commitment to expanding the offerings to be inclusive of the great

The emotional arguments of heritage, history, racism, sexism, voice, oppression, inclusion, and exclusion create a discourse that is complex and, at times divisive, partly because the canon feels like an old friend and changing it seems like a threat to the world we have known.

literature that reflects high literary standards and is inclusive of authors and illustrators whose work was previously excluded from children's literature.

This leads us to the third issue: What books should we include in the curriculum? What books do we talk about and make available, knowing that by providing the visibility, focus, and attention of having them as part of our curriculum, we are likely to create a new more inclusive canon? My course focuses on the inclusion of multicultural children's literature and the diversity that is found within races and ethnicities throughout the genres.

Certainly one of the best sources for information about exceptional multicultural literature is the Coretta Scott King award winners list. Established in 1970 by the American Library Association, Coretta Scott King awards are given each year for outstanding literature written or illustrated by people of color "whose distinguished books promote an understanding and appreciation of the 'American Dream'" (ALA, 2003). There are award winner and honor books for chapter books and an award winner and honor books for illustrations. An additional award, the John Steptoe Award for New Talent, honors talented authors and illustrators of color new to published children's literature.

Of course, it's not just availability in the classroom that will create a canon. Publishing, marketing, and maintaining books in print will all play a part, too. Interestingly, while browsing amazon.com, I find that out of the 29 picture books awarded the Coretta Scott King Award since 1974, when picture books began receiving awards, four are out of print. However, of the 65 Caldecott Award winners selected since its inception in 1938, only one is out of print. This comparative lack of availability over time will diminish the chances of books becoming woven into the fabric of our reading and becoming part of the canon.

Violet Harris, a scholar and author in the study of

multicultural children's literature, suggests that these statistics may reflect the fact that some major booksellers are reluctant to stock the works of smaller publishers and a belief that there is a limited market for the books (1991). She laments that many wonderful books are not read because of the belief that the themes in multicultural literature do not have universal appeal and that the books will only appeal to the racial or ethnic group portrayed. Another misconception that I have heard is that in communities where there is little cultural diversity, these books are not needed. Nothing could be further from the truth, as communities where little diversity is present

in children's everyday lives are in even greater need of broader understandings of people and places in their global neighborhood. By providing books with representations of different races, religions, and ethnicities, we provide children with "stories that open windows into the lives of people different from themselves, windows that open to tolerance, empathy, compassion, and celebrations of diversity"

(Casement, 2002, p. 46).

Certainly, as important as the books themselves are, the authors and illustrators who have become known for their extraordinary talents are worth noting. Virginia Hamilton, Julius Lester, Nikki Grimes, Mildred Taylor, Eloise Greenfield, Christopher Paul Curtis, Jacqueline Woodson, Andrea Davis Pinkney, Walter Dean Myers, Angela Johnson, and Patricia and Frederick McKissack, along with Bryan Collier and Tom Feelings, both of whom do their own illustrations, are some of the names of the outstanding authors of children's literature today who also happen to be people of color. Illustrators of color whose talents create some of the best art work in children's literature are Jerry Pinkney, E. B. Lewis, Floyd Cooper, Brian Pinkney, Faith Ringgold, Ashley Bryan, John Steptoe, Christopher Myers, Pat Cummings, and the married team of Leo and Diane Dillon. And this list is far from exhaustive.

By providing books with representations of different races, religions, and ethnicities, we provide children with "stories that open windows into the lives of people different from themselves, windows that open to tolerance, empathy, compassion, and celebrations of diversity"

These authors and illustrators likely would have been excluded from the publishing world before the 1960s and, amazingly, may still be excluded from the canon even as we begin to include more contemporary work. Andrea Pinkney, author and publisher, went to hear a well-respected children's literature scholar speaking about the history of picture books. She brought with her a friend, an African American woman new to the world of children's literature illustration. Pinkney and her friend were the only black attendees in an audience of young editorial assistants and junior editors, many of whom would be the likely editors and publishers of the future. The lecture and slide presentation of exemplary books was chronological and as the speaker began to bring in the books of the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties, Pinkney waited to hear the names of African American authors and illustrators whom she would have expected to hear mentioned for their outstanding work, work that had won the Caldecott as well as the Coretta Scott King Award. To her astonishment, none of the authors or illustrators of color were mentioned. Not one.

As the lecture concluded with not one single mention of a black illustrator, I felt the acute sense of isolation that comes from unintended neglect. I felt most saddened for my friend, the new illustrator, and for the young people in the audience, many of whom were not even aware of what they'd missed. (Pinkney, 2001, p. 536)

This experience provided Pinkney, who is the wife of Brian Pinkney and daughter-in-law of Jerry Pinkney, both of whom are prize-winning illustrators, with a powerful argument for the continued need for the Coretta Scott King Award. But, it also is a clear warning that even with the wonderful multicultural literature that we have today, we still have issues that may stand in the way of having this work become part of the children's literature canon. These issues, including publishing limitations, confusion as to the audience of these books, and a long history that must take a new direction, continue to present real barriers. Now that we have wonderful multicultural children's literature, literature that represents the best literary and artistic quality, we must make sure that it has

a wide audience, and an audience that will give it a chance to become part of their favorite books, part of their history with children's literature and, yes, part of the canon of children's literature.

