

YOUNG ADULT FICTION BY



AFRICAN AMERICAN

WRITERS, 1968–1993



A Critical and Annotated Guide

Deborah Kutenplon and



Ellen Olmstead

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DEBORAH KUTENPLON
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To the students at Martin Luther King, Jr.,
High School in New York and
Charles H. Hickey, Jr., School in Baltimore

and

To Amy Richlin and Rhonda Cobham-Sander for your teaching,
mentoring, and friendship

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Preface

Young Adult Fiction by African American Writers, 1968-1993: A Critical and Annotated Guide is as comprehensive and current as possible, including all fiction titles published between 1968 and 1993 by African American authors and targeted toward young adult readers—166 titles by 57 authors. Only works of fiction—historical fiction, modern realistic fiction, fantasy and science fiction, and mystery and suspense—by African American authors and centering on African American protagonists are included. We chose 1968 as a cutoff year because earlier works tend to be out of print or dated. Several factors precipitated by 1968 a momentous, albeit short-lived, boom in the publishing of African American children's and young adult literature. Every effort has been made to locate and evaluate books published by large and small presses. If we missed a book, please let us know!

While some of the world's most celebrated African American authors have written novels and stories featuring African American young adult protagonists that are of interest to young adult readers, young adult literature is a special genre, and only books written specifically for, and marketed to, young adults are included in this bibliography. The protagonists of these books are between twelve and nineteen years old, in sixth through twelfth grade, if they are in school. Books without illustrations and at least 100 pages long that feature nine- to eleven-year-old protagonists are also included.

This bibliography follows a traditional format—alphabetical by author, with all titles by each author arranged in order of publication date. The brief Introduction places contemporary young adult fiction by African American

writers in an historical and political context. The annotation for each title is much longer than annotations found in usual bibliographies: it reads more like a full-length book review, presenting the salient themes and plot twists, drawing attention to minor themes or plot points if they are unique or problematic. Plus it offers an in-depth critical appraisal of the novel or story, judging the quality of writing, the appeal and development of characters, problems, and themes, and its handling of complex and sensitive cultural, historical, and sociopolitical issues, where applicable. Each annotation also includes recommended reader age and gender, based on the developmental, emotional, and intellectual level of the intended audience.

Scholars in the field of African American literature for young people are pioneers. Only a handful of critical articles and books on the subject have been published, most within the past twenty years. The articles are scattered and the selection of titles included in them is often random and incomplete. Previous book-length discussions are dated, since they include only books published through the mid-1980s. Typically the critical materials look at African American young adult fiction in general, examining broad themes and trends within the whole field of publishing, rather than examining specific authors and texts closely. The scholarship also tends to focus on the better known, award-winning authors and their best-selling titles. Comprehensiveness, currency, and extensive criticism of individual titles differentiate this bibliography from superb forerunners of its field: Diane Johnson's *Telling Tales: The Pedagogy and Promise of African American Literature for Youth*, Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard's *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, Barbara Rollock's *The Black Experience in Children's Books and Black Authors and Illustrators of Children's Books*, Barbara Dodds Stanford's *Black Literature for High School Students*, Rudine Sims' *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Children's Fiction*, and Helen E. Williams' *Books by African American Authors and Illustrators for Children and Young Adults*.¹

While it's wonderful that an ever-increasing number of books by African American authors about African American protagonists are being published, it's disturbing that some people promote a book simply because it is "multicultural." We evaluated each book on its literary merits as well as in terms of its direct and indirect treatment of developmental or psychological issues and issues of race, gender, class, ability, age, sexuality, and sexual orientation. Books have the potential to socialize young readers and transmit values to them; books have the potential to affect young readers' self-image, attitudes, and emotional and intellectual development. Our bias is in favor of ambiguity and complexity over preachy propaganda. Pace, character, and a plot focusing on a real life problem are important ingredients of popular young adult fiction:

Overwhelmingly, . . . students liked books with teen protagonists and stories that might be termed realistic fiction or 'problem' novels. . . . [T]hey liked books that seemed real to them or that involved teens with problems that they themselves had or thought those around them had. They selected books because they liked a writer's style, especially the ability to create an exciting, fast paced story and to make them feel involved in the action through the development of a character. . . . And they selected books because they were interested in a particular subject and wanted to read about it.²

An author is an individual, in perspective and voice, and shouldn't be expected to represent a people. Furthermore, one writer or one story can't take on the whole group experience. We don't expect only African American authors to create African American characters; nor do we expect African American authors to write only about African American characters. Being European American doesn't inherently result in writing that's racist, that objectifies or misrepresents African Americans, but,

statistically, that's been the trend. A good writer can speak to anyone and write about anyone. And a writer's ethnic or racial identity doesn't guarantee that accuracy or authenticity will come across in her/his storytelling, and, as some of the writers reviewed here prove, it's no insurance against unintentionally expressing internalized racism! However, being an insider automatically certifies that the authorial perspective—popular, palatable, or not—is indeed an indigenous African American one. There's a lot to be said for people speaking for themselves.

In addition, this bibliography focuses on books featuring African American protagonists only by African American authors because their works are underpublished, underpromoted, and largely unrecognized, particularly when compared to the number and commercial success of books about African American characters written by European American authors. Even African American authors who have already published critically and financially successful books recount horror stories of how they do not enjoy equal access to the publishing industry and of the creative limitations publishers attempt to impose upon them. Publishing has mirrored the changes in racial awareness in broader society. In the mid-1960s, only 7% of all children's books published included African American characters; that number increased to 14% in the mid-1970s, following the Civil Rights Movement, but has since dropped again to only 2% today.³ Currently, on average only 1% of all children's and young adult books published are *written* by an African American, and 20% of these books are published by small presses.⁴ Meanwhile, the number of picture books is increasing and the number of novels is decreasing.⁵

This bibliography includes only books which feature African American protagonists, because somewhere in this body of literature African American young adults will recognize themselves and gain a window on the extraordinary diversity and immensity of the African American experience. African American youth, marginalized, miseducated, and villainized by American society, need this validation and education. "Adolescence is a time of very serious work in terms of self-

identity and self-worth," and good literature can provide "opportunities and models for learning . . . positive messages about [oneself]," aiding the developmental process and the building of self-esteem.⁶

Not only African American young adults should read the books included in this bibliography, just as African American young adults do not read books only by and about African Americans. The African American experience is a strand inextricably entwined with the American experience, so all young people need to read the best of these books. A Eurocentric curriculum gives young people a misleading conception of the world and their relationship within and to it. Wherever there is an issue of difference, there is a connection to be made, a stereotype to dispel, or a notion of homogeneity to shatter, and the best of these books do it irresistibly and masterfully with grace and passion. The best books simultaneously tackle universal adolescent dilemmas while introducing the reader to an individual protagonist in all her/his particularity and conflict, as a person possessing strengths and weaknesses. Our intention in focusing exclusively on young adult African American fiction is not to further isolate or segregate but to identify and make accessible, to provide a unique resource for the connoisseur and the curious.

The need for these young adult books is obvious. But why this bibliography? We hope that parents, teachers, librarians, bookstore owners, and young people will use this bibliography. Armed with *Young Adult Fiction by African American Writers, 1968-1993: A Critical and Annotated Guide*, visit your school library or local library or your favorite bookstore and take an inventory to see how many of the titles included in this bibliography are available for you to borrow or to buy. Or, survey the curriculum in your school to see how many of these titles are included in the reading list for your classes. The need for this bibliography, whose purpose is to bring your attention to many outstanding but virtually unknown writers, will be painfully clear after this exercise. Ignorance is no longer an excuse! Seek out, borrow or purchase, and promote authentic multicultural literature.

Notes

1. Dianne Johnson, *Telling Tales: The Pedagogy and Promise of African American Literature for Youth* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990). Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard, eds., *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985). Barbara Rollock, ed., *The Black Experience in Children's Books* (New York: New York Public Library, 1984). Barbara Rollock, *Black Authors and Illustrators of Children's Books* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988). Rudine Sims, *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Children's Fiction* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982). Barbara Dodds Stanford, ed., *Black Literature for High School Students* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978). Helen E. Williams, *Black Authors and Illustrators for Children and Young Adults* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1991).

2. Barbara G. Samuels, "Young Adults' Choices: Why Do Students 'Really Like' Particular Books?," *Journal of Reading* 32.8 (May 1989), p. 717.

3. Barbara Dodds Stanford, ed., "Introduction," *Black Literature for High School Students* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), p. 3.

4. Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard, "Authentic Multicultural Literature for Children: An Author's Perspective," *The Multicolored Mirror: Cultural Substance in Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Merri V. Lindgren, ed. (Fort Atkinson, WI: Highsmith Press, 1991), p. 93.

5. Rudine Sims Bishop, "Evaluating Books by and about African-Americans," *The Multicolored Mirror: Cultural Substance in Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Merri V. Lindgren, ed. (Fort Atkinson, WI: Highsmith Press, 1991), p. 34.

6. Virginia M. Henderson, "The Development of Self-Esteem in Children of Color," *The Multicolored Mirror: Cultural Substance in Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Merri V. Lindgren, ed. (Fort Atkinson, WI: Highsmith Press, 1991), p. 20-24.

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Introduction

What is the history of young adult fiction featuring African American protagonists written by African American authors? American children's literature, which emerged as a distinct genre last century, "has a long, sorry history" of "cultural substance, authenticity, and accuracy" where books about African Americans are concerned. Over one hundred years of children's literature, created predominantly by and for European Americans, usually grossly misrepresented the personal and collective realities of African Americans, and "offered inaccurate and hurtful images."¹ The prevalent stereotypes included: "'the contented slave,' 'the wretched freeman,' 'the comic Negro,' 'the brute Negro,' 'the tragic mulatto,' 'the local-color Negro,' and 'the exotic primitive.'"²

The tradition of literature created by African Americans for children of all races likewise spans more than a century. Its "tumultuous past" included: "limited awareness among readers; circumscribed publication and distribution; omission from libraries, schools, and bookstores; and uninformed criticism."³ Pinpointing the exact starting date and a complete list of titles for the African American tradition of children's literature is difficult, for few texts survived of those produced by African American economic, fraternal and sororal, religious, and social organizations, reputedly the principal producers of curriculum materials targeted toward African American children.

In light of the pivotal role that the church played in promoting education and literacy, the publication of children's literature by African American religious organizations takes on greater significance; the dearth of relics greater sadness. From 1887-1889, Mrs. A.E. Johnson edited and marketed a magazine for African American children, *The Joy*, that delivered a

message of "racial uplift"; published by the European American-administered Baptist Publication Society, *The Joy* featured African American characters in church-oriented stories. In 1896, its first year of operation, The National Baptist Publishing Board, headed by Richard Henry Boyd, published 700,000 church school materials geared toward African American youth, centered around Bible stories and religious moral teachings.⁴

The oldest extant children's literature created by African Americans does not qualify for consideration in this bibliography: Mrs. A.E. Johnson's novel, *Clarence and Corinne, or, God's Way*, published in 1889, features European American protagonists; Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Little Brown Baby*, published in 1896, is a collection of dialect poems. In the 1800s, few African American children were literate, and "few could have encountered the texts in their schooling because major strictures were placed on funding, curricula, and type of schooling provided for African Americans."⁵

But in the 1900s, an emerging formally educated, literate, African American middle class "demanded culturally authentic literature" for their children, fueling the expansion of that tradition. "Enhancement of the new tradition also necessitated the emergence of an educated group of persons interested in writing as a vocation or avocation. It also depended on the further development of African American publishers and changes in attitudes among White publishers."⁶ These necessary preconditions were met by 1920, when W.E.B. DuBois and Augustus G. Dill formed the DuBois and Dill Publishing Company, which produced Elizabeth Ross Haynes' twenty-two volume biography series of African Americans called *Unsung Heroes*, and *The Brownies' Book*, a multidisciplinary, multigenre, African diaspora-centered newsmagazine "designed to inform, educate, and politicize children and their parents and to showcase the achievements of people of color" and edited by Jessie R. Fauset.⁷ *The Brownies' Book*, set within an African American cultural context, but accessible to children of all races, was the premier periodical for African American children until *Ebony Jr.*!

edited by Constance Johnson, appeared in 1973. *The Brownies' Book* sought to inculcate race and class consciousness, pride in African roots and African American heritage, African American unity, family loyalty, and respect for basic values and education. It provided role models, entertainment, and inspired readers toward activism, "racial uplift and sacrifice."⁸ *The Brownies' Book* struggled financially and folded after two years, in 1922, with a circulation of 4,000.⁹ In the tradition of *The Brownies' Book*, the less classist, but also less feminist and internationalist *Ebony Jr!* accentuated the positive and praised "moderation." It likewise succumbed to financial constraints and folded after ten years, in 1985, peaking at a circulation of 100,000.¹⁰ Although a different genre, these children's magazines best represent the beginning of an African American tradition of children's and young adult fiction, for they provided a forum and support for artists of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s to write fiction specifically for African American young people.

