



Logo illustration © by James E. Ransome

I Never Knew ...

Fall 2008

A Newsletter Highlighting African American Children's Literature

My name is Jonda C. McNair, and I am an Assistant Professor of Reading Education at Clemson University. In the fall of 2005, I was awarded a grant by the Research Foundation of the National Council of Teachers of English to implement a family literacy project entitled, "I Never Knew There Were So Many Books About Us: Parents and Children Reading African American Children's Literature Together." Ten African American families with children in grades kindergarten through two participated in a series of five monthly workshops—from March through July of 2006—at Toxaway United Methodist Church in Anderson, South Carolina. The workshops were conducted with the assistance of the Kappa Zeta Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. During the workshops, I provided each family with approximately 50 children's books written by and about African Americans and modeled ways to read aloud and help children respond to the books through art, discussion, and writing.

Participants from the Call Me MISTER Program—a teacher recruitment initiative developed in South Carolina to increase the number of black male elementary school teachers—were invited to participate in the project in a number of ways, such as reading aloud to the children, assisting them in responding to books via art and writing, taking photographs, and so forth. The project ended with a presentation and book signing by James E. Ransome, a well known illustrator whose children's books have been featured on the television series, "Reading Rainbow."

This newsletter, created by Call Me MISTER participants and myself, is an extension of this family literacy project. It is our intention that this newsletter will serve as a means by which to promote an awareness of and an appreciation for literature written by and about African Americans for children in grades K-6. Our intended audience includes parents, teachers, media specialists, booksellers, and interested others in the upstate area and beyond.

Classic African American Children's Literature

Generally when the term "classic" is used within the context of children's literature, it refers to titles such as *Make Way for Ducklings*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *Millions of Cats*. I do consider these titles classics, but it should be noted that all of these books are written by Whites. There are also classic children's books that are written by African Americans as well as people from other groups of color. Classics are usually regarded as books with an enduring appeal for various reasons which might include touching upon desires or themes that are important to diverse readers across time and place, strength of writing, and originality in terms of factors such as style and topic.

I contacted several highly respected scholars of children's literature and asked for their opinions about books written by and about African Americans that they believe are classics or destined to become classics. All of

the books reviewed in this newsletter are ones that were repeatedly identified by these scholars in this manner. It should also be noted that a number of these classic African American children's books (e.g., *Flossie and the Fox* and *Honey, I Love*) have been reviewed in previous newsletters. The titles in this newsletter are classics for several reasons. For instance, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* is destined to become a classic due to its pioneering use of humor as a literary device to draw readers into a story about the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. *Everett Anderson's Goodbye* is considered a classic because it is exceptionally written and humanizes a black child as he grapples with the death of his father, a universal theme with which children of any racial or ethnic group from any time period or place can relate.

It is my hope that teachers, teacher educators, parents, and others will broaden their definition of the term "classic" so as to present all children with a diverse collection of books that will stand the test of time.

Literature Reviews

Show Way

Written by Jacqueline Woodson. Illustrated by Hudson Talbott.
G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2005 \$16.99 Grades 2-6

“When Soonie’s Great-Grandma was seven, she was sold from the Virginia land to a plantation in South Carolina without her ma or pa but with some muslin her ma had given her. And two needles she got from the big house—and thread dyed bright red with berries from the chokecherry tree” (unpaged). And so begins this story about how the making of quilts is passed down from one woman to another across several generations. Soonie’s Great-Grandma learns to sew quilts called “Show Ways” that show the road to freedom. Her daughter, Mathis May, is also sold away and she learns to sew the “Show Ways.” When freedom comes, the women in the family continue to learn how to sew beautiful quilts, which they sell to earn a living. One of my favorite quotes from the book reads, “Sewed those quilts to live. Sewed those quilts to remember. And though some could book read, most could not. Stars and moon and roads. Picture reading was what they’d always known” (unpaged). In the end, many of these women learn to read, participate in the Civil Rights Movement and become teachers and writers. The book ends with the author, Jacqueline Woodson, telling her daughter Toshi about “Show Ways” and the stories of her family. The book’s illustrations add to the story by showing images of quilts and the women who make them across time.

