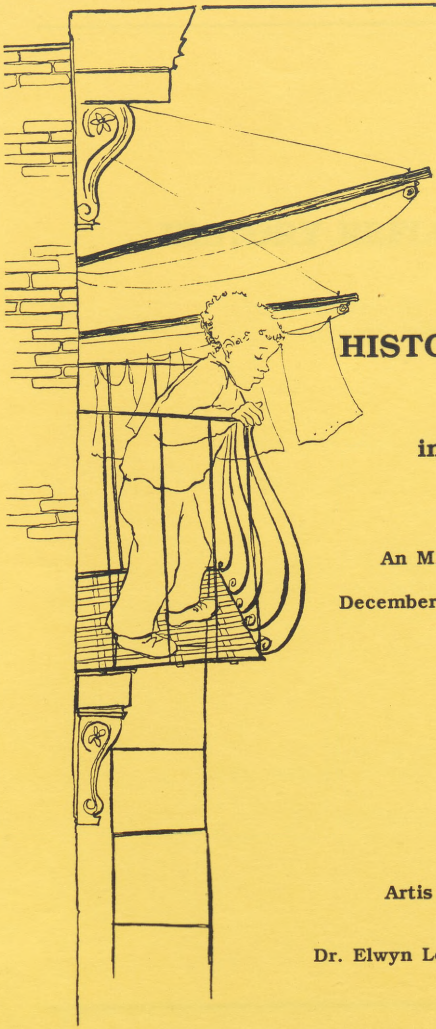

HISTORY REFLECTED

The Image of Blacks in Children's Literature

An M.D. Anderson Library Exhibit

December 1, 1989 - February 1, 1990

Curated by
Artis Bernard, Special Collections

With a foreword by
Dr. Elwyn Lee, African-American Studies

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FOREWORD

The history of pervasive efforts to inculcate little children with negative images of Blacks is a saga we should not repeat. Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it. For this reason, this exhibit contributes greatly to assuring a better future. It does this by vividly and profoundly enhancing our understanding of why so many persons carry negative images of Blacks; it is also a reminder of why African-Americans are so sensitive about the repetition of disparaging words or images. Therefore, we are deeply indebted to the Library for exposing this sensitive and important topic, and I encourage everyone to view the entire exhibit.

Dr. Elwyn C. Lee, Interim Director
African-American Studies Program

INTRODUCTION

When he was growing up in Los Angeles in the early years of this century, Arna Bontemps, a well-known figure of the Harlem Renaissance, haunted the public library looking for books in which someone like himself might appear. "What I found was of cold comfort, to say the least. Nothing more inspiring than *Our Little Ethiopian Cousin* was on the shelves, and I read almost every book in the room to make sure. Moreover, *Our Little Ethiopian Cousin* was not me and his world was not mine." Twenty years later, when his own children were growing up, all he could locate for them was *The Pickaninny Twins.* This reflects the two views of blacks that have prevailed in children's literature until recently. Blacks were either invisible or they were caricatured.

Children's book collector A. S. Rosenbach believed that children's books "more than any class of literature...reflect the minds of the generation that produced them," for in children's books lie all the myths and values adults want children to believe. "Hence no better guide to the history and development of any country can be found than its juvenile literature."

This exhibit traces the changes that have occurred in the image of blacks in children's literature since the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* before the Civil War. The Civil War may have settled the legal question of Negroes as property, but it did not settle the social and economic questions of blacks as equals. That struggle, played out across America, north and south, urban and rural, is mirrored in the children's literature of our age.

Although the first effort to change the image of blacks in children's literature was made by a group of black women who wrote black history plays for children in the 1920s, it wasn't until the Civil Rights Movement that the demand for good children's books representing blacks began to influence the publishing companies. The demand became so great in the late 1960s that companies actively sought books about blacks. This opened an opportunity to many talented black authors and illustrators whose books are available in bookstores and libraries today.

Artis Bernard
Special Collections

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Harriet Beacher Stowe. *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Boston: John P. Jewett & Company; Cleveland: Jewett, Proctor & Worthington, 1852.

Amelia Opie. *The Black Man's Lament; or, How to make sugar.* London: Printed for Harvey and Darton, 1826. Reprinted in *Flowers of Delight*, edited by Leonard de Vries. New York: Pantheon Books, 1956.

