

# FREE WITHIN OURSELVES

The Development of African American  
Children's Literature

RUDINE SIMS BISHOP

HEINEMANN  
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.  
361 Hanover Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912  
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

© 2007 by Rudine Sims Bishop

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

A hardcover edition of *Free within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature* is available from Greenwood Press, an imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc. (ISBN 978-0-313-34093-2)

ISBN-13: 978-0-325-07135-0 (Heinemann paper)

ISBN-10: 0-325-07135-7 (Heinemann paper)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Bishop, Rudine Sims.

Free within ourselves : the development of African American children's literature / Rudine Sims Bishop.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-325-07135-0 (alk. paper)

1. American literature—African American authors—History and criticism. 2. Children's literature, American—History and criticism. 3. African Americans in literature. 4. African American children in literature. 5. African American children—Books and reading. 6. African Americans—Intellectual life. I. Title.

PS153.N5B526 2007

810.9'928208996073—dc22 2007000612

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## CHAPTER 2

# For the Children of the Sun: African American Children's Literature Begins to Bloom

Although the roots of African American children's literature had been established by the end of the nineteenth century, its blossoming unfolded over several more decades. The first twentieth century milestone in African American children's literature was *The Brownies' Book*, a children's magazine published in 1920–1921 by W.E.B. Du Bois, the leading African American intellectual of his day. Although *The Brownies' Book* lasted only a short time, its spirit lived on. At least two of its regular contributors continued to write for children. In the last half of the 1920s, Effie Lee Newsome produced a regular children's page for *The Crisis*, the NAACP magazine edited by Du Bois. Later she published a noteworthy volume of original poetry for young children, which included some of the poems she had published originally in the two magazines. Langston Hughes, the most famous of the Harlem Renaissance writers, contributed a variety of poems and other pieces to *The Brownies' Book* and, beginning in the 1930s, also produced a number of children's books.

Although *The Brownies' Book* was a remarkable development of the period, it was not the only one. Another African American intellectual giant, historian Carter G. Woodson, established his own publishing company and between the late 1920s and the early 1950s published a number of children's books about Black life and Black history, including a few books he wrote himself. The work of these pioneering individuals represents the first steps toward a canon of modern African American children's literature.

### **THE BROWNIES' BOOK**

*The Brownies' Book* emerged out of a number of complex social and political circumstances. By the time it was launched in 1920, W.E.B. Du Bois had assumed the intellectual leadership that had been the province of the very influential and highly respected Black educator Booker T. Washington, who had died in 1915. Washington, who had been born into slavery, had espoused a strategy for advancing the race by postponing open agitation for social equality until Black people lifted themselves up through acquiring training in useful skills and trades and becoming economically self-reliant. Therefore, he promoted and supported vocational and industrial training schools for Blacks, even at the college level. Du Bois strongly

opposed both Washington's social philosophy regarding equal rights and his over-emphasis on vocational and industrial training, particularly in higher education.

Born in 1868 in Massachusetts, Du Bois was a highly educated graduate of Fisk University; he also studied in Germany and in 1895 became the first Black scholar to earn a PhD from Harvard. He was a sociologist, writer, teacher, lifelong advocate for equal rights, and one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization seeded in part by opposition to Washington's accommodationist views. Its founding purposes were to secure equal civil and political rights for all citizens and to end discrimination and violence against African Americans.

When the NAACP was launched in 1909, Du Bois became director of publications and research and thereby editor of its official organ, *The Crisis*. Beginning in October 1911, *The Crisis* had annually published a children's issue, which proved to be the most popular issue each year. In an editorial piece entitled "The True Brownies" in the October 1919 *Crisis*, Du Bois declared that the popularity of the children's number was fitting because "we are and must be interested in our children above all else, if we love our race and humanity" (Du Bois 1919, 285). He was concerned that the "kiddies," influenced by monthly reports in *The Crisis* of race riots and lynchings, might be learning hatred rather than activism. Between 1900 and 1919, 1360 Black people were lynched; 76 in 1919 alone (Linder 2000). Du Bois had received a letter from a twelve-year-old stating that she hated "the white man as much as he hates me and probably more." Du Bois was appalled, but he understood well the dilemma that Black parents faced in trying to raise their children in a racialized society. "To educate them in human hatred is more disastrous to them than to the hated. To seek to raise them in ignorance of their racial identity and peculiar situation is inadvisable—impossible" (Du Bois 1919, 285). His alternative was to launch "a little magazine for children—for all children, but especially for *ours*, 'the Children of the Sun'" (286). It was to be published independently, but in cooperation with *The Crisis*, by Du Bois and Augustus Dill, who was the business manager for both publications.

If the founding of the NAACP was partly the result of impatience with Washington's social philosophy, *The Brownies' Book* was partly a reflection of Du Bois's contrasting vision of the ideal education for Black people. Du Bois resolutely demanded excellence in education for Black children, including a strong foundation in reading, writing, and especially thinking. He also encouraged the teaching of the humanities and sciences and believed that education for Black children should cultivate a spirit of sacrifice and aspirations to a life of service. He viewed education as a process of teaching certain values that are central to the development of character, such as moderation, courtesy, endurance, and a love of beauty (Aptheker 1973, x–xi).

In terms of higher education, at this point in his life Du Bois was also espousing his own strategy for elevating "the race." Unlike Washington, Du Bois did not believe that the masses of Black people could lift themselves by their own bootstraps, so to speak. He thought that advancement would come through the efforts of a cadre of liberally educated "exceptional men," the most able 10 percent of young Blacks, which he referred to as the Talented Tenth. Armed with an excellent education, they would in turn serve Black people as "race leaders," thereby taking the leadership of the national Black community out of the hands of Whites, whom Du Bois did not always trust to act in Blacks' best interests (Du Bois 1968, 236). By encouraging its readers to pursue the ideals of a broad and liberal education, Du Bois used *The Brownies' Book* to promote the development of future members of the Talented Tenth.

## THE NECESSITY FOR *THE BROWNIES' BOOK*

A magazine with a mission, *The Brownies' Book* was a prime example of literature as social action. It was advertised in the October 1919 *Crisis* as follows:

It will be a thing of Joy and Beauty, dealing in Happiness, Laughter and Emulation, and designed especially for Kiddies from Six to Sixteen.

It will seek to teach Universal Love and Brotherhood for all little folk, black and brown and yellow and white. (Du Bois 1919, 286)

Although its primary audience was defined as “the children of the sun,” in reaching out to all children, Du Bois prefigured the move toward multiculturalism in children’s literature that would come decades later. In any case, *The Brownies' Book* was not intended merely as a pleasant diversion. In keeping with his educational philosophy and his concern for the “peculiar situation” of Black children, Du Bois made clear in the statement of goals for the magazine that *The Brownies' Book* would be guided by an explicit set of values and an underlying ideology:

Defly intertwined with the mission of entertainment will go the endeavor:

- (a) To make colored children realize that being “colored” is a normal, beautiful thing.
- (b) To make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race.
- (c) To make them know that other colored children have grown into beautiful, useful and famous persons.
- (d) To teach them delicately a code of honor and action in their relations with white children.
- (e) To turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition and love of their homes and companions.
- (f) To point out the best amusements and joys and worth-while things of life.
- (g) To inspire them to prepare for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice. (Du Bois 1919, 286)

To build a magazine on the perceived need—among others—for Black children to recognize themselves as normal, to learn about Black history, and to recognize their own potential was to indict both the sociopolitical environment and the instructional and literary texts available to children of the time. Although by 1920 English language children’s literature had made great strides toward literary artistry and enjoyment, and away from the moralizing and piety that marked so many children’s books of prior centuries, realistic Black American characters were mostly absent. England was experiencing a “golden age” with the flourishing of fantasy and fairy tales and fictional classics that were read on both sides of the Atlantic, such as *The Wind in the Willows* (Grahame 1908), *Peter Pan* (Barrie 1906/1980), and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (Potter 1903). In the United States, although well-known and long-lasting books such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum 1900) and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (Wiggin 1903) had appeared at the turn of the century, children’s book publishing as a distinct enterprise of the major publishers was just beginning to flourish.

