



I Never Knew ...

Spring 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 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.

Tips on Reading Aloud

Reading aloud is one of the most significant contributing factors to children's early literacy development. When children are read to, there are opportunities for them to be exposed to new vocabulary, encounter different types of texts (e.g., fiction, poetry, and nonfiction), and develop important understandings about concepts of print (e.g., that in English we read from left to right and the unique way in which we "read" punctuation marks). Recently a colleague of mine described an incident that took place while reading the book, *Please, Puppy, Please* with her four-year-old daughter, who is an early reader. When her daughter saw the sentence, "Outside? Let's go play, puppy, puppy, puppy, please," she pointed to the question mark and asked what it was. My colleague responded, and then her daughter read the sentence by saying, "Outside question mark Let's go . . ." Then my colleague explained that you don't say "question mark" when you see it, but that it lets you know someone is asking a question. This incident highlights the importance

of dialogue between adults (or more experienced others) and young children when reading aloud. Here are some tips for conducting an interactive read aloud:

1. Read the book beforehand and decide on good places to stop or pause when reading with your child.
2. Avoid asking questions that require only a response of "yes" or "no." For example, as opposed to asking your child "Did you like this story?," ask questions such as "What was your favorite part?" or "What does this story make you think about?" Also allow your child to ask questions and make comments before, during, and after the reading of the book.
3. Make connections to other books that you and your child have read. For example, when you read several books that are illustrated by the same artist (e.g., Kadir Nelson), you can discuss similarities in the artwork.
4. Draw children's attention to parts of the book such as the dedication page and the information on the back-flap about the author and the illustrator.

Literature Reviews



Hewitt Anderson's Great Big Life

Written by Jerdine Nolen. Illustrated by Kadir Nelson.
Paula Wiseman Books/Simon & Schuster Books for
Young Readers, 2005 \$16.95 Grades K-3

What if everything — your room, your toys, even your friends and family — were a hundred times bigger than you? Maybe you should read this story because Hewitt Anderson lives in just such a world. *Hewitt Anderson's Great Big Life* is the story of a boy who is born to parents who are giants. When you're a hundred times smaller than everyone and everything around you, it's easy to feel short-changed. You could get caught in a tidal wave at the pond or swept away by a broom or lost in a vat of flour. But, Hewitt Anderson proves that if you believe in yourself and do your best, it doesn't matter if the world is one hundred times bigger than you. Kadir Nelson's illustrative talents shine at showing the contrasts between Hewitt and his parents as well as the furnishings in their home. One of my favorite images is of little Hewitt sleeping amidst the grooves of his father's huge palm. Overall, it's an engaging read with illustrations that are sure to be a great big hit!

--MISTER AbdurRabb Watkins

The Adventures of Sparrowboy

Written and illustrated by Brian Pinkney.
Aladdin Paperbacks, 1997 \$5.99 Grades K-6

Extra, extra; read all about it! "Henry the paperboy always read the front page before he started on his route. Then he read the comics. Sometimes the headlines got Henry down. "Why does this stuff have to happen?" he asked himself. "If Falconman was here, he'd make things better." As Henry heads off and begins delivering newspapers along his route on Thurber Street, he accidentally bumps into a sparrow. All of a sudden, he has the power to fly just like his comic

book hero Falconman. Henry becomes Sparrowboy and swoops above his neighborhood performing heroic feats such as saving two children from being bitten by a dog and taking care of Bruno, the neighborhood bully. The action-packed illustrations are done in comic book style. To find out more about Henry and his life as a superhero you must read *The Adventures of Sparrowboy*.

--MISTER Daniel Spencer

Flower Girl Butterflies

Written by Elizabeth F. Howard. Illustrated by Christiane Krömer. Greenwillow, 2004 \$16.99 Grades K-3

Many people dream about being in a beautiful wedding. Well, Sarah's dream comes true when she is in her Aunt Robin's wedding. She picks out the prettiest dress to wear for the wedding but after she thinks about everything bad that could happen at the wedding, she does not want to be the flower girl anymore. However, she doesn't want to let her Aunt Robin and soon-to-be Uncle Jeff down. Sarah starts to get butterflies in her stomach thinking about the wedding. After the wedding she forgets about all the bad things that could have happened and dances until the end of the wedding. Her aunt Robin tells her, "Sarah, you are so beautiful and I am so happy that you are my flower girl." The pictures are filled with lots of pink images and they convey to readers how Sarah feels throughout the story.

--MISTER LeAndrea Montgomery

Honey, I Love

Written by Eloise Greenfield. Illustrated by Diane & Leo Dillon. HarperCollins, 1978 \$5.99 Grades K-6

Honey, I love some good poetry! This book has sixteen poems about topics ranging from family to music to friendship. The main theme of love runs throughout all of the poems which are accentuated by the soft illustrations of Diane and Leo Dillon. A poem I especially love would have to be, "Love Don't Mean." It goes like this: "Love don't mean all that kissing / Like on television / Love means Daddy / Saying keep your mama company / Till I get back / And me doing it." There are several more poems that maybe you will love too.