--MISTER LeAndrea Montgomery

Stevie

Written and illustrated by John Steptoe.
HarperTrophy, 1969 \$6.99 Grades K-3

This is an inspiring story about friendship between children. In the beginning of the story, the main character Robert tells of all of the new problems that have arisen in his life because of the presence of his new house mate, Stevie. “He used to like to get up on my bed to look out the window and leave his dirty footprints all over my bed. And my momma never said nothin’ to him” (unpaged). Then one Saturday when Stevie’s mother comes to pick him up, she announces that Stevie will not be returning. On that day, Robert sits and thinks about all of the fun things he and Stevie did together like playing cowboys and Indians on the stoop and playing boogie man. “He was a nice little guy. He was kinda like a little brother. Little Stevie” (unpaged). I would recommend this story because it reminds us that we often

take important people in our lives for granted. Steptoe uses bold colors in the illustrations to convey a strong sense of emotion. In an extraordinary move, in 1969 *Life Magazine* published this book in its entirety in full color.

--MISTER Mansa Joseph

Let it Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals

Illustrated by Ashley Bryan.
Atheneum, 2007 \$16.99 Grades K-6

Ashley Bryan has visually interpreted three well-known spirituals in this breathtaking book. The three spirituals are “This Little Light of Mine,” “Oh, When the Saints Go Marching In,” and “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands.” Bryan has used collage illustrations with bright colors to create a number of scenes of children that relate to the songs’ lyrics. This book is one that children will enjoy singing over and over again. The book concludes with the lyrics to all three songs as well as information about the origin of spirituals.

--Dr. Jonda C. McNair



The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963

Written by Christopher Paul Curtis.
Delacorte Press, 1995 \$6.99 Grades 4-6

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 is the story of a boy named Kenny Watson and the exploits of him and his family. Kenny lives in Flint, Michigan with his mother and father, Daniel and Wilona Watson, older brother Byron, and younger sister Joetta (Joey). Kenny refers to his family as the “Weird Watsons” because of their diverse personalities

and all of the crazy situations in which they find themselves. Kenny describes a number of adventures such as Byron sneaking to get his hair processed and getting his lips frozen to the family car's side view mirror. When Byron gets into too much trouble at home, Mr. and Mrs. Watson decide to take him to Birmingham to stay with his maternal grandmother in an effort to get him straight. The use of humor in this book makes it a standout. For example, when the family finally arrives at the grandmother's house, Kenny describes her as "a teeny-weeny, old, old, old woman that looked just like Momma would if someone shrank her down about five sizes and sucked all the juice out of her!" (p. 156) The book concludes with the racially-charged bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963. After experiencing the harshness of racism, Kenny gains a new understanding of the adult world in tragic fashion. Christopher Paul Curtis does an excellent job of telling the story from the point of view of a 10 year-old. He illustrates the innocence of childhood and having to deal with siblings and parents. Also, he shows the healing factor that a family can bring during times of tragedy.

--MISTERS Ryan Henry and Jared Holloway

Sing to the Sun

Written and illustrated by Ashley Bryan.

HarperTrophy, 1992 \$7.99 Grades K-6

Sing to the Sun is a collection of twenty three poems celebrating many aspects of life such as family, friends, music, birds, and rain showers. Each poem features at least one colorful illustration. Poems such as "Song" will touch the heart and remain in memories for weeks to come. This poem reads, "Sing to the sun / It will listen / And warm your words / Your joy will rise / Like the sun / And glow / Within you / Sing to the moon / It will hear / And soothe your cares / Your fears will set / Like the moon / And fade / Within you" (unpaged). These poems will have readers feeling all types of emotions and will spark thought and conversation. This is an outstanding collection of fine poems for all ages.