The first mainstream publishing house to establish an independent children’s department, Macmillan, did so in 1919, the year before *The Brownies' Book* was launched. Fewer than 500 new children’s books were published in the United States in 1920 (Huck et al. 2001, 101), and it is safe to assume that very few, if any, were created by Black writers or featured realistic Black characters.

A Black presence, however, had been a part of establishment children’s books and magazines, presumably aimed at a white audience, for decades. For the most part,

Blacks in those early materials were presented as plantation stereotypes, objects of ridicule or laughter, or faithful and comical servants to White children and their families. Even *St. Nicholas Magazine*, the premier children's magazine of its time, engaged in such stereotypes. It had been established in 1873 and in its pages had appeared the work of an impressive array of famous White authors, including Louisa May Alcott, William Cullen Bryant, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Lucretia Hale, Joel Chandler Harris, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Mark Twain. In 1920 it was still considered the nation's finest literary magazine for children. *St. Nicholas* may well have provided a model of a successful children's magazine in terms of its format and features, but if Du Bois had searched its pages the year before he published *The Brownies' Book*, he would have found ample motivation to develop a magazine with more uplifting content for and about the children of the sun.

Regarding Black children, the most striking feature of *St. Nicholas* is the veil of invisibility it confers on them and their lives. No pictures of "normal" Black children appear in any of the issues for that year except for one Black child who appears in a decoration representing children of various ethnicities or nationalities at the top of a puzzle page in the January 1919 issue (287). The one Black character who appears in the 1919 issues is Mammy in Chapter 6 of a serialized story called "Blue Magic," by Edith Ballinger Price. Mammy, who is the nurse to a young White boy cruising on a yacht on the Nile, speaks in the exaggerated dialect typically employed by White writers to show the ignorance and lack of intelligence of Black characters: "Lawdy, Lawdy! One of dem heathen men! Hyah, you! git out ob here! Did n' I allus says dis was a onnatchel lan'? I ain' nebbah seen such a onnatchel lan—nebbah! Oh, Massa Fen! honey chile, doan' let dat air E-gypshun critter tech you!" (July 1919, 246). The illustration shows Mammy as an overweight, dark-skinned woman wearing a white ruffled cap and a long white apron over an even longer plaid dress. It is telling that the only active Black character in a year's worth of issues is an adult whose function as a servant to a child "master" is taken for granted and whose function as a character is to provide comic relief. To the extent that *St. Nicholas* was typical, it indicates not only the dearth of suitable material connected to the lives of Black children, but also the persistent presence of stereotyped images of Blacks and assumptions of the natural superiority of whites that lingered in one form or another in children's literature through at least the first five or so decades of the twentieth century.

While *The Brownies' Book* functioned to lift the veil of invisibility and counteract false images and stereotypes in children's books and magazines, it also had an active agenda related to the development of Black children and what was commonly referred to as "the race," meaning a national Black cultural community. Implicit in its set of goals is the intention to foster self-esteem and race pride by offering young Black readers information about exemplary Black children, Black heroes, and Black achievements. The objectives also tacitly acknowledge a need to help Black children live successfully in a social atmosphere poisoned by racism. Implicit as well is a desire to direct Black child readers toward an education that would introduce them to "the worth-while things of life" and equip them for service and leadership. In setting out these aims, Du Bois identified Black children as a distinctive readership with unique needs brought on by the realities of growing up Black in the United States of the early twentieth century.

Du Bois saw no contradiction in his intent to interweave teaching and entertainment. The goals of *The Brownies' Book* reflect his attitude toward the functions of art/beauty and the relationship between beauty and truth. Du Bois (1995) saw

art/beauty as inextricably tied to truth and goodness and rejected the notion of art for art's sake. "I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with beauty to set the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect beauty sits above truth and right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and unseparable" (511). Indeed, Du Bois goes on to declare:

Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. (514)

*The Brownies' Book*, consequently, is an example of art used in the service of social change, truth and goodness, aimed at setting the children of the sun on the path to love, enjoyment, and leadership.

### **CONTENTS OF *THE BROWNIES' BOOK***

Much of the credit for carrying out the vision that Du Bois set forth for *The Brownies' Book* belongs to Jessie Fauset, who was its literary editor and, for the second year, managing editor. An apt choice, Fauset was herself a well-educated member of the Talented Tenth, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Cornell, with a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania. A writer who later published four novels, she had also studied at the Sorbonne and spoke fluent French. She is frequently cited as one of the important contributors to the Harlem Renaissance, both as an author and as a mentor to the young writers whose work she published in *The Crisis*. In addition to acquiring and supporting the work of the contributors to *The Brownies' Book*, Fauset personally contributed many of the pieces—poems, biographies, stories—that were published in the magazine.

Each issue of the magazine, which measured 8 × 11 inches, was about thirty-two pages long and contained poems, stories, biographical sketches, illustrations, photographs, and a number of featured columns. Month by month, Fauset and Du Bois provided Black children with a view of themselves and of Black people in general, as well as a perspective on the nation and the world, that was largely unavailable in any other publication addressed to young people. The dedicatory verse in the first issue, written by Fauset, indicates that the magazine was indeed intended to fill a void:

To children who with eager look  
Scanned vainly library shelf and nook  
For History or Song or Story  
That told of Colored People's glory  
We dedicate *The Brownies' Book*. (January 1920, 32)

This dearth of literature about "Colored People" was, even decades later, still one of the motivations for the creation of African American children's literature.

#### **"The Judge": Wisdom from an Elder**

"The Judge" was one of two columns in which the editors created a persona through which to address the readers directly. The column is usually ascribed to

Jessie Fauset, although Harris (1986, 141) noted that there is some argument about whether Fauset was actually the author. In keeping with Du Bois's and Fauset's views on education as a process of teaching values, "The Judge" was unabashedly didactic and made clear from the beginning that he would offer advice on the conduct of life, and that he expected the children to make a difference in the future:

I Am the Judge. I am very, very old. I know all things, except a few, and I have been appointed by the King to sit in the Court of Children and tell them the Law and listen to what they have to say. The Law is old and musty and needs sadly to be changed. In time the children will change it; but now it is the law. . . . It is my business—I, the Judge—to say each month a little lecture to Billikins, Billie and William, *and* their sisters . . . and also to listen very patiently while the *children* speak to me and to the world. (January 1920, 12) [italics in original]

In the "little lectures," "The Judge" explicitly focused on the behaviors and attitudes that needed to be developed if the children were to become the kind of adults who would change "the law," in other words to become race leaders. The column consisted of conversations between the Judge, the above-named children, who are six, ten, and fifteen, respectively, and William's older sister, Wilhelmina, who is sixteen. The children's ages, from six to sixteen, correspond to the ages of the children to whom *The Brownies' Book* was directed, and across the twenty-four issues, the conversations addressed some of the differing developmental needs and characteristics of children from early childhood to adolescence.