There was a period before the Civil War when Negroes played an important role in literature for children. The anti-slavery crusade was responsible for such works as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Amelia Opie's *The Black Man's Lament*, which described the evils of slavery with the intention of convincing readers, children and adults alike, that there was no moral justification for supporting it. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an unusual commercial success and was read by children worldwide.

The contemporary black author, Julius Lester, whose *To Be a Slave* appears later in this exhibit, explains that abolitionists "corrected" Negro dialect in their stories because they wanted them to be readily accessible to readers. Lester chose to use the words of the slaves themselves.

Maben. *Pickaninny.* London: The Sylvan Press, no date.

Published in London, this book is not unlike many published in the United States during the first half of the century. Its English origin may account for the fact that Pickaninny doesn't speak a dialect, a predictable characteristic of blacks in early American children's books. "Pickaninny" was a term that was hard to eradicate from children's literature because it has always been considered a term of affection.

Edward W. Kemble. *Kemble's Coons. A Collection of Southern Sketches.* New York: R. H. Russell & Son Publishers, 1897.

Following the Civil War, images of blacks rarely appeared in children's literature except as caricatures: servile, innocent--if not outright stupid, ragged, and dirty, or else cute and well-tended by a large, round-faced, kerchief-wearing black mammy. As the struggle for equal rights intensified, outright racist books such as this disappeared from the publishers' lists.

It isn't clear that this book was meant for children, but there's no doubt it took part in and fostered the black stereotypes that were endemic to American literature around the turn of the century and later. The word "coon" for Negro may have come from the fact that runaway slaves were hunted in much the same way that racoons were hunted. Although it is claimed that there was often a good deal of affection between slaves and their masters, this book shows little affection and a great deal of cruel jesting.

THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY TO THE 1920s

Ten Little Nigger Boys. London: Juvenile Productions, Ltd., 1900.

Another import from England, *Ten Little Nigger Boys* is remarkable for its off-hand, sing-song violence. Although there is often violence in fairytales and nursery rhymes, there is nothing like the kind of genocide that is hinted at in this children's book.

Helen Bannerman. *The Story of Little Black Sambo.* New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1920[?]. Courtesy of Houston Public Library.

Little Black Sambo was written by Helen Bannerman when she was making a long trip by ox-cart in India with her two small children. Her original sympathetic illustrations of the black family in the story were vulgarized by American illustrators when the book was published in this country. The English publisher claimed that in paying 5 pounds for the manuscript he had bought the copyright and that Mrs. Bannerman no longer had any right to control the appearance of the book. In the 1950s the book was widely criticized for its racist illustrations, and many children's librarians removed it from the shelves.

Hugh Lofting. *The Story of Doctor Dolittle.* Philadelphia, New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1920, and *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle.* Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1988. Courtesy of Houston Public Library.

Hugh Lofting's first Doctor Dolittle story won the 1923 Newbery Medal as "The most distinguished contribution to children's literature" in that year. In this story Dr. Dolittle mixes a potion that successfully changes a black prince, Prince Bumpo, to a white prince. When Prince Bumpo appears in the next volume, *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle,* the reader learns that the potion turned only his face white and that he looked very funny in his swimming trunks. Many children's librarians have placed the books on special research shelves, believing that too many incidents like this in the books carry a racist message and are destructive to black children's image of themselves.

In the 1988 edition of *The Voyages of Doctor Doolittle* the offending passages have been altered by the publisher. In explaining this action, Christopher Lofting states: "Hugh Lofting would have been appalled at the suggestion that any part of his work could give offense and would have been the first to have made the changes himself."

THE DEPRESSION ERA AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Even as late as 1962, out of the more than 5000 books published for children each year, only a small percentage included one or more blacks. Of that small percentage, more than half were, like *Boomba Lives in Africa*, placed outside of the U.S. or, like *Across the Cotton Patch*, placed before World War II. Only a few told a story about contemporary American blacks.

