

“HE MAY MEAN GOOD, BUT HE DO SO DOGGONE POOR!”:

A Critical Analysis of Recently Published “Social Conscience” Children’s Literature

by Jonda C. McNair

“The Negro has met with as great injustice in American literature as he has in American life.” (Sterling Brown, 1933; 180)

Because literature is a sociocultural product, it provides a reflection of societal values, beliefs, and attitudes. Williams (1977) contends that literature also serves as a means by which to maintain the social order and the hegemony of dominant groups. In this article I will provide a critical analysis of recently published “social conscience” children’s books, the majority of which perpetuate racial stereotypes and misrepresent African-American experiences and perspectives. According to Sims (1982), “social conscience” books are written mainly by white authors and directed mainly at white readers in an attempt to make them aware of the problems blacks face and to develop a social conscience. Before presenting the analysis of recently published social conscience books, I will offer a description of Sims’s research.

“CULTURALLY CONSCIOUS” BOOKS

Sims (1982) conducted a content analysis of 150 children’s books of contemporary realistic fiction featuring African Americans published between 1965 and 1979. She created the following typologies to categorize the books: “culturally conscious” books, “melting pot” books, and “social conscience” books. According to Sims, “the label culturally conscious suggests that elements in the text, not just the pictures, make it clear that the book consciously seeks to depict a fictional Afro-American life experience” (49). *Mirandy and Brother Wind*, by Patricia McKissack, is an example of a culturally conscious children’s book. Recurring features within culturally conscious books include language that “reflects the well known syntactic features of Black English,” descriptions of skin colors, nicknames and names that are common with the African-American community, as well as its historical and cultural traditions (Sims, 1982; 68). According to Sims, “these books come closest to constituting a body of Afro-American literature for children” (49).

“MELTING POT” BOOKS

The “melting pot” books were those that ignored all racial differences among children, except for physical ones such as skin color. They were usually in the picture book format; otherwise readers would not know that the characters were

black (Sims, 1982). An example of a melting pot book is *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, written by Sarah Hale and photo-illustrated by Bruce McMillan. This book is a contemporary reinterpretation of the well-known poem accompanied by photographs of an African-American girl. There are no textual changes, and if it weren’t for the pictures, readers would likely assume that Mary was white. Recurring features within the melting pot books include nuclear families, standard English, and specific details indicating that, although authors were making an attempt to be color-blind, they might have been “sometimes influenced by some unconscious internalized images of Afro-Americans partially resulting from the negative images of the past” (43). Although the “melting pot” books ignored the “cultural distinctness” of African Americans, they were considered by Sims to be an improvement over the last typology, “social conscience” books, which I will explore in greater detail throughout this article.

“SOCIAL CONSCIENCE” BOOKS/STORY VARIATIONS

Sims writes, “in most cases the ‘social conscience’ books were created from an ethnocentric, non-Afro-American perspective which resulted in the perpetuation of undesirable attitudes” (18). She also noted that many of the books within this typology were poorly written and frequently contained “happily ever after” endings, stereotypes, and implausible episodes. The social conscience books that Sims analyzed were contemporary realistic fiction in that they focused mainly on the civil rights era and had been written during that time period as well.

Awareness of Sims’s work during the 1980s contributed to an increase in the number and proportion of culturally conscious books for children, written and illustrated by African-American authors and artists, later in the decade and into the 1990s (Miller-Lachmann, 1992). A generation of younger authors such as Rita Williams-Garcia, Sharon Draper, Christopher Paul Curtis, Karen English, and Andrea Davis Pinkney joined the pioneering and prolific older generation of Patricia and Fredrick McKissack, Virginia Hamilton, Walter Dean Myers, Eloise Greenfield, Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard, Mildred D. Taylor, and others. During this era, fewer children’s books by white authors and illustrators depicted African Americans in significant roles. Debates raged as to whether outsiders could present African-American characters effectively (Cooperative Children’s

Book Center, 1991; Rochman, 1993).

Concerns about the writer's background appeared to diminish by the end of the 1990s. However, the emergence of white authors writing about the African-American experience—often focusing on multiracial identity or relationships between blacks and whites past and present—raised questions about the reemergence of the self-conscious social conscience book. Had white writers and publishers learned anything from Sims's scholarship and the acclaimed works of African-American authors? Were these new books a recycling of the themes and stereotypes of previous works, or did they reflect a new understanding?