The October 1920 number provides an example of the tone of the Judge's voice. In this conversation, little Billikins is overjoyed because he is going to school. The older children sneer at his enthusiasm and express their displeasure at the "stupid business of going to school." The Judge speaks: "You know," he continues meditatively, stroking his wig, "the value of education consists not in what you take in but in what it brings out of you. If a person has to study hard to get his lessons and does it, he develops will power, concentration and determination, and these are the qualities which he carries out into life with him. That's what education is going to do for you, isn't it, Billikins?" (306).

The general thrust of the "The Judge" was to socialize, to provide instruction in the conduct of life for a cultured Black individual (Harris 1986, 139). Conversations grew out of life situations and centered on the kinds of behaviors, attitudes, and values that would be expected of a refined intelligent Black child or adolescent, such as appropriate manners and deportment, recognition of their parents' responsibilities and respect for their parents' decisions, participation in worthwhile recreational activities, selection of suitable reading matter, use of Standard English grammar, and appropriate ways to dress. In addition, "The Judge" also sought to move the young people toward becoming active and informed citizens, with knowledge about and positive attitudes toward Africa and people of African descent. Children who heeded the Judge's advice would become not only refined, but also knowledgeable about the world and about themselves as members of families, citizens of a democratic society, and African Americans with an obligation to make a positive difference in their world.

#### **"As the Crow Flies": News of the World**

While Fauset, in the guise of the Judge, offered wisdom, Du Bois cast himself as the Crow and offered world news in a column called "As the Crow Flies." If the Judge sought to socialize, the Crow aimed to politicize. The Crow, "black and O



so beautiful” (January 1920, 23) flew over the earth and gathered news for the Brownies. Generally, the Crow reported first on news from around the world and then on what he found when he returned back home to the United States. The Crow emphasized news that was particularly relevant to people of color in the nation and in the world and at the same time broadened the horizons of his readers by bringing them news of global importance generally. In the February 1920 issue, for instance, the Crow reported: “Norway has adopted the prohibition of strong alcoholic liquors, by a vote of 428, 455” (63) and “Many of the most beautiful art treasures of Austria will be sold to obtain food for the starving.” In the second part of the same column, when he returned to the United States the Crow reported:

America has not ratified the Peace Treaty. The Senate, led by the stubborn Senator Lodge, does not want to sign the treaty unless the responsibilities of the United States in the new League of Nations are made very much smaller. The President, also stubborn, wants the treaty signed just as it stands. Most folk would like a compromise. (63–64)

As is evident, the Crow did not simply “report the facts.” His political perspective was reflected in his selection of items and his interpretations of the news. “Colored” children growing up in a nation where lynching Black people was a regular occurrence needed to understand the larger world context in which the United States was operating. The Crow also did not hesitate to criticize directly the actions of the U.S. government. Du Bois saw constructive criticism not only as a right, but as part of the responsibility of citizenship: “There is no place like Home—none, none so good, none so bad: good because it belongs to Us; bad, because it is Ours to make better and this means Work and Eye-sight” (October 1920, 318, 320). In the February 1920 issue, for example, he criticized the treatment of Mexico:

Some folk are making continued effort to embroil Mexico and the United States in war. Mexico is a poor, struggling country, which the United States has grievously wronged in the past and deprived of territory. Today, many Americans own vast property there,—in oil, minerals, land, etc.—and they want to control the policy of Mexico, so as to make lots of money. (64)

The Crow also was interested in having the children of the sun make connections between themselves and the world’s other people of color and between their struggles at home and those of oppressed people everywhere. Aptheker (1980) notes that, throughout the twenty-four Crow columns, Du Bois paid particular attention to women’s rights; to labor issues; to the independence struggles of countries such as India, Egypt, and Ireland; and to the emergent Soviet Union. In his national news, the Crow also paid special attention to news about Black people and their activities and events that would be particularly relevant to them. In keeping with the magazine’s expressed intention to provide information about the achievements of Black people, some of those items focused on accomplishments such as the opening of a Black hotel in Washington, D.C., and on commemorations of important achievers, such as Frederick Douglass.

Each international and national section of the column is introduced with a paragraph demonstrating the Crow’s penchant for poetic language. The August 1920 column, for example, begins: “Midsummer! Dark green forests bow to light green waters; blue skies kiss golden suns; great sheets of rain swirl on brown and black lands. I love summer. My plumage is dead black and sleek and the whirr of my wide

wings is heard from Minnesota to Georgia as I fly and peer and cry and scream” (234). This artistic touch supports Du Bois’s claim to be “one who seeks with beauty to set the world right.” The main purpose of the column, however, was to politicize readers of *The Brownies’ Book* and to prepare them to be astute and socially progressive citizens of the nation and of the world.

**Celebrating the Children: “Little People of the Month,”  
“Some Little Friends of Ours”**

Although the entire *The Brownies’ Book* magazine tacitly fostered self-esteem and race pride, “The Little People of the Month” column addressed that goal directly. This column, accompanied by photographs, celebrated the academic and creative achievements of Black children and youth who were themselves growing into beautiful and useful, if not necessarily famous, persons. For example, the March 1920 issue noted that “Leta B. Lewis is an ‘A’ pupil, in both conduct and proficiency. She’s in the fifth term grammar school, at Omaha, Neb. During her entire school course, she has received only one ‘B’” (20). The September 1920 issue celebrates an artist who is particularly noteworthy: “It’s so wonderful to be an artist, and make pictures of beautiful flowers and trees and oceans and skies. . . . Well, at Boston, Mass., there’s a Brownie, 14 years of age, who has won her second scholarship at the Museum of Fine Arts. Her name is Lois M. Jones, and she’s an honor student of the High School of Practical Arts at Boston” (284). Lois Mailou Jones went on to become an acclaimed artist, professor at Howard University, and an illustrator of children’s books.

Other “Brownies” were lauded for such accomplishments as winning oratorical contests, winning essay contests, having perfect school attendance, and making contributions to the welfare of the community. Looking back from the beginning of the twenty-first century, some of these achievements may appear rather ordinary, but they often were hard-won in the world of 1920. They most certainly ran counter to the prevailing images of Black children and their families in the books and other media of the day. That these Black children were doing so well in these endeavors was a demonstration of the intellectual potential of Black children. That their achievements were highlighted was an indication of the kinds of behaviors Black adults valued as well as an inspiration for other children.

Both July issues of *The Brownies’ Book* were called Education Issues and supplanting the “Little People of the Month” column were features called “Graduates of 1920” and “Brownie Graduates.” These sections were filled with photographs and brief profiles of African American high school graduates as well as reports of the numbers of such high school graduates nationally. It is a testament to the state of education for Black people that, in the early 1920s so few Black children were graduating from high school, relatively speaking, that the editors could write to “all high schools having colored graduates” (July 1921, 194) and either list the names of such graduates or name the schools across the nation from which Blacks were graduating and the numbers of Blacks graduating from each school. In 1920, there were “121 graduates from mixed high schools, 865 graduates from colored high schools, and 2029 graduates from colored normal schools—or a total of 3015 Brownie graduates, of each one of whom we are proud” (210). Among the graduates pictured in the July 1920 issue is one Langston Hughes, of Central High School in Cleveland, who would become one of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance and one of the most important American literary figures of the century.