In the 1930s the Countee Cullen Regional Branch of the New York Public Library on 135th Street set up a model collection of books for black children. This was first time careful attention was given to blacks in children's literature. The selection criteria focused on the illustrations, the language, and the portrayal of black adults. The committee looked for books in which the illustrations of the characters had the features and attractions of blacks, and they rejected books in which the black characters were simply white characters made brown or black with water color. The use of dialect had to be realistic and consistent. That is, a book in which only blacks spoke dialect or in which the dialect was an invention of the author was not accepted. Books with derogatory terms were rejected. Although the committee wanted to see blacks portrayed in a variety of occupations, not only servile ones, they found that if they insisted on that requirement, they would have to eliminate every book. Setting that aside, they were able to put together a collection of 40 books.

Bernice G. Anderson. *Topsy Turvy's Pigtails.* New York: Rand McNally and Co., 1930.

Topsy Turvy's Pigtail is one of the books that have regrettable illustrations but a good and nonracist story about a determined and self-reliant little black girl. This discrepancy between the story and the illustrations often occurred because the traditional graphic representation of black characters was so stereotyped and had been made use of for so many decades that it was difficult for illustrators to break away from it.

Pamela L. Travers. *Mary Poppins.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1934. Reprinted 1962.

Pamela Travers grew up in Australia and never considered herself a racist. She was surprised when a teacher objected to passages such as this scene from the chapter, Bad Tuesday:

> "Ah bin 'specting you a long time, Mar' Poppins," she said, smiling. "You bring dem chillun dere into ma li'l house for a slice of watermelon right now. My, but dem's very white babies. You wan' use a li'l bit blackboot polish on dem. Com 'long, now. You'se mighty welcome."

Travers decided that "if even one Black child were troubled, or even if *she* [the teacher] were troubled, then I would have to alter it." This quoted passage was changed to:

> "We've been anticipating your visit, Mary Poppins," she said, smiling. "Goodness, those are very pale children! Where did you find them? On the moon?" She laughed at them, loud happy laughter, as she got to her feet and began to lead the way to a little hut made of palm-leaves. "Come in, come in and share our dinner. You're all as welcome as sunlight."

Caroline Singer and Cyrus LeRoy Baldridge. *Boomba Lives in Africa.* New York: Holiday House, 1935.

It is this sort of story that Arna Bontemps ran into when looking for books that would mirror his own experience. *Boomba Lives in Africa* is an unusually fine story about an African child. In the first paragraph, the authors help the young reader set aside previous notions about race:

"Some People call Africans 'black.' But no 'white' person is ever a really white white. And no 'black' person is ever a really black black. The boy is a beautiful dark brown. Do not ask anybody why. For nobody knows why some people are brown and why others are not."

Hildegarde Hoyt Swift. *The Railroad to Freedom.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1932.

This historical account of Harriet Tubman, the black woman responsible for the birth of the Underground Railroad, who acted as pilot on the river boats in the south and as nurse during the Civil War, was written by a white woman who grew up in Harriet Tubman's home town. Her own childhood was filled with stories of Harriet Tubman, and she was dismayed to learn later that few people knew who Harriet Tubman was. This book is one the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library included in their collection of books for black children. They found it to be true to the historical background and that its use of dialect was fairly accurate. Note, however, that in the frontispiece, it is difficult to see that the heroine is black. The black soldiers with her are close to being caricatures, but she could easily be mistaken for a white woman.

Langston Hughes. *The Dream Keeper.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932.

Langston Hughes published several books for children. When his book of poetry, *The Dream Keeper*, was in production, he was adamant that the illustrations represent attractive black children. He dreaded the possibility that the illustrations would be stereotypes such as those in *Topsy Turvy's Pigtails* or *Little Brown Koko* or *Little Black Sambo.*

Hughes collaborated with Arna Bontemps on one of the first books written for black children by black authors, *Popo and Fifina.*

Ellis Credle. *Across the Cotton Patch.* New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1935.

Although based on the pattern common to all "plantation" books of the period, *Across the Cotton Patch* is an integrated book, with attractive black characters reacting with white characters. However, it is always the white characters who make the decisions, who move the story along, while the black characters have accessory roles.

Blanche Seale Hunt. *Stories of Little Brown Koko.* Illustrated by Dorothy Wagstaff. Chicago and New York: American Colortype Co., 1940.

Publishers and writers of children's books perpetuated the black stereotype even after resistance to it had developed. Publishers were still producing such stereotyped books as this one through the 1940s. Without opening this book, the reader can guess that Little Brown Koko's hair will be described as being "wooly," that he'll have an adventure with a watermelon, that he'll say "you-all" and "thar" and that he will often "grin from ear to ear" and "roll his big round eyes."

