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Book review

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Bishop, R. S. (2007). *Free within ourselves: The development of African American children's literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. 295 pp. ISBN 0-325-07135-7, \$22.00 (paperback).

“To children who with eager look  
Scanned vainly library shelf and nook  
For History or Song or Story  
That told of Colored People's glory...”

Jessie Fauset (Dedication, first issue of “The Brownies Book,”  
January, 1920)

*Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature*, Bishop's newest publication (2007), gathers and extends previous scholarship to offer literacy educators at all levels a comprehensive, single source of information on the history and present state of African American children's literature. This book traces the development of literature written and illustrated by African Americans from its early roots in oral tradition to the work of present day *image makers* in the genres of poetry, realistic fiction, illustration, historical fiction, and picture books. The first three chapters address the progression of African American children's literature prior to the 1960s. Chapter four describes some parallel and opposing early developments in literature born of necessity to counteract the negative imagery that “robbed children of the truth about themselves” (p. xv). The fifth chapter examines expansion in poetry from the 1960s to the present, including the contributions of major African American children's poets. Chapters 6 and 7 explore picture books, including important texts, authors, and themes. Chapters 8 and 9 focus on the work of African American illustrators that have redefined the image of children's books. Chapters 10 and 11 present contemporary realistic fiction for upper elementary, middle school, and young adults. Chapter 12 looks at African American historical fiction, and a final section offers concluding thoughts and speculations on the future of African American children's literature.

Over four decades ago, Nancy Larrick (1965) notified the American public through the *Saturday Review* that the world of children's literature was decidedly all white. Citing startling statistics, Larrick revealed that only 6.7 percent of all children's books published in the previous three years included even one Black child in either illustration or text. These children's books, typically authored by Whites, often reinforced stereotypical beliefs and depictions of Black life. Echoing the rising concern over the glaring omission and misrepresentation of Black faces and voices in children's literature, Dorothy Broderick (1973) examined the portrayed images of African American characters in children's books dating from 1827 – 1967. Rudine Sims Bishop (1982) continued the work of Broderick and others with her seminal work, *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction*, an examination of 150 works of contemporary realistic fiction published from 1965 – 1979. Intended as an information source and selection tool for librarians, classroom teachers, and teacher-educators, *Shadow and Substance* sought to cast light upon the ways that African Americans are represented in children's literature. Key issues identified in this work have become touchstones in the study of multicultural literature.

### **Sowing the Seeds: African American Children's Literature Pre-1900 – 1960s**

Bishop (2007) cites three aspects of antebellum and late nineteenth century as fundamental to the development of African American children's literature despite the deterring presence of slavery and racism: the vital oral culture, the persistent pursuit of literacy, and published periodicals and newspapers containing writings addressed to Black children authored primarily by women. Both religious and secular publications assumed responsibility for the moral instruction of Black youth, viewing them as the "hope of the future." (p.14). Early in the twentieth century, W.E. B. Du Bois, an early founder of the N.A.A.C.P., created *The Brownies Book* (1920) with the specific mission of speaking directly to "colored" children. Bishop devotes much of Chapter 2 to Du Bois, Carter Woodson, and other literary and intellectual leaders who spearheaded a type of children's literature with a sociopolitical agenda: to counter literary stereotypes of Blacks, to instruct them in Black history, and to affirm their humanity. She concludes this section with a discussion in Chapter 3 of the work of visionary writer Arna Bontemps and others of the Harlem Renaissance with the focus on the more general, artistic, and literary goals of illuminating Black life and the human condition.

### **Fertile Soil – the Rise of African American Children's Literature Post 1960s**

The turbulent 1960s gave rise to social, political, and economic circumstances that launched the canon of contemporary African American children's literature. Urban uprisings, antiwar sentiments, assassinations, and the increasing presence of nonviolent racial protests set the stage for Black writers to tell their stories. Chapter 4 gives the reader an overview of "the image of the Black" (Broderick, 1973) in both children's and adult literature, citing typical stereotypical representations such as the Contented Slave, the Tragic Mulatto, or the Brute Negro. Noting the "intercultural" education movement, an early predecessor of today's multicultural education, Bishop (2007) chronicles the development of The Council of Interracial Books for Children, a confrontational and controversial organization that encouraged the writing, production, and distribution of books to "fill the needs of non-White and urban poor children" (*Interracial Books for Children*, 1967, p. 9). Bishop mentions The Black Arts Movement, which

fostered the establishment of Black publishing companies. Finally, Bishop discusses the Coretta Scott King award, developed in response to the relative absence of African American authors and illustrators from the lists of established literary awards.

### **The Image Makers: Contemporary Shapers of African American Children's Literature**

The remaining chapters of the book provide individual and thorough treatments of the genres of poetry, picture books, illustrators, realistic fiction, and historical fiction. Bishop (2007) situates her discussion of each genre within both sociopolitical context and the larger, developing corpus of African American children's literature. Examining important texts and authors, she shares topics and themes that characterize each genre, as well as the writer's/illustrator's perspectives on their work and its goals and objectives. These voices resonate with the works themselves, lending a rich, deep dimension to the usual literature list. Bishop steps aside, allowing her reader to interact with the primary sources of the literature in two ways. Extensive bibliographies accompany each chapter offering teachers, librarians, and scholars a reference list and selection guide for future study and purchase. Samples of the work of several illustrators are also included in the center of the book. Careful to acknowledge that her text is by no means a comprehensive list of all African American authors and illustrators of children's books, Bishop states that she has sought to extensively discuss pacesetters in the field, those with the greatest productivity and recognition. Bishop chooses not to include the genres of African American nonfiction and biography within the scope of this book, although she acknowledges the positive trend of themes and subjects that continue to illuminate the important and often unknown roles played by African Americans in history.

### **Using This Text**

Despite the recent copyright date, I have already used this book several times for reference in my academic life. I have also drawn from Bishop's (2007) work in the professional arena. As a school library media specialist, the extensive bibliographies have literally become purchasing lists. Since many of the suggested titles included in the bibliography are not readily found through mainstream publishing houses, Bishop's list of independent and imprint publishers (special interest divisions within a larger publishing house) who produce books of Black interest have been particularly useful. As I collaborate with teachers to develop culturally-conscious lessons, this book serves as a frequent reference point, providing biographical and historical information to enhance my understanding of each author and work. I have also distributed Bishop's recommendations to my fellow media specialists for consideration.

*Free Within Ourselves* could easily become required reading for librarians and preservice teachers. Far from a supplementary text, this book deserves a place alongside any anthology or canon of children's literature we may read. Within the current educational movement toward multiculturalism, Bishop offers a comprehensive, historically-situated picture of African American children's literature. Her work is scholarly yet readable, strong yet inviting. Works such as this makes us long for similar voices from other cultural corners yet undocumented and unsung.

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