DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 520 CS 213 720

AUTHOR Kline, Lucinda
TITLE African-American Children's Literature.
PUB DATE Dec 92
NOTE 27p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS African Culture; African History; *Black Culture; *Black History; Black Youth; Childrens Libraries; *Childrens Literature; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Context; Multicultural Education; Picture Books
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; Historical Background; Trade Books

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the history of African American children's literature, the present-day status of it, and ventures predictions about its future. The paper also considers the historic and social factors of the debate about whether an author who is not African American can write a book that will/should be accepted in this category of children's literature. The first section of the paper deals with the history of this body of literature and designates the 1890s as the first decade in which books written for children of color were published and includes a survey of representative titles. The next section describes the present-day status of such work and includes discussion of specific picture books, folktales, and historical novels. The last section of the paper predicts the future of literature written for children of color, notes that the demand for this kind of literature has steadily increased over the last 3 decades, and suggests that the current commitment to multi-cultural education will only continue to increase that demand. The paper concludes that the changing demographics of today's society not only leave children of color at a disadvantage if diversities are not explored, studied, and accepted, but also predicts real difficulty for white children who will have to cope with the first American minority-majority. Thirty-two footnotes are attached. (SAM)

African-American Children's Literature

Lucinda Kline
Fairfield University
December 1992

"But there are other things, Cassie, that if I'd let be, they'd eat away at me and destroy me in the end. And it's the same with you, baby. There are things you can't back down on, things you gotta take a stand on. But it's up to you to decide what them things are. You have to demand respect in this world, ain't nobody just gonna hand it to you. How you carry yourself, what you stand for--that's how you gain respect. But, little one, ain't nobody's respect worth more than your own. You understand that?"

David from Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Puffin Books, 1975, pp. 175-176)

The above quotation is from a conversation David Logan has with his ten-year-old daughter Cassie. The words sound similar to many a loving father-daughter conversation, but the precipitating incident is far from average. Cassie had been told to walk in the road so a white girl could walk on the sidewalk, and when Cassie balked, she was knocked into the road by a white man. Her father explains to her that while he wanted to go after that man and knock **him** down, he had to weigh the results of those actions against the repercussions they would bring to the entire family. Thus, instead Cassie must lose a bit of her childhood and her father must teach her how to gain strength from such situations.

Isolated as such, this incident is easily matched by all children growing up, but for African-American children these incidents may well occur all too often. Therefore, it is imperative that African-American children find these stories in literature and know these strong, positive figures. It is vitally important that all children understand the devastating effects of prejudice and the history of peoples who have withstood and perserved and survived such prejudice for generations --thus, the essential need for quality African-American children's literature.

This paper will look at the history of African-American children's literature, the present day status of it, and what can be predicted about its future. There is much debate concerning African-American children's literature around the issue of whether an author who is not African-American can write a book that will/should be accepted under this category. Considering the historic and social factors of this controversy, this paper will examine that conflict within the framework of the paper.

The definition of American-African children's literature for this paper will be books written for African-American children and books with African-American children and families as the main characters.

History of African-American children's literature

The first African-American children's literature was published in the 1890's. Mrs. A. E. Johnson is usually credited with the first book written about and presumably for children of color (Harris, 1990, p.543). The novel Mrs. Johnson wrote portrayed well-mannered children striving to achieve the status of middle-class by obedience and refined behavior. The book did not examine or portray prejudice or hardship; instead, it offered goals to be achieved through assimilation and dogged perservance. With respect to the social parameters of the time, Mrs. Johnson's books, while distressing and dishonest by today's standards, broke racial barriers and did indeed offer hope.

Also written in the same decade was a collection of poems entitled Little Brown Baby by Paul Dunbar. Harris (1990) describes the collection as "an appreciation of African American folk culture" (p. 544) but explains the difficulty of reading the thick dialect of its language.

It must be mentioned that for several reasons the fact that these two books were published is in itself a wonder. Aside from the post-Reconstructive attitudes and prejudice, these authors faced the difficulty of writing for a population which was not only poorly educated but whose education was controlled by a dominant culture that judged the African-American culture as inferior and not worthy of study. It is hardly sur-

prising that Mrs. Johnson's characters are submissive; the important fact is that they existed.