Eula G. Duncan. *Big Roadwalker.* Illustrated by Fritz Eichenberg. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1940.

Big Roadwalker is a collection of folktales invented by the grandfather of Alice Cannon, the Negro cook of Eula Duncan's sister. It was rare during this period for Negroes to have the opportunity to publish books. It's obvious that Alice Cannon and her father were careful in preserving orally the stories of her grandfather, but only when a white person intervened could they be published. It was this kind of control of the black image by whites that enraged such black activists as Hoyt Fuller, who spoke of seizing "control of the Black image from those who have never respected it and to place that image in the hands of Black people, where it belongs."

Rose B. Knox. *The Boys and Sally.* New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1941.

This book is typical of the "plantation books" that proliferated at the end of the 19th century and into the 20th. First published in 1930, *The Boys and Sally* enjoyed sufficient popularity to be reprinted in 1941. It is a book in which there is no southern dialect, only Negro dialect, and the Negro slaves are shown as innocent and happy-go-lucky, never questioning their fate, always willing to please, always grateful for handouts.

Maud and Miska Petersham. *The Rooster Crows. A Book of American Rhymes and Jingles.* New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955.

This book was first published in 1945 before the great Civil Rights movement. The first efforts of educators and librarians to change the way blacks were portrayed in children's books had no effect on the Macmillan Company which, in spite of many

complaints, reprinted the book as is in 1955. By 1965, however, the complaints had grown in number and the publisher decided to have the illustrations of the black child removed rather than have them redrawn less stereotypically. Publishers could not accept any other way of seeing the Negro but as invisible or caricatured, and the Council for Interracial Books for Children accused publishers of participating in a "cultural lobotomy" in which "Negro history and Negro identification have been forgotten."

Patsie McRee. *The Kitchen and the Cotton Patch.* Atlanta: Cullom & Ghertner Co., 1948.

In the Foreword to her book, Patsie McRee states that she wants to give the reader a "fleeting conception of some of the lovable and humorous characteristics of the Southern Negroes who accepted their lot in life with simplicity and devotion." Yet, what the reader finds are the same stereotypes. Before the Civil Rights movement, rarely could whites, even those who had lived and worked closely with blacks, write about blacks with realism. Whatever understanding they may have had of the experiences of blacks, that understanding never made it to the printed page.

Roark Bradford. *How Come Christmas.* New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1948.

Roark Bradford, a native of Tennessee, is considered unique among the white authors of his time who wrote about blacks. He tried to present the situation of blacks as it really was. His ability to express his respect for blacks without relying on sentimental or romanticized images is highly unusual for this period. His retelling of biblical stories in Negro dialect, *Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun*, became the successful play *Green Pastures.*

1950s AND 1960s

In 1967, John Killens, an influential black novelist could say, "A Negro child can go to school and look into his school books and children's books and come home and watch television and go to an occasional movie, and follow this routine from day to day, month to month, and year to year, and hardly if ever see a reflection of himself." Virginie Fowler, editor of Knopf's Borzoi Books for Young People, admitted, "I was surprised to realize how few books we have on our list that accept an integrated society." This changed rapidly as publishers actively began to seek books about blacks. Black actors became popular, and more and more books written for black children by black authors were published.

Ann Petry. *Harriet Tubman.* New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1955.

Ann Petry was one of the first black novelists to write books for older children. She believed that the texts used in high schools didn't give a true picture of slavery and wrote *Harriet Tubman* to fill that need. Compare the jacket of this book with the frontispiece to *The Railroad to Freedom* and you can see that the jacket does not intend to obscure the fact that the heroine is black. In *The Railroad to Freedom*, Tubman speaks a stereotyped dialect: "Hit's de failure ob de negro troops, sah. Seems lak I cahn't bear dat mah regiment fail--." In *Harriet Tubman* she speaks her own language: "I'd go to the hospital, I would, early every morning. I'd get a big chunk of ice, I would, and put it in a basin, and fill it with water; then I'd take a sponge and begin. First man I'd come to, I'd thrash away the flies, and they'd rise, they would, like bees around a hive. Then I'd begin to bathe the wounds..."

