

2010 May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture

Can Children's Books Save the World? *Advocates for Diversity in Children's Books and Libraries*

Kathleen T. Horning



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It is a great honor to be standing here before you to deliver the 2010 May Hill Arbuthnot Lecture. When Arbuthnot Chair Kristi Jemtegaard first called me way back in August of 2008 to give me the news, her first words after identifying herself were, "I bet you can guess why I'm calling."

Actually, I couldn't. The only thing I could think of was that it had something to do with the 2009 Arbuthnot Lecture, hosted by the Langston Hughes Library at the Alex Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee, because I had written a letter of support for Theresa Venable and her wonderful committee who had submitted what turned out to be the winning application. I actually thought that Kristi might have a question about the feasibility of a shuttle bus from the Knoxville Airport to the farm.

But Kristi quickly reminded me that, no, she was actually chair of the 2010 committee, not the one that had chosen Walter Dean Myers for this honor the year before. And she was calling to inform me that I had been selected as the 2010 lecturer. That was a lot to take in. And then the next thing she told me was that I would have to keep this news a secret until January of 2009.

So before I begin my speech, I'd like to thank Kristi Jemtegaard, and the members of the 2010 Arbuthnot Committee with whom she worked—Marian Creamer, Peter Howard, Joyce Laoisa, and Lauren Liang—for giving me this great honor, and for selecting the Riverside County Library System as the host. It's been a pleasure working with Mark Smith, whom I've known for several years for his amazing work with *El día de los niños / El día de los libros*, the annual celebration of family literacy, created by the author and advocate Pat Mora and members of REFORMA and administered by ALA's Association for Library Service to Children. Mark's commitment to diversity and to serving *all* families in his community is an inspiration. The members of the local planning committee have also been very helpful in making this happen. I'd also like to thank everyone in the ALSC office, most especially Executive Director Aimee Strittmatter, as well as ALSC President Thom Barthelmess, for

all his work within ALSC on behalf of children's librarians, children, and books.

As soon as I got the news that Riverside County Library System had been selected as the host site, I contacted Mark to find out why, exactly, they had applied to host a lecture that I would write and deliver. He told me that it was due to my work in multicultural literature, since the community here is a diverse one, and they, too, are passionate about books that reflect that diversity. I was very happy to hear this from Mark because—if you don't know it by now you will within the hour—multicultural literature is my passion, and I love to talk about it.

I told Mark that I was thinking of using the title "Why Multicultural Literature Matters." There was a little silence on his end of the phone, and then he told me he'd like to run it by his Planning Committee and he came back to me a few weeks later with an alternative title that they had agreed on. They wanted something with a bit more punch. How about "Can Children's Books Save the World?" I thought about it for a few days and decided I could take that on.

It's a rather grand title, perhaps, that conjures up images of children's authors and artists in capes with superpowers, flying in to save the day. But when you think about it, isn't that why we're all here, those of us who care about children and children's books?

I have found over the years that children's librarians have an almost missionary-like zeal about getting books into the hands of children. I think it's because we hear so many stories in our profession about how a book changed someone's life. Just a few weeks ago, for example, I was having dinner with a group of people, seated next to a seventy-four-year-old woman I had never met. She had just returned from serving in the Peace Corps in Peru, so I immediately knew I was in for some interesting conversation.

When she asked me what I did for a living and I told her I was a librarian, she said quite soberly, "A librarian saved my life." Well, I was thinking that maybe a librarian had rescued her from falling off a mountainside in the Andes, perhaps, or

had performed some such heroic deed. But then she elaborated.

“I grew up in rural Montana, and there was nothing for miles around. But there was a bookmobile that came every two weeks, and the librarian would bring me new books to read. I used to ride out into the countryside on my horse, far away from home, and I would just lie on top of my horse and read for hours on end. That’s how I learned about the world. And that saved me.”

Now, we’ve all heard stories like that—maybe not from seventy-four-year-old Peace Corps volunteers—but there are other stories, just as dramatic or compelling.

I think that every children’s librarian I have ever known has had a firm belief that children’s books have the power to save—if not the whole world, at least individual children. Like much in our field, this can be traced back to Anne Carroll Moore, the formidable head of children’s services at New York Public Library from 1906 to 1941.

If you know anything about Anne Carroll Moore, you probably know about her eccentricities, such as her strong dislike for *Charlotte’s Web*, which allegedly kept the book from winning the Newbery Medal back in 1952 . . . in spite of the fact she wasn’t on the committee that year, and that, by then, she had been retired from her position at New York Public Library for ten years.