Carter G. Woodson, whose legacy includes establishing Negro History Week, which became Black History Month, and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, founded the Associated Publishers in 1920 to produce literature "explicitly designed to educate, entertain, and emancipate," and he authored groundbreaking textbooks, beginning with *The Negro in Our History*, in 1922.¹¹ Woodson's project specialized in non-fiction, however.

Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes published children's books, beginning in 1932 with their joint juvenile picture book venture, *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti*. Critics characterize Bontemps, with his sixteen books for children, as "the contemporary 'father' of African American children's literature."¹² However, "father" seems a misnomer within the context of the African American tradition of literature for young people, for, as the aforementioned firsts indicate, women pioneered as authors and editors. Bontemps geared his fiction toward young children, his non-fiction and poetry toward young adults. His only publication that might

qualify as an early work of young adult fiction is *We Have Tomorrow*, true stories of twelve barrier-breaking African Americans, published in 1945, with its style resembling historical fiction. Hughes concentrated first on poetry for young adults, then on non-fiction Afrocentric geography, history, and music, with his *First Books of...* series, beginning in 1952. Backed by major European American publishers and addressing children of all races as their audience, Bontemps and Hughes enjoyed unrivalledly successful readership and book sales. Not coincidentally, their work signals a "shift from an emphasis on explicit racial themes and consciousness . . . to a more assimilationist posture utilizing only subtle racial undertones."¹³

The assimilationist bent of the literature of the 1940s and 1950s corresponds with the thrust for integration that occurred during that era. Lorenz Graham and Jesse Jackson established the foundation for African American young adult fiction with their first assimilationist yet pioneering novels, *South Town* and *Call Me Charley*, published in 1945 and 1958, respectively. At the same time, Shirley Graham wrote a quasi-historical fiction biography series, beginning with *There Once Was a Slave: The Heroic Story of Frederick Douglass*, in 1947, as did Ann Petry, beginning with *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, in 1955.

In carefully choosing themes and characters to contradict stereotypes in their own writing, African American publishers and authors of the 1910s and 1920s implicitly critiqued European American children's literature by creating "oppositional texts," i.e., "works that contradict a theme, motif, or stereotype."¹⁴ In the early 1940's, Augusta Baker and Charlemae Rollins ushered in the formal critical movement in African American children's literature. Coordinators of Children's Services at the New York Public Library, Baker and her successor Barbara Rollock influenced the movement for critical analysis of African American children's books for forty years, starting in 1944, producing annotated bibliographies, essays, reports, and studies on images of African Americans in children's literature and publishing trends. Their work spurred

the publishing of African American children's authors. Under their direction, the New York Public Library published *The Black Experience in Children's Books* beginning in 1950. Charlemae Rollins, Children's Librarian for the Chicago Public Library, under the auspices of the National Council of Teachers of English, published annotated recommendation lists entitled *We Build Together: A Reader's Guide to Negro Life and Literature for Elementary and High School Use*, beginning in 1941. In 1965, the *Saturday Review* published a landmark study conducted by educator Nancy Larrick; Larrick's article, "The All-White World of Children's Books," shamed publishers into producing more multicultural books and spurred buyers and readers to demand more multicultural books from publishers.

In 1967, Bradford Chambers founded the Council on Interracial Books for Children, "a powerful force for change," in New York City.¹⁵ The *Bulletin of the Council on Interracial Books for Children* "provided a forum for socially conscious criticism of children's books" through articles and reviews—often deservedly harsh and confrontational—by content specialists, which played an instrumental role in improving images of African Americans in children's books. In addition, the bulletin sponsored contests for unpublished African American writers and illustrators, which sparked the careers of the core of best-known authors included in this bibliography.¹⁶ In 1969, African American librarians "seeking to formally acknowledge excellence in published writing by Black authors of books for children and young adults" established the Coretta Scott King Award, administered through the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association.

Surging Civil Rights and Black Nationalist activism, urban riots in response to injustice and violence, heightened awareness within the educational and publishing establishments of racial crisis and racism, and African American librarians' assault on European American publishers and authors' distortions and omissions of African Americans in young people's literature brought the ongoing struggle between

"cultural imperialism" and "self-affirmation" to a productive head.¹⁷ The majority of books featuring African American characters published through the 1960s were written by European American authors, from a Eurocentric perspective and geared toward a European American audience: they wrote about African American children for European American children. Publishers, committed to selling books, not to creating images or influencing attitudes, operated on the assumption of a white primary audience or market, which influenced the authorship, theme, and content of their projects. European American authors wrote about active, central white characters who befriend or "help" sketchy, passive African American characters in a setting where benevolent European Americans are colorblind or pitying.

The best-intended of books written by European American authors in the 1960s and 1970s and featuring African American young people as protagonists leave much to be desired. Categorizable as "social conscience" books, "which are mainly those characterized . . . as being about Blacks and written to help whites to know the condition of their fellow humans," and "melting pot" books, "which . . . were written for both Black and white readers on the assumption that both need to be informed that nonwhite children are exactly like other American children, except for the color of their skins," are products of an era that prescribed integration as the panacea to widespread social problems.¹⁸ Some black writers, miraculously oblivious to racism or eager to get published, obliged, creating characters who met "white middle-class standards" of manners, dress, and speech in order to be acceptable and accepted. The "social conscience" books served a purpose: they increased visibility of African Americans in young adult literature. "Their topics were timely, highlighting prominent social issues of concern to everyone," but the literary quality of the bulk of these books "is poor enough to suggest that had they not been timely, they might not have been published at all."¹⁹ "Melting pot" books, which "make a point of recognizing our universality . . . [and] make a point of ignoring our differences, . . . do not concern themselves with

racial prejudice, discrimination, or conflict."²⁰ The "melting pot" books:

... create that imaginary, racially integrated social order in which ... [blacks and whites] live and work together harmoniously, and in which [blacks] have assimilated and have been assimilated into the larger white cultural milieu. ... On one level, to project such a social order is a positive act. It permits one to assume a primary audience of both Black and white readers. ... It also allows for the integration of the all-white world of children's books. ... On some other level, however, ... the ignoring of differences becomes a signal that the recognition of them makes people uncomfortable or unhappy. ... [T]he implication is that ... differences ... signify something undesirable. To ignore ... [specific characteristics or differences of a] group of children may be another means of conferring a kind of invisibility on them. They are permitted to exist in books only so long as they conform to the norm of middle-class Euro-American social and cultural values and life experiences.²¹

In other words, "a story that could have been about anybody is probably a story that could have been about precisely nobody at all."²² Most African American literature for young adults published contemporaneously with the "social conscience" and "melting pot" books by their European American counterparts clearly are written on some level in response to them.

Cultural and political events of the 1960s forced nurturers and publishers to evaluate how African Americans and racial relations were portrayed in children's books and the significance of these depictions or lack thereof. Educators stepped up their critiquing of children's books. Increased government funding for educational, literary, and social programs starting in the 1960s made more money available for

agencies to buy books, fueling business opportunities for publishers: in the early 1970s, approximately 14% of children's books featured African Americans as the central characters, and 60% "demonstrated a positive sensitivity" toward African Americans.²³ Within ten years, publishers could point to change: in 1965, African American characters appeared in 6.7% of all children's literature, 14.4% in 1975; in 1965, 60% of black characters appeared in settings outside of the United States, 20% in 1975; in 1965, African American characters appeared in a contemporary setting in 14% of all children's literature, 28% in 1975.²⁴ However, "the number of books published . . . [featuring] African Americans . . . hovered around two hundred books per year."²⁵ European American-authored fiction of 1971-1982 compared to that of 1958-1970 exhibited less blatantly racist content but continued to feature inauthentic African American characters and experiences.²⁶

Not surprisingly, African American writers primarily have produced what critics regard as the best books featuring African American protagonists, the "culturally conscious" books, "written primarily, though not exclusively, for Afro-American readers . . . [and which] attempt to reflect and illuminate both the uniqueness and the universal humanness of the Afro-American experience from the perspective of an Afro-American child or family."²⁷ Between 1965 and 1979, African American authors produced approximately two thirds of all "culturally conscious" young people's books, and just five African American authors—four of whose books are included in this bibliography, Eloise Greenfield, Virginia Hamilton, Sharon Bell Mathis, and Walter Dean Myers—produced approximately a third of the total books.²⁸ Where European American authors promoted "racial harmony and American cultural homogeneity," African American authors promoted "self-affirmation for Afro-American children" by creating literature that:

... clearly reflects Afro-American cultural traditions, sensibilities, and world views. It presents an image of Afro-Americans as courageous

survivors with a strong sense of community and cultural affinity and with positive feelings about being Black. It presents Afro-American children as strong, resilient, capable, and confident . . . [able to achieve their self-identified goals despite oppression and violence]. . . Its focus is on the human relationships and inner resources that provide support and comfort and strength.²⁹

The "culturally conscious" books, predominantly of the contemporary realistic fiction or historical fiction genre:

. . . recognize, sometimes even celebrate, the distinctiveness of the experience of growing up simultaneously Black and American. . . [T]he major characters are Afro-Americans, the story is told from their perspective, the setting is an Afro-American community or home, and the text includes some means of identifying the characters as Black.³⁰

African American writers assumed the task of providing authentic representations of African American characters and situations and countered the insidious, covert, and subtle racism of their European American counterparts' writings.

African American writers concentrated on writing books about African American youth for African American youth. The milestones in this tradition for young people are: John Steptoe's *Stevie*, the first picture book by an African American about an African American child for an African American child, published in 1969, and Virginia Hamilton's *Zeely*, a novel created by an African American author for and about an African American young adult, published in 1967.

The core writers whose books are included in this bibliography broke into print during the late 1960s and 1970s, critically regarded as an exciting breakthrough time of "quality . . . literature . . . peopled with black characters growing into a positive sense of black-self—rediscovering and

redefining their past, looking into themselves, and exercising some degree of self-determination as they look to the future."³¹ The vanguard of this movement had to be "substantially superior in order to be published," as evidenced by "the disproportionately high percentage of books by [these] authors that went on to receive prestigious prizes and distinctions" in the 1970s.³² For example, Virginia Hamilton's *M.C. Higgins, the Great*, published in 1974, is the only children's book ever to win three of the most coveted children's literature prizes: the Boston Globe-Horn Book Magazine Award, the National Book Award, and the John Newbery Medal Award. More than half of the writers included in this bibliography have earned at least one major award or distinction. Virginia Hamilton, Julius Lester, Walter Dean Myers, and Mildred Taylor are big award winners in the field of children's literature. Yet these writers, regardless of their track record, felt constrained thematically and stylistically by their publishers. Into the 1980s, when a novel featuring an African American protagonist received critical recognition or an award, more often it was written by a European American author than by an African American author.

Furthermore, a number of major awards with themes particularly relevant to African American young adult literature have never been awarded to African American authors. For instance, no African American author has ever won the Scott O'Dell Award for historical fiction. Very few have won the Jane Addams Book Award—for a children's book that stresses themes of togetherness and peace, equality of the races and sexes, and social justice—or the John Newbery Medal Award—for a distinguished children's book. Only one African American writer, Walter Dean Myers, has won the Margaret A. Edwards Award, and one, Virginia Hamilton, has won the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, both given to an author for young people for a book or books that contribute to illuminating their experiences. Finally, in 1995, one writer received the long overdue recognition that several African American writers for young adults deserve: Virginia Hamilton received the MacArthur Foundation (Genius) Grant, the ultimate award.

While the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the ongoing tradition of black consciousness and militancy deeply impacted the psyches of African Americans, it seemed to make no deep and permanent inroads in the European American power structure of the book trade. "Retrenchment" in the publishing of books by and about African Americans marked the 1980s. Declining political activism, an upsurge in conservatism, a backlash to progressive movements, government spending cuts, and a lack of commitment on the part of publishers—the majority of whom indicated that they felt the market for African American writers had decreased in recent years—contributed to the reversal in publishing of African American young people's literature. During the 1970s, most alternative presses that cyclically "emerged or expanded to fill the void" created by "mainstream presses . . . pulling back" from their commitment to multicultural publishing, folded within the decade.³³ The need for analysis and publishing continued, but "progressive" publishing and criticism in the 1980s swung toward other issues, particularly sexism, ableism, and general multicultural representation in children's literature.³⁴ New writers struggled to break into print. Established writers watched their award-winning books go out of print while they suffered multi-year gaps in getting their latest books published.³⁵ In 1980, librarians nationwide expressed a willingness or urgency to spend from 5% to 25% of their budgets on books by and about blacks, who represented 12.2% of the national population, if such books were available; "yet Black authors participate[d] at a market rate of only 1.3%." In 1985, less than 5% of children's and young adult books featured African Americans.³⁶ Only 18 children's books written or illustrated by African Americans were published in 1985.³⁷

Content Trends in the Literature

Until the turn of this decade, there were many more African American male-centered than female-centered novels: not only was the narrator or central character male, but almost

all of the characters in the story were male. Females were incidental at best or hateful at worst, particularly mother figures. This literary state of affairs perpetuated, if not intensified, a contradictory condition of invisibility and targeting for African American girls and women. Ironically, there were nearly four times as many women writers on the market. Presumably, the phenomenon of girls reading books about boys and girls, but boys reading only books about boys, accounted for the preponderance of male-focused novels. The dominant issues of the male-centered novels suggested that African American experience was monolithic and grim, with its unrelenting focus on drugs, police violence and/or arbitrary arrest, and violence and death.