In the early part of this century, various novels written for African-American children were published, meeting the rise of a growing middle class of educated black Americans. The most important publication of this time was W. E. B. DuBois' children's magazine **The Brownies' Book.** As Harris (1990) explained, the magazine had seven stated goals:

> to "make colored children realize that being 'colored' is a normal, beautiful thing"; to inform them of the achievements of their race; to teach them a code of honor; to entertain them; to provide them with a model for interacting with Whites; to instill pride in home and family; and to inspire them toward racial uplift and sacrifice. (p. 546)

While the magazine remained in publication only for two years, it set a precedence not only for other African-American children's magazines (as demonstrated by Vaughn-Robeson and Hill in their work, 1989) but also set in motion a set of standards for an ethnic community of writers. The African-American experience became legitimized and the needs of African-American children were recognized as culturally different and specific. The goals that DuBois stated were structured for the success of his culture within a society ruled by another dominant culture.

Since the arrival of the first Africans to this country, a culture had been denied them; they were not allowed to maintained their African ways nor were they allowed to embrace

the white American culture. As Ostendorf (1982) explained: "Cultural exclusion meant that blacks had to fall back on the resources of their oral tradition and to work with their own socialization agencies." (p.22) The culture of and arising from slavery became the African-American culture with its own sets of social mores and aspirations. What DuBois' work set in motion was a statement of that culture--a strong, positive statement that spoke not only of the past, but of the present and most importantly to the future.

During the middle decades of this century, the majority of African-American children's books were of two categories: black biographies and novels. The biographies serve a valuable function, as Hale (1991) states, to:

> transmit the message to African American children that quicksand and landmines characterize the road to becoming an African American achiever in America; however, they also transmit the message that it is possible to overcome these obstacles. (p. 13)

These biographies state the problems for the culture and offer strong, positive role models. They also confirm the oppression of the culture and help children to deal with prejudice in a literary form, preparing them for dealing with it in their own lives.

The novels of this time were mostly what is described as socially conscious or melting pot books. This literature told the stories of African-American children and families, by portraying them as colorless, universally good/bad characters. These books were important in their time for several reasons. First, they did speak of the universality of mankind, and while the African-American culture certainly possesses a long list of culturally specific experiences and attributes, never before had blacks been portrayed in such positive ways. Additionally, for a society being forced to admit its racial atrocities, these books offered a non-threatening portrayal of African-American life. Furthermore, as Ostendorf (1982) states:

> For a long time it was not politically wise to stress any cultural difference between Afro-Americans and (Euro-) Americans. One could not study African retentions without supporting Southern senators who argued for segregation on the grounds of cultural difference. (p.6)

These books acted as social stepping stones and were valuable in their time. However, as Harris (1990) points out there is real danger in these books: "the reality of African American life and the continued racial discrimination and retrenchment of the era belied the books' attempts to present a rosier picture" (pp. 549-550). These novels also gave birth to the controversy surrounding the classification of African-American children's literature which is written by white authors.

It is the inaccuracies and attempts to ignore the structure and history of the African-American culture that has enraged

people when authors do not address the realities of their black characters. Trousdale (1990) examines the message of such literature in her article concerning the "submissive theology" of well-known and often-assigned children's books. She examines Amos Fortune, Free Man, Sounder, and Words by Heart and substantiates very powerfully her belief that these novels give the message that for African-Americans "growing up involves acceptance of a submissive attitude along with an inferior position in society" (p. 137). She compares Mildred Taylor's Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry with the first three books, stating that in the first group of books "the reader is given the sense that black people are prepared to be subservient to whites and that they expect and accept a secondary position in a white-dominated society" (p.136). In Taylor's book, however, black people are depicted as strong, intelligent people who have learned how to cope and survive and succeed in a world of cruelty and injustice.

Trousdale is certainly correct in stating that "the perspective which Amos Fortune, Free Man, Sounder, and Words by Heart present on the history, values, and beliefs of an oppressed people is the perspective of the class of society that has perpetuated the oppression" (p.138). These books are not good literature if they are not researched and are not accurate in their portrayals of different cultures. Somehow they remain on the canons of literature for children. The

authors are guilty of inaccurate, socially dangerous writing; the established society of educators and critics is guilty of perpetuating and empowering the dishonesty these books portray. If indeed, there were historical and social reasons for the way African-Americans were portrayed in the middle of this century, those reasons are no longer legitimate. If Trousdale is correct in her analysis that "In none of these books is racial injustice seen to be the systematic, cruel, and calculated means of ensuring continued white control over blacks..."(p. 136), then these books need to taught as examples of socially-restrained literature, including introducing the historical perspective that is necessary to explore and understand.

