



Logo illustration © by James E. Ransome

I Never Knew ...

Fall 2007

A Newsletter Highlighting African American Children's Literature

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

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

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

Book Extension Activities

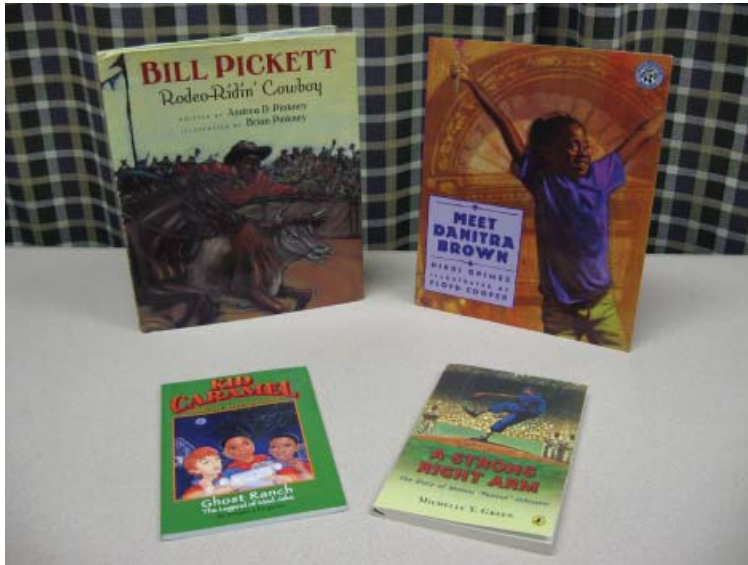
After reading *Conjure Times: Black Magicians in America* (James Haskins, 2001), I was surprised to discover that historians believe the first American-born magician was a black man named Richard Potter. I also learned that Henry "Box" Brown, the slave who mailed himself to freedom in a box, was an amateur magician. Reading this book led me to surf the Internet, discuss this topic with friends and family members, and search for additional books on the subject. Books can be extended in a number of ways, and they can lead readers to find out more about certain people, places, and events. Using books that have been reviewed in previous newsletters and in this one, I will provide examples of ways that children and parents can participate in enriching activities that extend the enjoyment that can be derived from reading books.

My Pop Pop and Me (Irene Smalls, 2006) – A young boy and his grandfather bake a lemon bar cake. The end of the book contains the lemon bar cake recipe. Baking the cake is something that parents and children could do together.

Flower Girl Butterflies (Elizabeth F. Howard, 2004) – After reading this story about a flower girl in a wedding, parents or relatives could bring out photo albums or video recordings of weddings and talk about those experiences and their memories of them.

Bill Pickett: Rodeo-Ridin' Cowboy (Andrea D. Pinkney, 1996) – For this biography of the legendary cowboy, children could find out about other famous black cowboys such as Nat Love, Mose Reeder, and Daniel Webster Wallace. In addition, families or classrooms might consider attending the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo, the only black touring rodeo in the nation. For those of us living in South Carolina, the rodeo will be in Atlanta from August 16-17, 2008. If traveling to the rodeo is not an option, children can view video clips by going to www.youtube.com, using the search option, and typing in the words "Bill," "Pickett," and "rodeo." A number of clips are available that show cowboys/cowgirls in action as well as interviews with some of the black cowboys and cowgirls who participate.

Literature Reviews



A Strong Right Arm

Written by Michelle Y. Green.

Penguin Group, 2002 \$5.99 Grades 4-6

Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and Buck Leonard are the names of some of the most famous Negro Baseball League players. Many people know about them and their great stories, but few know of Lyle Stone, Connie Morgan, or Mamie “Peanut” Johnson. These are the names of some famous female Negro Baseball League players. *A Strong Right Arm* tells the story of Mamie “Peanut” Johnson and her remarkable journey from a little Southern girl to a starting pitcher for the Indianapolis Clowns. Mamie starts out living in South Carolina playing baseball with her uncle and friends. She then moves to New Jersey to live with her aunt and uncle after a family tragedy. Once there, she joins a police club baseball team and then a sandlot baseball team, which eventually leads to her playing for the Clowns. Mamie has to undergo many hardships and challenges to fulfill her dream of being a professional baseball player. You can not help but find yourself rooting for her as you read of her journey to become one the greatest female pitchers in Negro Baseball League history. In the end, the story of Mamie “Peanut” Johnson is a heartwarming and uplifting story that the whole family can enjoy.

