

Celebrating African American Children's Literature

An "Eye of the Beholder" Workshop

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As an academic librarian at a liberal arts university, I was asked by our school's art museum staff to collaborate on programming for an exhibition by African American illustrators of children's books. The exhibition, called *Telling a People's Story: African-American Children's Illustrated Literature*, ran on campus through June 2018 as the first of its kind. To represent 33 different artists, the nearly 130 works on display included paintings, pastels, drawings, and mixed-media works. Artists included veterans like Jerry Pinkney, who has been illustrating award-winning books since the 1960s, and younger artists like Javaka Steptoe, whose *Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat* won the 2017 Randolph Caldecott Medal.

Art curator Jason Shaiman and children's literature professor Brenda Dales considered more than six hundred books and fourteen thousand illustrations when selecting the impactful artwork for the exhibition. Shaiman wrote about the range of artwork in the exhibition:

Strong representation of events and milestones in the annals of African-American history, [including] . . . African Origins, Middle Passage, Slavery, Emancipation, Reconstruction, Harlem Renaissance, Segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement. Other themes draw attention to historical figures in politics, music, sports, arts, and entertainment.¹

Walking through the galleries, I was moved by the powerful icons and cultural experiences depicted in the artwork—Billie Holiday with a gardenia in her hair; Miles Davis as a kid blowing his trumpet in a nightclub; Alvin Ailey's dance troupe in motion; Martin Luther King Jr. and his young son striding in identical suits—and I imagined that children of

color would feel pride and excitement when looking at the exhibition.

While surrounded by so many powerful and celebratory images of African Americans in the artwork, it was easy to lose sight of the fact that children's books illustrated by African Americans represent a very small fraction of the overall market. According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), which tracks diversity in juvenile literature, of the thirty-four hundred new children's books they received in 2016, only seventy-one—or 2 percent—of those titles were written or illustrated by African Americans.² This statistic is troubling if we consider the implications for young children of color. As Melanie D. Koss states, "Seeing self is critical, and not seeing self is even more critical because children may feel marginalized."³

Rudine Sims Bishop developed an extended metaphor to describe the impact of children's literature for young people. She began by comparing picturebooks to "mirrors" that can reflect aspects of a child's identity. She also suggested that stories can serve as "a sliding glass door" that supports children in encountering characters from different and



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unfamiliar backgrounds.⁴ Koss writes, "Picturebooks are written artifacts that convey cultural messages and values about society and help children learn about their world."⁵ There was something for every child in this exhibition.

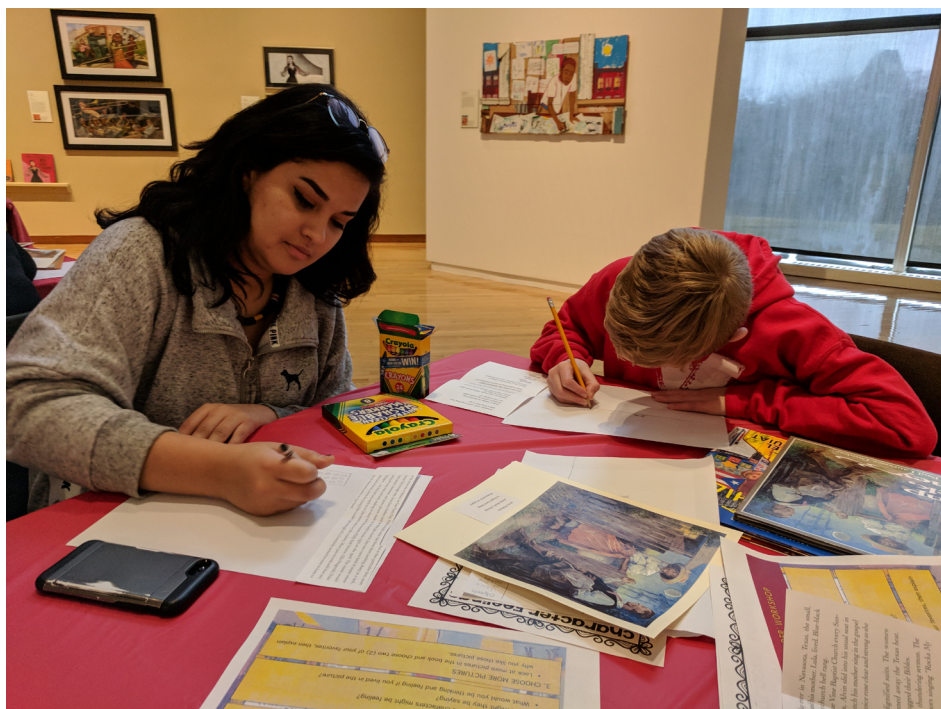
With that in mind, I planned an hour-long Eye of the Beholder workshop for community children and their caregivers. Since the workshop was being held in a gallery at the museum amongst the artwork, I wanted to encourage workshop participants to make connections between the artwork and the books that featured the artists' illustrations. I also planned to emphasize how the visual arts and writing can be used in combination to tell stories.