The present status of African-American children's literature:

The importance of quality African-American children's literature is unquestioned; it is a necessity for the healthy development of all children and especially, of black children.

> Literature functions as a major soicalizing agent. It tells students who and what their society and culture values, what kind of behaviors are acceptable and appropriate, and what it means to be a decent human being. If African-American students cannot find themselves and people like them in the books they read and have read to them, they receive a powerful message about how they are undervalued in both school and society. If those students then fail

> to become readers, that failure is understandable; reading has little to offer them. (Sims-Bishop, 1990, p. 561)

The use of African-American literature can also serve as a tool to increase ethnic understanding as well as serve as a "spring board" for discussions about and information concerning other ethnicities (Walker-Dalhouse, 1992).

There is quality African-American literature, and Harris (1992) classifies it into three categories: specific, generic, and neutral (p. 44). She lists as specific books those by authors such as Mildred Tayor who portray characters that are culturally entrenched in the African-American experience. There is no way to consider the Logan family as an American family; they are an African-American family defined by and defining their culture. Picture books may also be culturally specific; however, the reader needs to be cognizant of the cultural clues--"the names of the characters, the form of address for a parent, the values or attitudes of the cahracters, the description of skin color" (Harris, 1992, p. 45).

Generic literature features African-American characters but are American works--books where the race of a character is not a distinguishing factor, other than visually. These books address the commonality of living in this country and are similar to the melting pot novels of years past.

Culturally neutral books offer characters of color in situations that are universal to all people. These are multi-cultural books that celebrate diversities. There is value to

each of these categories, and children should be familiar with books from each.

Picture books are an important part of a young child's formation of self-esteem and confidence. In the most recent publication from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Bredekamp and Rosegrant (1992) state that by four years old, a child begins to view him/herself as part of an ethnic group and that by six years of age, children "can suffer serious damage both to personal self-esteem and to a positive sense of racial or ethnic group identity if they experience the impact of societal biases" (p. 118). Assuming that omission can be a statement of societal biases, it is vital that early childhood programs have quality African-American literature available and read to their children.

For young children, appropriate specifically African-American picture books could include the works of the Hudsons, John Steptoe's books for young children, and books by Patricia McKissack, Faith Ringgold, Mary Hoffman, Valerie Flournoy, and always, Eloise Greenfield. John Steptoe's work has been hailed as providing "a mirror in which African-American children may see a beautiful and real reflection of themselves in both language and image" (Bradley, 1991, p.12). Eloise Greenfield's books are so very rich in their language and their love of the African-American people, young and old alike.

Older children will enjoy Phil Mendez' The Black Snowman, Muriel and Tom Feelings books on Swahili, and the many excellent books about African and African-American folktales, including Gerald McDermott, Virginia Hamilton, Robert San Souci, and Verna Aardema. Virginia Hamilton's book The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales was one of the first African-American children's books to be an overnight financial success; it sold over 150,000 copies in its first three months (Loer, 1992). It is also an academic and artistic success. Leo and Diane Dillon's illustrations celebrate the vibrancy of these stories, and Hamilton's text and explanations offer insights for black and non-black readers to the importance of African-American folktales.

Folktales also offer an excellent opportunity to discuss accurately the history of Africans in America. Folktales were very often vehicles of communicating within hearshot of white overseers/masters. They often told of escapes or communicated information of impending clandestine meetings. The picture of Uncle Remus as a kindly, old black man creating stories to amuse his white charges propogate the image of the submissive African-American and deprive children of all races of an accurate account of slave life. From folktales to hymns, there was constant communication concerning oppression and ways to combat it, often in the very presence of the oppressors. This image of the kidnapped Africans certainly commands more respect than that of the happy darkie.

There is a danger for authors of today's African-American children's picture books, and that problem concerns dealing with the feeling that some experiences of people of color are too painful, too disturbing for younger children. There is a fear that some authors will attempt to gloss over these experiences. That situation could echo the socially conscious novels of the mid 1900's. Moore (MacCann and Richard, 1992) voices her concern:

> The flattening of story surfaces, even in the better works, is a feature of the conglomerate book--books designed for mass appeal. Children need adults to explain the material in books. More and more children will be dependent upon adult intervention if they are to obtain what is deleted from books. And information relegated to a story's subtext will need adult interpreters (p. 28).