Until the 1950s and the Civil Rights movement the Negro in children's literature always spoke in dialect, a dialect often made up by and understandable only to the author. In the Bobbsey Twins series, the Negro cook, Dinah, finally lost her idiosyncratic dialect in 1953.

Gwendolyn Brooks. *Bronzeville Boys and Girls.* Pictures by Ronni Solbert. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1956.

Gwendolyn Brooks, the first black to win the Pultizer Prize for literature, has written with great sympathy and understanding about urban childhood. She grew up in Chicago and published her first poem when she was a teenager. She has no difficulty with the question, should you write about life as it really is when writing for children. Life as it really is is the source of her magic:

Otto

It's Christmas Day. I did not get
The presents that I hoped for. Yet,
It is not nice to frown or fret.
To frown or fret would not be fair.
My Dad must never know I care.
It's hard enough for him to bear.

Ann Petry. *Tituba of Salem Village.* New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1964.

Realizing the need to acquaint children with the role of blacks in American history, Petry wrote this novel for older children. Everyone knows about the witch trials in New England in the 17th century, but few people realize how vulnerable a black slave would be in such an atmosphere of incrimination. Tituba was a black slave from Barbados accused of being a witch:

> "Were you a witch in the West Indies?"
> "No--never."
> "Were you a witch in Boston?"
> "No, I have never been a witch."
> "But you knew Judah White, a Jersey Maid, who was a witch in Boston. Did you not?"
> "Yes, I knew her. But I did not know she was a witch."
> "She is a known witch. You admit that you knew her, so you knew a witch in Boston."

Through this kind of arguing Tituba is accused of having access to magic, including the magic of growing more and better vegetables than anyone else.

Kristin Hunter. *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou.* New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 1968.

This book has been praised for its graphic depiction of ghetto culture and for the realism with which the author portrays the main character's search for identity. Sister Lou learns to be proud of the positive values of black life--deep spirituality, warm personal and family relationships, and a rich cultural heritage. In writing this book, Kristin Hunter included "some of the milestones I have passed on my own continuing journey to discovering the meaning of my Afro-American identity and its worth."

Bob Teague. *Letters to a Black Boy.* New York: Walker and Co., 1968.

Bob Teague was a football star at the University of Wisconsin before he became a journalist. He worked on *The Milwaukee Journal* and *The New York Times* until he went into television broadcasting. In the Postscript he requests that these letters be held for his son until he is 13: "What I hope to do is alert you. My theory is that if you can pick up some idea of what reality is like early, before it intrudes unannounced, you may not be caught off guard--unprepared and undone--as often as most men are." The letters form an autobiography that is meant both as warning and inspiration.

To understand what Teague is saying it's helpful to know that just 10 years earlier, in 1958, Southern librarians were attacked for displaying Garth Williams' book, *The Rabbits' Wedding*, a story about the wedding of a black rabbit and a white rabbit.

Julius Lester. *To Be a Slave.* New York: The Dial Press, 1968.

A Newbery Honor Book in 1969, *To Be a Slave* is based on slave narratives taken down by the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s and those taken down by abolitionists during the first half of the 19th century. Lester explains that the Federal Writers' Project was especially interested in linguistic accuracy, so narratives were transcribed word for word. The abolitionists, who collected their material in the struggle against slavery, wanted it to conform to the literary standards of the day and be readily accessible to readers. The book quotes from both types of narrative, one with its "earthy directness," the other with its "advantage of analysis." The result is a powerful book that speaks directly to the reader from the slaves' experience.

Elizabeth Witheridge. *And What of You, Josephine Charlotte?* Drawings by Barbara McGee. New York: Atheneum, 1969.

This is a story about a young Quaker woman and her slave, a young black woman who grew up with her as her best friend. Written by a white woman and based on her own family history, the story tries to deal accurately with the economic and emotional questions that freedom forced on the slaves. How will Josephine Charlotte earn a living after she's freed? What will be her relationship to the beloved mistress who has freed her? Even though Julius Lester would agree with the moral center of the story, "No human being should be owned by another," he would not accept the story as the common experience of blacks because the violence of slavery has been too muted.

Langston Hughes. *Don't You Turn Back.* Woodcuts by Ann Crifalconi. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.