You may have heard stories about Nicholas, the little wooden doll she carried with her everywhere. You may have heard that she spoke to other people through this doll and expected them to respond to him. But you may not know that she supposedly coined that famous phrase, “The right book for the right child at the right time.” Getting great books into children’s hands. This, in fact was her guiding philosophy, first articulated back in 1902, before she even started working at New York Public, when she was teaching a summer course in children’s librarianship for the Iowa Library Commission.¹

It quickly became the children’s librarian’s mantra. “The right book for the right child

“Can Children’s Books Save the World? . . . It’s a rather grand title, perhaps, that conjures up images of children’s authors and artists in capes with superpowers, flying in to save the day. But when you think about it, isn’t that why we’re all here, those of us who care about children and children’s books?”

at the right time.” I like the precise clarity of the phrase. We children’s librarians spend a lot of our time and energy selecting the “right books” and in knowing them and the communities we serve so we can place the right book into a child’s hands right when it is needed.

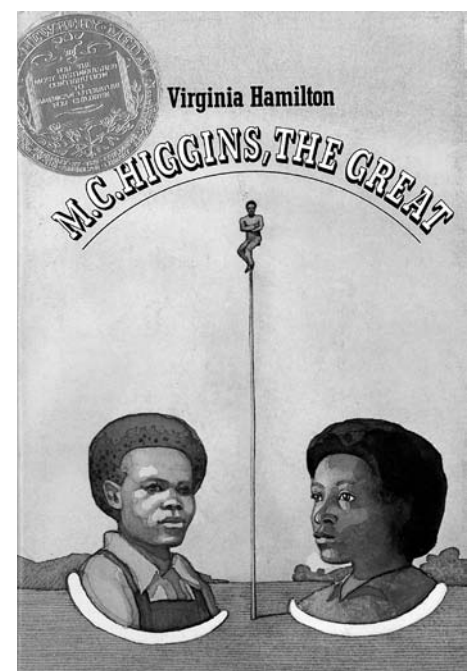
But let’s consider for a moment this idea of a “right child.” Just who is the right child? To me, the implication is that if there is a right child, then there must also be a wrong child. But is there? Is there ever a wrong child whom we would pass over and exclude? Not if we expect children’s books to save the world. That’s why, as children’s librarians, another key part of our philosophy is to include *all* children in the services we provide.

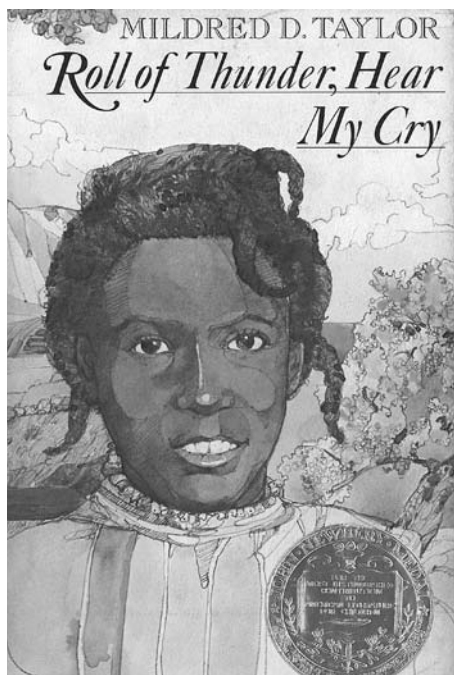
And, in fact, I was so troubled by this idea that our foremothers in the field of children’s librarianship started with a concept of “the right child” that I sought out the original quote from Miss Moore, and found that she never said anything about a “right child.” Instead she said that librarians must assure that “*every child [be given] the right book at the right time*” (italics are my own).² That’s much more in keeping with the values of the children’s librarians I know, and it was true a hundred years ago, as well.

I believe that the best way to put these beliefs into action is by sharing books with children that reflect the diversity they see in their everyday lives, and in the world around them. As it turns out, that’s harder than it sounds. There simply are not many multicultural books out there to select from and to put into children’s hands. And we’re also paralyzed by attitudes about race and ethnicity in this country that keep us from moving forward, even in 2010—and maybe most especially in 2010, given the tenor of the political conversation swirling around these days.

We live in a world where elected officials, members of our representative government, feel free to state publicly that one can identify undocumented workers by the way they dress. And policy can be passed to exclude people with foreign accents from teaching English in public schools—never mind that they often speak the language better than the native English speakers. Still, one would hope to see progress in the past sixty years, given the hard lessons we learned from World War II, from the Holocaust in Germany, and from our own national disgrace, the Japanese-American internment camps.

In looking specifically just at multicultural literature, we see the same sort of issues being grappled with today that we saw generations ago. To demonstrate this, I want to give you all a brief overview of multicultural literature for children and teens: how it developed, what challenges we faced, how it was promoted—or not promoted, as the case may be.





I think many of us—myself included, at one time—have a tendency to believe that authentic multicultural literature was invented in the 1970s. Perhaps this is because we measure so much by “firsts” in our field, and we all know that Virginia Hamilton was the first African-American author to win the Newbery Medal in 1975 for *M. C. Higgins, The Great*, and Mildred D. Taylor two years later for *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. At around the same time, in 1976 and 1977, Leo and Diane Dillon won back-to-back Caldecott Medals for *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* and *Ashanti to Zulu*, marking the first—and second—Caldecott Medal that went to an African-American artist.