While no responsible adult would choose to horrify young children, the results of any further rosy pictures of racial prejudice and oppression would be disastrous to children of color and white children as well. Perhaps, the answer in this case is the simple recognition of what is developmentally appropriate for all children. The question should be if this is an appropriate issue to deal with in a young child's book, not how can this issue--which is distressing to adults--be made to "fit" into a children's book? Hopefully, in the rush to offer a selection of African and African-American children's books, such a mistake is not committed.

It should not be forgotten that for this part of society, simple picture books that are generic or neutral in nature are of real value. Young children are visually oriented; their world becomes literal only when an adult chooses that option for them. Having books available that show children of color doing everyday things is important; it validates the feeling of importance for the child of color and it confirms--and sometimes, initiates--the equality of people of color to the white child.

There are some wonderful authors of chapter books about African-Americans for older children. Virginia Hamilton and Mildred Taylor are two authors whose works are stunning examples of superbly crafted, culturally committed and accurate portrayals of the African-American culture. Their books are about African-American families who endure the atrocities of prejudice and injustice; they are books that are written without bitterness or hatred but with respect and love for the culture that has survived such oppression. The families in these books are role models not only for African-American families, but for all families. As Russell points out in his critique of Hamilton's M. C. Higgins, the Great:

> Her fiction is not so much a vehicle of social protest...rather, it is the impassioned portrayal of individuals engaged in the difficult process of getting along in the world, of perserving, and occasionally, winning out...her interest is the viable means by which the African-American can grasp an individual identity in modern society (p. 254).

It would be a fine measure of school excellence to note the inclusion of either of these authors on a required reading list.

There are other authors whose works reflect a cultural authenticity; these include Walter Dean Myers, Sharon Bell Mathis, Joyce Hansen, and Bette Green. There are other authors like Paula Fox and Christopher Collier who write about the African-American experience in an accurate and sensitive way but from a white perspective. The important fact is that these authors offer a true and accurate picture of being African in the American society, regardless of the historical time frame or the race of the author. It cannot be stated too often the importance of this honesty, both for children of color and white children:

> The tendency of Euro-Americans to distort human history by painting a picture of never-ending Euro-American victories has robbed white children of the legitimate lessons to be learned by overcoming adversity (Hale, 1991, p. 13).

The omission of historical details has been one way of depriving the African-American culture of its history and pride. Another method has been the distortion or fabrication of "facts." This dishonesty is powerfully shown in Herbert Kohl's investigation into the presentation of the Rosa Park's story. While resting on the socially conscious laurels of mere presentation of the story, educators have presented an inaccurate, culturally insulting version of what actually occurred in Montgomery. Kohl substantiates his claim by examining the text book version

of the story alongside a few little-known facts. Rosa Parks was not a helpless seamstress whose feet were too tired to move; she was a well known, well respected civil rights activist who seized hold of an opportunity. The Montgomery Boycott had been planned for years; in fact, three other African-Americans who had also refused to give up their seats had been arrested in the three months preceding Mrs. Parks' arrest and had been considered by the black community as the precipitating personna. However, Mrs. Parks was the first such person to be arrested who was considered strong enough to endure the publicity that would result. This was the action, or rather, the planned reaction of a collective, organized community, striking out effectively against oppression--not a snowballing fluke started by a weary seamstress. This story, when told honestly, teaches children that oppression can be dealt with and that people can create change if organized. Kohl suspects that this society does not choose to tell this story accurately because it does not welcome change.

> As a tale of social movement and a community effort to overthrow injustice, the Rosa Parks story...opens the possibility of every child identifying her/himself as an activist, as someone who can help make justice happen (p. 47-48).

While Kohl's theory may be disturbing, it appears to be valid in light of the suppression and distortion of facts that this student alone has found. It is encouraging to know that the recent committment of publishers to African-American

literature, as well as a committment by educators to a multicultural curriculum will help ensure that the African-American culture and history will be presented in a more truthful, sensitive way. It is the responsibility of all adults to monitor that presentation--which for many adults requires educating or re-educating themselves.

> As Julius Lester wrote, "A book written by a Black for Blacks is not closed to whites...Whites will never understand the Black view of the world until they get it straight from Blacks, respect it, and accept it (Lester in Corson, 1987, pp. 24-25)."