--MISTER Tony Webb

Meet Danitra Brown

Written by Nikki Grimes. Illustrated by Floyd Cooper.

HarperTrophy, 1997 \$6.99 Grades K-6

Meet Danitra Brown is a collection of thirteen poems about the friendship between two girls named Zuri and Danitra. The poems help readers understand everything about Danitra, from her neighborhood, to her family, and most

importantly Danitra herself. Many of the poems describe the daily activities the two friends engage in like the poem “Bike Crazy.” It reads, “Watch me and Danitra biking down the street, / whee! round the corner. There go Danitra’s feet / right off the pedals, arms thrown up to the sky. / Me, I laugh and yell out, “Fly, Danitra, Fly!” Floyd Cooper’s realistic illustrations complement the text in that they show the close relationship between Danitra and Zuri.

--MISTER Arthur E. Doctor, Jr.

Bill Pickett: Rodeo-Ridin' Cowboy

Written by Andrea Davis Pinkney. Illustrated by Brian Pinkney.

Voyager Books, 1996 \$7.00 K-6

This is a biography about the adventurous life of Bill Pickett, who is arguably the most famous African American cowboy. In regard to his childhood in Texas, Pinkney writes, “A young’un who took after his father, Bill was the feistiest boy South of Abilene. He was quick as a jackrabbit, more wide-eyed than a hooty owl—and curious.” Working on his parent’s small farm he would constantly see cowboys herding cattle past their land. One day he saw a bulldog taking down a cow by biting its lip. When Bill saw this, it made him wonder, “If a small bulldog can bite-hold a big-lipped cow, why can’t I do the same?” This technique became known as “bulldogging” and it was what Bill used while traveling from show to show amazing people from the Midwest to the East Coast, and even as far as England, where he performed for King George V and Queen Mary. The illustrations by Brian Pinkney allow readers to visualize what took place in the late 19th and early 20th century.

--MISTER Daniel Spencer

Kid Caramel, Private Investigator: Ghost Ranch, The Legend of Mad Jake

Written by Dwayne Ferguson. Just Us Books, 2004 \$4.50
Grades 4-6

“He’s smart! He’s cool! He’s a detective! And he’s a kid!” The author of the Kid Caramel series, Dwayne Ferguson, grew up reading and enjoying the Encyclopedia Brown books. In the fourth book of this series, Kid Caramel’s history teacher takes the class on a field trip to a town called Boseville, a former settlement for black cowboys. Boseville is supposedly haunted by a ghost named Mad Jake and it is up to Kid Caramel to find out who Mad Jake is and why he is so angry. Ferguson’s writing is engaging, humorous, and will speak to young readers who are beginning to enjoy chapter books.

--Dr. Jonda C. McNair

The Chicken-Chasing Queen of Lamar County

Written by Janice N. Harrington. Illustrated by Shelley Jackson. Melanie Kroupa Books, 2007 \$16.00 Grades K-3

Big Mama doesn't like her chickens getting all worked up since it affects their egg production, but when Big Mama isn't looking the Chicken-Chasing Queen starts chasing them. She's the best chicken-chaser in the county, though there's one particular fowl she's been eyeing for some time. The bird's name is Miss Hen and she's a beauty. "Her feathers are shiny as a rained-on roof. She has high yellow stockings and long-fingered feet, and when she talks—"Pruck! Pruck! Pruck!"—it sounds like pennies falling on a dinner plate." She is determined to catch Miss Hen, but when she discovers Miss Hen's hiding spot and secret, the greatest chicken-chaser of Lamar County shows some compassion and develops a whole new goal in life. The collage illustrations, which contain a variety of unique objects from buttons to fabric to pieces of paper cut from magazines, make this story a visual delight.