But they were not the first authors of color to be so awarded. Dhan Gopal Mukerji, an East Indian-American, had won the Newbery Medal nearly fifty years earlier for *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon*, back in 1928. I have read a lot of critical articles and reviews from the 1920s about the children's books of that era for a book on the history of the Newbery Medal that I am working on, and never have I found anything in the literature that suggests the choice of Mukerji was considered unusual or surprising in its time. The closest thing I have found is a description of the lengths librarians had to go to keep his winning a secret.

In those years, the winner, although the decision was made in March, was

not revealed until June, at the Newbery Banquet, and the author of *Gay-Neck* could not have remained anonymous in a crowd of mostly white women. His brown skin and turban would have made him immediately recognizable, so poor Dhan Gopal Mukerji had to stay hidden behind a bush on the hotel grounds where the banquet was being held until the announcement was made.³

Although it would be nearly fifty years before another author or illustrator of color won either the Newbery or the Caldecott (and there really weren't many children's books published at all that were by people of color), the literature of the 1920s and 1930s—and certainly that selected by the Newbery Committees of that time—shows that there was definitely an appreciation of cultural and ethnic diversity. In fact, many if not most of the children's novels published in those years were set in other countries—and not just in Europe. I have often suspected—although I haven't yet been able to find proof—that publishers in the early years of the children's book industry, the 20s and the 30s, were encouraged and rewarded for publishing books reflecting diversity so that librarians could put them into the hands of children from the various immigrant populations who were coming into the library.

We know, for example, that Anne Carroll Moore hired a young Puerto Rican woman named Pura Belpré and sent her to work at the 115th Street Branch of New York Public Library in 1929 to meet the needs of the growing Latino population in the neighborhood. There she offered bilingual story hours and advocated for Spanish-language book collections. She even published a picture book herself, *Perez y Martina*, from her own storytelling repertoire, in both Spanish and English, and in 1932 it became the first book published in English in the United States by a Puerto Rican writer.⁴

We get a good portrait of Pura Belpré and her impact on Spanish-speaking families in New York City with Lucía González's excellent picture book from 2008, *The Storyteller's Candle / La velita de los cuentos*—which incidentally was an honor book for the Pura Belpré Award. Here

is the book's young protagonist's first impression of her:

That afternoon, a special guest came to Hildamar and Santiago's class. She was a tall, slender woman with dark eyes that sparkled like *luceros* in the night sky. When she spoke her hands moved through the air like the wings of a bird.

“*Buenos días*, good morning,” she said. “My name is Pura Belpré. I come from the public library and I bring stories and puppets to share with you today.”

Ms. Belpré told stories with puppets, in English and in español. Everyone laughed at the end of the story of silly Juan Bobo chasing a three-legged pot. At the end of the show. Ms. Belpré invited the children to visit the library during winter vacation.

“The library is for everyone, *la biblioteca es para todos*,” she said.⁵

One of the most tantalizing tidbits I came across when doing the research for this lecture was found in Frances Clarke Sayers' biography of Anne Carroll Moore. Sayers mentioned that, in its early years, the Central Children's Room of the New York Public Library was funded privately, and so Moore did not have to abide by the personnel rules of the New York Public Library System. Essentially, she could hire whomever she wanted to hire, even people who had no formal professional training as librarians (but who would certainly get it under her direction!), and, most interestingly, people who were not citizens of the United States, as was required by the system. She strategically placed her employees in communities where they would have the greatest affinity—an Italian librarian in an Italian neighborhood, a Russian librarian in a Russian neighborhood, and so on. As Frances Clarke Sayers described them, “They were young women with unusual gifts, aptitudes, manifold backgrounds, and varied educational experiences.”⁶ In a word, diverse. They were the right *librarians* to put the right book at the right time into children's hands.

One of these women was a young African-American librarian named Augusta Baker,

whom Miss Moore had summoned to her office in February of 1937. She was looking for someone for the children's department in the Harlem branch at 135th Street, twenty blocks uptown from the branch where Pura Belpré had been working for the past eight years. The African-American librarian who had been working there as a children's librarian had left to become a school librarian, and somehow Miss Moore found out that Augusta Baker had a library degree. In fact, she had already applied three times to the New York Public Library, and had been passed over, she believed, because of her race.

In the midst of her interview with Anne Carroll Moore in the personnel office at New York Public Library, Miss Moore got up and went next door to the director's office, and tore a strip off of him, loudly scolding him for not passing the application on to her, as he was supposed to do with applicants who expressed an interest in children's work.⁷ Well, you probably know that Augusta Baker was indeed hired and she went on to become head of children's services at New York Public Library in 1961.