Another feature, titled “Some Little Friends of Ours” or some variation of that theme, offered photographs of Black children. Usually posed and apparently taken by professional photographers, the children were shown at their very best—well dressed, hair neatly styled. These photographs, sent by parents at the invitation of the editors, apparently were intended to celebrate the beauty and diversity to be found among Black children. In so doing, the editors provided a much-needed refutation of the images of Black children and Black people that were prevalent in the literature and popular culture of the day.

### **Voices of Readers: “The Jury” and the “Grown-ups’ Corner”**

The voices of readers were featured in the letters-to-the-editor column called “The Jury.” Many of their letters indicate that Fauset was right in inferring that “colored” children were hungry for material about “Colored People’s glory.” The letters from “The Jury” also indicated that Black children were very much aware of racial discrimination and the racist environment in which they were living and looked to *The Brownies’ Book* for ammunition to counter racist views of themselves and their people. George Max Simpson, of Toronto, wrote in the March 1920, issue: “Could you take time to suggest a small library for me? . . . I want to know a great deal about colored people. I think when I finish school I shall go to Africa and work there in some way. If I decide to do this I ought to know a great deal about our people and all the places where they live, all over the world, don’t you think so?” (83).

“The Jury” also provided opportunities for children to relate their own accomplishments. In the July 1920 issue, there is a long letter from James Alpheus Butler Jr. of Tampa, Florida. He describes himself:

I am a colored boy, brownskinned and proud of it. I am 14 years old. My home is now in Tampa, but at present I am a second year student at the Florida A. & M. College. My father is a doctor and my mother a music teacher. I play four musical instruments: the violin, piano, clarinet and ’cello, but I like the violin best of all. I started playing the violin when I was six years old. Long ago I completed the Keyser violin method and have subsequently studied awhile in New York and also under a very strict German professor. I’ve been appearing in public with my violin ever since I can remember. (215)

His musical talents notwithstanding, Butler wants to be a writer, and the October 1920 and December 1921 issues of *The Brownies’ Book* contain well-written realistic stories by this precocious teenager, undoubtedly part of the Talented Tenth. Other young readers also became contributors of poems, pictures, and stories, including, as we shall see, Langston Hughes.

The “Grown-ups’ Corner” provided a forum for parents and other adult subscribers to express their support or criticisms of the magazine and to request the kinds of material they wanted to see. Mainly, the letters are laudatory and express gratitude for the magazine and its contents, which apparently filled gaps in typical school curricula and was a source of pride and inspiration for parents and children alike.

### ***The Brownies’ Book* as Literature**

Although *The Brownie’s Book* was expressly intended to instill certain values and attitudes, it was at the same time a literary endeavor. It included nonfiction, realistic and fantasy stories, folktales, biography, plays, and poems that would compare

favorably to the typical children's literature of its day. In part because of Du Bois's and Fauset's influence as editors of *The Crisis*, they were able to draw from an impressive group of participants in the Harlem Renaissance. Some of the best and best-known Black writers of the day—James Weldon Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Arthur Huff Fauset (Jessie Fauset's half brother), Nella Larsen Imes, and Langston Hughes—contributed to *The Brownies' Book*. Jessie Redmon Fauset and Du Bois both contributed pieces under their own names, as did Du Bois's daughter Yolande. Alongside material from this prestigious group, Fauset published stories, poems, and other works written by readers, such as the aforementioned James Alpheus Butler and a teenager named Pocohantas Foster.

A number of stories and plays in *The Brownies' Book* incorporate fantasy elements—fairies, elves, talking animals, dragons, magic, transformations, and the like. Often these stories and plays make their points very clear, and their morals reflect the values espoused by the editors. In the October 1921 issue, for example, there is a play called "The Dragon's Tooth" by Willis Richardson. The child characters, guided by the king's soothsayer, retrieve the secret of the future of good in the world, which is written on the tooth of an expired dragon. The secret, it turns out, "depends upon the growth of Love and Brotherhood. Liberty, Equality and Fraternity must rule the world in place of Inequality, Envy, and Hate." When asked how this future can be realized, the Soothsayer replies: "Children such as you must bring this good about. It must grow in your hearts until you are men and women, and as you grow you must spread the truth abroad" (278–279). The "lesson" of the play clearly echoes Du Bois's explicit intention to teach "Universal Love and Brotherhood" and his intention to inspire children to a life of service.

The magazine also served as a forum for original stories by some of its readers, who apparently also clearly understood its objectives. Pocohantas Foster, a reader who had written to the "Jury" column, for example, wrote a story promoting pride of identity. In "A Prize Winner," King Earth offers a prize to the "race" that had made the greatest advance. The four existing races were Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. Spring, Fall, and Winter, each represented by a queen, brought rich gifts symbolizing the progress of their races. Summer, however, was represented by "a little brown child about 10 years old" and "hosts of little barefoot brown children with sleeves rolled up and bare heads" and carrying no gifts but various farm implements. King Earth awards the prize to the little Queen of Summer because she had "learned the one thing that is greater than all,—the Spirit of Service." Foster ends her story this way: "Thus you see that the first prize ever given was won by a little brown child and little brown children have been winning prizes ever since that day" (August 1920, 244).

Realistic stories in the magazine provided a picture of the everyday lives of Black people in the early 1920s—mainly middle class, but from other socioeconomic strata as well. A story, for example, by James Alpheus Butler, the reader whose letter had been published in the July issue, showed his understanding of the idea that material wealth does not determine character, and that among Blacks the boundaries between socioeconomic classes should not constitute obstacles to friendship. In "An Elusive Idea," Marcus Cornelius Smith, a middle-class aspiring writer (not unlike James Alpheus Butler), meets and befriends "ragged and barefooted" 'Lias, who is struggling to help his mother make ends meet and has had his money stolen by a bully. Over an afternoon of fishing, Marcus and 'Lias become friends. All ends well when 'Lias forces the bully to return his money, and Marcus uses 'Lias as inspiration for a story that gets published (October 1920). Class differences

between the characters are clearly marked, most obviously by the differences in their dialects: Marcus is a speaker of Standard English, 'Lias speaks a less-prestigious variety. Although Marcus seems a bit patronizing in his views of 'Lias, he is able to see beyond the surface to 'Lias's quick intelligence, his determination, his sense of duty, and his courage in facing and triumphing over the bully. Although the "lessons to be learned" from this story are fairly obvious, it is also a fairly well crafted tale, with its story-within-a-story frame and enough action to hold the attention of its readers.

*The Brownies' Book* also published a number of folk tales across its twenty-four issues. Most of the stories were either African in origin or could be traced to people of African descent. Prominent among them were animal tales such as the African American Brer Rabbit stories, but a variety of other kinds of stories was also included, such as an Annancy story from the West Indies and a story from the Cape Verde Islands, "Wolf and His Nephew." The folk stories, for the most part, were generally directed toward the goal of entertainment and, aside from the emphasis on valuing stories related to Africa and the African diaspora, were not overtly didactic.