--MISTER LeAndrea Montgomery

God Bless the Child

Written by Billie Holiday and Arthur Herzog, Jr. Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. Amistad, 2004 \$16.99 Grades K-6

In this book the song, "God Bless the Child" serves as the inspiration for watercolor paintings that depict one African American family moving from the South to the North during the Great Migration. The story shows a young boy and his family moving away from their small country home to the busy city. Slowly the boy and his family adjust to their new jobs and way of life. Near the end of the story the family members come together and overcome their situation together. The book also comes with a CD of Billie Holiday's famous song, "God Bless the Child."

--MISTER Wallace Deandre Cobbs

What's the Hurry, Fox? And Other Animal Stories

Written by Zora Neale Hurston. Adapted by Joyce Carol Thomas. Illustrated by Bryan Collier. HarperCollins, 2004 \$16.99 Grades K-6

What's the Hurry, Fox contains eight *pourquoi* tales collected by Zora Neale Hurston from ordinary black people in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana. One tale, "Why the Dog Hates the Cat," explains the reason for the strained relationship between these two animals. According to the tale, Dog and Cat were once friends and they put their money together, went downtown, and bought a ham. When Dog toted the ham, he would say, "Our ham, our ham, ours, ours, ours," but when Cat carried the ham she would say, "My ham, my ham, my ham." When

Dog confronted Cat about this, she ran up a tree with the ham and ate it all by herself. Dog responded by saying, "Our friendship is broken forever. I can't climb a tree, but you got to come down sometime, and when you do ..." Other tales include "Why Frog Got Eyes and Mole Got Tail" and "Why Flies Get the First Taste." Caldecott artist Bryan Collier's illustrations complement the folktales by conveying their humor and mystique.

--MISTER Rodney Richardson



Talkin' About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman
Written by Nikki Grimes. Illustrated by E.B. Lewis
Orchard Books, 2002 \$16.95 Grades 4-6

There is a gathering taking place in a parlor on the South Side of Chicago. The room is filled with those who have been a part of Bessie Coleman's life. There are reporters, family members, fans, friends, and others whom she has impacted in one way or another. Their stories extend from her youth in Texas, to her time in France studying flight, and in between. Bessie's life unfolds as they share recollections from each of their individual vantage points. Readers can almost place themselves in the parlor that fine day listening to Bessie's brother comment on her diligence, a flight school classmate comment on her passion for flying, and a white woman, who was one of Bessie's laundry customers, comment on her defiance. Part of the laundry customer's recollection reads, "Bessie Coleman? She was a nice-enough girl. / Polite in her way, I suppose. Goodness knows, / I couldn't complain about her work. . . . She'd come to the back door, like they were supposed to in those days. / But when I opened it, there this Colored girl would be standin', / lookin' me straight in the eye, like we were just any two people / meetin' on a street in town. You know, like we were *equals*. / It was odd, I don't mind tellin' you." The illustrations by E.B. Lewis help to make the fictionalized accounts feel real.

--MISTER AbdurRabb Watkins

Profile of Nikki Grimes

Nikki Grimes is a well-known poet who has authored more than two dozen children's books. She has written notable titles such as *Meet Danitra Brown*, *Talkin' About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman*, *Come Sunday*, and *My Man Blue*. Ms. Grimes has received numerous awards for her books including a Coretta Scott King Author Award and the Excellence in Poetry for Children Award from the National Council of Teachers of English.

She was born and raised in New York City, and as a child spent time in the foster care system. Because she moved around frequently, this made it important for her to make new friends. As a result, friendship is an important theme in many of her books. Ms.

Grimes began creating verse at the age of six and has been doing so ever since. She graduated from Livingston College in New Jersey with a degree in English literature and a minor in African languages. Her hobbies include traveling, creating jewelry, and knitting. She resides in Corona, California.