I don't want to give the impression that all the influential children's librarians worked in New York City. There were many, many others, and among those who most strongly stressed the importance of serving all children by offering authentic multicultural literature, we can count Charlemae Rollins, who was at Chicago Public Library and Effie Lee Morris at San Francisco Public. They all not only advocated for diversity, but each one shaped many, many of the children's librarians with whom they worked. Each one trained dozens of young librarians, and they imbued all of us with a sense of the importance of our work. They convinced us of our ability to save the world through children's books. And of our ability to change children's books through careful selection. Anne Carroll Moore liked to quote an ancient Persian proverb, "Choosing is creating."⁸ Through critical analysis and careful selection, they helped to shape children's literature.

In her groundbreaking book, *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction*, Rudine Sims (now Rudine Sims Bishop) characterizes the theme of the socially con-

scious fiction of the 1950s and 1960s, written mostly by white authors, as "how to behave when the Black folks move in."⁹ In 1955, Augusta Baker published her own version of this, addressed to her white colleagues. This article appeared in *Top of the News*, the professional journal of the Children's Services Division of the ALA, what is today known as the Association for Library Service to Children. It was entitled "The Children's Librarian in a Changing Neighborhood." After describing a typical library in a white, middle class neighborhood with a homogenous user group, she wrote:

Then, one day, you notice a group of your "old regulars" standing together, whispering and watching the stairway. As you have worked at the desk, you have been unaware of someone intently watching you. A round, brown face peeps in the doorway—eyes wide, frightened, questioning—the rest of the body comes into view, poised for instant and headlong flight. How do you look? Does a really warm, sincere smile come to your face or does a quick frown shadow it? Do you go over to that child and welcome him or do you continue with your work, hoping he will go away?¹⁰

Augusta Baker's description of the way a welcoming librarian should behave reminds me of the librarian in Pat Mora's 1997 picture book *Tomás and the Library Lady* who welcomed a young Chicano boy from a migrant family into the public library in Hampton, Iowa, in the early 1940s. The following passage from the book sounds eerily like the scenario Mrs. Baker played out in her article, but from the perspective of the child.

Tomás stood in front of the library doors. He pressed his nose against the glass and peeked in. The library was huge!

A hand tapped his shoulder. Tomás jumped. A tall lady looked down at him. "It's a hot day," she said. "Come inside and have a drink of water. What's your name?" she asked.

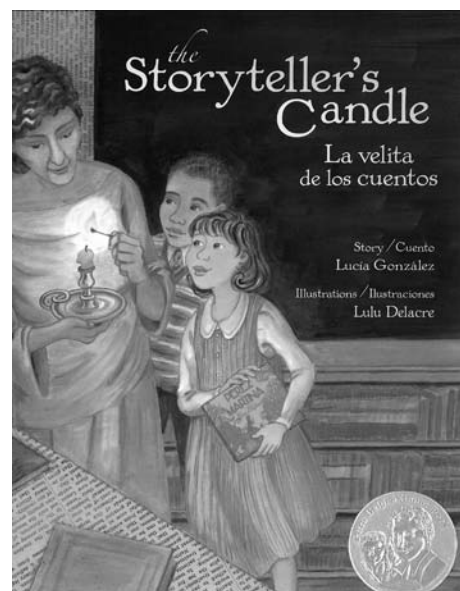
"Tomás," he said.

"Come, Tomás," she said.

Inside it was cool. Tomás had never seen so many books. The lady watched him. "Come," she said again, leading him to the drinking fountain. "First some water. Then I will bring books to this table for you. What would you like to read about?"¹¹

Mrs. Baker's article had not yet been published, but the librarian in this small town in Iowa knew instinctively to let a warm, sincere smile come to her face, and to go over to him and welcome him. She even let him take books back to his family, checked out on her own card. The boy grew up to be a famous author, poet, and educator named Tomás Rivera. I know those of you from around here have heard of him, since he was the chancellor here from 1979 until his death in 1984, and there is a campus library named after him.

But who was the librarian? If Dr. Rivera ever knew her name, he had forgotten it by the time he grew up. My friend Tim Wadham, an amazing librarian in his own right, traveled to Hampton, Iowa, to try to track her down when he was doing background research for a children's play based on the book while he was working as a youth services librarian at the Maricopa County Library District in Phoenix, Arizona. None of the people he talked to in Hampton was exactly sure who it could possibly have been until Tim mentioned one detail Dr. Rivera had remembered—that she had worn tennis shoes. And then everyone thought of the same person. The tennis shoes were



a dead giveaway. A librarian who had worked there named Bertha Gaulke was known for the tennis shoes she always wore when she walked to and from the library, although she never wore them while on duty. This suggests that she may have interacted with young Tomás while the library was closed, perhaps even opening the doors after hours to let him in. The truly odd thing was that Bertha Gaulke wasn't a children's librarian at all. And she wasn't even particularly friendly, as those who had known her recalled. But she had been a German immigrant and those who had known her thought that perhaps she might have empathized with a young child who was also a stranger in a strange land.¹²

In "The Children's Librarian in a Changing Neighborhood," Mrs. Baker also wrote about the books these children would find on library shelves.