--MISTER AbdurRabb Watkins

Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom

Written by Carole Boston Weatherford. Illustrated by Kadir Nelson. Hyperion Books for Children, 2006 \$15.99 Grades 2-6

An old woman slowly tracks through the woods at night, "splish, splash, splish, splash" through a muddy moon lit path. Her legs ache, her back hurts, and her stomach

quivers from emptiness. All the while she prays, “Lord just help me take one more step.” The story of how Harriet Tubman found her freedom and returned for her people is a beautiful, heart warming, and faith strengthening story. Carol Weatherford’s use of language, along with Kadir Nelson’s illustrations, help the story come to life as you read. It is as if you can hear the frogs croaking and feel the chill from the midnight air as you embark on this journey for freedom. *Moses* is truly an inspirational story that the whole family can learn from and enjoy for years to come.

--MISTER Tony Webb

Tar Beach

Written & illustrated by Faith Ringgold.
Crown Publishers, 1991 \$6.99 Grades K-3

“I can fly-yes, fly. Me, Cassie Louise Lightfoot, only eight years old and in the third grade, and I can fly.” Cassie’s dream is to fly among the stars, go anywhere she wants to go, and to provide her family with everything that they need. This dream comes true one night when she is up on “Tar Beach,” which is the rooftop of the apartment building where she lives. *Tar Beach* is a book about hopes, dreams, and the joy that comes when those hopes and dreams are fulfilled. You and your children cannot help but be moved by the story of how much love Cassie has for her family and how much she believes in dreams. In the end, you too will be inspired to pursue your dreams, because as Cassie proves, anything is possible!

--MISTER Tony Webb

Please, Puppy, Please

Written by Spike Lee & Tonya Lewis-Lee. Illustrated by Kadir Nelson. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005 \$16.95 Grades K-3

Although I am usually somewhat wary of children’s books written by celebrities, I must say that *Please, Puppy, Please* has become one of my favorite books. Not only is the writing and use of language playful and engaging, but the paintings by Kadir Nelson, a rising star in the field of children’s book illustration, are simply mesmerizing. In this story, a young girl and boy take their spirited puppy outside to play and engage in rollicking fun as they chase him, give him a bath, and teach him to fetch a ball and return it. The illustrations capture the fondness of the children for their puppy and also communicate the mischievous nature of the puppy, who while not quite tamed, really does want to please the two children. The story ends with the children hugging their puppy while saying, “You’re doing just fine, puppy puppy puppy puppy. Always be mine, puppy, please, puppy, please.”

--Dr. Jonda C. McNair

Poetry for Young People: Langston Hughes

Edited by David Roessel & Arnold Rampersad. Illustrated by Benny Andrews. Sterling Publishing, 2006 \$14.95
Grades 4-6

This book contains 26 poems, including notable ones like “Aunt Sue’s Stories,” “Theme for English B,” “The Dream Keeper,” “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” and “Homesick Blues.” These poems are timeless in that they touch on issues in present day life that were relevant during the time in which Mr. Hughes wrote them. Hughes’ poems are accompanied by beautiful paintings created by one of America’s most inspirational artists, Benny Andrews. Mr. Andrews’ paintings help young readers to better understand the poetry, by providing an excellent visualization of the topics. This book can assist upper elementary and middle school children in developing an appreciation for one of America’s most talented writers.

--MISTER Keith Wilkes



Bigmama's

Written & illustrated by Donald Crews.
HarperCollins, 1991 \$16.99 Grades K-3

Bigmama's begins with young children anticipating an upcoming visit to their grandparents’ house for the summer. The children describe their surroundings perfectly, from the outhouse to the barn. The cars, kerosene lamps, wind-up record player, and everyday living conditions featured in Crews’ illustrations give readers an idea of what life was like during the late 40s-early 50s. *Bigmama's* ending is most surprising because the narrator you thought was a youngster describing the events turns out to be an older man (Donald Crews himself) reflecting upon his time at Bigmama’s. I was able to relate to the feelings of the characters, as I thought about visits with my grandparents. *Bigmama's* is a good read and would be a great addition to a young child’s library.

