

Wilder Award Acceptance Speech

Paradise as a Library

Ashley Bryan

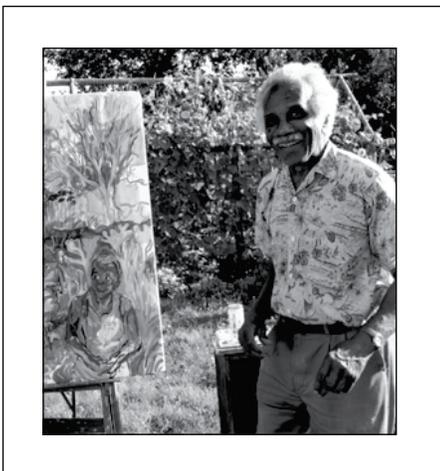


Photo by Bill McGuinness, courtesy of HarperCollins.

Ashley Bryan is the winner of the 2009 Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal, awarded for the body of a person's work. His acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago on July 12, 2009.

You are my people! I grew up in New York City, in the Bronx. My home was in four- and five-story tenement apartment buildings. We knew everyone in these apartments, and everyone looked after everyone as family. That is what I mean when I say you are my people. It was the early recognition that family need not be based solely on blood.

Now the American Library Association has chosen me to join the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award family. I am deeply moved. The ALA committees make the hard choices of selecting the best from the large body of fine work published each year. I am indeed humbled when chosen to represent all who have given the best of their time and talent in this outreach to children.

When awards are announced, I rejoice. I feel this is an affirmation of the importance of books in our lives. Excellent books are not in competition with one another. I feel they all enter that Heaven where east, west, north, and south offer books that are equally challenging, magical. I love the Jorge Luis Borges quote, "I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library."

A library was certainly like a paradise to me during my childhood. Books were free, and we could take them home. My sister, brother, and I, the first three of six children, used orange crates as bookshelves for the borrowed library books. We called them our own home library.

It is no wonder that I was excited when, in kindergarten, I made my first book. It was an alphabet book created with my own pictures. I was writer, illustrator, binder; I sewed the pages together to the color paper cover, and as distributor I took the book home.

The rave reviews I received for these limited-edition one-of-a-kind books kept me going. Later, the teacher explained that all of the books on library shelves began as what we were doing: limited-edition, one-of-a-kind books. Because of the praise I received for those books, I gave gifts of my handmade books to family and friends.

I tried for many years to enter the children's book world. Then Jean Karl, founding editor of children's books at Atheneum, heard of my work and came to my studio in the Bronx. She spent the day looking at my art. She was excited by my varied approaches to texts and soon afterward sent me a contract to begin work with Atheneum. That was in the early 1960s; I was in my forties. Now my books would reach beyond my small circle of family and friends because they would be printed in the thousands . . . *Hurrah!*

Although now my books are printed in the thousands, it is the feeling of the handmade book that is at the heart of my bookmaking. I'd like you, holding one of my books, to feel that I am offering you a one-of-a-kind gift that you will treasure and share.

My work with Jean Karl continued through the years. She knew my work, family, and community commitments, but she kept after me to keep developing the book themes that she had noted in my studio. Jean remembered my illustrations of African tales and asked to use them. When I told her that most of my illustrations were done for texts that documented the story but did not approach the oral tradition, she said, "Ashley, tell them in your own words!"

That was my challenge, to find a way to keep the voice of the oral tradition alive as it is carried over into the book. My lead was poetry. Poetry has always been at the heart of all I do. In elementary school in the Bronx, we students prepared expressive readings of poetry. We were taught that the soul of poetry, like song, is experienced in hearing it. Each day began with students reciting their interpretation of the poem they had been given at least two weeks to prepare.

The prose of my African stories uses the devices of poetry, rhythm, rhyme, onomatopoeia, and alliteration to open the sound of the voice to the printed word. It is my hope that readers, even reading silently, will feel that they are hearing the storyteller.

I graduated from high school in 1940 and knew that I would have to have a schol-

arship to further my studies. My high school art teachers advised me to apply to the Cooper Union School of Art and Engineering, which to this day grants free tuition to all of its undergraduates. I was fortunate in being among those admitted to the art school.

When I begin planning the illustrations for a book, I choose the visual approach that will best partner the text. At Cooper Union, we studied the art and culture of

I enjoy exploring different art cultures for my books. I acknowledge my sources: medieval illuminated manuscripts for Langston Hughes's *Carol of the Brown King*; early block-printed books for my first two block-printed books of spirituals. Whatever the source, it has allowed me to discover untapped reserves of myself.

So, I have explored a variety of art materials to illustrate the texts I choose: tempera

cheered my collage spreads all the way through.

Authors and illustrators work closely with our editors. They have this gift of insight that enables them to critique and guide our work to the published book. I think of it as the editors' awesome ability to follow us, one step ahead!

There are so many wonderful people with whom I have worked in our world of young people's books. I remember librarians, teachers, and readers. Many of you have become dear friends. From the heart I thank each one of you, individually. To paraphrase St. Teresa, "I have a heart so grateful it could be bought with a sardine."

In the integrity and dignity by which we validate time, our being, whatever the nature of our work, I feel we are feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, because we are pursuing the ways of peace.

In conversations with Caitlyn Dlouhy on my collage book of three favorite spirituals, *Let It Shine*, we talked of how singers have often added a verse or verses of their own to the spirituals. She invited me to do so as well. To "Oh, When the Saints Go Marching In" I added the verse, "Oh, when the children play in peace, Oh, when the children play in peace, Oh, Lord I want to be in that number, when the children play in peace." Let's sing it! AMEN! ☺

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the world. I draw upon these sources for the illustration of my books. For my first book of African tales, I used red, yellow, black, and white tempera paint. I painted clearly shaped forms inspired by African sculpture, masks, and the Bushmen rock paintings.

For the African tale *The Dancing Granny*, I did swift line brush paintings to capture the spirit of dance. It was the scenes of everyday-life brush paintings by the Japanese artist Hokusai that inspired my illustrations for *Granny* and the trickster Spider Ananse.

paint, watercolor, pencil, crayon pencil, and block prints. But when I began to work with my current editor, Caitlyn Dlouhy, I had not yet worked in collage. We chose a story from Zambia that I had begun retelling, "How the Ringdove Came by Its Ring." I retitled it *Beautiful Blackbird*. The opening lines of the text describe the birds as all colors of the rainbow. I felt this would allow me to cut colored papers of the birds rather than painting them. Caitlyn encouraged this approach. She was excited by my first double-page spreads, and as she worked closely with my retelling of the tale, she

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