--MISTER Lawrence Ochieng

Everett Anderson's Goodbye

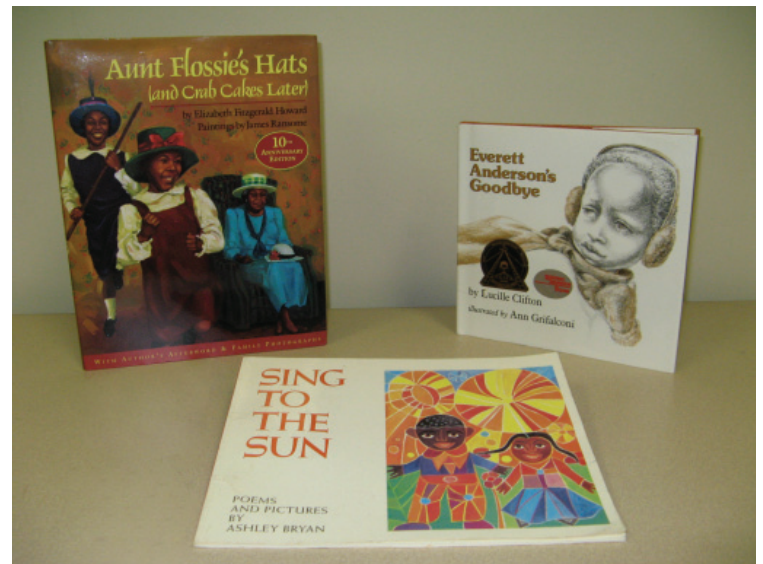
Written by Lucille Clifton. Illustrated by Ann Grifalconi.

Henry Holt and Company, 1983 \$7.95 Grades K-3

After the death of his father, Everett Anderson is experiencing the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. For example, during the third stage, Everett says, "I promise to learn my / nine times nine / and never sleep late or / gobble my bread / if I can see Daddy / walking, and talking, and / waving his hand, and / turning his head"

(unpaged). In the fourth phase, Everett is depressed and cannot eat or sleep. After a bit of time Everett says, "I knew / my daddy loved me through and through, / and whatever happens when people die, / love doesn't stop, and / neither will I"(unpaged). Everett has realized that his father's love is eternal and he accepts his death. Ann Grifalconi's illustrations, done in pencil, convey the mood of depression and allow the reader to feel Everett's emotions. Everett's story is touching, and those who have lost a loved one should be able to relate to it.

--MISTERS Wallace Cobbs and Alvin Crouch



Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)

Written by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard. Illustrated by James Ransome.

Clarion Books, 1991 \$16.00 Grades K-3

This is a story about two young girls named Susan and Sarah, who visit their Great-great-aunt Flossie. While at their Aunt Flossie's house, they sip from tea cups and eat cookies. Aunt Flossie's house is filled with lots of exciting things, but the most amusing things are the "boxes and boxes and boxes of HATS!" (page 5) Aunt Flossie lets the girls pick out hats and try them on. She says that the hats are her memories and that each one has its own story. One green hat that Sarah picks out has a smoky smell. Aunt Flossie says, "The big fire in Baltimore. Everything smelled of smoke for miles around. For days and days. Big fire" (page 12). Finally, the girls and Aunt Flossie eat crab cakes. The girls agree that crab cakes are good but that they "taste best after stories... stories about Aunt Flossie's hats!" (page 31) Howard's writing is engaging and will make children aware of the power of memories. Ransome's paintings depict the closeness of the girls and Aunt Flossie.