Taken as a group, African American young adult fiction now offers a relatively healthy balance of positive male and female characters. It portrays an essential, full picture of young people's lives that are about a lot more than just their oppression—about their surviving, struggling, and living with beauty, grace, joy, love, and power. The current body of literature also realistically represents hard problems and oppression along with suggestions for or descriptions of young people working through and strategizing to change problems in their lives and in society at large.

Until recently, images of family were another major shortcoming of this literature: too many absent fathers; too many sick, dysfunctionally neurotic or addicted mothers, too many children parenting themselves. Rare was the novel featuring a female-headed household where the mother was present and positive—a "good" parent, healthy, hard-working, or even ordinary. Typically, the novels set up a dichotomy of two kinds of mother figures: the sick mother—abandoning, abusive, or alcoholic—versus the neurotic mother with middle-class aspirations. Only within two-parent families were there positive female role models, i.e., women could be "good" if there was a man by their side, and kids needed a father regardless. Married women were commonly portrayed as entirely passive. If the father was present, he was almost always the most important figure in the young

adult's life. The other common scenario was even more depressing: parentlessness or abandonment, with the young adult protagonist trying to grow up alone or trying to take care of a parent or family.

The last decade's novels balance out the representation of family life. While continuing to tackle issues of family dysfunction, the literature is starting to show at least some portraits of strong families and mature parental presence, as well as rare positive representations of female-headed households. These positive images, too, reflect an important reality of African American life, particularly the incredible work of many African American mothers. In addition, there is a growing number of novels featuring strong grandmothers, supportive kinship networks, and engaged communities.

Today, we are, fortunately, on the crest of a dramatic expansion in the publishing of fiction by African American authors about and for African American young adults. "The success of small presses and their authors . . . [and] major demographic changes during the [1980s]" contributed to a "revitalization that went beyond even the gains of the 1970s."³⁸ African American-owned "ventures that published African-American authors frozen out of the mainstream," emerged and stabilized in the 1980s.³⁹ "A new wave of . . . authors emerged . . . being given a chance to grow and develop rather than having to prove perfection with their first manuscript. . . . A greater diversity of statements is being made, and readers are learning about [a] multiplicity of lifestyles, communities, and experiences."⁴⁰

Nevertheless, several factors can make or break this dynamic development. The struggle within the educational system for genuine multicultural education will continue to play a central part. The existence of traditional literary canons limits students' potential exposure to the books included in this bibliography:

Canons . . . constitute the literature many students read. . . . Unfortunately, literary canons tend to include a preponderance of [Anglocentric]

books. . . . Few texts written by African Americans . . . are designated classics, even though many exhibit extraordinary literary merit, expand or reinterpret literary forms, or provide a forum for voices silenced or ignored in mainstream literature.⁴¹

Because publishing is an industry that responds to profit, the law of supply and demand ultimately determines its future. Children's books divisions of publishing conglomerates rarely score large profits and are, in fact, often subsidized by the gargantuanly profitable adult divisions. Publishers regularly veto projects because they assume that the targeted audience cannot sustain the product—and they often assume that only African Americans will support African American children's literature. This creates a double-bind for African American young adult fiction; the demand is low in part because access to the product is limited. Even an African American young adult book that makes it to publication may commonly be difficult to find because bookstores, libraries and schools seldom carry them, and don't display them prominently when they do. Advertising is often inadequate or inappropriate, and mainstream publications may choose not to review the book. Then, because the book is not widely purchased, the publisher assumes that it's not needed or wanted. The economy and political climate, which determine the resources available to schools and libraries—the major consumers of trade books for young adults—to purchase and publicize multicultural materials, show signs of ever-waning support. Nevertheless, the emergence of new writers "suggests that African American children's literature will remain a viable, vibrant tradition, albeit one that remains unfairly neglected."⁴²

Twenty-five years ago, the entry of African American authors into the European American-dominated children's book field assured a focus on diverse themes and plots, particularly a focus on conflicts and issues within African American communities, on African and African American heritage and identity, on culturally specific developmental and political

issues. The ever-increasing diversification of personalities, locales, and issues in African American-authored young adult fiction is a trend that grows more robust by the decades. Yet the dominance of a few authors—shaped largely by publishers and awards committees—inherently limits the diversity of concepts and perspectives. A number of vital issues relevant to African American young adults today are glaringly lacking in the literature that has been created for them thus far. Topics demanding further exploration include class issues; the world of work; critical analyses of materialism; biracial identity; sexual decision making and the spectrum of sexual expression; pregnancy, abortion, and teen parenting; foster care and adoption from the child's and the mother's perspective; HIV and AIDS; Black Muslims; relations between African Americans and other individuals and communities of color; sexism; sexual abuse and rape; experience with the police, courts, prison or reform school; gangs from an insider's perspective, articulating the needs met by belonging as well as the dangers; lesbian, gay and bisexual identities; and developmental, emotional and physical disabilities.

More works of historical fiction also need to be written, focusing on figures and events in African Americans' four hundred years of history besides slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. The historical fiction also needs to include more women as fictional protagonists and actual historical figures. Furthermore, many popular genres of fiction are underrepresented, including suspense thrillers, fantasy and science fiction, mystery, romance, and multi-volume series featuring the same characters.

Notes

1. Kathleen T. Horning and Ginny Moore Kruse, "Looking into the Mirror: Considerations Behind the Reflections," *The Multicolored Mirror: Cultural Substance in Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Merri V. Lindgren, ed. (Fort Atkinson, WI: Highsmith Press, 1991), p. 1.

2. Violet J. Harris, "African American Children's Literature: The First One Hundred Years," *Freedom's Plow: Teaching in the Multicultural Classroom*, Theresa Perry and James W. Fraser, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 167.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 167-168.

4. James Fraser, "Black Publishing for Black Children: The Experience of the Sixties and Seventies," *School Library Journal* 20.3 (November 1973), p. 19.

5. Violet J. Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 171-172.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

8. Courtney Vaughn-Robertson and Brenda Hill, "The Brownies' Book and *Ebony Jr.*: Literature as a Mirror of the Afro-American Experience," *Journal of Negro Education* 58.4 (Fall 1989), p. 497.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 495.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 496.

11. Violet J. Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

15. Kathleen T. Horning and Ginny Moore Kruse, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

16. Kathleen T. Horning and Ginny Moore Kruse, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

17. Rudine Sims, *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Children's Fiction* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982), p. 11.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 33-34.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 45-46.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
23. Evelyn Graves Gibson, "The Black Image in Children's Fiction: A Content Analysis of Racist Content, Black Experience and Primary Audience in Children's Books Published Between 1958-1970 and 1971-1982," *University Microfilms International* #8521083 (1985), p. 4-5.
24. Jeanne S. Chall, Eugene Radwin, Valerie W. French, and Cynthia R. Hall, "Blacks in the World of Children's Books," *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard, eds. (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985), p. 218-219.
25. Violet J. Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 179.
26. Evelyn Graves Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
27. Rudine Sims, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 103-105.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
31. Karima Amin, "Adolescent Literature by and about Black People," *Black Literature for High School Students*, Barbara Dodds Stanford, ed. (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), p. 98-99.
32. Lyn Miller-Lachmann, ed., "Introduction," *Our Family, Our Friends, Our World: An Annotated Guide to Significant Multicultural Books for Children and Teenagers*, (New Providence, NJ: R.R. Bowker, 1992), p. 7.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
34. Evelyn Graves Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
35. Lyn Miller-Lachmann, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 7.
36. Evelyn Graves Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
37. Lyn Miller-Lachmann, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 8.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.
41. Violet J. Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 171.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

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Guidelines for Evaluating the Books

It is much harder to create something new than to critique what someone else has created. Therefore, before we go any further, we would like to honor all of the African American authors who've put their hearts and sweat and vision into creating these stories to help the next generation grow up strong and proud. This bibliography recognizes and celebrates the accomplishments and promise of a body of literature whose very existence is in itself an achievement. Reading can be a powerful vehicle for learning about new ways of life, for learning about African American history or envisioning a better future, and for developing a sense of self. African American children, in particular, are bombarded with so many negative messages about themselves and their people that reading affirming books can be a lifesaver. So to all these authors we owe a debt.

Children and teens have to be seduced by reading if it is to hold their interest in the face of competition from television, action movies, and the street. If books don't interest them, if they don't see themselves reflected in the characters and the situations portrayed, they're not going to like reading and they're not going to do it. Reading requires more energy than most other forms of entertainment, but ultimately it delivers more as well. It holds within it the possibility of opening new worlds, teaching kids to think for themselves, and facilitating educational success. We have been exacting in our criticism of these young adult books because African American children deserve the best. They deserve multilayered characters, interesting plots, and beautiful language. They deserve realistic dialogue. They deserve a complex wrestling with the issues of their lives, and empowering but unsentimental

portrayals of black history. The best books in this collection deliver these qualities. Many more of these books offer strengths and weaknesses, but are still well worth reading. A few are best passed over entirely; we do young people a serious disservice by offering them books that they are not going to like, which may discourage them from reading altogether. We hope that young readers, teachers, librarians and parents will use this bibliography to select books that not only inform but are also most likely to draw young adults into reading more.

The good news is that the spectrum of issues tackled by African American young adult books is constantly broadening. Young adult readers can now choose from fictionalized slave narratives and accounts of the Civil Rights Movement, from romances, sports stories, mysteries and science fiction, from stories about surviving the ghetto to tales about life on the South Carolina sea islands, and just about everything in between! On these pages, readers can meet orphans and teen mothers, activists and addicts, brilliant students and dropouts, gay and lesbian teens and disabled kids, musicians, athletes, and ordinary friends. There truly are books for every taste, and the beauty is that all of them feature African American characters. We invite you to explore these cultural riches.

Like any critique, these book reviews are subjective, informed by our personal perspectives and experiences. Although reviewers sometimes feign objectivity to give their opinions more authority, ultimately all critiques are simply opinion. To balance this, we have tried to give extensive details both about the novel's content and about how we arrived at our opinions of its quality. We encourage readers to use these details—and not simply our conclusions—to decide whether to read a particular book themselves. If a book interests you, but we've rated it poorly, don't let that stop you from reading it and forming your own opinion of it. In some cases, books which we've rated poorly have won major literary awards—so clearly other reviewers had higher opinions of them! For this reason, we have included both our own list of "best books" and a list of titles which have won major literary awards. Never let a negative review keep you from reading a

book which interests you, but *do* check out the books which we rated highly. There are a number of little-known gems in this category which deserve a much broader audience.

We've tried to be very specific in both our criticism and our praise, to enable you to filter and adjust our critiques to your own values. Since any review is value laden, we believe that the most honest and helpful approach is to verbalize our values as explicitly as we can, to allow you to identify those with which you agree or disagree. These values are set out in the next section, in the guidelines on how to critique books on your own. Obviously, if some of your values differ from ours, you will have to adapt the relevant guidelines. Although we've tried to find and review every young adult book written between 1968 and 1993 by an African American author featuring African American protagonists, new books are always coming out. Therefore, these guidelines on how to critique a young adult book yourself may prove a useful tool for the future, as well as describing explicitly what we looked for in critiquing the books in this collection.

Literary Guidelines

Are the characters multifaceted, with strengths and weaknesses, and well developed through their appearance, words, thoughts, and actions, and other characters' responses to them? Are the characters flat or full, static or dynamic?¹ Is character development inextricably woven into the plot?

Are there a limited number of characters so that they can be fully fleshed out? Are the relationships between key characters well developed and realistic? Are the characters individuals, not mere representatives of a group or point of view? Is the antagonist merely a foil or stereotype? Are there stock characters? Does the story make a character or a group of people more understandable? Does the reader grow to care what happens to the characters?

Is the story told from a young adult's perspective? If told from an adult or omniscient perspective, is the voice didactic or

dogmatic? If the writer uses a first-person voice, is the narrator's understanding of people and events, use of language, focus, and attitude appropriate for and consistent with that character's personality, maturity, and experience? "Does the writer stay within the limitations of the chosen point of view?"² Do the characters experience conflicts and concerns that are realistic for their age and life situation? Can readers identify with them?

Does the protagonist reach an understanding or achieve something by the end of the story? If the character grows or undergoes change in the story, is the process of change clear, realistic, and convincing?³ Does the book demonstrate how characters become aware of their inner strength and resources, and leave the reader with a sense of hope and direction? Do the characters, by example, teach the reader skills necessary for survival and success? Does the book inculcate positive values?