Gifts, Goodies, and Games

History in Action Toys



Attorney Sterling Ashby created historical action figures of three unsung Americans: Benjamin Banneker (the astronomer), Elizabeth "Bessie" Coleman (the pilot), and Matthew Henson (the polar explorer). Each action figure stands approximately 6 and ¼ inches tall and comes in a display case that presents biographical information, along with accessories. For example, the Matthew Henson historical action figure is dressed in Arctic gear and comes with snow shoes, an ice axe, and other snow gear. Each historical action figure costs \$24.95, although all three can be purchased as a set for \$68.95. Prices do not include shipping and handling.

www.hiatoys.com

Sweet Blackberry

Karyn Parsons, the actress known for her role as Hilary Banks on "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," is now the mother of two young children and the founder of Sweet Blackberry, a company that produces educational DVDs for children ages 3 through 8. The first DVD produced by Sweet Blackberry is "The Journey of Henry "Box" Brown" and it is narrated by the actress,



Alfre Woodard. Through verse and music, this DVD tells the story of Henry Brown, the slave, who mailed himself in a box from a plantation in Virginia to Pennsylvania in order to escape slavery. A second DVD entitled "Garrett's Gift" about Garrett Morgan, the inventor, is scheduled for release in February of 2008. The price of the DVDs is \$14.95. Prices do not include shipping and handling.

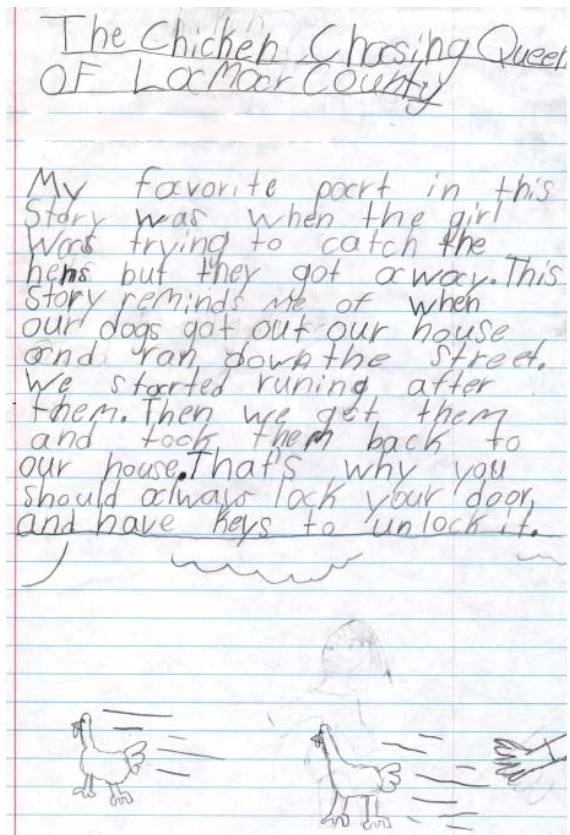
www.sweetblackberry.com

"When I was growing up, I rarely found beautiful images of myself in the pages of a book, and that's precisely why I chose to write books for young people like me. I wanted them to meet girls like Zuri and Danitra in *Meet Danitra Brown*, like LaTasha in *Come Sunday*, boys like Damon, and men like Blue in *My Man Blue* These were people whose stories I knew and wanted to tell, people who looked and felt like me."

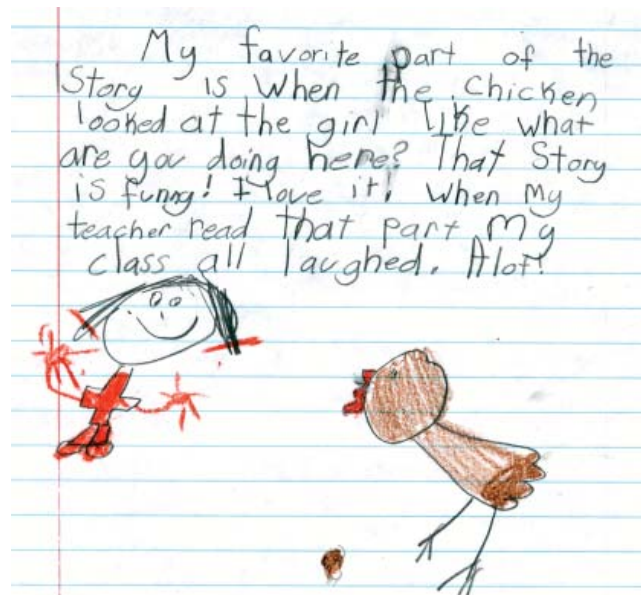
Children's Responses to *The Chicken-Chasing Queen of Lamar County*



↑ Savanna Y., age 8
Pendleton, South Carolina
Savanna enjoys dancing, singing, and reading.