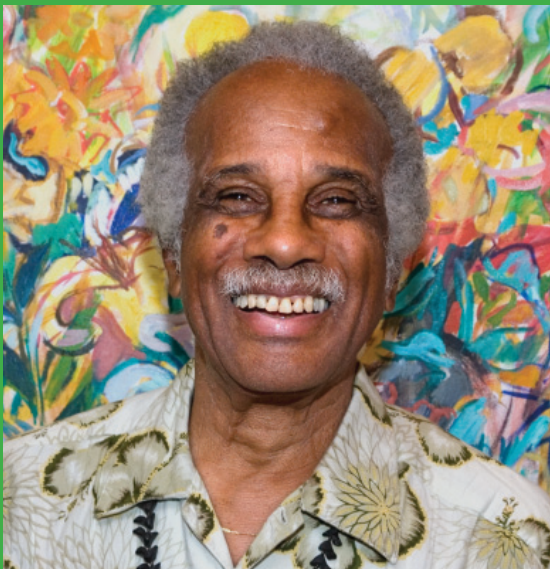
--MISTER Lemanuel Chandler

Profile of Ashley Bryan

Ashley Bryan is the author and or illustrator of more than thirty books including *Beautiful Blackbird*, *Ashley Bryan's ABC of African American Poetry*, *All Day, All Night: A Child's First Book of African-American Spirituals*, *What a Wonderful World*, *Sing to the Sun*, and *Let It Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals*. Mr. Bryan has received numerous accolades for his books including two Coretta Scott King Illustrator Awards, the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, and the Virginia Hamilton Literary Award.

Mr. Bryan was born in 1923 in New York City during the Great Depression to parents who had immigrated to the United States from Antigua. He attended Cooper Union Art School but was forced to interrupt his studies there in order to fight in World War II. He later returned to complete his education. Mr. Bryan has taught art at a number of institutions including Queens College—CUNY and Dartmouth College, where he at one time chaired the art department. Mr. Bryan lives on an island off the coast of Maine where he has spent summers since 1946. He receives inspiration for his work from his past and from his home which is full of toys, art, and literature.

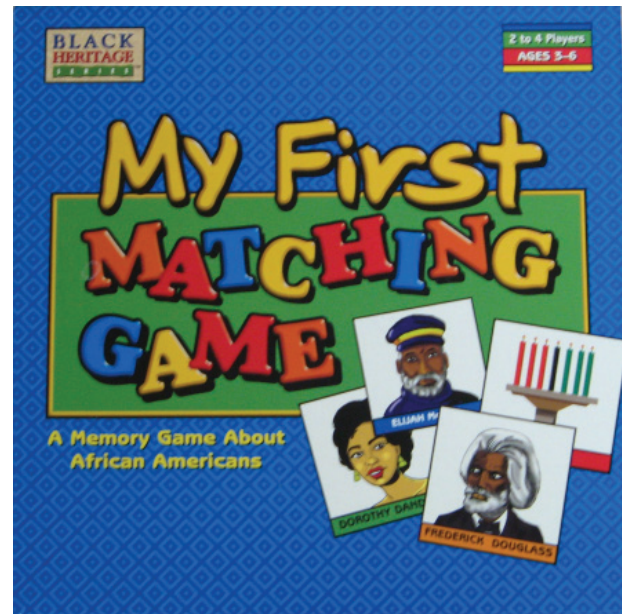
One poem, "The Artist," that appears in *Sing to the Sun*, seems to speak to Mr. Bryan's work as a painter. It reads, "I know a man / Like a child / He loves to paint / He can paint anything / He sets his heart to / He knows / That to have / Anything he loves / He can have it / Fair and forever / If he paints / A picture of it / He knows / That to face / Anything that hurts / He can do it / Transform the sorrow / If he paints / A picture of it / This is how he lives / This is what he does."



"I cannot remember a time when
I have not been drawing and painting."