Is the dialogue age-appropriate? Is it current or dated? If it relies heavily on Black English or a local slang, does this limit the story's accessibility to weaker readers? Is the dialogue understandable to African American readers from a variety of local cultures?

Is the theme relevant to young people today? Does the theme challenge the reader to question and think? Is it explicit or implicit? Does it seem that the theme was the author's "first motive for writing"? Or is it easy to "believe in the character, . . . believe in the experience, and . . . accept the theme"?⁴ Does the author preach? Is the theme dealt with in full complexity or oversimplified? Is the author's approach biased, and if so, in what direction?

Is the plot realistic, believable, and unpatronizing? Is it relatively uncomplicated and fast paced? Whether information and events are related chronologically or through flashbacks, is it easy for the reader to follow? Is the plot too

formulaic or predictable? Is characterization and plot exaggerated or sensational?

Does the story's conflict or resolution rely on coincidence or sentimentality?⁵ If the story takes an honest look at a painful or seemingly futile situation, is it pessimistic or ultimately positive, without being solved too simply?⁶ If the story leaves the reader feeling frustrated, confused, or angry, are these responses appropriate to the seriousness of the theme and the age of the intended audience?

Is the setting accurately described? Does the character "live in the setting . . . or move over it? Are action and character superimposed upon time and place?"⁷ "Does the historical information seem more important to the writer than understanding of human beings? Are the historical details seen as important to our understanding of the story, or are they the purpose of the story?"⁸ Or does context illuminate character, establish mood, or symbolically support theme? Does the character seem to be a product of a particular time and place? Is the setting historically accurate? Is it situated within the overall context of American and African American experience/history?

If the writer uses figurative language, allusion, imagery, symbolism, or wordplay, is it accessible and integrated into the pace and purpose of the story? Is the writing tight and lively?

General Guidelines

Does the author perpetuate misconceptions, myths, or stereotypes about:

- African Americans, Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, European Americans, Latinas/Latinos, or Native Americans?
- men or women?
- young people or old people?
- poor, working-class, or owning-class people?

- people with developmental, emotional, intellectual, or physical disabilities?
- Jews or Muslims?
- lesbians, gays, or bisexual people?

Is negative characterization or negative action attributed or linked to a character's group identity? Is there a blanket statement about a group of people that begins with, "All . . ."? If an individual character espouses oppressive opinions, is the character's opinion clearly differentiated from the author's? Are all characters of a particular racial or religious background negative, or all strictly positive? If a single character is especially villainous, are there other positive or neutral characters of the same background to balance the portrayal?

Does the book celebrate differences and cultural pluralism, counter stereotypes, and encourage critical thinking? Does it reflect respect for personal and cultural differences and affirm the worth and importance of individuals and peoples?

How many female characters are there? In what roles? Are the female characters passive? What values are reinforced for male versus female characters? Are girls applauded only for beauty or cooperativeness? Are they portrayed as interested only in clothes and boyfriends? Are boys applauded just for external accomplishments, never for the quality of their character? Are they portrayed as interested only in sports and girlfriends? Are they permitted to feel?

To what extent are different characters defined by their gender? Do they experience universal adolescent feelings, dilemmas and exploits, or only gender-specific ones? Will their lives interest readers of the other sex?

Is sex and sexual decision-making part of the story? If so, are the descriptions age-appropriate for both the characters and the intended audience? Does the author offer a balanced portrait of the attractions and risks of sex? Is the author overly

judgmental? Is there a double standard for female and male characters? Do the characters make active decisions about sex or fall into it? Do they protect themselves from pregnancy and disease? What is the take-home message about teenage sex and sexuality?

In general, are the young adult characters active participants and decision makers in their own lives, or do events carry them passively along? Does the author suggest that teenagers can make a difference, both in their own lives and in the world?

African American Guidelines

Does the book employ oversimplifications or stereotypes of African Americans? Are African American characters defined according to European Americans as the norm? Are strong African American characters treated as exceptional or extraordinary?

Is the story presented from an Afrocentric or a Eurocentric perspective?

Recognizing that there exists a diversity of African American cultures, geographies and histories, lifestyles and traditions, religious practices, speech patterns, and perspectives, does the author write with accuracy, authenticity, and stress individuality and specificity? Does the book provide insight into the experience of a distinct African American individual or culture? "Are there a variety of class backgrounds, settings, and family situations portrayed?"⁹ When differences are mentioned, are they mentioned respectfully?

In what ways are the characters portrayed as African American? "To what extent are the conflicts, issues, and specific details unique to African Americans, and to what extent are they universal? Could non-African American characters have been substituted, with little or no change in

the content of the work?"¹⁰ Does the author stress that there is no difference between African Americans and others? Does s/he deny the uniqueness of African American identity to do so?

Are the characters' race and culture central to their identity, either implicitly or explicitly, without being the sum total of their identity? Does the book depict personal struggles as well as societal struggles? Is there a sense of balance and multidimensionality to the issues presented?

"Are the characters . . . presented as 'model victims,' or are they allowed to be human beings capable of the full range of human emotions? . . . Are problems solved by African Americans themselves or by benevolent whites?"¹¹ Are African Americans portrayed as active and assertive or passive and subservient? Is the character's being African American represented as a "problem" or are the joys as well as the challenges of being African American in racist American society depicted? Does the book portray African Americans' relationships with each other as equally or more important than their relationships with European Americans? If the book focuses on the interactions between African Americans and the dominant culture, is this focus justified by the book's theme? Are African American characters defined primarily in relation to European Americans?

Is pride in educational and occupational advancement presented? How many of the characters exhibit a sense of identity and pride? Does the narrative refer to or incorporate elements of African or African American history and heritage? Is the character's culture a significant part of her/his life? Is cultural information "presented in a manner consistent with the flow of the story"? Does the author "halt . . . the story to explain cultural details . . . [or present it] as exotica [and not as a normal part]—whether major or minor—of an individual's life[?]"¹² Does the author make African American culture palpable in the details?

Does the book authentically depict and interpret African Americans' lives and histories, expanding the reader's knowledge of the past and/or present? Is slavery the only past African American experience presented? Is the Civil Rights Movement presented as the only African American resistance movement? Does the book provide insight into individual or institutional racism, if racism is depicted in the story? Are racist incidents presented without comment? If the African American protagonist is angry, jaded, or distrustful of European Americans, does the narrative on some level legitimate those feelings and explain their genesis? Is there a suggestion in the book that solutions to oppression require more than an individual response, that structures must change? Is the present depicted as a utopia of equality, with racism eradicated, or more realistically, as a time of co-existing progress and powerlessness? Does the character respond to injustice through resistance or struggle, or does s/he passively accept it? Does the story tend to "blame the victim"?

Is dialect used? How? Does everyone speak the same, regardless of place of origin, region, age, class, education, and audience? Does the story feature nicknames, proverbs, colloquial/figurative expressions, rhymes, and verbal contests? Are demeaning epithets and profanity used? To what effect? Is color symbolism used baldly, wherein black or darkness is negative and white or lightness is positive? What terminology is used to define the character's identity—Colored, Negro, black, Afro-American, African American, or African?

"To what extent do the characters in a novel have a 'history' as African Americans, communicated by family members, other adult role models, and their own discovery of their heritage? How is the past portrayed?"¹³

How is family represented? Are loving relationships emphasized? Are adults shown as positive role models? "Are personal and family problems in African-American communities treated realistically, or are they either

downplayed or sensationalized?"¹⁴ Are any adults acting as responsible parents, or are all the children parenting themselves? How are male and female roles in the family portrayed? Are all the families fatherless? Are all the family's troubles ultimately blamed on the mother figure (who is too strong/not strong enough, overinvolved/selfish, "just a housewife"/never home—or simply female)? Does the story suggest that every family needs a man to be healthy?

Is there an extended family or a sense of community? Does some adult in the child's life offer support and guidance? What role does religion play in the story? How is the black church portrayed? Where do characters find strength and community?

Notes

1. Rebecca J. Lukens, *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature* (Boston: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1986), p. 59.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
9. April Hoffman, Sandra Payne, and Reeves Smith, "United States: African Americans," *Our Family, Our Friends, Our World: An Annotated Guide to Significant Multicultural Books for Children and Teenagers*, Lyn Miller-Lachmann, ed. (New Providence, NJ: R.R. Bowker, 1992), p. 27.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
12. Lyn Miller-Lachmann, *Our Family, Our Friends, Our World: An Annotated Guide to Significant Multicultural Books for Children and Teenagers* (New Providence, NJ: R.R. Bowker, 1992), p. 19.
13. April Hoffman et al., *op. cit.*, p. 27.
14. *Ibid.*

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Our Best Book Choices

Bright Shadow. Joyce Carol Thomas.
Chevrolet Saturdays. Candy Dawson Boyd.
Circle of Gold. Candy Dawson Boyd.
Conjure Tales. Ray Anthony Shepard.
The Dark Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural. Patricia McKissack.
Don't Explain: A Song of Billie Holiday. Alexis DeVeaux.
Edith Jackson. Rosa Guy.
Fallen Angels. Walter Dean Myers.
Fast Talk on a Slow Track. Rita Williams-Garcia.
The Friends. Rosa Guy.
The Future and Other Stories. Ralph Cheo Thurmon.
The Gift-Giver. Joyce Hansen.
Guests in the Promised Land. Kristin Hunter.
A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich. Alice Childress.
If Beale Street Could Talk. James Baldwin.
Last Summer with Maizon. Jacqueline Woodson.
Let the Circle Be Unbroken. Mildred Taylor.
Maizon at Blue Hill. Jacqueline Woodson.
Marked by Fire. Joyce Carol Thomas.
Marvin and Tige. Frankcina Glass.
Motown and Didi. Walter Dean Myers.
The Road to Memphis. Mildred Taylor.
Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. Mildred Taylor.
Scorpions. Walter Dean Myers.
Song of the Trees. Mildred Taylor.
The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou. Kristin Hunter.
Sweet Illusions. Walter Dean Myers.
Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush. Virginia Hamilton.
The Sweetest Berry on the Bush. Nubia Kai.

Teacup Full of Roses. Sharon Bell Mathis.

This Strange New Feeling. Julius Lester.

Trouble's Child. Mildred Pitts Walter.

Where Do I Go From Here? Valerie Wilson Wesley.

Yellow Bird and Me. Joyce Hansen.

YOUNG ADULT FICTION
BY AFRICAN AMERICAN
WRITERS, 1968-1993

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The Book Reviews

Key To Ratings

*****Outstanding, a must-read

****Highly recommended

***Good

**Has some problems, but may still be worth reading

*Not worth the time

1. Baldwin, James. *If Beale Street Could Talk*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1974. 213 pages. *****

American Library Association Notable Books for Children and Young Adults, 1974

If Beale Street Could Talk is a moving book about the survival of a black family in New York City in the late 1960s. Tish is eighteen years old, pregnant, and very much in love with Fonny. Fonny is twenty-one, a sculptor, in jail awaiting trial for a rape he didn't commit. Tish and her entire family are working very hard to free Fonny, while Fonny tries hard to survive his time in jail and to get back to Tish before the baby is born. Through this struggle and a series of flashbacks, the beauty of Tish and Fonny's love for each other and Tish's family's love is pitted against the devastating power of a racist criminal justice system.

The most accessible for young readers of all Baldwin's novels, *If Beale Street Could Talk* carries the same strength of

vision and poetry of language that one expects from Baldwin. Love and despair are the most tangible elements in the story, and neither is oversimplified. Baldwin has a rare talent for exploring and attacking racism without ever sacrificing the complexity of his characters to his moral message. The characters are entirely human and the plot, without clear resolution, is only too believable.

This is an excellent book to introduce teenagers to Baldwin—the relatively short length, the elegant simplicity of voice, and the age and issues of the protagonists invite high-school readership. The explicit, and loving, sex scenes will undoubtedly keep teenagers' attention. There are strong black role models, both male and female, and the young people are powerful actors in their own lives, making decisions and coping together with the oppression that contracts their lives. Although the lack of plot resolution is frustrating, everything else about this novel is beautiful, and I highly recommend it.

2. Boyd, Candy Dawson. *Circle of Gold*. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1984. 124 pages. ****

Coretta Scott King Honor Book, 1985

Eleven-year-old Mattie Mae Benson and her twin brother Matt miss their father, who was killed by a drunk driver six months earlier. The loss of her father is especially devastating for Mattie because she was his "princess," whereas her mother favored Matt. Regardless of this favoritism, the twins love and support each other through their mother's episodes of crying and yelling. Their mother juggles two jobs—managing the apartment building in which they live on the south side of Chicago and working in a factory. Mattie babysits and Matt delivers newspapers to supplement the family's meager income and they clean the house, make the meals, and perform many of the chores around the apartment building.