Are there books on the shelves which will hurt and alienate your newcomers while at the same time they perpetuate stereotyped ideas in the minds of your regular library users? Get a good list of recommended books in the area of your minority groups and use this list with your book stock. Learn the criteria for this literature and discard the titles which may be obsolete in their ideas. Watch the illustrations for caricature, the language for unnecessary epithets and dialect, the characterization for stereotype. Make your book stock inviting and worth while for all groups who may use your room.¹³

Ah, but where to get the aforementioned criteria for evaluation and the "good list of recommended books?" Well, that's where Charlemae Hill Rollins comes in. Another African American pioneer of children's services, Mrs. Rollins joined the staff of the Chicago Public Library in 1927, and throughout her career she strove to eliminate painful stereotypes and promote authentic children's literature. She published what I believe is the first booklist of recommended multicultural literature—specifically African American literature—in 1941, with her pamphlet *We Build Together*. In the introduction to the book's second edition, published in 1948, she wrote, "Whether books are

written for Negro children or about them for other children, the objective should be the same. They should interpret life. They should help young people live together with tolerance and understand each other better."¹⁴

Mrs. Rollins was president of the Children's Services Division in 1957 and, as such, was also a member of the 1958 Newbery Committee. Among her personal papers in the Black Librarians Archive at the University of North Carolina, Professor Holly Willett found fascinating correspondence between her and Elizabeth Riley, the children's book editor at Crowell. The correspondence demonstrates how she worked quietly behind the scenes to try to improve the image of blacks in books. The book in question was *Rifles for Watie*, written by Harold Keith and edited by Elizabeth Riley, which had just won the 1958 Newbery Medal. In her correspondence, Mrs. Rollins gently but firmly outlines the concerns that she and other African American children's librarians had about specific lines in the book, for example, an African American woman in the story was described as having teeth "like a row of white piano keys," and about a young African-American male character the author had written, "He even smelled clean."¹⁵

She knew the book would be going into a second printing after it won the award, and this would provide an excellent opportunity for a slight revision. Ms. Rollins even supplied the suggested text to use in the revision. The fact that the editor agreed to make the suggested changes for the second printing is a testament to the power and respect Charlemae Rollins garnered, at least within the publishing world. I say "at least" because once author Harold Keith got wind of the changes that were made, he demanded they be changed back for the third printing.¹⁶

She was also highly regarded by the community she served, and Christopher Paul Curtis paid tribute to her in his 2000 Newbery Medal winning book, *Bud, Not Buddy*. When ten-year-old Bud runs away from his foster home, he turns toward the library, hoping to find his friend, the children's librarian, Miss Hill:

I knew a nervous-looking, stung-up kid with blood dripping from a fish-

head bite and carrying a old raggedy suitcase didn't look like he belonged around here.

The only hope I had was the north side library. If I got there, maybe Miss Hill would be able to help me, maybe she'd understand and would be able to tell me what to do.¹⁷

And, of course, I can't leave this discussion of early pioneers in the library field without mentioning Effie Lee Morris, who started out at Cleveland Public Library in 1946 and was hired as the first children's services coordinator at San Francisco Public Library in 1963. Miss Morris sadly passed on several months ago, and one of the last conversations I had with her was about May Hill Arbuthnot herself. We were sharing a cab together between meetings at the annual ALA conference in Anaheim a couple of years ago, and I brought up the upcoming Arbuthnot Lecture at the Langston Hughes Library, which we were both planning to attend. She told me that at Case Western, she had studied children's literature with her.

"May Hill Arbuthnot," she said in her characteristically clipped, emphatic voice. "I could tell you a thing or two about May Hill Arbuthnot." It was one of those rare times I wished a cab ride could have lasted for hours, instead of minutes.

These amazing women devoted their careers to promoting diversity, in libraries and in literature, helping to shape the future.

Two years after Charlemae Rollins retired, Nancy Larrick published an article in the *Saturday Review* that got white people—particularly those in the publishing industry—to pay attention to the issues that had been raised by librarians of color for nearly thirty years. "The All-White World of Children's Books" outlined the problem by providing statistics. Ms. Larrick looked at 5,206 children's books published by 63 publishers from 1962 through 1964, and found that only 349 of them, or 6.4 percent, included one or more Blacks in the illustrations. Of these, 60 percent were placed outside the United States or took place before World War II, which meant that only four-fifths of one percent of the children's trade books published in the

United States from 1962–64 were about contemporary African-Americans.¹⁸

The feeling of what it's like for a child of color to be completely omitted from the cultural life of the nation during this time period is vividly captured in Rita Williams-Garcia's brilliant new middle-grade novel set in Oakland, California, in 1968, *One Crazy Summer*. Here is the eleven-year-old protagonist, Delphine, talking about how she and her younger sisters experienced the all-white world of network television:

Each week, Jet magazine pointed out all the shows with colored people. My sisters and I became expert colored counters. We had it down to a science. Not only did we count how many colored people were on TV, we also counted the number of words they were given to say. For instance, it was

At the end of Nancy Larrick's article, she talks about a new organization that had just come into being, called the Council on Interracial Books for Children. The council, or CIBC as it was known, published a regular newsletter that offered critical reviews and articles. The CIBC didn't cloak any of their criticism in niceties. To give you an idea of their perspective, here's a sentence from Elinor Sinnette, one of the CIBC founders who was quoted in "The All-White World of Children's Books" about the all-white world of children's books: "Publishers have participated in a cultural lobotomy."²⁰ There was no beating around the bush for the Council on Interracial Books for Children. Many in the children's book world found their tone strident, and even hurtful. But it was necessary for us all to take a good hard, critical look at ourselves and where we were going in order to move forward.

Flynt Greer and Mabel McKissack, and publisher John Carroll, were discussing the sad fact that no African American author had ever been awarded a Newbery or a Caldecott Medal, and it was out of this discussion that the idea for the Coretta Scott King Award grew.²¹ The award was established to encourage and acknowledge African American authors and illustrators, in the same way the Newbery Award had been created nearly fifty years earlier, to help create a body of distinguished children's literature. Remember: choosing *is* creating.

The 1970s were a time of great growth and change in children's literature. Thanks to the efforts of the Council on Interracial Books for Children and the Coretta Scott King Award, as well as a growing social consciousness in our nation as a whole, we began for the first time to see African American literature flourish, and to a

“Thanks to the efforts of the Council on Interracial Books for Children and the Coretta Scott King Award, as well as a growing social consciousness in our nation as a whole, we began for the first time to see African-American literature flourish, and to a lesser extent, we saw a bit of development in other areas of multicultural literature, as well. This all happened in the midst of a sea of change in children’s literature as a whole, as the romanticism that marked children’s books of the first half of the century started to be replaced by what was then called the ‘new realism.’”

easy to count the number of words the negro engineer on *Mission Impossible* spoke as well as the black POW on *Hogan's Heroes*. Sometimes the black POW didn't have any words to say, so we scored him a "1" for being there. We counted how many times Lieutenant Uhuru hailed the frequency on *Star Trek*. We'd even take turns being her, although Big Ma would have never let us wear a minidress or space boots. But then there was *I Spy*. All three of us together couldn't count every word Bill Cosby said. And then there was a new show, *Julia*, coming in September, starring Diahann Carroll. We agreed to shout "Black Infinity!" when *Julia* came on because each episode would be all about her character.¹⁹

In addition to its critical articles and reviews, the CIBC held annual contests for unpublished authors of color. There was the promise of a \$500 cash prize, and the attention brought to the authors usually got the manuscript read by a children's book editor, which often led to a publishing contract. As a result, the field of children's literature was greatly enriched—and when I say enriched, I do mean enriched. Authors who got their start in children's books as a result of winning the contest include Kristen Hunter, Walter Dean Myers, Sharon Bell Mathis, Mildred D. Taylor, Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, Minfong Ho, and Ai Ling Louie.

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lesser extent, we saw a bit of development in other areas of multicultural literature, as well. This all happened in the midst of a sea of change in children's literature as a whole, as the romanticism that marked children's books of the first half of the century started to be replaced by what was then called the "new realism."

At the Cooperative Children's Book Center where I work, there has always been an interest in multicultural literature since the center's founding in 1963, but we got into it on a greater scale in the mid-1980s. I have spent my career working as a librarian at the CCBC, an examination center and research library that is part of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

I am pleased and proud that my friend and mentor for many years, Ginny Moore Kruse, is here with us today, and I am so glad Ginny could be here with us for this event because so much of what I know about multicultural literature has been part of a lifelong journey I have shared with Ginny. So you may be wondering how these two white, middle-class women from a predominantly white, middle-class city in the middle of the country came to be known for their work in multicultural literature.

It all started with a phone call from a school librarian. She had started a new job at a predominantly African American school and had found the existing library collection to be lacking. What few African American books they did have that were still relevant were worn and tattered, and when she had tried to replace them, she found that they were out of print.

When she looked for new titles that had been published in the past few years, she couldn't find much. "I must be missing something," she said. "Where are the books?" We looked, too, and didn't have any better luck than she did. In fact, I remember clearly the moment of revelation when I looked up "Blacks—Fiction" in the subject guide to Children's Books in Print and found less than a column of listings of in-print titles. But when I flipped back just a bit, there were pages and pages of books with the subject heading "Bears—Fiction."