Gifts, Goodies, and Games

My First Matching Game



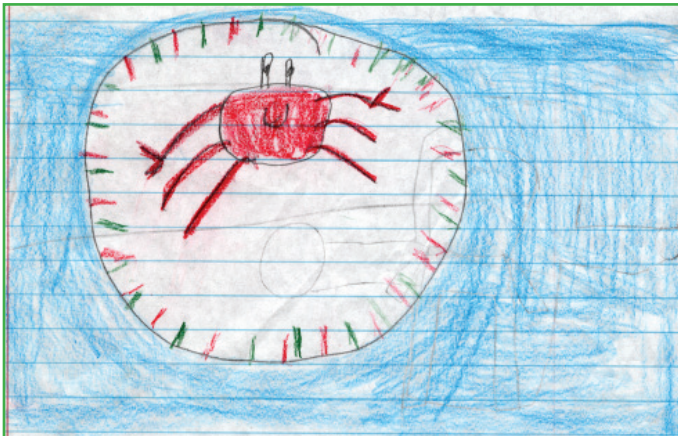
This is an educational matching game that exposes children to the richness of the African American experience. The gameboard contains the following categories: history, scientists and inventors, athletes and entertainers, and culture. It is for 2-4 players ages 3-6, and the objective of the game is to be the player who matches the last pair of cards and places them on the board. The game pieces include one gameboard, forty-eight playing cards, and a Black Heroes booklet. The booklet provides information about the African American cultural components (e.g., dancing and music) and historical figures featured on the gameboard. For instance, part of the description of Matthew Henson reads, "Matthew Henson was the greatest of all the Arctic explorers. In 1909 he discovered the North Pole, along with Robert E. Peary."

This game is available from www.dollslikeme.com and costs \$13.95, plus shipping and handling. To receive information or to place an order, please call 1-800-971-7159.

Item # 05065-MATCH



Children's Responses to *Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)*



Sarah and Susan go to Aunt Flossie's house to see her hats.

Susan and Sarah are listening to their Aunt Flossie tell stories about her hats.

Sarah and Susan and their family go get crab cakes.



One day on Sunday Sarah and Susan went to their Aunt Flossie's house to see her.

Sarah and Susan were looking at Aunt Flossie's hats and found one special to her!

Sarah's and Susan's mom and dad and Aunt Flossie went to eat crab cakes and wore hats!

The end

John Lucas G., age 8
Anderson, South Carolina
John enjoys baseball, soccer, and swimming.

Jordan W., age 7
Anderson, South Carolina
Jordan enjoys dance and gymnastics.



Sarah and Susan went to Aunt Flossie's house to look at her hats and to spend time with her. All Aunt Flossie's hats have a story they were in. One is about their own family going to get crab cakes when Aunt Flossie's hat flew in to the stream. Dad tried to get it but he slid in to the mud. Mom tried to get it with a stick. She fell. A boy with a dog said my dog can get that hat for you and she did. Then they went out to get crab cakes.



Aunt Flossie's Hats and crab cakes later reminds me of my Aunt Nebbly and all of her hats. She had her hats for a long time. Aunt Nebbly started collecting hats at my age which is 8. My favorite hat is the tiaravale and in her wedding dress.

Sara M., age 8
Anderson, South Carolina
Sara enjoys horseback riding, art, and music.

Lydia F., age 8
Anderson, South Carolina
Lydia enjoys swimming, dancing, gymnastics, singing, painting, and cooking.

Children's Art - Submissions

We are proud to feature the pictures that four children drew in response to the book *Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)*. We intend to feature children's work in all of our newsletters. If your child draws a picture or writes something in response to one of the books featured in this newsletter, we will be glad to include it in a future newsletter. Children who submit a picture or writing sample will receive a complimentary copy of an African American children's book. Please mail pictures or writing samples—along with your contact information—to the following address:

Dr. Jonda C. McNair
Clemson University
Eugene T. Moore School of Education
400A Tillman Hall
Clemson, SC 29634 - 0705

Please feel free to contact Dr. McNair by phone (864-656-1577) or e-mail jmcnair@clemson.edu if you have any questions.

Credits

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Coming in the next issue of *I Never Knew ...*

A profile of children's book author Joyce Carol Thomas

2009 Coretta Scott King book award winners

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