*The Brownie's Book* contained numerous poems, produced by various writers, some of whom were or would become famous, such as Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Georgia Douglass Johnson. Probably only a few of the poems, such as Hughes's "April Rain Song," (April 1921, 111) have passed the proverbial "test of time." Not unlike other poetry and verse for children produced at the time, *The Brownies' Book* poems frequently focused on nature and on topics thought to be of interest to children, such as everyday child activities. C. Lesley Frazier published this verse in the June 1921 issue:

Come on in, the water's fine,  
Put away your fishing line,  
Hang your pants up next to mine—  
Come on in! (173)

Some poems dealt with the holidays that occurred during the month of publication. Some were addressed to Brownie children, as in "Slumber Song," by Alpha Angela Bratton (November 1921, 315):

Close those eyes where points of light  
Shine like stars through the velvet night,  
Brownie Boy.

A goodly portion of the poems also addressed topics such as race pride and the beauty of Black children. Some were sheer nonsense, indicating that Fauset did not forget the declared intention of the magazine to deal in happiness and laughter. One of the most frequently published of *The Brownies' Book* poets, Mary Effie Lee (Newsome), would go on to produce a book of children's poetry a couple of decades after the demise of the magazine.

True to its goal of making "colored" children "familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race," *The Brownies' Book* introduced its readers to "colored" achievers from a variety of fields through numerous biographical sketches. Subjects included Harriet Tubman, Katy Ferguson, Crispus Attucks, Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Banneker, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Alexander Pushkin, and

Denmark Vesey. These pieces usually made clear those aspects of the person's life that were, in the view of the author, worthy of emulation. A biographical sketch of Paul Cuffee, for example, honors him not only for his achievements as a sailor, but also for his service to his people. It also makes clear the desirability of maintaining connections with Africa.

After Cuffee had thus gratified the wish of his heart,—the desire to ride the seas,—he bent every effort toward satisfying his other ruling passion,—that is, his ambition to help his fellowman. The people in whom he was most deeply interested lived in two widely separated lands,—in Massachusetts and in Africa. (February 1920, 38)

Almost all the subjects were Black men and women who had achieved some degree of fame, but as a general rule, whether the subjects were White or Black, male or female, well known or little known, they were committed to service, to helping or advancing the race. They were exemplars of the “broad spirit of sacrifice” with which *The Brownies' Book* sought to imbue its readers.

The magazine also included a number of other features, both to amuse and to provide information. “Playtime” included games, some of which are challenging word or math games, dances, and nursery rhymes with actions, songs, and puzzles. Frequently, the games had an international focus, such as the Mexican games “arranged” by Langston Hughes in the January 1921 issue. An international perspective suffused the magazine, with places such as the Caribbean, Africa, and Scandinavia represented in story, song, games, or expository material. Several pieces were translated from Spanish or French. Other features of *The Brownies' Book* included information on science, geography, and other such topics of general knowledge. It also included a few works by Robert Louis Stevenson and other non-Black writers.

Even a cursory look through the issues of *The Brownie's Book* reveals that presenting nonstereotyped visual images was an important aspect of the magazine. Photographs of attractive Black children, youth, and adults abound, reflecting a cross section of African American physical features (e.g., skin coloring, hair texture). They often showed Black people engaged in what might today seem ordinary activities: at the library, as members of a Boy Scout troop; taking part in activities at Black colleges; participating in a protest parade; participating in scouting. Given the goals of the magazine, however, it is likely that the photographs were carefully chosen to be exemplary. The cover art and the illustrations throughout *The Brownies' Book* were drawn by some of the young Black artists whose work became highly respected over the next decade, most notably Laura Wheeler, Marcellus Hawkins, and Hilda Wilkinson. Their depictions of Black people reflected warm affection and an apparent appreciation for the beauty of their subjects. Through the art and the photographs, Du Bois and Fauset sought to offer the Brownies a public view of themselves as normal, attractive, and appealing people, contrary to the prevailing images of the day.

In her comprehensive study and analysis of *The Brownies' Book*, Harris (1986, 207) identified eight themes that were developed in the fiction and poetry published in the magazine. These themes emphasized activism and service, character values, and pride in race and culture. They were clearly connected to the expressed goals of the magazine, and the writers, in tailoring their work to fit those goals, sometimes appeared to make literary considerations secondary. As a consequence, the quality of the literature was uneven, but a substantial portion

of the selections would likely have been very appealing to the presumed primary audience.

In addition to the explicitly expressed thematic emphases, a number of sub-themes were also developed within the magazine, many of which remain significant in contemporary African American children's literature. For example, even though the importance of family is not explicitly stated as one of the values the magazine sought to inculcate, it is, not surprisingly, an important theme in the stories, especially in the sense that parents are held up as a source of wisdom that should be obeyed. Internal, in-group attitudes toward skin color are broached in a number of stories, bringing to light—sometimes in tacit agreement with, sometimes in opposition to—the popular association between beauty and light skin and straight hair. The issue of class and attitudes toward Black people with less money and less formal education than middle-class protagonists is also raised, usually upholding the idea that character is more important than economic status. In the fiction and poetry, as well as the nonfiction, the columns, and the information pieces, self-pride and pride in identity are emphasized through such devices as advocating “colored dolls” for Brownie children. The similarity that will be seen between the thematic emphases in contemporary African American literature and those of *The Brownies' Book* may be attributed not to a conscious imitation of the latter, but to the perception among writers a couple of generations later that many of the social and literary conditions that had spurred the creation of *The Brownies' Book*—for example, the dearth of books about Black children, the distortion and omission of Black history and Black achievement from school curricula, the inaccurate or caricatured visual or literary images of Black people—had changed but little since the 1920s.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF *THE BROWNIES' BOOK***

In light of the prevailing social and political climate, Du Bois and his associates had set about to create a new literature and a new image of and for the Black child. Thus, the twenty-four issues of *The Brownies' Book* collectively constitute a literary and artistic “cultural family album” for the children of the sun. It affirmed them as “normal and beautiful” children in a literary world that most often either ignored their existence or offered them portraits of themselves mainly as plantation pickaninnies. It connected them with the larger national and international Black community and introduced them to Black people—young and old, living and dead—whose achievements were worth noting and worth emulating. Recognizing its dual audience of parent and child, it provided opportunities for parents to participate in the shaping of the magazine and offered some tacit advice about how to deal with the responsibilities of parenting. It also provided a forum for the children of the sun to express their own views and reflect on their own lives. It was as well a forum in which some of the best African American writers and artists of the day participated in the creation of a remarkable literary milestone in the history of African American children's literature.

The final issue of *The Brownies' Book* was published in December 1921. For the two years of its existence, it had sought to educate, politicize, socialize, enculturate, and at the same time entertain its readers. In conceiving and creating *The Brownies' Book*, Du Bois and his associates had called for a literature that would be “adapted to colored children, and indeed to all children who live in a world of varied races” (December 1921, 354). Explicit in the stated objectives of the magazine,

# Our Little Friends



*The Brownies' Book* and Eloise Greenfield.

and implicit in the magazine's content, was the proposition that literature "adapted to colored children" was to be a literature with a mission, literature as social action. It aimed to counter the effects of racism on Black children and their self-image; to foster race pride; to counter prevailing negative images and stereotypes of Black people, to promote certain positive values and behaviors; and to inspire a sense of responsibility to the race as a whole. In a sense, like the nineteenth century writings addressed to Black children in secular and religious periodicals, *The Brownies' Book* can be viewed as a vehicle for racial uplift. The significance of *The Brownies' Book* was that it affirmed the need for a distinctive African American children's literature, provided a model of what such a body of literature might be like, and articulated through its expressed mission an ideological stance that constituted a foundation on which such a literature could be built.