The point was driven home for us even further the next year when Ginny Moore Kruse served on the Coretta Scott King Award Committee in 1985 and learned the exact number of books that were eligible for the award in that year, since she received copies of all eligible books, that is to say, books written or illustrated by African Americans. There were just eighteen books by black authors and illustrators in 1985, out of about 2,500 children's books published in total. And, of those, only twelve had the necessary cultural content to be considered contenders for the award. We were so shocked by the statistic that we decided to put it into print in our annual publication of the year's best books, *CCBC Choices*.²² And every year thereafter, we documented the number and printed it in the introduction

to *Choices*. Before long, we had people calling us, asking us for the statistics on African American books. *USA Today* even did a feature story on the subject in 1989 that quoted our statistics in a colorful bar graph designed to look like the spines of books lined up on a shelf—for those who couldn't visualize how a shelf of eighteen books would look in comparison to a shelf of thirty books.²³

We also began to experience the phenomenon we have come to call "The Great Information Loop," where our colleagues from around the country, in libraries and publishing houses, would quote the statistic back to us, not realizing we were the source. It started a buzz, just as Nancy Larrick's 1965 article, "The All-White World of Children's Books," had done twenty years earlier. I don't know if it's that we both had statistical data or the fact that white people were making noise about a problem that caused the spotlight to be cast on the issue. Whatever the case, we began to see the number climb slowly over the next few years, from eighteen books in 1985 to seventy-four in 1993. During the same time, the number of children's books had nearly doubled, but even so, the percentage of books by African American authors and illustrators did go up a bit.

By 1995, we were being asked for the statistics for other authors of color, and because at the CCBC we receive review copies of nearly every children's and young adult book published in the United States, we were able to provide them. The number of books by authors of color have gone up and down over the years, but none of the four groups we track—African-American, American Indian, Asian-Pacific, and Latino—none of these groups has ever topped one hundred children's or young adult books in any given year. And the overall statistic for all children's books by and about people of color has never risen above five percent during the time we have been documenting the numbers.²⁴

The biggest change we saw in the 1990s was with Latino literature for children. In 1991, I spoke about Latino literature in the United States at a day-long workshop for bilingual teachers at Columbia University, and in the hour that was allotted to me, I was able to speak about every-

thing that had been published. Most of it, as I recall, came from small presses, such as Children's Book Press and Margarita's Books for Brown Eyes. But soon after that, things started to change. Perhaps the ongoing national dialogue about issues raised by the Columbus quinqucentenary brought this to the forefront for the corporate publishers, but in any case, I always mark 1992 as the year the publishers discovered we have a Spanish speaking population here in the United States. We began to see Spanish/English bilingual books from the corporate publishers, as well as Spanish-language editions of popular titles from their back lists.

And certainly the Pura Belpré Award for Latino literature has had an impact. This award, conceived by Oralia Garza de Cortés and established in 1996, is sponsored jointly by ALSC and REFORMA, and it has done for Latino authors and illustrators what the Coretta Scott King Award did for black authors in the 1970s. And as of 2009, it's gone from being a biennial award to an annual one, as there are now enough books to consider in any given year. In recent years, both the American Indian Library Association and the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association have established children's book awards to encourage more publishing in these areas.

With all these hopeful signs in multicultural literature since the mid-1980s, there is still the reality of those statistics. We hear from our friends in the publishing world that multicultural books are a hard sell. They have trouble pushing a book with a multicultural theme past their marketing department because marketing claims the mega-bookstores won't stock the books. And yet we all know the demand *is* there. We have to get that message across by buying multicultural books and by putting them into the hands of *all* children. As the poet Alexis De Veaux once said, "Buying a book is a political act."

Walter Dean Myers once published an eloquent editorial in the *New York Times* entitled "I Actually Thought We Would Revolutionize the Industry." It was published in 1986, but his words are still sadly true today. He speaks of the hope that was raised with the development of African American children's literature in

the 1970s, only to be quashed in the 1980s by the dwindling numbers. Disillusioned by what he saw, he wrote:

I have changed my notion of the obligation of the book publishing industry. While it does have the responsibility to avoid the publishing of negative images of any people, I no longer feel that the industry has any more obligation to me, to my people, to my children, than does, say, a fast-food chain. It's clear to me that if any race, any religion or social group, elects to place its cultural needs in the hands of the profit makers then it had better be prepared for the inevitable disappointment.²⁵

And going back twenty years earlier to Nancy Larrick's words, written in 1965, which still ring true today, "White supremacy in children's literature will be abolished when authors, editors, publishers and booksellers decide they need not submit to bigots."²⁶

Over the years, I have learned a lot about book evaluation from listening to the children themselves. I love nothing better than to discuss a good book with third graders. They're not always articulate, but they are often perceptive, and always eager to share their opinions. One of the most memorable discussions I ever had with children was one in which we discussed *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry when it was first new. We'd had a remarkable discussion in which the children had discovered, on their own, what a literary allusion was, due to Lowry's expert and child-friendly embedding of the little-red-riding-hood tale into the story.

They had found parallels I had missed between the main character's younger sister, Kirsti, and the young man, Peter, who was a member of the Resistance Movement. Both, they noted, had stood up to the Nazis, but they decided only Peter could qualify as truly heroic because he alone understood the consequences of his actions.