With Mother's Day fast approaching and her mother's heart and mind a million miles away, Mattie agonizes over what "miracle gift" to get her mother and how to afford it. She sets her sights on an unusual pin, a "circle of gold," a symbol of the family's wholeness and connection, which costs fifty-five dollars. To get the money together, she enters a writing contest about "what your mother means to you," sponsored by a Chicago newspaper. First prize means fifty dollars and dinner for the winner's family in a choice restaurant. After several rounds of unsatisfactory drafts, Mattie begs her best friend, Toni Douglas, to write the essay for her.

In the end, Mattie submits her own raw and unfinished essay. She puts twenty dollars down as a deposit on the pin, but is forced to admit defeat at the end of the thirty-day limit to pay the balance—besides, someone else wants to purchase the pin. Ironically, after this blow she wins the writing contest. The newspaper editor awards her the prize, plus—to everyone's surprise—the pin, which he tracked down because it figured largely in Mattie's essay. Mattie's essay touches her mother deeply.

Toni helps Mattie ride out every crisis with Mattie's archenemy in the fifth grade, her misnamed classmate Angel. Angel is the "Queen Bee" of the class because everyone envies her gray eyes and long, wavy hair, her expensive clothing and jewelry. When Angel accuses Mattie of stealing a special bracelet, Toni helps Mattie prove her innocence. It turns out that Angel's "best friend," Charlene, who envies Angel as much as she admires her, stole the bracelet.

Mattie turns to her elderly neighbor and church member, Mrs. Elvira Staples, for parenting. Mrs. Staples helps Mattie to keep her mother's behavior in perspective and encourages her to seek professional help for her mother. Although her mother becomes infuriated when Mattie asks Reverend Harris for help, Mattie's desperation in seeking outside help eventually pushes her mother to enter therapy. Therapy enables Mattie's mother to begin to pull the family's life together as the story ends with the family together in church.

The loving and supportive relationships between Mattie and her brother, Toni, and Mrs. Staples are precious and provide readers with hope. However, Candy Dawson Boyd creates a disturbing portrait of a family nearly destroyed by the loss of a parent. She presents the mother, in denial and despair, struggling as a working-class single parent, keeping her problems private for pride's sake. This portrayal, from Mattie's perspective, contains such candor and depth that readers will be upset with and yet understand Mattie's mother.

Whether readers share Mattie's circumstances, they will be compelled by the intensity of the drama. The author empowers young readers with the message that parents, like children, are people who have problems, fears, and worries, some of which children can understand, some of which children can help fix, and none of which children are to blame for.

Mrs. Staples, in brief conversations, teaches Mattie that tough times and tough decisions can be "skin-stretching," even though fraught with risks: "If you live your life based only on what you think you can do well, you won't achieve very much. [H]ow do you know what you can do until you try?" As Mattie's relationship with her mother deteriorates, Mrs. Staples helps Mattie to not take her mother's behavior personally but to see it as a response to pain and pressure, and to understand that "[t]his is when loving your mother really counts." Mrs. Staples teaches Mattie that there is no miracle cure for complex emotional and financial problems. Through Mattie's relationship with Mrs. Staples, Candy Dawson Boyd simultaneously provides the reader with comforting reassurance and instruction as well as a testament to cross-generational friendships.

Upper-elementary and middle-school students, particularly girls, will identify strongly with at least some of the emotions and experiences portrayed nearly perfectly in *Circle of Gold*.

3. Boyd, Candy Dawson. *Breadsticks and Blessing Places*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1985. 210 pages. ****

Twelve-year-old Toni lives a middle-class Chicago life, worrying about math tests, menstruation, and squabbles between her two best friends. Her parents want more for her, though, and are pushing her to pass the entrance exams for King High School, Chicago's elite college-preparatory public high school. Toni's not sure she wants to go to King and is even less sure that she can pass the math section of the exam anyway. Her best friend Mattie, a serious student and choir soloist, plans to attend King for its music program. Her other best friend, Susan, favors parties and shopping—including shoplifting—over schoolwork, and insists that she will be leaving to live with her musician father in New York any day now. Toni is caught in the middle, confused.

Then Susan is killed by a drunk driver, and nothing else matters. Devastated, Toni sinks into a depression that lasts for many months. Unable to concentrate on her schoolwork or anything else, Toni lashes out at everyone who goes on with their lives. Mattie understands what she's going through because her own father died only a year before. Finally, Mattie and Mrs. Stamps, Toni's surrogate grandmother, help Toni construct a ceremony to say good-bye to Susan. Afterward, she can pick up her own life again, despite her sadness.

Breadsticks and Blessing Places does a very good job of exploring the difficult, bewildering feelings that accompany a young person's death. Young readers who have experienced the death of a close friend or relative will find this book affirming, particularly in its description of how long Toni's pervasive sadness and anger continued and how unhelpfully most people responded to it. The story suggests that everyone, including children, can and must find within themselves the strength to go on after a terrible loss.

The novel is reassuring for young readers in that, despite Susan's death, it returns Toni to the more mundane concerns of twelve-year-old life. It also tries to be reassuring in providing a plethora of understanding, helpful adults to guide Toni, but

this is one of the book's weaknesses as well—none of the characters has major faults. It's hard to believe that any teenager is surrounded by so many patient, wise parents, teachers, neighbors, and friends' parents. Similarly, Toni's friends are all too good to be true, except perhaps Susan, who dies anyway. These characters ring false in what is otherwise an unsentimental and moving depiction of a teenager's response to her friend's death.

Although *Breadsticks and Blessing Places* is long, its protagonist's age and concerns are most relevant for younger teens, ages ten to fourteen. The young characters are not yet into adolescent rebellion, so older teens may have trouble identifying with them. They may also find it hard to relate to King High School with its unrealistically enthusiastic students, complete racial harmony, and spirited class discussions. This is not like any public high school I've ever seen!

On the other hand, *Breadsticks and Blessing Places* is an excellent book to use with teens of any age who have experienced a friend's or relative's death, both to stimulate discussion and to affirm their experience. It is one of very few young adult books which deal so sensitively and honestly with death. This novel was also issued as *Forever Friends* in 1985.

4. Boyd, Candy Dawson. *Charlie Pippin*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987. 182 pages. ****

Eleven-year-old Chartreuse "Charlie" Pippin lives in a middle-class, Afrocentric home in a comfortably multiracial neighborhood in Berkeley, California. Charlie suffers the sometimes arbitrary and excessive rules and reprimands of her sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Hayamoto, and her principal, Mr. Rockers, at Hayden Elementary School. The staff at Hayden are bent on molding the students into clone-like "responsible learners."

Mostly, Charlie gets in trouble for the entrepreneurial enterprises she sets up in the school yard at recess; since second grade, she's been making origami animals and plants to sell along with carrying convenience items such as school supplies. It's in her blood. Her grandmother is an artist who reminds Charlie that turning art into objects of everyday use and hawking them is part of her West African heritage. Likewise, her grandfather runs a convenience store.

The events in *Charlie Pippin* are structured around Charlie's work on a social studies project about war and peace, focusing on the Vietnam War. It is the tenth anniversary of the end of a war in which Charlie's father survived two tours of duty on the front lines. Through the assignment she hopes to gain a better understanding of him. She yearns to get around the strained superficiality of his commanding and criticizing tone with her, to break through his mysterious silence about Vietnam in order to gain insight into his anger and his relationship with her. However, Charlie's father refuses to talk about Vietnam; any mention of the war sends him into a violent fit.

In the process of interviewing and research, Charlie learns that her father lost his youth and his innocence in the war. He had to fight a triple war—as a black man in America, as a soldier, and as a black soldier in Vietnam. Partially penetrating her father's silence, Charlie learns that he risked his life to save two friends, irreparably damaging his leg; the friends died. Nevertheless, he expresses support for the war. Although to Charlie he seems a man of rules and responsibilities who makes her home life one long series of punishments, he had dreams of owning land, starting an inn, raising four children on the Oregon coast, and, primarily, painting. He returned from Vietnam unable to dare or to dream.

Charlie's investigation culminates in sneaking off to visit the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., with her Aunt Jessie and Uncle Ben. This requires an elaborate alibi and careful planning. The experience is indescribably powerful. While there, she gets a rubbing of her father's two friends' names on the Memorial, places origami cranes—symbols of

peace—near their names, and takes pictures of the panels. When Charlie returns, after she lets her parents vent their anger and worry, she presents her father with her "souvenirs" of the trip. The rubbings and photographs catch Oscar by surprise, and the resulting moment of vulnerability opens up the possibility of a truce and a whole new relationship between father and daughter.

Charlie Pippin is a sweet and sassy story, its star a wholly likable character—independent, artistic, resourceful, a critical thinker. Although she is only eleven and the school routine of line partners, Halloween parties, and after school detentions draws attention to the elementary school setting, the issues and actions presented in *Charlie Pippin* will engage readers of all ages and reading abilities, especially middle-school readers. This book, paired with Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels*, provides an outstanding entry into the Vietnam war experience, or the theme of war and peace in general.

Author Candy Dawson Boyd explores substantial issues with ease, packaging her prose in crisp, immediate writing. In the course of documenting Charlie's research project, Boyd manages to present an easy-to-digest but far from simplistic analysis of big issues including war and peace, racism and colonialism, communism and freedom. The book never sounds didactic and never settles for facile explanations. And the author never forgets that *Charlie Pippin* is a novel, not a history text.

In addition, Boyd subtly critiques Charlie's school's demands for conformity and cowardice of conscience and its accent on discipline and standardized testing. In its focus on Charlie's growthful experience with her war and peace project, *Charlie Pippin* implicitly pleads the case for a relevant, student-centered curriculum and for cooperative learning methods.

The other related positive element is Charlie's empowerment; at a peace march, another young African American girl, Akina, sparks Charlie's political consciousness and inspires her to become an activist, to take her research a step beyond reporting what happened in the past to educating

for world peace for future generations. At the end of the novel, Charlie applies her entrepreneurial and artistic skills to help another social studies group organize a fund-raiser for an African hunger relief agency.

When Charlie works with her team on the war and peace project, she makes a few moves that are totally appropriate and true to her wonderful character. When Chris assumes that she will take the notes for the project because she's female, Charlie tells him that she's not his secretary. When he starts taking up all the meeting time just to hear himself talk, she tells him to get to the point and to quit being condescending. When he rolls his eyes at Charlie's ideas, dismissing them as unimportant, she cuts through his arrogance with rapid-fire questions that reveal his ignorance and insensitivity.

The narrative effectively builds up to the very real sense of dread that Charlie feels when she knows she must face her angry father and dramatizes well Mama's regular refereeing between Oscar and Charlie. However, the reader comes away with an uncompromisingly positive impression of the Pippin family. They are a loving extended family. Mom and Dad are readily available; Dad's parents are nearly neighbors; and Mom's siblings call and visit frequently. It is refreshing to see a household where parents are parents and kids are kids. Eleanor, a billing clerk, and Oscar, an insurance claims manager, provide emotional and material security, and spend quality time with their daughter, offering affection and dialogue. Charlie shares in household chores, but her domestic responsibilities leave her plenty of time for secret boyfriends and business adventures. She never worries about death, homelessness, and hunger—the unfortunately too-familiar problems depicted in many black YA books. And no character is all good or all bad. There are few easy alliances or polarizations, few predictable reactions. Rather, each character comes across as three dimensional and each relationship is described as a process, with a long history rooted in complicated familial and social contexts.

Feisty and funny female role models abound in *Charlie Pippin*, so it's little wonder where Charlie got her spunk. Her grandmother, Mama Bliss, encourages her entrepreneurship and her aggressive inquisitiveness into family secrets. She takes Charlie to craft fairs and peace marches, affectionately calling her "rebel." Charlie's mother likewise validates her daughter's burgeoning peace activism by making a connection between it and the Civil Rights Movement. The strong female characters who dominate the story make it most appealing to girls.

In the end, the author leaves key threads of her story unresolved, which is realistic and satisfying. Charlie's parents refuse to divulge some memories and emotions which are too private, leaving Charlie to ponder whether or not it works for a family "to keep secrets to keep from hurting each other." At the same time, her defiant prying enables her first real conversation with her father, and they reach a starting point for a depth of appreciation and understanding of each other. Oscar cries in front of Charlie for the first time, and answers her most daring questions. Charlie recognizes that Oscar's reactions to her have a deeper source than her recent "peace nut" phase, and they agree to disagree. And Oscar promises to share more one day.

5. Boyd, Candy Dawson. *Chevrolet Saturdays*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1993. 176 pages. *****

Eleven-year-old Joey Davis lives in Berkeley, California, with his mother, Ernestine, and his stepfather, Franklin, whom he calls Mr. Johnson. Although his father, who moved out two years ago, moves to Chicago for promotion to an insurance management position, Joey holds onto the hope that his parents will reconcile and his father will come home again.