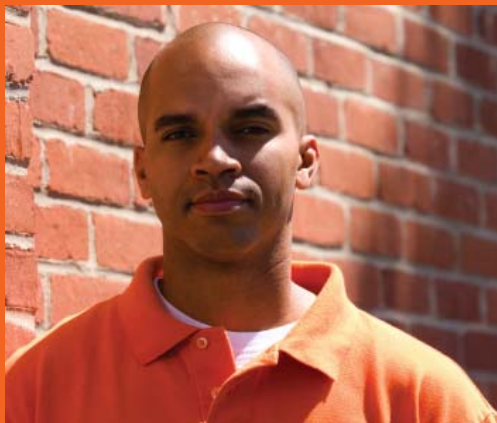
--MISTER Arthur Edwin Doctor, Jr.

Profile of Kadir Nelson

Kadir Nelson is the illustrator of more than a dozen children's books written by well-known authors such as Jerdine Nolen, Carole Boston Weatherford, and Nikki Grimes. Some of the titles he has illustrated include *Hewitt Anderson's Great Big Life*, *Thunder Rose*, *Ellington Was Not a Street*, and *Moses*. He has received two Coretta Scott King Awards for Illustration, a Caldecott Honor, gold and silver medals from the Society of Illustrators in New York City, and an NAACP Image Award for outstanding children's literature.

Mr. Nelson was born in Washington, D.C., and grew up in Atlantic City, New Jersey and San Diego, California. He began drawing at the age of three. From the time he was eleven years old, he was trained by his uncle, who was an artist and art instructor. His paintings are influenced by the work of artists such as N.C. Wyeth, Norman Rockwell, and Ernie Barnes. Mr. Nelson graduated with honors from Pratt Institute, a prestigious school of the arts, located in New York City.

Mr. Nelson's paintings are in the private collections of a number of actors, musicians, and professional athletes, including Denzel Washington, Darryl Strawberry, Shaquille O'Neal, Queen Latifah, Spike Lee, Venus Williams, and Eddie Murphy. He has also created images for Coca-Cola, Nike, and Major League Baseball. Mr. Nelson resides in San Diego, California with his wife Keara and their two daughters, Amel (10) and Aya (6). When he is not painting or traveling to promote his books, he enjoys spending time with his family. For more information about Mr. Nelson, please visit his website www.kadirnelson.com.



"I was born to be an artist. I have created artwork ever since I can remember. I think it's in my genes."

Gifts, Goodies, and Games

People Colors Crayons and Pencils

Mocha, peach, ebony, mahogany, gingerbread, chestnut, cinnamon, and almond are just a few of the color names given to these unique crayons created by Lakeshore Learning Materials. These crayons allow children



to create portraits of themselves, family members, and friends that are more realistic. The People Colors crayons can be purchased in regular and jumbo size, while the People Colors pencils are only available in jumbo size. In addition, People Colors craft paper and paint (not shown here) can be purchased from Lakeshore Learning Materials.

People Colors Crayons Item # LC360 \$4.95

Jumbo People Colors Crayons Item # LC363 \$6.95

Jumbo People Colors Pencils Item # LC385 \$8.95

To make a purchase, please call Lakeshore Learning Materials at 1-800-778-4456 or visit the website www.lakeshorelearning.com.

Award Puzzles

JTG of Nashville has developed tray puzzles featuring artwork from children's books that have won the Caldecott or Coretta Scott King honor/award. *Mirandy and Brother Wind*, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, and *Tar Beach*, illustrated by Faith Ringgold, both received a Caldecott honor. Other African American children's book illustrators whose artwork is featured on these puzzles include Donald Crews, Leo Dillon, and John Steptoe. All tray puzzles cost \$7.95.



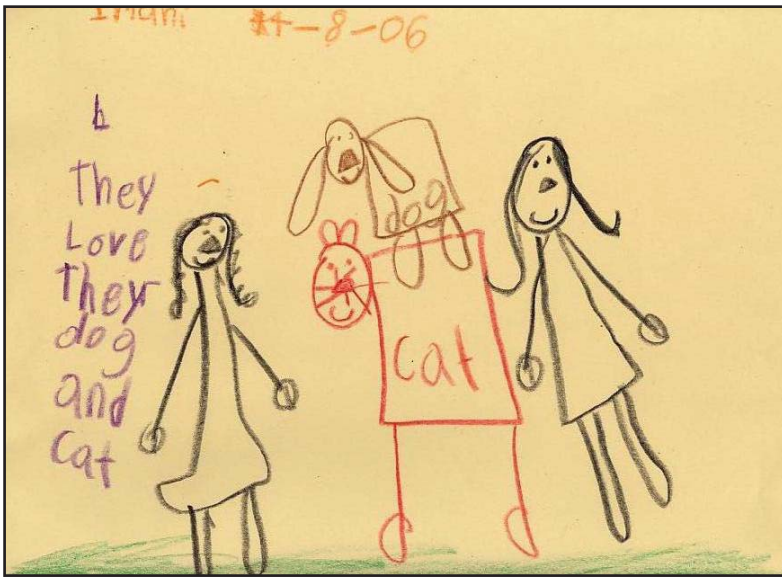
Mirandy and Brother Wind (45 pieces) Item # 3917