I was just getting ready to wind down the discussion when eight-year-old Erin piped up, "There's one thing I don't understand

about *Number the Stars*." Erin was small for her age. She had that classic Irish look, and her cheeks would turn as bright red as her hair whenever she spoke. "Well," she said, "the Nazis hated the Jews but the author never told us *why*. Why did they hate them so much? They're just people, aren't they? Aren't they just like all of us?"

Erin's question was more perceptive than any answer I could have given her. And it was a good reminder that children can find themselves in books about other children whose lives seem, on the surface, to have nothing to do with theirs.

Early in my career, I heard the British author Penelope Lively say something in a public lecture that has always stuck with me. "The great children's books help free children from the prison of egotism." Children are so naturally and necessarily egotistical, and breaking out of that prison of egotism is an important part

"Children can find themselves in books about other children whose lives seem, on the surface, to have nothing to do with theirs."

of their development. Great books can help them to do just that, as *Number the Stars* did for Erin. And it seems to me that multicultural literature stands especially poised to do just that. It brings characters to life who are both different and the same. A variation on a human theme, so to speak. And they are books to share with *all* children, all year round.

Why do so many insist on giving children books that show them only themselves, sometimes ridiculously so. I once had a mother ask me for a book for her daughter who was just starting fourth grade, who wasn't a great reader but who enjoyed historical fiction set in the United States. She was looking for a short chapter book, preferably with a strong female character. I suggested *Sarah Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan. The mother looked at me as if I had suggested *Valley of the Dolls* for her daughter. "Oh, no, that won't do," she said. "My daughter is short and beautiful."

I have observed this desire to match readers exactly to book characters in action with preschoolers during story hour at the public library. Each week, I would put out books by the same authors or illustrators, or on the same themes, as those I planned to read in the story hour. I would put them face out, around the room, propped up along the walls of the story hour room, at the preschoolers' eye level. What I noticed, again and again, is that the children would pick up whatever book interested them, without regard to the ethnicity or the gender of the character pictured on the cover. But the adults with the children would nearly always choose a book where the character on the cover looked like his or her child. A white father with white daughter, for example, would select a book with a white girl on the cover. An African American mother would select a book with an African American child on the cover, and so on. Often times, I even saw a parent take a book out of his or her child's hands and put it back, if the character didn't match.

These were progressive parents in Madison, Wisconsin, acting with the best of intentions, wanting their children to see themselves reflected in their library books. I can understand

that and appreciate it. But what were they really doing? Were they subconsciously teaching their child that they should stick to their own kind? So much of the conversation about multicultural literature over the years has focused on the need for children of color to see themselves reflected in books—and the need certainly is there. But multicultural literature is important for all children—white children, too.

Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman's 2009 book *Nurture Shock* includes an entire chapter on why white parents don't talk to children about race, and the effect it has on them. They've culled together the results of several studies on young children's perceptions of and attitudes toward race, and have found that the vast majority of white parents have never discussed race with children, beyond vague principles such as, "We're all the same underneath the skin," believing that they are raising their children in a color-blind environment.

In one study, white children between the ages of five and seven, who had been raised in this sort of progressive environment where their parents didn't discuss race were asked directly "Do your parents like black people?" Fourteen percent answered, "No, my parents don't like black people," and 38 percent answered "I don't know." The children were drawing their own conclusions from their parents' silence on the issue of race.²⁷

But you can't really blame these parents. We live in a society where race is a highly charged subject. Most adults can't talk about it, even with each other, without getting defensive and sometimes downright nasty. And not everyone can be invited to the White House to discuss it over a beer with President Obama. But books can be a bridge to understanding. For adults wanting to open a discussion with children about race, I'd suggest starting with Sandra and Myles Pinkney's *Shades of Black*. It's not just black children—all children are the right child for this book. Try it. You'll find that children are eager to talk about the differences they observe all around them, in skin color, eye color, and hair texture. They'll be relieved to learn that you have noticed the differences, too, even though you've told them all along that race doesn't matter.

Years after I heard Penelope Lively talk about the prison of egotism, I learned that the expression hadn't actually originated with her. She had probably cited John Erskine in her lecture as the source for the phrase; I wouldn't be surprised if I had been too dazzled by the concept to have remembered that she did.

John Erskine was the founder of the Great Books program, and he first used the term in writing about the underlying philosophy of the program. He wrote that "great books would help people to free themselves from the prison of egotism and take part in the complete citizenship of mankind" and that they would lead to fellowship and human understanding.²⁸

He probably should have been a children's librarian.

I'm going to close with a quote from Erskine because with these simple words, he really did tell us how children's books

can save the world. He wrote, "Let's tell young people the best books are yet to be written; the best painting, the best government, the best of everything is yet to be done by them."²⁹ They will be the ones to save the world—the next generation of children like Hildmar and Santiago, Delphine and Bud, and Tomás—if we can just give them what they need to do it—the right book at the right time for every child. ☺

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