At Joey's multiracial school, Mrs. Hamlin terrorizes the entire fifth-grade class with her criticism and yelling. Mrs. Hamlin singles Joey out for special negative attention, treating him as if he were stupid and lazy. Whereas Joey hopes to be referred for testing for a gifted and talented program, Mrs. Hamlin refers him for special education classes for attention deficit disorder. Mrs. Hamlin avoids teaching science, which is Joey's favorite subject, and she believes class bully Clark Miller when he frames Joey for assorted mischievous pranks. Fortunately, Joey's affirming fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Alder, and the principal, Mrs. Mack, who is "tougher than a tank" but fair, intervene. Mrs. Mack monitors Mrs. Hamlin's class and allows Joey to test for the gifted program. Joey qualifies for a special program in science at the University of California at Berkeley.

Franklin makes a supreme effort to reach out to Joey. For him, an orphan never officially adopted and without any family until he married Ernestine, forming a family with Joey is especially important. Franklin installs security systems for a corporation all week and works all weekend independently, building up clientele and business for the contracting business he's trying to start so that he can be his own boss. After he buys a 1953 Chevrolet pickup truck for his business—and paints "Johnson and Family, Contractors" on it as a sign of his desire to make Joey part of the family—he invites Joey to work with him on Saturdays. Joey reluctantly accompanies Franklin, only to find that he relishes Franklin's treating him like a manly assistant-apprentice while sharing confidences about moral and emotional dilemmas he experienced as a young man.

Even after Franklin advocates aggressively and effectively on Joey's behalf to rectify problems at school, Joey continues to call Franklin "Mr. Johnson," keeping him at a distance. However, an incident with Franklin's Airedale terrier, Josie, becomes the turning point in their relationship: Joey forgets to lock the gate one day, and Josie runs off, gets hit by a car, and is badly injured. Joey now feels compelled to prove himself to his stepfather. In caring for the injured dog, Joey bonds with her and, by extension, his stepfather. In the end,

Joey forgives Franklin for displacing his father, and Franklin forgives Joey for treating him like an outsider and nearly killing his dog. Joey starts calling Franklin "Mr. J."

Surrogate father figure, Doc, who runs a soda fountain and pharmacy, cheers Joey up after every rough day at school. He tries to redirect Joey's perspective on problems; consoles him with stories of how he misses his deceased wife; and employs Joey part time, which makes Joey feel competent and enables him to contribute toward Josie's costly veterinary bills. Joey's best friend, D.J. Tyler, also provides camaraderie and consolation, refusing to assume that he is smarter than Joey simply because he is in the gifted program and nudging Joey to regard Franklin as an extra father—a distinct advantage from his perspective, as an only son with six sisters.

Chevrolet Saturdays is a substantive, thoughtful, and wise work. Candy Dawson Boyd celebrates ordinary people as role models—hardworking, moral, honest, sensitive, and devoted to family and kin. No elitism in the narrative privileges Joey's highly educated middle-class father over his worldly-wise, working-class stepfather. All readers will find themselves caring deeply about every member of this gentle family, and readers agonizing over divorce and/or a stepparent will find themselves totally absorbed in Joey, Ernestine, and Franklin's growing pains. Ernestine's anger and despair about her son's troubles are not extreme, only all too human. The very "together" Franklin, with the remarkable presence of mind to declare his anger without inflicting it on others, never raises his voice or hand to Joey. He only loses his composure when Joey's well-being is threatened or Josie's safety is endangered. Particularly moving is the evolving relationship between Joey and Franklin.

The age of the protagonist suggests a fourth- to sixth-grade audience, though middle-school students will not feel far more mature than Joey. High-school readers may feel overly aware of the protagonist's eleven years while finding the sentiments and solutions cathartic. Selective readers will enjoy the science riddles and trivia which Joey spouts, which to the most disinterested readers will, at worst, seem funny.

Although Joey is suffering from the divorce, he is blessed with loving and highly involved parents. *Chevrolet Saturdays* presents a realistic yet refreshing portrait of changing families. Ernestine and Franklin are always there for Joey, firm but tender; his father spoils him. While the relationship between Joey's divorced parents is amicable, it is not idealized: when Joey's father disappoints him, his mother flares up righteously and critically about her ex-husband. Generally, however, she facilitates Joey's close relationship with his father, demonstrating that parents' splitting up doesn't mean that parents and children must split up, too.

Candy Dawson Boyd allows adult characters to teach without being didactic. For instance, in counseling Joey on how to cope with being African American in racist American society, Doc frames Joey's problems in a larger context. Family and school are Joey's first tests and work will be the next test. But Doc urges Joey not to wait passively for "fate" but to make choices and to take action to influence his destiny. Mr. Johnson extends Doc's message: as an African American man, Joey will face a particular and trying constellation of challenges, but he must be proud and persistent in striving for his goals. Joey's father filed a discrimination complaint against his employer for passing him over for advancement opportunities even though it jeopardized his job and, by extension, his marriage; he never gives up pursuing his dream of becoming a manager although it requires him to leave his son. The author takes the potentially negative aspect of racism and turns it on its head. The adults, acting as agents instead of victims—without denying the realities of racism—see the oppression as a unique challenge which demands the best of them.

While the author emphasizes that boys need men in their lives, that sons need fathers or father figures, she does not negate the importance of mothers. Ernestine, who runs her own beauty shop, begs Joey to accept Franklin. When Joey actively hurts Franklin by neglecting his dog, Ernestine challenges her son with: "Sorry and love are just words. They don't mean a thing unless your actions back them up."

Through every adult example in the novel, Candy Dawson Boyd affirms the industry and determination of African Americans. Doc explains that through work he prevails: "Work gives me a great deal of solace and joy."

The author evokes the tense struggle between Mrs. Hamlin and Joey without portraying Mrs. Hamlin as wholly evil or foolish. Nevertheless, through examples rather than statements, the author dramatizes the power that teachers and schools have over young people, shaping esteem and determining not only an individual's future but a family's and a people's future. The African American adults in *Chevrolet Saturdays* invest heavily in the power of education to provide opportunities for their children. Special education, particularly because African American males are disproportionately tracked and trapped into it, is a prime target for the narrative's attack. Ironically, the story seems to plug gifted programs, when the reader would expect it to oppose such programs as a form of tracking.

6. Brown, Kay. *Willy's Summer Dream*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1989. 132 pages. **

Fourteen-year-old Willy Palmer lives with his mother in a Brooklyn brownstone. Although he looks more adult everyday, most things in his life confuse him. Like why the neighborhood kids make fun of him and call him a retard. Or why he is being moved to a special class in school, even though he tries to pay attention and doesn't laugh uncontrollably in the middle of class the way he used to. His mother tells him he'll outgrow all his troubles, but at the same time, she transfers him to a new school every time he is placed in special education.

Willy's life starts to improve when Kathleen moves in next door from the West Indies. The beautiful Kathleen goes out with Willy almost every day. She doesn't think anything is

wrong with him, but when he confesses his frustration and loneliness to her, she begins tutoring him. He is less interested in the tutoring than in his feelings of sexual awakening. Soon, though, she must return to the West Indies, leaving Willy as devastated and depressed as when his father left him.

In the meantime, Willy is confused about whether he is actually mentally retarded or not. He makes friends on vacation with an eleven-year-old boy, whom he saves from an abusive baby-sitter; he tells himself that a retarded person could not have done that. When Willy returns home, he starts practicing basketball every day, hoping to win the acceptance and friendship of the neighborhood boys. The story ends with them inviting him to join a game.

I wanted to like *Willy's Summer Dream* because of what author Kay Brown is trying to do—to bring the reader inside the experience of someone labeled retarded—but the story just never grabbed me. Brown's depiction of Willy's reality is powerful, including the confusion, disappointment, and frustration that he feels about his learning disabilities and his social isolation. However, the story never moves beyond that. Despite Willy's experiences in various relationships and a well-paced plot, Willy has changed little when the story closes, giving the entire book a static tone. Perhaps this was Brown's intention, to emphasize the limits of Willy's life. In any case, I think YA readers may be frustrated by it.

Although written in the third person, *Willy's Summer Dream* is nonetheless written from Willy's perspective. This is both a strength and a weakness, making his experience very vivid but not offering the reader any distance to gain insight into what's actually happening to him and why. For instance, Kathleen's motives for spending so much time with Willy are never clarified. Is she interested in him as a boyfriend? Does she see herself solely in a helping role? Is she just lonely? Or, coming from a more accepting culture, does she simply value him as a friend despite his disability? This ambiguity accurately mirrors Willy's confusion about her motives, but I'm not sure it offers the reader much insight. In contrast, Willy's mother's character is nicely drawn, alternating between

exasperation over her teenager's rebellion, concern over his future, and an attempt to deny his disabilities. Willy's relationship with his self-centered father also rings true, as he moves from idolizing him, to disillusionment, to anger.

Despite a little optimism in the last chapter, *Willy's Summer Dream* offers a bleak picture of his life and his future. There is no exploration of any formal supports or programs for him, and the people in his life are sadly unable to bridge his isolation. Ultimately, this leaves the reader acutely aware of his despair but unable to picture a way out.

This novel's reading level and subject matter are appropriate for eighth- to eleventh-grade readers. It may appeal to boys more than girls since the primary female character, Kathleen, is poorly developed, serving mainly as a foil for Willy's feelings. Readers with a particular interest in learning disabilities may connect more with this story than most teenage readers, who will simply find it depressing.

7. Brown, Margery W. *That Ruby*. Chicago: Reilly and Lee, 1969. 154 pages. *

That Ruby describes the sixth-grade year of Bonnie Jean Walker, her friend Kathy, and Ruby Johnson, a sullen twelve-year-old girl in their class who already flunked sixth grade once. The story follows the girls through their excitement about Girl Scout barbecues, school book fairs, and a math competition.

Ruby is an outsider, suspected of stealing Bonnie's clown pencil and another classmate's train book. However, when Ruby's apartment burns following a gas leak explosion, she goes to stay with Kathy's family and the girls get to know her better. They learn that Ruby's father died last year, her mother works long hours, and she has major responsibility for taking care of her younger brother. They realize that she's a good cook and a good cooking teacher. Ruby warms up to the

girls as they become friendlier to her, and eventually they even invite her to join their Girl Scout troop.

That Ruby is "Father Knows Best" meets "The Cosby Show." The sixth graders of Room 412 love their teacher, each other, and their studies. Bonnie's storybook nuclear family never fights. Even Ruby, who provides the only small conflict to propel the plot, comes around quickly with minimal effort. In other words, *That Ruby* is boring, unrealistic, and inane. The characters use expressions like, "Golly!," ensuring that no reader over the age of nine will want to identify with them. In addition, none of the characters ever becomes real to the reader; rather, they skate from event to event without ever delving below the surface. The characters could be of any racial or cultural background—no details of locale, dialogue, or identity ground them in African American culture.

With illustrations, an easy reading level, and the preadolescent concerns of its characters, *That Ruby* is appropriate for fourth- or fifth-grade readers. Boys will find little to interest them in the all-female cast, but girls are unlikely to be engaged by the insipid plot. Although *That Ruby* has a worthwhile theme of extending friendship to a defensive outcast, the lack of plot and character development makes it a poor choice for young readers.

8. Brown, Margery W. *The Second Stone*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974. 124 pages.**

Fifteen-year-old Henry Wilson lives with his older brother Dan's family in an unnamed inner city. A good student and athlete, he works as a counselor at the Boys Club. His best friend Ric Martinez is more troubled, coping with a drunken, unemployed father. Ric is in danger of dropping out of school and joining a local teenage gang which Dan, a cop, believes to be responsible for a recent series of muggings and robberies in the neighborhood.

When a shopkeeper is shot during one of the robberies and Henry's niece Patty disappears at the same time, he goes in search of her. He finally tracks her down to the old Andrews' place, the only private estate left in the neighborhood. Unable to flee before the police cordoned off the neighborhood, the teen gang hides out at the Andrews' house, holding Patty and the two elderly Andrews sisters hostage. After Henry sends for the police, he overhears Ric offering the gang an escape car if they'll let Patty and the women go. Then the police burst in, fatally wounding Ric in the ensuing struggle and arresting the rest of the gang. Tormented by his friend's death, Henry briefly joins in the rioting that follows but repents after accidentally hurting a woman with flying glass. Thereafter, he vows to stay away from gangs.

The Second Stone is only a moderately interesting book. In jumping back and forth from Henry to Ric to the child-artist Jay, Margery Brown dissipates much of the book's focus, decreasing the reader's emotional connection with any of the characters. The themes are important, particularly the choice of male adolescents deciding whether to pursue the straight and narrow path with potentially slow rewards versus dropping out and joining get-rich-quick, illegal schemes. However, the somewhat unfocused plot, the dated language, and the "goody two shoes" tone limit this novel's appeal to contemporary young adult readers. In addition, the story unnecessarily kills off Ric to prove how dangerous gangs are instead of using Henry's more moderate experience of following the crowd against his better judgment and then feeling regret over hurting someone.