## CARRYING ON THE TRADITION: TWO LEGACIES OF *THE BROWNIES BOOK*

*The Brownies' Book* lasted for only two years and for twenty-four issues. In their "Valedictory," published in the December 1921 issue, Du Bois and Dill announced that they were discontinuing the magazine for financial reasons. They had as many



as 3500 subscribers but needed at least 15,000 to keep up with their expenses. They were \$3000 in debt and were not optimistic that they could generate enough subscriptions soon enough to continue publishing (354). The main pool of prospective subscribers—educated, middle-class Blacks—was still relatively small in the United States of 1921, and it would be nearly half a century more before an African American children’s literature would fully blossom into a distinctive feature of the children’s literature landscape. *The Brownies’ Book* died about the time that the Harlem Renaissance was born, but even though the Renaissance produced an outpouring of African American literature, very little of that literature was directed to children. At least two regular *Brownies’ Book* contributors, however, continued to advance the burgeoning field of African American children’s literature after its demise: Mary Effie Lee Newsome and Langston Hughes. The latter became famous; the former has been nearly forgotten.

### MARY EFFIE LEE/EFFIE LEE NEWSOME

Mary Effie Lee (later Effie Lee Newsome) was, if not the first, certainly one of the first twentieth century African American women to devote the bulk of her literary career to writing for children. Mainly a poet, but something of a naturalist as well, she contributed several poems and one nature study to *The Brownies’ Book* over the two years of its existence. Born in 1885, Lee was the daughter of Benjamin Franklin Lee, the A.M.E. bishop who succeeded Daniel Alexander Payne as president of Wilberforce University and who was editor of *The Christian Recorder* from 1884 to 1892. She married an A.M.E. bishop, and although she spent some time in Birmingham, Alabama, much of her adult life was spent in Wilberforce, Ohio. Lee was a keen observer of the natural landscape around her. She particularly loved birds, and the nature study she published in *The Brownies’ Book* was on the topic “Birds at My Door” (April 1920, 105).

Her poems also were most often about nature, although some were devoted to celebrating children and their everyday lives and activities. For example, in the May 1920 issue of *The Brownies’ Book*, she published “Mount Ice Cream,” a verse in the voice of a small child:

Mumsie, I had the sweetest dream!  
I fought I lived on Mount Ice Cream,  
And wif a silver spoon for shovel,  
I ’stroyed that mountain without trouble! (253)

Beginning in March 1925, using the pen name Effie Lee Newsome, she wrote “The Little Page” for *The Crisis*, which was still under the editorship of W.E.B. Du Bois. The column appeared regularly, although not in every issue, until June 1929. It was an attempt to continue to address and engage the audience that had been served by *The Brownies’ Book*, and it subtly carried on some of the ideals of that publication. Newsome’s column primarily featured her original poems and a “Calendar Chat,” which was frequently accompanied by her own pen-and-ink illustrations. The calendar chats were mainly written nature sketches, usually featuring a plant, animal, insect, or bird that might be associated with the month or the season of publication. Frequently, she recalled a childhood experience or described some of the flora and fauna in and around her home in Wilberforce. The sketches were generally intended to be informative as well as entertaining,



*The Brownies' Book* and Eloise Greenfield.

including not only material about nature, but also references to literature, myth, and history, evidence of her liberal educational background. She had studied at Wilberforce, Oberlin, and the University of Pennsylvania. She often made a special effort to allude to the works of people of color, alongside allusions to “classic” Western literature and art. For example, the November 1926 “Calendar Chat” reads in part:

Dunbar in his poem “Sympathy” said that he could imagine what must be the feeling of the caged bird as he listens to the free birds singing about him, taunting in their boundless liberty.

You have read so much of the great Italian painter Da Vinci. You have seen many prints from his *Mona Lisa*, or *La Gioconda*, as the mysteriously-smiling lady is sometimes called. . . . But have you remembered that this same Da Vinci who painted *Mona Lisa*, *The Last Supper*, *Madonna of the Rocks*—this same Da Vinci, who was a sculptor, a military engineer, a writer of masks and pageants, the musician who took his home-manufactured silver harp to the court of Milan, mathematician, mineralogist—what not—this same imposing courtier in his long rose-colored robe used to buy caged birds whenever he was able and set them free, and watch them with great joy flying into the turquoise skies of Italy? I shall write you a rhyme about Da Vinci, so that when you read of his art you will think of his *heart*. [italics in original] (25)

Newsome also included in “The Little Page” some imaginative stories, often featuring Mother Gardner, a matronly figure through whose voice Newsome could inform readers about nature and offer wisdom about life. Many of the stories included personified plants, animals, or seasonal objects such as kites. A few, such as “On the Pelican’s Back” (August 1928, 264), “Jonquil and Goldfish” (April 1927, 50), and “Spider and Amber” (January 1929, 11) offer fable-like lessons about self-esteem, self-pride, and endurance. In their focus on such values, the stories reflected the emphasis on identity and pride emphasized in the stated goals of *The Brownies’ Book*.

Newsome, however, was primarily a poet. Many of her poems focused on nature as well—cardinals, winds, ladybugs, butterflies and the like— but others focused on everyday childhood experiences. A number were about play, and a few were humorous, or nonsensical such as “Old Commodore Quiver,” which would easily amuse contemporary young children:

Old Commodore Quiver  
 Went down to the river  
 Old Commodore Quiver of Gaul.  
 He sailed from the shore,  
 But what he went for  
 He hadn’t a notion at all,  
 No, he hadn’t one notion at all. (*The Crisis* January 1928, 8)

Many of the nature poems from “The Little Page” and those from *The Brownies’ Book* were included in her one book of poetry, *Gladiola Garden*, published in 1940 by Associated Publishers. Not only was Lee/Newsome one of the few African American writers in the 1920s who devoted most of her work to a child audience, she was among the first African American poets to produce a body of original poems primarily for children.

## LANGSTON HUGHES

One of the most important legacies of *The Brownies’ Book* is that in its pages appeared the first nationally published poems of Langston Hughes, the most famous son of the Harlem Renaissance and one of America’s most highly respected poets. When *The Brownies’ Book* was first published in 1920, Hughes was just turning eighteen. His picture and notice of his high school graduation appeared in the July 1920 issue of *The Brownies’ Book*, as did a letter he had written to the editor: “It might interest you to know that I have been elected Class Poet and have also written the Class Song for the graduates. I am, too, the first Negro to hold the position since 1901, when it was held by the son of Charles W. Chesnutt” (July 1920, 206).

Hughes was not only aware of *The Brownies’ Book*, but he was also familiar with the work of its founder and editor. In a 1965 memorial tribute to Du Bois, Hughes (1965, 11) noted: “My earliest memories of written words are those of Du Bois and the Bible. My maternal grandmother in Kansas, the last surviving widow of John Brown’s raid, read to me as a child from both the Bible and *The Crisis*. And one of the first books I read on my own was *The Souls of Black Folk*.” It is no wonder then, that *The Brownies’ Book*, with Du Bois as editor and its policy of encouraging readers to submit material for publication, appealed to the young Hughes as a possible venue for his poems.

In January 1921, two of his poems, "Fairies" and "Winter Sweetness," appeared in *The Brownies' Book*. "Fairies" is a whimsical little musing about the wonder of fairies weaving garments from dream dust and creating wings from the "purple and rose" of memories. "Winter Sweetness," on the other hand, captures in four lines both a charming image of a small house in winter and the accent on the beauty and self-esteem of Black children that was a part of the magazine's reason for being. A snow-covered house is likened to sugar and at the window is a "maple-sugar" child, connecting the brown sweetness of maple sugar to the figurative sweetness of a Black child. The appearance of these two poems preceded by six months the publication, in the June 1921 issue of *The Crisis*, of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," which is frequently cited, even by Hughes himself, as his first nationally published poem (Hughes 1940, 72).