In the introduction Arna Bontemps talks of the "quality of youngness...in [Langston Hughes'] poems themselves as well as in his personality." This collection of Hughes' poetry for children was put together two years after his death and given the title of one of his most poignant poems in which a black mother urges her son,

> So, boy, don't you turn back.
> Don't you set down on the steps
> 'Cause you finds it kinder hard.

1970s TO THE PRESENT

June Jordan. *His Own Where.* New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1971. *Who Look at Me.* New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1969. Uncorrected advance proofs.

Among the most impressive of the books written for children in the late '60s and early '70s are those by June Jordan, a poet, novelist, and artist who, among many other prizes, has received the Prix de Rome for environmental design. In discussing the use of dialect in books for children, Albert Schwartz of the Council for Interracial Books for Children praises her work for its recognition of the richness and beauty of black dialect. Dialect, he notes, has been recognized by linguists as not a debased form of the mother tongue, but a source of enrichment and vitality that keeps the mother tongue from becoming static. Jordan's use of dialect requires no diacritical marks or misspellings and causes no puzzlement to the reader.

John Steptoe. *Stevie.* New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969.

John Steptoe wrote and illustrated *Stevie* when he was 17 years old. It is the story of a little boy who is jealous of another little boy his mother is taking care of. A prolific writer, his work has become a guide for other black authors who want to write for black children about the experiences of black adults and children. At a recent conference on racism in children's literature, an argument developed over *Stevie*, some speakers believing that the story could be any child's story, others that it was specifically a black child's story. Steptoe seems to have developed a remarkable style that is simultaneously universal and specific.

John Steptoe. *Train Ride.* New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971.

In this story a several boys take a train ride into the city and get back so late they're worried about how their parents are going to greet them:

"Hey, man, could I spend the night over your house?"

"I don't even want to spend the night over my house."

Kali Grosvenor. *Poems by Kali.* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970.

These poems were written by Kali when she was 6 and 7, and were published when she was 8. She dedicated her book to three little black girls who were killed in a 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama.

Julius Lester. *Two Love Stories.* New York: Dial Press, 1972.

Julius Lester is well known for his adult novels and his books for children. He justifies his militant stand against children's books about blacks written by whites by insisting on the importance of literature in bringing to the surface what one knows unconsciously: "It is the black writer's job to tell black people about themselves.... Could you take seriously a history of Jews written by an Arab? The idea is so ridiculous as to be insulting." In an exchange of letters on this question, Lester suggests that we "will eventually get . . . to that point in history where whites will be able to accept blackness as a good that has value in and of itself and is not the least bit threatening to them."

Virginia Hamilton. *M.C. Higgins the Great.* New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974.

Virginia Hamilton, whose grandparents took part in the Underground Railroad, has won innumerable prizes for her novels for children. Always centered around the black heritage and her own family history, her stories have subtlety as well as excitement. *M.C. Higgens the Great* has the unusual honor of having won both the National Book Award and the Newberry Medal. Her books are good examples of the standards set by the Council on Interracial Books for Children: "We are asking that Third World people be shown as fully human individuals--and at the same time, that their historical group experience be recognized and treated with honesty. We are asking that cultural differences be portrayed--and, at the same time, that these differences be non-stereotyped. We are asking that oppression and suffering be shown--and at the same time, that minority peoples be depicted not only as suffering but also as resisting."

James Baldwin. *Little Man Little Man.* New York: Dial Press, 1976.

When James Baldwin writes about being a child in Harlem, he writes from his own experience. The son of a Baptist preacher, he himself ran a storefront church when he was in high school. More than any American writer he has focused on what it means to be black in America. In a conversation with Margaret Mead, he notes that life itself is difficult, but that racism in America places an additional burden on blacks that is unjust. This affectionate story of an ordinary kid playing in the street, running errands for his neighbors, cutting his foot on a piece of glass presents a vivid picture of life in Harlem that no publisher would have been willing to publish 20 years earlier.

Vera B. Williams. *Cherries and Cherry Pits.* New York: Greenwillow Books, 1986.

Publishers, authors and readers have come a long way when a story such as this one can be published. In this story a little black girl draws a story about cherries, cherry pits, and cherry trees. She draws many characters, but it's significant that the author--and the publishing company--can imagine her drawing a little white lady. This book is typical of the many well-written and well-illustrated books with black characters that can be found in bookstores and libraries today.