Of the books that were brought in the first day of class, only *The Snowy Day* includes people of color in the illustrations. Of the books I mentioned earlier, none of the authors or illustrators is a person of color. Because our classroom libraries reveal what we value in children's literature and because the books in our libraries can have a significant impact on our students, we must choose our selections carefully, going beyond our own old favorites. Because books authored or illustrated by people of color may not have been available in our own early reading experiences, we must make an intentional effort to acquaint ourselves with work published more recently that has not yet been represented in the "traditional" canon. Only when teachers make this effort to include excellent multicultural books in their classrooms will the outstanding books of the last 40 years that include people of color find their rightful place in the children's literature canon of today.

References

- Barbieri, R. (1996). Independent reading. *Independent School*, 55(2), 84-89.
- Casement, R. (2003). Jacqueline Woodson: Real characters, real voices. *Language Arts*, 81(1), 84-87.
- Casement, R. (2002). Democratic representation in children's literature. *Democracy & Education*, 14 (3), 45-47.
- Coretta Scott King Award*. (Last revised: August 8, 2003). Retrieved September 6, 2003, from http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Our_Association/Round_Tables/SRRT/Coretta_Scott_King_Book_Awards/Coretta_Scott_King_Book_Awards.htm
- Evans, S. (1994). "All the colors of the race": Three guides to children's books. *African American Review*, 28(4), 683-686.
- Harris, V. (1991). 'Have you heard about an African Cinderella story?' The hunt for multiethnic literature. *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 7(3), 23-37.

- Hoffman, N. V. (1999/2000). The children's canon: From sermons to entertainment—and back again. *Civilization*, 6(6) 38-41.
- Jussawalla, F. (1997). Children's literature. *College Literature*, 24(3), 180-186.
- Lester, J. (reteller). (1996). *Sam and the tigers: A new telling of Little Black Sambo*. (Ill. by J. Pinkney). New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Lewis, D. (2001). More news from the front: Recent books about the North American 'culture wars.' *English Studies*, 3, 262-270.
- Pinkney, A. (2001). Awards that stand on solid ground. *The Horn Book Magazine*, 77 (5), 535-540.
- Rollock, B. (1988). *Black authors and illustrators of children's books: A biographical dictionary*. New York: Garland.
- Stotsky, S. (1999). Is it really multicultural illiteracy? *The Education Digest*, 65 (4), 17-21.
- Templin, C. (1995). Canons, class, and the crisis of the humanities. *College Literature*, 22(2), 151-157.
- Favorite Children's Books Cited**
- Bannerman, H. (1900). *The story of little black Sambo*. London: Grant Richards.
- Barrie, J.M. (1906). *Peter Pan in Kensington gardens* (1st ed.). (Ill. by A. Rackham). London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Baum, L.F. (1900). *The wonderful wizard of Oz*. (Ill. by W.W. Denslow). Chicago: G.M. Hill.
- Brown, M.W. (1947). *Goodnight moon*. (Ill. by C. Hurd). New York: Harper.
- Burton, V.L. (1942). *The little house*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Carle, E. (1969). *The very hungry caterpillar*. New York: Philomel Books.
- Carroll, L. (1865). *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*. (Ill. by J. Tenniel). London: Macmillan.
- Chandler, J.G. (1843). *Remarkable story of Chicken Little*. Boston: T.H. Carter & Co.
- Collodi, C. (1925). *The adventures of Pinocchio* (3d ed.). (Ill. by A. Mussino). New York: Macmillan.
- Defoe, D. (1719). *The life & strange surprising adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York*. Oxford: B. Blackwell.
- Gág, W. (1928). *Millions of cats*. New York: Coward-McCann.
- Geisel, T. [Dr. Seuss]. (1957). *The cat in the hat*. New York: Random House.
- Keats, E.J. (1962). *The snowy day*. New York: Viking Press.
- Lowrey, J. (1942). *The pokey little puppy*. New York: Simon & Schuster/Golden Books.
- Martin Jr., B., & Carle, E. (1967). *Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?* New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston.
- McCloskey, R. (1941). *Make way for ducklings*. New York: Viking Press.
- McCloskey, R. (1948). *Blueberries for Sal*. New York: Viking Press.
- Milne, A.A. (1926). *Winnie-the-Pooh*. (Ill. by E.H. Shepard). London: Methuen.
- Piper, W. (1930). *The little engine that could*. New York: Platt & Munk.
- Potter, B. (1902). *The tale of Peter Rabbit*. London: Frederick Warne.
- Sendak, M. (1963). *Where the wild things are*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Silverstein, S. (1974). *Where the sidewalk ends*. New York: Harper.
- Swift, J. (1735). *[Gulliver's] Travels into several remote nations of the world. In four parts* (revised ed.). Dublin: G. Faulkner.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1937). *The hobbit or, There and back again*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- White, E.B. (1952). *Charlotte's web* (1st ed.). (Ill. by G. Williams). New York: Harper.
- Wilder, L.I. (1932). *Little house in the big woods*. (Ill. by H. Sewell). New York: Harper & Brothers.