Over the course of the year 1921, Fauset published six more of Hughes's poems in *The Brownies' Book*, including the well-known "April Rain Song." In the same issue in which the first two poems appeared, Hughes "arranged" descriptions of three Mexican games for the "Playtime" section. His experience living in Mexico with his father was also the basis for two nonfiction pieces in later issues, "In a Mexican City" and "Up to the Crater of an Old Volcano." In the July 1921 issue, there was a play, "The Gold Piece." For the November 1921 issue, Hughes contributed a story called "Those Who Have No Turkey," which slyly contrasted the innocent generosity of a country child to the uptight concern with middle-class propriety of the aunt with whom she spends Thanksgiving. Thus, *The Brownies' Book* was an important outlet for the early work, in various genres, of the talented poet, essayist, playwright, novelist, and short-story writer who would become the most prolific writer of the Harlem Renaissance and one of America's foremost literary artists.

By the time his first book for children appeared, Hughes was an established literary presence and had already published four books of poems and a novel. His poems had also been published in a number of magazines, including both the most influential Black magazines of the day and important magazines with a largely White readership. Among the readers of his poems were a White librarian, Effie Lee Power, and her youthful patrons at the Cleveland Public Library. In 1931, Power, the library's director of work with children, requested that Hughes compile a selection of his poems that would be suitable for young people (Rampersad 1986, 197). Hughes gathered 59 poems, which were published the following year by Knopf under the title *The Dream Keeper* (Hughes 1932). It was a landmark publication of African American poetry for children, one of the first children's books by an African American writer to be published by one of the major New York publishers.

### ***The Dream Keeper***

Because of its significance as a landmark, because it set a new standard for artistry in African American literature for young people, and because a number of the poems in the book have become classic, it is informative to examine the contents of *The Dream Keeper*. It was divided into five sections, which collectively exemplify the range of Hughes's early poetry. The first section, "The Dream Keeper," contains the poems that seem most directly addressed to children or to speak in a voice closest to that of a child. Included here are four poems that were composed for a child audience since they were first published in *The Brownies' Book*: "Fairies," "Winter Sweetness," "Autumn Thought," and "April Rain Song." With the possible exception of the reference to a "maple sugar child" in "Winter Sweetness,"

the poems in this section are not overtly race conscious but are about such topics as a winter moon, seasons, hopes, and dreams. This section includes three of the best-known and most often anthologized poems in American children's literature: "Dreams" ("Hold fast to dreams"), "Poem" ("I loved my friend"), and the aforementioned "April Rain Song" ("Let the rain kiss you"). The second group of poems, "Sea Charm," reflects, as the section title implies, Hughes's experiences on the sea and abroad.

The poems in the other three sections, "Dressed Up," "Feet o' Jesus," and "Walkers with the Dawn," are deeply rooted in Hughes's experience as an African American and in his profound love for ordinary Black people. It is this expression of the distinctiveness and inherent value of Black culture and Black life that was the declared aim of Hughes and the other young literary artists of the Harlem Renaissance. "Dressed Up," which includes five blues poems, opens with an instructive preface, "A Note on Blues." The other poems in this section, although not in blues form, are generally about the topics associated with the blues—love, loneliness, pain—but tempered with the recognition that, in the words of a spiritual, "trouble don't last always." Hughes was among the first, if not *the* first, twentieth century literary artist to celebrate the blues and jazz as artistic forms and to dip into this Black music as a way to shape his writing. He was certainly the first to offer work based on these forms to a child audience.

The poems in "Feet o' Jesus" also dip into Black culture but move from the secular to the sacred, from the cabaret to the church. This section includes eight poems, six of which echo the Black church in terms of their religious themes and their forms and structure. Hughes captured in poetic form the diction of songs and prayers and testifying that might be heard on Sunday mornings and week-night prayer meetings in many Black churches. The other two poems, "Baby" and "Lullaby," both are addressed to children. In "Baby," an adult, presumably a mother, warns Albert not to play in the road. "Lullaby" is a quiet night poem that celebrates a "little dark baby."

The final section of *The Dream Keeper*, "Walkers with the Dawn" contains poems that express Hughes's pride in being Black and that honor Black people as individuals and as a people. The general mood is hopeful, uplifting, and forward-looking. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," written when Hughes was just out of high school and crossing the Mississippi River on a train bound for Mexico, has become a classic expression of pride in a racial/cultural heritage. Some of Hughes's best-known and best-loved poems—"Mother to Son," "Dream Variation," "My People," "Aunt Sue's Stories"—are included in this section. The poems celebrate the history of Black people from Africa through and beyond slavery and then look to the future. "I, Too," another of his famous poems, asserts Black people's claim to a scornful nation and expresses faith that the future will bring change. The book ends with "Youth," the poem Alain Locke, professor and influential Harlem Renaissance intellectual, cited in his 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*, as expressing the essential outlook and attitude of the young artists of the Harlem Renaissance, marching toward the future, with the past "a night-gone thing."

### **Hughes's Manifesto: Free within Ourselves**

The views of Hughes and the other "New Negroes" were not without opposition. One of the controversies during the Harlem Renaissance was related to the extent to which the full range of Black life was an appropriate subject for literature. If Black life was to be portrayed, in the view of some "old school" conservatives,

then it should be respectable, middle-class Black life, which would demonstrate that Blacks could be easily integrated into mainstream America. Also, some Black intellectuals thought it important that Black writers move outside the boundaries of race to create literature that emulated and measured up to the most-valued literature in the Western tradition.

Even among the young Renaissance writers there was not unanimity. In a statement that continues to resonate with some African American writers, acclaimed poet Countee Cullen (1924) argued that he was not interested in being identified as a “Negro poet”:

If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be POET and not NEGRO POET. This is what has hindered the development of artists among us. Their one note has been the concern with their race. That is all very well, none of us can get away from it. I cannot at times. You will see it in my verse. The consciousness of this is too poignant at times. I cannot escape it. But what I mean is this: I shall not write of negro subjects for the purpose of propaganda. That is not what a poet is concerned with. Of course, when the emotion rising out of the fact that I am a negro is strong, I express it. But that is another matter. (*Brooklyn Eagle* February 10, 1924)

Langston Hughes took issue with Cullen’s views, interpreting them as devaluing Black life and culture as literary subjects. While Hughes ably demonstrated his own ability to create “nonracial” poetry, he saw Black life and Black culture as vital sources for his art, and in an article, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes (1926, 201) declared, “So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, ‘I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,’ as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world.” He ended the essay with the stirring declaration:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (202)

With this essay, Hughes in effect created a manifesto for the young Black artists of the Harlem Renaissance and offered inspiration for new generations of Black writers and artists.