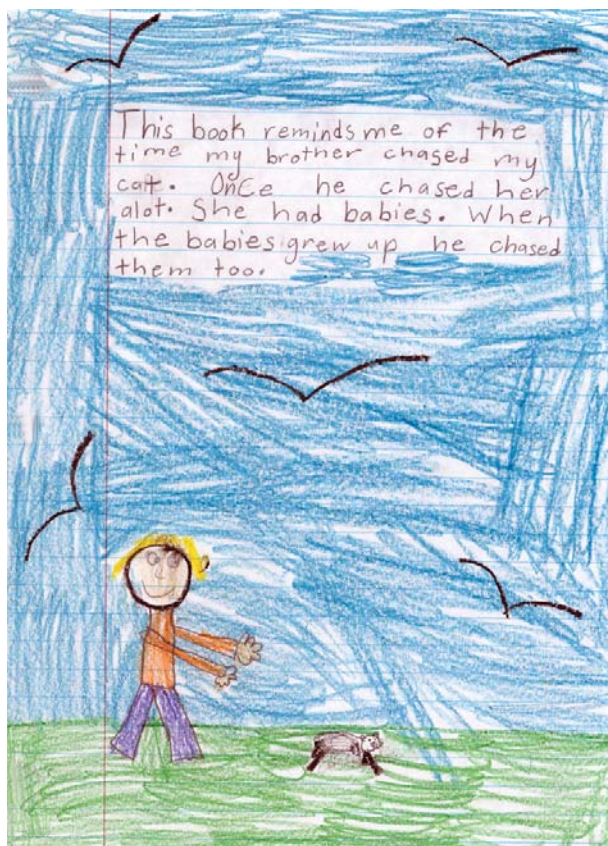


← Markiz H., age 8
Anderson, South Carolina
Markiz enjoys playing outside, building things, and playing with games, Hot Wheels cars, and Lego blocks.



↑ Maddison M., age 7
Sandy Springs, South Carolina
Maddison enjoys dancing, singing, reading, and drawing.

↓ Caitlyn J., age 7
Anderson, South Carolina
Caitlyn enjoys go-kart racing, reading, writing, drawing, and cheerleading.



Children's Art - Submissions

We are proud to feature the pictures that four children drew in response to the book *The Chicken-Chasing Queen of Lamar County*. We intend to feature children's work in all of our newsletters. If your child draws a picture or writes something in response to one of the books featured in this newsletter, we will be glad to include it in a future newsletter. The first ten children who submit a picture or writing sample will receive a complimentary copy of an African American children's book. Please mail pictures or writing samples—along with your contact information—to the following address:

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

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

Credits

The *I Never Knew . . .* newsletter is published once each semester by Dr. Jonda C. McNair and participants in the Call Me MISTER Program. This newsletter was created as a part of the Creative Inquiry Program at Clemson University. The Creative Inquiry Program allows faculty and students to collaborate on visual and performing arts, research, and service learning projects. The newsletter logo was created by and used with the permission of James E. Ransome.

I Never Knew . . . wishes to thank the following individuals and organizations for their support and assistance:

Dr. Jeff Appling, Provost Doris Helms, Dr. Roy Jones, Winston Holton, James E. Ransome, Susie McGhee, the Research Foundation of the National Council of Teachers of English, the Kappa Zeta Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Ken Cothran, Jessica Lynn Hughes, Dana K. Moody, Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, Dr. Violet J. Harris, and Dr. Linda Leonard Lamme.

*A special thank you to Drs. Bishop, Harris, and Lamme. My passion for and knowledge about African American children's literature is because of the three of you. Thanks for passing it on.

Coming in the Next Issue of *I Never Knew ...*

A profile of children's book author Andrea Davis Pinkney
2008 Coretta Scott King book award winners

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