The future of African-American children's literature

In the most recent publication distributed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, a great deal of emphasism and print is given to the issue of diversity and teaching and supporting diversity in the early childhood classroom. Clearly, this is a subject which is not going to disappear, and educators must educate themselves as to the correct way to teach respect for and harmony with the diversities of the next century's society.

> Integrating diversity content into the whole curriculum requires breaking down the false dichotomy between the teacher's launching a specific subject versus waiting for the subject to emerge from the children and never mentioning the subject if the children don't...If the teacher does not create a material and emotional environment that clearly communicates that diversity is important, valued, and safe in the classroom, then

> children will not raise issues (Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992, p. 127).

For homogeneous classrooms, multicultural and cultural literature may be the only opportunity to introduce diversities.

The demand for African-American children's literature has increased steadily over the last three decades, not only from parents of color but also from teachers seeking quality literature that celebrates the African-American culture. How to market this literature remains a muddle, from the physical set-up of a bookstore--"'People of color want these books separated out because they are looking for something very specific and don't want to weed through every picture book to find it'"(Chapman in Maughan, 1992, p. 39)--to adequate supplying the new classics of multi-cultures--this student encountered the same difficulty in securing Virginia Hamilton's books as Harris (1991) reported.

But the committment to multicultural education has been made, and the literature of all cultures is an important part of this committment. Norton (1990) explains that folktales and myths help explain the values and foundations of a culture,and that through recent literature, students are able to examine the common themes that connect a culture throughout generations. This type of literal investigation will increase children's understandings of different value systems and increase their sensitivity to and appreciation of diversities.

It will be the responsibilities of the adults, however, to monitor this literature, for children--especially, young children--are not always able to recognize bad,

stereotyping literature. This implies work, as Kruse (1992) states simply:

> Reading and knowing a wide body of literature by book creators from backgrounds other than one's own race and culture is requisite to beginning able to spot the inauthentic voice, the illogical fictional response, the inaccurate account (p. 33)

The emergence of African-American children's literature specifically and multicultural literature in general will not be and is not now met without opposition. While the informed person understands the social evolution transpiring--the dissolution of a white majority society--others will be threatened and afraid of the changes necessary in dealing with the new demographics. Educators and adults cannot succumb to this cultural backlash, for it is destructive to every culture and its children. For this society, "colorblindness" can no longer be tolerated; we cannot "ignore what we know about children's development of identity and attitudes as well as the realities of racisim in the daily lives of people of color" (Jones and Derman-Sparks, 1992). Furthermore, the changing demographics of today's society leave not only children of color at a disadvantage if diversities are not explored, studied, and respected; white children will be at a very definite disadvantage as they try to cope with the first American minority-majority.

There is a true spirit of hope in the world of African-American children's literature, and the hope is carried in the

joy and love of its leading authors. Although John Steptoe succumbed to the AIDS virus at an early age, his hope was that people will mature "enough to fully embrace the idea that all people have a common origin" (Steptoe, 1988, p.28). Virginia Hamilton speaks of a commonality of language which bonds all Americans and of the discovery of all Americans of African-American history as integrating all of American history. She believes that "black folk tales...allow us to share in the known, the remembered, and the imagined together as Americans sharing the same history" (Hamilton, 1986, p. 687).

As wonderful as these words are, all progress our society has made in its acceptance and appreciation of African-American culture will be for naught if these words are interpreted as assimilation into a Euro-American culture. The African-American culture is a culture which respects and demands a process of rediscovering and redefining of self through investigation of self and ancestry. It is a culture that has survived generations of non-culturalism, of being cut-off from its heritage, of constructing culture from joy always accompanied by pain. It needs to reconnect with those roots of its heritage in order to grow. Just as important, the Euro-American culture must face its shame and guilt and put them aside so it may embrace the full history of all the American peoples--and ensure that prejudice is eradicated and not allowed to flourish ever again.

Until the day when all of America's cultures stand strong and confident, side by side, children and adults must be taught to respect and enjoy the diversities of this society. We must all listen to the voices of each culture as it teaches us what it means to be a member of that culture.

> We celebrate life; we can take the pain; we have endured it. We don't want our experience just stated or told to us in a flat way--not even our sorrow. It must move for us--up and down like the blues, flowing, flying, flourishing, like jazz. It must pulsate for us like a deep, heavy heartbeat, or glow with the uplifting, luminous energy of our spirituals. Whatever it is, it must always sing for us. (Tom Feelings, 1985, p. 695)

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