By the time he started writing for children, Hughes had become acutely aware of the necessity for a literature addressed specifically to the needs of African American children. In a piece published in *The Children’s Library Yearbook* of 1932, Hughes lambasted the kind of material available about and for Black children in textbooks and in “booklets on Negro themes.” “The need today,” he declared, “is for books that Negro parents and teachers can read to their children without hesitancy as to the psychological effect on the growing mind, books whose dark characters are not all clowns, and whose illustrations are not merely caricatures” (1932a, 109). Given his awareness of the clowns and caricatures that populated so much of the material available for children, he was understandably wary about the artwork for *The Dream Keeper*. The illustrator was Helen Sewell, a White artist who would go on to create the original illustrations for some of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House books. Hughes had begged Sewell to avoid the typical stereotyped images of Blacks and expressed a desire for beautiful images that Black children would not be ashamed

to associate with themselves. Hughes admired the drawings (Rampersad 1986, 235). In 1994 Knopf published a new edition of *The Dream Keeper* (1932/1994), illustrated by a young, highly praised Black artist, Brian Pinkney. Pinkney's remarkable black-and-white scratchboard drawings make the poems seem fresh for a new generation of readers while remaining true to the emotions of the poems and the race pride and affection for the common Black folk that permeate them.

In *The Dream Keeper*, Hughes produced the first known twentieth century collection of original African American poems selected (or written) with children expressly identified as the target audience.<sup>1</sup> Like *The Brownies' Book*, *The Dream Keeper* included material that was "race conscious" in that it incorporated aspects of Black culture—music and religious expression—and expressed race pride and racial self-love. As did *The Brownies' Book*, Hughes also took an integrationist stance in the sense of representing the Negro as "the darker brother" in the American family. And as in *The Brownies' Book*, some of the poems in *The Dream Keeper* reflect experiences and emotions that easily cross cultural or racial boundaries. Unlike *The Brownies' Book*, however, *The Dream Keeper* is not didactic in its intent. The poems do not talk down to children, partly because many of them were not written specifically with a child audience in mind. The poems are essentially literary pieces expressing cultural and political themes. If one of the criteria for becoming a classic is timelessness, then in *The Dream Keeper* Hughes created one of the first classics of African American children's literature.

With one exception, it would be two decades before Hughes published another children's book. Between 1952 and 1960, he produced five books for the Franklin Watts First Book series: *The First Book of Negroes* (1952), *The First Book of Rhythms* (1954), *The First Book of Jazz* (1955), *The First Book of the West Indies* (1956), and *The First Book of Africa* (1960). He also wrote three collective biographies on Blacks, *Famous American Negroes* (1954), *Famous Negro Music Makers* (1955), and *Famous Negro Heroes of America* (1958) all for Dodd, Mead. The titles reflect Hughes's intense interest in the history and culture of Black people and his personal interest in Black music. In creating these nonfiction works, Hughes continued the tradition, as expressed by Du Bois in his goals for *The Brownies' Book*, of making children "familiar with the achievements of the Negro race." That goal has remained one of the most important underlying motives for the creation of African American children's literature.

## CARTER G. WOODSON: EDUCATION THROUGH LITERATURE

Historian Carter G. Woodson also pursued the goal of acquainting Black children, indeed all children, with knowledge and understanding of the history and achievements of Black people in Africa and in the Americas. Known as "the father of modern Black history," Woodson was one of the most highly regarded scholars of his day. The son of former slaves, he earned a PhD from Harvard in 1912. In 1915, he established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and the next year became the founder and editor of its official quarterly, the *Journal of Negro History*, to which W.E.B. Du Bois was an early contributor. Woodson is also credited with establishing, in 1926, Negro History Week, which grew over the years into Black History Month. As an author, he may be best known for his book, *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933/1972), in which he denounced the inadequacies of an educational system in which Black children were taught that they were

inferior and deprived of opportunities to learn about Black history and achievement and to develop pride in themselves and their cultural group. He called for comprehensive curricular reform to make it possible for Black children to develop to their fullest potential.

In an effort to address the dearth of information available to Black youngsters, Woodson published a number of books for children and youth. In 1921, the second year of *The Brownie's Book*, Woodson founded Associated Publishers, which issued several books on Black history and culture for school-aged readers. Woodson himself wrote a number of the books, including *The Negro in Our History* (1922) for high school and college students, *Negro Makers of History* (1928) for elementary students, *African Myths, Together with Proverbs* (1928), and *African Heroes and Heroines* (1939).

Associated Publishers also issued, over the next few decades, a number of children's books by authors other than Woodson, including folklore collections, biographies, and poetry. It was Woodson's company that published Effie Lee Newsome's book of poems, *Gladiola Garden* in 1940. Several of the children's books from Associated Publishers were illustrated by the renowned artist Lois Mailou Jones, who had been featured in *The Brownies' Book* when she was in high school. During a period when African American children's literature was less than plentiful, these works helped to fill a void. True to the mission of educating young African Americans about their history and heritage, some of the books include features usually associated with instructional texts, such as end-of-chapter questions and grade-level designations.

Nevertheless, Woodson's contributions should not be underestimated or undervalued. Like Du Bois, Woodson recognized a need for books that told the story of African and African American contributions to the world and contradicted the misinformation and negative stereotypes perpetuated in the popular literature and informational texts of the time. Like Du Bois, he set about to fill that need. In the 1920s, in particular, Woodson's books were among the few that did so. It was not until the 1930s that Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps moved African American children's literature into the mainstream or, in Bontemps's terms, the front line of children's book publishing.

## NOTE

1. The poems in *Little Brown Baby*, a selection of Paul Laurence Dunbar's work for young people, were composed earlier, but the book was not published until 1940. Paul Lawrence Dunbar. *Little Brown Baby*, edited by Bertha Rodgers. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1940).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY OF BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

*Note:* Sources other than books for children and young adults are documented in a references list at the back of the book.

- Barrie, James. 1906/1980. *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. Illus. by Arthur Rackham. New York: Buccaneer Books.
- Baum, L. Frank. 1900/1956. *The Wizard of Oz*. Chicago: Reilly and Lee.
- Dunbar, Paul Lawrence. 1940. *Little Brown Baby*. Edited by Bertha Rodgers. New York: Dodd, Mead.



- Grahame, Kenneth. 1908. *The Wind in the Willows*. New York: Scribner's.
- Potter, Beatrix. 1902. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. New York: Warne.
- Hughes, Langston. 1932. *The Dream Keeper*. Illus. by Helen Sewell. New York: Knopf.
- . 1932/1994. *The Dream Keeper*. Illus. by Brian Pinkney. New York: Knopf.
- Hughes, Langston. 1952. *The First Book of Negroes*. New York: Franklin Watts.
- . 1954. *Famous American Negroes*. New York: Dodd, Mead.
- . 1954a. *The First Book of Rhythms*. New York: Franklin Watts.
- . 1955. *Famous Negro Music Makers*. New York: Dodd, Mead.
- . 1955a. *The First Book of Jazz*. New York: Franklin Watts.
- . 1956. *The First Book of the West Indies*. New York: Franklin Watts.
- . 1958. *Famous Negro Heroes of America*. New York: Dodd, Mead.
- . 1960. *The First Book of Africa*. New York: Franklin Watts.
- Newsome, Effie Lee. 1940. *Gladiola Garden*. Washington, DC: Associated Publishers.
- Wiggin, Kate Douglas. 1903/1986. *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. New York: Penguin.
- Woodson, Carter, G. 1922. *The Negro in Our History*. Washington, DC: Associated Publishers.
- . 1928. *Negro Makers of History*. Washington, DC: Associated Publishers.
- . 1928. *African Myths, Together With Proverbs*. Washington, DC: Associated Publishers.
- . 1939. *African Heroes and Heroines*. Washington, DC: Associated Publishers.