Despite these faults, *The Second Stone* offers easy reading and a plot that keeps moving. Henry's home life is a fine example of caring extended family, with both surrogate father and mother very involved in his life and maturation. Henry's brother Dan is an African American man committed to his community and his family, working hard to make a living and to protect the people in his neighborhood.

Sixth through eighth graders will find *The Second Stone's* reading level accessible, though they may be insulted

by the fact that it contains many illustrations. Because the plot focuses entirely on boys, female readers will find little to interest them. Even male readers may have trouble identifying with the dated dialogue and the overly adult-pleasing Henry.

9. Campbell, Barbara. *A Girl Called Bob and a Horse Called Yoki*. New York: Dial Press, 1982. 167 pages.***

A Girl Called Bob and a Horse Called Yoki, reissued in 1986 as *Taking Care of Yoki*, is a heartwarming story that takes its readers back to the era of World War II. During a winter in St. Louis, Missouri, eight-year-old Barbara Ann Weathers, popularly known as Bob, and her friend, ten-year-old Chuckie Williams, steal a horse to save him from the slaughterhouse. Parallel to this plot runs another plot: Bob's indecision over whether she should be baptized. She's not sure she's ready: "It's a lot of responsibility being baptized. You got to try to watch what you do and what you say, trying to be a good person. It may be too much for me." The other plot that runs through the whole book is Bob missing and writing to her father, who has been away in the war for over a year.

Bob, her mother, and grandmother live in two rooms of a modest boarding house run by crazy Mrs. Beene, with her horde of cats. Bob's mother, Saree, works at a defense plant making army supplies. Her grandmother, Sweetmama, came up from the rural South to care for Bob while Saree's at work. The family isn't poor but it is frugal. Saree is saving for a house in California, which the family hopes to buy when the war is over.

The story is full of intimate conversations among family and friends, richly detailed descriptions of daily life in another time and place—from hitching up the horse to the milk wagon, to making ice cream out of snow, to preparing for Easter Sunday. Bob's black-positive classroom and the

passionate black church community are conveyed through occasional sketches of classroom lessons and church services.

Bob is mischievous and prone to impulsive actions and clumsiness. She tries to do right, but usually it comes out wrong. With help from fellow animal-lover Mrs. Beene, she and Chuckie steal Yoki, a mangy, decrepit horse, and take him to safety at Mrs. Beene's son's country farm. Meanwhile, the horse owner's nephew, Roger, who wanted to sell Yoki to the glue factory, vows to prosecute the thieves when he finds them.

Ultimately, Bob cannot live with herself for violating her principles, especially as she prepares to be baptized. Sweetmama, in helping Bob decide whether to be baptized, tells a personal story of her own childhood struggles, which brings the two of them closer together and gives Bob a satisfying philosophy with which she can live: "You going to do the best you can in life. You know right from wrong, and you going to try to do right. You just do your best. . . . I know I wouldn't be perfect, but who is?" Bob decides to tell Roger that she stole Yoki, even though he may prosecute her. Then she tells her mother. When she tells the truth, regardless of the consequences, she feels ready to be baptized. In the end, there are several happy endings: Bob gets baptized, and Roger's uncle thanks Bob for rescuing Yoki from Roger.

While never didactic, *A Girl Called Bob and a Horse Called Yoki* teaches several important lessons in addition to the aforementioned lessons of doing your best and of being honest despite the risks. Other lessons include: sometimes you have to do something bad in order to accomplish something good; sometimes you need to do for others to get a better perspective on your own problems; even if it accomplishes something good, you still have to pay a price for breaking the rules; your family can love you but still be angry with you; and giving and doing for others, making sacrifices, both hurts and feels good. All of the moral points that Barbara Campbell makes are illustrated largely through Bob's actions and their consequences, rather than spoken in a summation by an adult "moral exemplar."

This book has the best ingredients of historical fiction, nature-adventure, and coming-of-age genres. Although the chief protagonist of the story is a young girl and the dominant mood is sentimental and warm, elementary and middle-school girls alike will identify with Bob's moral dilemmas and enjoy her boldness. The nature theme is a big draw for boys. Bob is a complex character. She's a mature young person. So many facets of her life are so simple, and yet even the simplest situation can present an ethical dilemma. This book moves fairly quickly, but it's a full reading experience for elementary and middle-school students. The vitality of its characters and the predicaments and messages it presents make *A Girl Called Bob and a Horse Called Yoki* a worthwhile book.

10. Carter, Mary Kennedy. *On to Freedom*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1970. 55 pages. **

In the middle of the Civil War, thirteen-year-old slave Gabe Adams wants to escape his slave masters in Charleston, South Carolina. One day in town he meets Uncle Lee, a notorious free black man who helps slaves escape north to freedom. Gabe begs Uncle Lee to help him escape, but the older man insists that Gabe talk to his parents first, to try to convince them to go with him. Although they have been timidly saving toward legally buying their freedom for many, many years, Gabe's parents finally realize that escape is their only real hope. Gabe's father works on the ship *Planter*; together with Uncle Lee, they hatch a daring escape plan to steal the *Planter* with its entire black slave crew and sail to freedom right past southern naval checkpoints. Gabe becomes almost sick with anticipation as the day for escape approaches, but in the end he acts like a real man in helping his family and many others escape to freedom.

Based on a true historical event, *On to Freedom* gives the reader a small glimpse into the minds and conditions of slaves

during the Civil War. Unfortunately, none of the characters ever becomes real. They remain in two dimensions, somewhat woodenly resenting slavery and planning their escape. And despite the boldness of the actual historical event, *On to Freedom* fails to communicate the sense of excitement and immediacy necessary for a good adventure story. Most of the action focuses on Gabe's feelings, detracting from the plot. Yet even so, Gabe does not come alive enough for the reader to care deeply what happens to him. At the same time, the story clings stubbornly to a historically revisionist sexism—although female slaves actually faced as many dangers and worked just as hard as male slaves, *On to Freedom* portrays the women as followers, sleeping peacefully while the men, including young Gabe, lead and protect them.

Because of its brevity and large print, *On to Freedom* is not truly a YA book, being more appropriate for fourth to sixth graders. Because of the passivity of its few female characters, it will hold limited interest for female readers. Although readers can learn about an amazing incident in black history through this story, it never takes off as an adventure tale and thus fails to fire the imagination.

11. Childress, Alice. *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich*. New York: Avon Books, 1973. 127 pages. *****

American Library Association Notable Books for Children and Young Adults, 1973; Coretta Scott King Honor Book, 1974; Jane Addams Honor Book, 1974; Lewis Carroll Shelf Award, 1975; School Library Journal Best Books for Children and Young Adults, 1973

In trying to negotiate the passage from childhood to adulthood, Benjie Johnson, a thirteen-year-old African American boy from Harlem, gets hooked on heroin. *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* is about how and why that

happens and how everyone around him—family, friends, teachers, and Benjie himself—reacts to it.

The book's excellence lies in its format and depth. Each chapter, written in the voice of a different character, adds a new layer to the puzzle of Benjie's life. Not only does the reader get a beautifully clear picture of the people who surround Benjie but also of the complexity of personal and societal problems which intersect in this one young boy's life. Childress' characters offer varied and often conflicting views on the issues which touch Benjie: drugs, poverty, racism, abandonment by his father, schooling which deadens his sense of self, an inadequate social service system, black activism, and family members doing the very best they can in bewildering circumstances. Childress offers no easy answers, yet the story is, in the end, hopeful. She draws each of the characters with exquisite complexity and compassion and provides strong black role models in the characters of Benjie's stepfather and mother.

A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich is a brilliant book, readily appealing to students from grades seven through twelve. Although written in the vernacular of 1970s Harlem, the issues raised are still entirely relevant today, and Childress' treatment of them (in 127 pages, no less!) is more thoughtful and multilayered than anything I've read in years. Her skillful manipulation of characters provides powerful commentary on the issues without ever editorializing. This is an interactive book—although the characters speak bluntly, each in the first-person voice, the reader must actively sift through the sometimes contradictory information to make her/his own deductions. With its unusual format, this novel also offers an excellent opportunity to teach perspective and character development.

The Black English may make some chapters difficult for younger readers, but the short chapters, gripping plot, real life issues and narrative voices which seem to speak directly to the reader all make this compelling book accessible for younger readers. But don't let the novel's size or young protagonist fool you—*A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* is for adults, too,

and readers of any age will be moved by its insight and honesty.

12. Childress, Alice. *Rainbow Jordan*. New York: Avon Books, 1981. 127 pages. ***

American Library Association Notable Books for Children and Young Adults, 1981; Coretta Scott King Honor Book, 1982; School Library Journal Best Books for Children and Young Adults, 1981

Rainbow Jordan is a fourteen-year-old African American girl living in New York City either with her mother Kathie or her temporary foster mother Josephine. Rainbow's life is a juggling act—trying to take care of her irresponsible mother, trying to hold onto her boyfriend Eljay without giving in to his demands for sex, and trying to pretend to the world that she leads a normal family life. Rainbow's father lives in Detroit. Her mother, AFDC check in hand, leaves Rainbow for weeks at a time to travel around with a new boyfriend or to take temporary go-go dancing gigs out of town. Whenever Rainbow's social worker realizes she's been left again, Rainbow is sent to live with Josephine, a single black woman aspiring to middle-class refinement. The novel explores Rainbow's maturing relationship with Josephine and her coming to terms with Kathie's lack of commitment to motherhood.

Rainbow Jordan is not nearly as moving or poignant a novel as Childress' *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich*. In *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich*, the reader could identify with nearly every character in spite of her/his faults; in *Rainbow Jordan*, no character is sympathetic enough to identify with. Their faults are somewhat caricatured, and Childress does not give enough insight into how each woman became the person she did. Although *Rainbow Jordan* follows the first novel's format of each chapter in a different major character's

voice, the narrative lacks the gripping immediacy of *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich*, and the issues are explored in much less depth. Only in the last chapter does Childress reveal her genius in portraying the tender-tough, heartbreaking emotional jumble of adolescence in a dysfunctional family.

13. Chocolate, Debbi. *NEATE to the Rescue!* Orange, NJ: Just Us Books, Inc., 1992. 90 pages. ***

As a member of the city council, Naimah Gordon's mom has worked to improve the city for everyone, but now David Russell, a white racist challenger for her city council seat, is spreading lies about African Americans trying to take over the city. He has sponsored a bill to get the voting districts redrawn so an influx of suburban whites into Naimah's mother's district will threaten her chances for re-election. Thirteen-year-old Naimah, determined to help her mother, gets together her group of five friends to strategize about campaigning for Ms. Gordon. The first thing they do is go door to door with campaign flyers. But along the way, they encounter a rally for David Russell and start shouting slogans in favor of Naimah's mother, touching off a mini riot, with eggs being thrown and people getting trampled underfoot. All five friends are arrested, and their parents are not happy about having to come down to jail to bail them out! Naimah's mother grounds her and forbids her to work on the campaign.

Meanwhile, Naimah herself is running for a student council president position in her junior high school, campaigning on much the same platform as her mother's. Both promise to work to improve conditions for people of all colors. With an inspiring, unifying speech, Naimah sweeps to victory.

But her mother has a harder time. When the redistricting plan wins, Ms. Gordon finds herself trailing David Russell by eight points in the polls. Naimah is determined to

help her mother retain her city council seat in spite of her mother's ban. So with the help of her friends, she organizes a rally for all the junior high schools and high schools in the city, gathering the students together to remind them, "We're too young to vote, but we're not too young to urge our parents to vote." She reminds them that bad people can get into office when good people don't care enough to get out and vote. The television news picks up the story of the rally, focusing on the ethnic diversity, positive energy, and serious political focus of the students. With the help of the rally and the positive news coverage, Naimah's mother is re-elected.

NEATE to the Rescue! is a cute book with good intentions, but it is overly simplistic. The protagonist, Naimah, offers a great role model of somebody who sees something wrong and tries to fix it, building alliances with friends and strangers to make positive change. This is a wonderful message for young people to hear, particularly since this activist is a thirteen-year-old African American girl. However, she solves all of her problems too easily. Even though the kids get arrested briefly following their first organizing attempts, they bounce back too quickly, with no further problems. In particular, their ability to throw together a city-wide political rally, pulling together students from every school and every racial community in the city in just two days, is totally unrealistic. If part of the goal of this book is to encourage young people to become involved, offering such a facile view of political change sets readers up for failure if they try to apply it in their own lives. Debbi Chocolate would have done readers a greater service by looking seriously at some of the obstacles and discouragements that young activists face, while exploring ways they persevere to overcome those problems.

On the other hand, it's wonderful to see a young adult book featuring very proactive African American females, including both Naimah and her mother. In addition, there are a number of families in the book, including Naimah's family and her friend Tayesha's interracial family, that are intact

and functional, providing support and guidance for their young people.