Tar Beach (43 pieces) Item # 3916

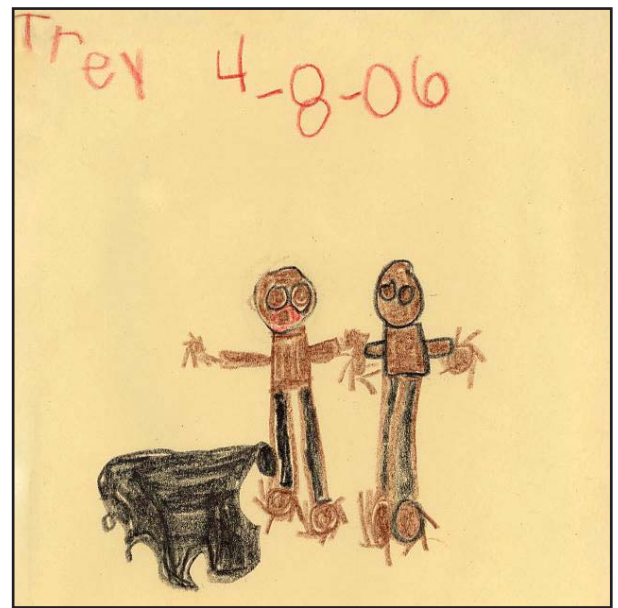
For more information, please visit the website www.jtgkids.com.

To make a purchase, call JTG Kids at 1-800-222-2JTG.

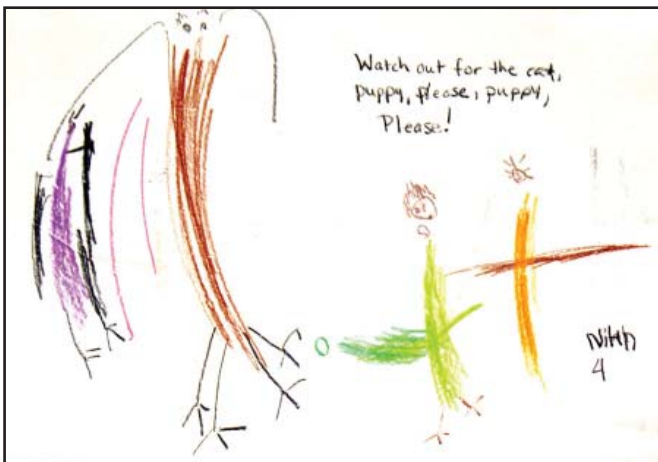
Children's Artwork in Response to *Please, Puppy, Please*



↑ Imani H., age 8
Central, South Carolina
Imani enjoys writing, reading, and bike riding.



↑ Trey M., age 7
Pendleton, South Carolina
Trey enjoys drawing, listening to music, and playing basketball.

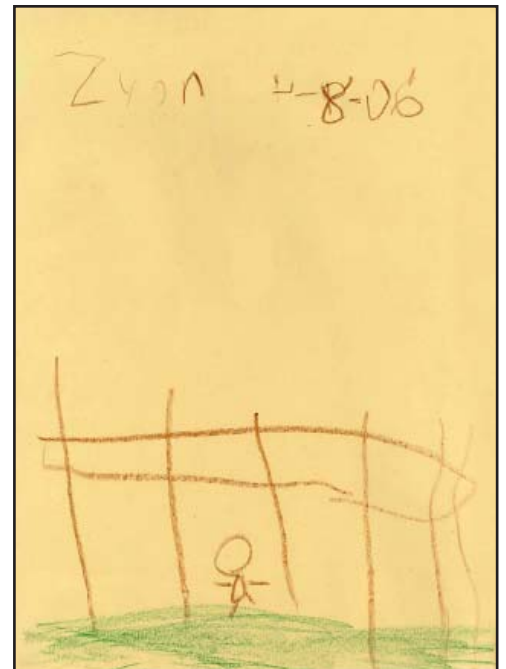


← Nilah J., age 4
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Nilah enjoys reading with her brother, tap dancing, playing with her doll house, cooking with mom, and putting puzzles together.



→ Zyon W., age 7
Anderson, South Carolina
Zyon enjoys skating, playing video games, drawing, and reading.

← Jaylen C., age 7
Clemson, South Carolina
Jaylen enjoys reading and gymnastics.



Do you know of children or students who would like to produce artwork or writing or both that could be included in future newsletters? Please refer to the next page for submission information.

Children's Art - Submissions

We are proud to feature the pictures that five children drew in response to the book *Please, Puppy, Please*. 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
Clemson University
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

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*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 Nikki Grimes

Educational DVDs about Henry "Box" Brown and Garrett Morgan

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