Having taught a book club for six- to nine-year-old children, I was somewhat familiar with the abilities and sensibilities of young people who engage with picturebooks. For the current workshop, I would be asking children to describe and build stories around the artwork in the exhibition. Since the activities would involve a certain level of abstract reasoning, articulation, and cross-think, I targeted a slightly older audience of seven- to eleven-year-olds. I would also require that a caregiver accompany each child to help facilitate the activities one-on-one.

To create the workshop, I needed to learn some fundamentals about art appreciation, so I turned to art educators and museums. Many of the online materials I found outlined a four- or five-step process—with minor variations—that involved viewing, describing, interpreting, and making personal connections.⁶ Such a process provided a great framework for assisting children in their explorations of how pictures and narrative overlap. Based on the multiple steps for looking at art, I developed a three-part activity for the workshop as a way to scaffold the participants' experiences.

I planned to make the picturebooks available on the workshop tables so participants could see the artwork in context. The exhibition planners had requested a donated copy of each title from the publishers; I purchased any remaining titles with the understanding that they would be added to the juvenile collection once the exhibition ended. Otherwise, the expense of our workshop amounted only to drawing supplies.

To publicize the event, the university's art museum created a flier that we posted one month in advance on bulletin boards at the local public library and grocery store. The flier included my phone number and email address as a registration contact, and we indicated that space was limited to the first twenty-four registrants. The public library manager also



Photos by/courtesy of Jason Shaiman.

suggested advertising to Facebook groups affiliated with her library. Once we established a channel for web advertising, I developed an online registration form using Google Forms as another option for registering via email or phone. For those people who registered online, an automatic confirmation was sent, and I sent personal confirmations to those who contacted me by phone or email.

Only eight people, including children, registered for the workshop—with most registering on the day before the event. As it turned out, most did not show for the workshop, though many people who had not registered in advance showed up on the day. Seventeen people attended, including five children ages seven to eleven, three children under seven, four university students, and three women from the community who did not bring children.

For the first activity, Describe the Picture, participants viewed the featured artworks as images on cardstock. The artwork chosen for this activity possessed remarkable visual appeal and narrative qualities and captured significant moments from the stories, such as Kadir Nelson's oil painting from *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*, published in 2011, and a collage by Ekua Holmes in *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer*, published in 2015. This activity asked participants to answer the following three questions:

- What do you see happening in the picture?
- What shapes and colors do you see?
- What other objects in the picture catch your eye?



Photos by/courtesy of Jason Shaiman.

To aid children in their observations, I supplied a color hand-out showing many adjectives they might use to describe the appearances, shapes, and sizes that they saw in the artwork, such as *elegant*, *old-fashioned*, *large*, *miniature*, *steep*, or *crooked*. This description activity prompted the children to use their eyes and voices together as they made sense of the artwork and started to “read” the picture.

The second activity, Live in the Picture, explored the narrative elements of character and dialogue as relating to the artwork. For this activity, participants viewed illustrations by Benny Andrews, Floyd Cooper, and Jerome LaGarrigue. Participants were asked the following three questions:

- What do you think the characters might be feeling?
- What might they be saying?
- What would you be thinking and feeling if you lived in the picture?

Building on the first activity where participants describe concrete elements in the artwork, the second set of questions encourages them to imagine what stories might lie beyond the more apparent visual details. In this way, they can increase their engagement with the artwork and also start to think like storytellers. As with the first activity, I provided a word list of emotions to prompt discussions.⁷

The third activity invited the children to look more closely at the actual books, select two additional illustrations that they liked, and explain why they chose the pictures as favorites. Books for this activity included Leo and Diane Dillon's *Jazz on a Saturday Night* (2007), which features a gouache painting of young Miles Davis blowing his trumpet, and Kathryn Lasky and Nneka Bennett's *Vision of Beauty: The Story of Sarah Breedlove Walker* (2000). To get at the heart of art appreciation, this activity encouraged the children to connect with the artwork based on their own experiences. The activity was also intended to promote a simple “interest in and enjoyment of books,”⁸ also known as the early literacy skill *print motivation*.

For the final activity, children worked in reverse by blindly picking a text passage from a bowl that they then used to inspire their own drawings; I supplied markers, crayons, colored pencils, and drawing pads. This text-to-picture method reflects the standard way that authors and illustrators collaborate in children's picturebook publishing. Authors typically provide their stories and poems to the artists who then develop the artwork. I included imagistic excerpts of poetry and prose from several of the featured picturebooks.

According to the brief survey distributed toward the end of the workshop, everyone indicated that they “greatly enjoyed” the workshop. One person suggested that I also read aloud from a featured picturebook for any future workshops.

References

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