NEATE to the Rescue! is a relatively short book, with simple chapters and vocabulary. The reading level will work for students in fifth through seventh grade. Despite a female protagonist, there are plenty of boys and girls in the story, and because Naimah is such an active and non-stereotypical character, readers of both sexes will enjoy the book. *NEATE to the Rescue!* is the first in a proposed series featuring the same characters. If this book is any indication, we can look forward to strong characters, very positive messages, and engaging plots. I hope that the future books will go more in depth into some of the problems and solutions involved in trying to create social change.

14. Cornwell, Anita. *The Girls of Summer*. Berkeley, CA: New Seed Press, 1989. 96 pages. *

Thirteen-year-old Aurelia Riverton was the first black student to integrate Carleton City Junior High School, located in an unnamed state in 1973. Her best friend there, Eunice Hightower, is a poor white girl with troubles of her own. Aurelia's father was killed years ago in the riots following Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death, while Eunice's father lives in a shack on the edge of town, drinking himself to death. But the girls' immediate concern is how to join the boys' Small Fry baseball league to give themselves something fun to do over the summer. Aurelia secretly hopes that playing Small Fry baseball will help her get onto the high school team, which, in turn, could help her win an athletic scholarship to college. She wants to become a scientist.

Aurelia and Eunice elicit the support of Aurelia's grandmother, who marches down to baseball practice with them and confronts the current coach, who has a 0-10 losing record from previous seasons. The old coach conveniently has a

heart attack on the spot just thinking about letting girls play, and Granny takes over as coach. Fortunately, she knows how to coach from her days of traveling with her husband, a pitcher in the old Negro baseball league. She immediately puts girls in all the key positions, and with some strenuous practices, the team begins to win. Few townspeople oppose the changes, except Aurelia's mother, who doesn't think baseball is ladylike.

One day in the middle of the season, Eunice has to go ask her father for rent money for her sick mother. Aurelia accompanies her. Not only is Eunice's father drunk, but he is furious to see his daughter in the company of a black friend, and he comes after them with a meat cleaver. The girls run away but Eunice trips. Her father is about to split her skull when Aurelia throws a fast ball at his head and almost kills him. Her grandmother takes Aurelia to an African American woman psychiatrist to get over her trauma and has a friendly female judge visit her to assure her that she will not be charged with a crime. So Aurelia's next greatest problem is getting to the final game of the season when her mother insists she must go to a picnic instead. Aurelia jumps from the train taking them to the picnic and hitchhikes to the game, which she wins with a special pitch her grandmother has taught her.

The Girls of Summer is every bit as foolish and unrealistic as it sounds. To begin with, the characters are unreal, particularly Aurelia who speaks like a college graduate, pitches better than anyone else in town, and single-handedly integrates the junior high school. Eunice's character is never fleshed out, serving instead as a foil to Aurelia. Granny paints her own house, coaches like a pro, raises her granddaughters alone, and intimately knows the only female judge in the county. Carleton County is backward enough to have seen the killing of civil rights workers a few years back but just happens to have an African American woman doctor practicing at the local hospital and a female judge. Furthermore, the girls' campaign to play baseball is won far too easily, with almost no resistance. As nice a dream as it is, it's a little hard to swallow.

Anita Cornwell tries to provide strong female role models for her readers, but in the process, she fails to make them human. The plot also fails, swinging between Eunice's wildly unbelievable escape from her father's meat cleaver to the mundane details of baseball games which will interest only the most avid fans.

It's too bad *The Girls of Summer* falls so flat, because we certainly can use more YA books featuring strong girls and women actively trying to improve their lives, even through sports. While many YA books focus on sports as African American boys' ticket to college and prosperity, this is the first I've seen which suggests the same avenue for girls. This, too, is part of the book's idealism—relatively few girls of any race manage to attend college on athletic scholarships, especially in the early 1970s, and baseball is simply not a female collegiate event. Perhaps more importantly, *The Girls of Summer* is unlikely to convince its readers that reading is an enjoyable or worthwhile pursuit either.

This novel's reading level is fifth to eighth grade. With a virtually all-female cast, it will not appeal to boys, but girls will also have a hard time becoming absorbed by the lackluster plot.

15. Davis, Ossie. *Just Like Martin*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992. 215 pages. ***

In Alabama 1963, change is sweeping across the land. Fourteen-year-old Isaac Stone has met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and vows to be like him, to embrace nonviolence and to protest injustice wherever he finds it. As the Junior Assistant Pastor of Holy Oak Baptist Church and the president of the Young People's Bible Class, Stone works side by side with Reverend Cable, a personal friend of Dr. King's. Stone tries to set a good example for his peers, despite having his leadership constantly challenged by jealous Hookie Fenster. When *Just*

Like Martin opens, the Holy Oak Baptist Church, in fact all the blacks in Stone's town, are preparing to go to the March on Washington. Only Stone can't go, forbidden to participate by his Korean War veteran father who believes that nonviolence is cowardice and marching will not change anything. Stone tries to respect his father, Ike, although he's a difficult and morose man. Before Stone's mother died, she explained to him that his father changed after the war, that something terrible happened to him in Korea, from which he never recovered. So Stone struggles to understand his father and to take care of him as best he can.

When the church members return exuberant from the March on Washington, Reverend Cable approaches them with the idea of training the children to take the lead in the next marches. In a stormy meeting, the church fathers refuse, insisting that letting children lead marches is unsafe and cowardly. An elderly lawyer finally convinces them at least to offer children's workshops in nonviolence, because the children want to fight for their own future. Then a bomb explodes in the junior Bible class, killing two girls and severely injuring one boy. The congregation is devastated, but Stone takes the lead to organize a city-wide children's march against racist violence.

Realizing that he cannot keep Stone from the march, Ike decides to go along to protect him. But Stone is more concerned about his father bringing his gun along and sparking violence, so he hides his gun. Meanwhile, he practices Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, to give at the rally following the march. But he never gets the chance. Despite a large but peaceful turnout and a valid march permit, the sheriff orders everyone to disperse or risk arrest. When the children refuse to leave, the police begin arresting people. Stone's father fights back and is beaten badly and arrested. Afterward, Ike refuses to talk to Stone, insisting that he would never have been so humiliated if Stone hadn't hidden his gun. Although Stone knows that Ike would probably have been killed if he had pulled out a gun, nevertheless his father blames him for what happened, snarling: "The worst thing that ever happened to me in my whole life was having you for a son!"

Ike decides they are moving to California, away from the site of his humiliation. Sadly, Stone says good-bye to all his friends, to his church, and to the only home he has ever known. Just before they move, though, President Kennedy is shot, and Ike spends a night by the grave of Lucy, his wife, trying to understand all the violence. There, he has a change of heart and returns in the morning to tell Stone his terrible secret about Korea. While over there, Ike accidentally shot a mother and baby and has never forgiven himself. Realizing that they cannot outrun their fears, Ike decides to stay in Alabama, to rejoin the community, and to try to open himself up to Stone.

Just Like Martin follows two important revolutions, the Civil Rights Movement and the opening of a father's heart. Violence, justice, and responsibility weave the two themes together, with the son teaching the father. Ike's metamorphosis is moving and realistic, showing the ways that world events can impact a despairing man's psyche. His treatment of Stone, his reaction to nonviolence and to the humiliation of a beating and jail all ring heartbreakingly true. Stone, on the other hand, provides a perfect role model. Perhaps too perfect. Although author Ossie Davis tries to show Stone struggling to stay nonviolent, he is still too good to be entirely believable. Here is a fourteen-year-old who constantly forgives his father's verbal abuse, leads his peers, excels in school, nurtures kids' strengths when others have given up on them, catches the personal attention of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., successfully organizes a city-wide demonstration, memorizes the speeches of black leaders, and has a principal grooming him for a scholarship to Morehouse College while he's still in junior high school. Without more exploration of Stone's internal life and conflicts, he's a little too good to identify with.

Despite this weakness, *Just Like Martin* offers a powerful look at the events of the early 1960s and how they affected blacks in one ordinary Alabama town. By making the events personal, Ossie Davis encourages young readers to picture themselves there and to envision that they, too, can make social change. At the same time, he exposes one

complicated father-son relationship, exploring the way societal oppression can contaminate personal relationships and destroy lives. Ultimately, *Just Like Martin*'s message is hopeful, pointing to personal responsibility and just action as the path for both personal and societal change.

One serious weakness of the book is its exclusively male focus. While novels about coming of age *as a man* may legitimately have a strictly male focus, *Just Like Martin* is a more universal story and has no excuse for excluding females to the extent it does. All but one of Stone's friends are male, none of the three main characters has a mother, all the church's civil rights organizing is done solely by men and boys, and every leader is male. Even the church meeting about nonviolence training for the children features only men. Judging by *Just Like Martin*, one would think that women and girls never participated in the Civil Rights Movement at all, which is a misleading and damaging impression to give both female and male readers. For obvious reasons, then, *Just Like Martin* will appeal to boys more than girls. It has a seventh to tenth grade reading level.

16. DeVaux, Alexis. *Spirits in the Street*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1973. 192 pages. **

Alexis DeVaux considers *Spirits in the Street* a novel. This novel contains six chapters of prose poetry, news clippings, drawings, diary entries, poetry, and dialogue written in drama format. The book begins with a poem: "Do Not/pass/thru the pages/of this/book/and hear/nothin/on the way"; and a prose poem: "I write this book in recognition of the collective spirit of 3 people on 114 street. And their battle for survival. Forced to exist daily only painfully." The three people are Michelle, Charles, and Lynda, who live in Harlem. The mediator for their life stories, the narrator Alexis, writes the story at

twenty-two, after she drops out of Cornell University and returns to Harlem.

Although Alexis lovingly refers to the characters and their lives as "poetry," everything about these people's lives is awful. She wants to rescue them—"Away from the block to a different space. The one every body says is peace. Cause the real fantasy of living here is surely absurd." Prison is the operative metaphor for this story, and the characters' only crime is that they are black in a racist society: "We live in a special prison. You can't see the bars and the guards. A force shield keeps us inside and locked out. Inmates. Mates in a . . . box . . . of buildings and streets. A physical obstacle. Money. Information. We don't have either squeezed in here, black. Gates . . . to discourage us . . . to beat us. They say NIGGER GIVE UP. Captured. Yields the desired effects: claustrophobia depression and exile from life. And all those other things that cause inmates to go stir crazy."

The narrator emphasizes the unsavory details of mundane existence, dwelling on inhuman living conditions and institutions, on absent families and cheap but impossible dreams. Woven among the details of daily living are indictments of bureaucracies, particularly the criminal justice system, welfare, and the job market, and reflections on political activism as a constructive outlet for anger.

Family and school receive most of the narrative's attention. Charles never learned to read in school. When Michelle hits her third-grade teacher in retaliation for the teacher's ridicule and slaps, the school blames Michelle and forces her to spend the mornings baby-sitting other "troubled" children outside the guidance counselor's office and the afternoons in class with her head on her desk as punishment. In eighth grade, Lynda challenges her teacher because she's bored. She hangs out in the bathroom with other bored students. When a teacher barges into the bathroom and grabs only Lynda and one other girl to punish them for all of the girls' loitering and smoking, Lynda, in trying to extricate herself from the teacher's grasp, slaps the teacher to the ground. She gets suspended and sent to a girls' home.

Nevertheless, the young women continue to attend school, in spite of the racist white teachers.

Alexis' father spends more time in prison than at home. When Alexis, sixteen, runs away from home because it's too crowded, the court requires her to submit to counseling at a center for emotionally disturbed children. Michelle's mother struggles alone to support six children. Her favorite brother, Melvin, is in jail. Lynda, now seventeen, essentially abandoned by her family, is the mistress of a drug dealer named Sammy. Charles, with a mother in a state hospital and a father disappeared, was shuttled along the eastern seaboard to live with assorted relatives. Charles began his criminal career when he was fourteen, spending time in "training schools." Now eighteen, Charles is a junky who spends all of his time in the street, sorting through garbage and stealing whatever he can to hawk to buy drugs.

Given the depressing material and tone of the narrative, it's easy to miss the almost upbeat ending. Alexis concludes her story with a scene from a play she finished, in which the mother and daughter characters love each other and are getting strong from their struggles.

In its intense and unrelenting analysis of racism and black youths' angry reaction to it, *Spirits in the Street* is unparalleled in black young adult literature. Despite its unusual narrative techniques, the novel is accessible to high-school readers. Its poetry is irresistibly sumptuous and compelling. But I cannot recommend *Spirits in the Street* unqualifiedly to all high-school readers. Some readers will not appreciate Alexis DeVeaux's representing Harlem as hell on earth; others will challenge the author's assertion that all white people are the enemy. However, some readers will appreciate the narrator's bluntness and "no need to explain" approach to her characters. She takes the reader into an abyss which is in itself sufficient explanation and justification for her characters' unattractive anger, violence, apathy, and substance abuse. Love is understood as the basis for telling these characters' stories, but love is missing from their stories. To