To find the answer, I analyzed 12 social conscience books for intermediate readers and young adults published between 1998 and 2002. Eight of the novels were historical fiction, while the remaining four were contemporary realistic fiction. As I read through the novels, I noted problematic aspects within the books and generated the following categories: stereotypes, active whites/passive blacks, beauty standards, language, and white perspective. In the remainder of the article, I will discuss the four story variations within the social conscience books that Sims examined, provide brief descriptions of the 12 recently published social conscience books, and explore the problematic aspects within them as well as the importance of teaching children to conduct critical readings of texts.

Sims (1982) noted the following story variations within the social conscience books: (1) "School desegregation—marching into the lion's den," (2) "How to behave when the black folks move in" or "Guess who's coming to dinner?" (3) "Doing it the right way—working within the system," and (4) "Learning to get along with whites." It is interesting to note that the recently published books that could be categorized as social conscience books are remarkably consistent in regard to these four variations. For instance, *The Starplace*, which illustrates the first story variation, is a historical novel that takes place during the early 1960s in Quiver, a small town in Oklahoma. Celeste, an African American, becomes the first black student to integrate the local junior high school. She is befriended by Frannie, a European American, who on a number of occasions stands up for Celeste when she is confronted with racial discrimination. Frannie and Celeste become friends partly through a mutual love of singing, and Frannie constantly describes her friend's voice in superlative terms.

Crossing Jordan, an example of the second variation, is the story of the friendship that develops between two girls. Jemmie, an African American, and Cassie, a European American, meet after Jemmie's family moves in next door. Cassie's father is a racist and builds a fence between his home and that of his new neighbors which, according to him, "even Michael Jordan couldn't see over" (2). The ending of the story appears contrived and implausible. Cassie's father, who has expressed strong racist sentiments throughout the entire book, attends a potluck dinner with Jemmie's family. Although he had expressed anger at his wife for scheduling

the event, he ultimately offers the following prayer: "Thank you Lord for food and friends" (140).

The Speed of Light illustrates the third social conscience story variation, "Doing it the right way." This story is set in the 1950s and is told from the perspective of Audrey Ina, an 11-year-old Jewish girl. Her father is attempting to help a black man who works for him obtain employment as a police officer. The story focuses on the anti-Semitism that Audrey Ina's family faces as a result of trying to "work within the system" and help Mr. Cardwell and his family.

Starfish Summer illustrates the fourth story variation, "Learning to get along with whites." In this contemporary story Amy is spending the summer at the beach with her aunt, and she wants to become friends with Crystal, who is initially hostile. Amy, a European American, learns that Crystal, an African American, is hesitant to become friends with her because the last friend whom Crystal met at the beach hurt her feelings and didn't return any of her letters. Although there are no racial conflicts, the book, in my opinion, is a social conscience book because Amy's main goal throughout the book seems to be solving Crystal's problem. Once she figures it out, she and Crystal become friends.

BRIEF DESCRIPTIONS OF THE REMAINING SOCIAL CONSCIENCE BOOKS

In order to provide contextual information for the remaining social conscience books that I will discuss throughout this article, I offer brief descriptions of them. *F Is for Freedom*, which takes place a decade before the Civil War, is the story of a young white girl who discovers that her parents are abolitionists and their home is a stop along the Underground Railroad. She takes an active role in helping a family of slaves to freedom. In *Bright Freedom's Song*, the main protagonist is a young white girl named Bright who discovers that her father, also an abolitionist, was once an indentured servant. Bright, too, begins to take an active role in helping to transport slaves to freedom in this story set several decades before the Civil War.

North by Night takes place in 1851 and through journal entries describes the experiences of a teenage white girl whose parents' home in Ohio is a station on the Underground Railroad. She befriends a runaway slave who is approximately her age and later takes the baby of this slave to freedom after the slave dies. *Stealing Freedom* is about a young black slave named Anna who travels on the Underground Railroad in hopes of being reunited with family members who have escaped to Canada. It too is set in the 1850s.

Darby takes place in South Carolina in 1926 and focuses on nine-year-old Darby, a white girl who wants to be a reporter. Darby is inspired to write because one of her closest friends, Evette, a black girl, is a talented writer. Darby eventually writes a story on racial equality for the local newspaper that creates controversy. *Jericho Walls* is set during the civil rights era, in 1957 in Alabama. It describes the experiences of Jo Clawson, a 12-year-old white girl who is

the daughter of a preacher, and her friendship with a black boy named Lucas.

The two remaining novels, *Foreign Exchange* and *Zack*, are contemporary realistic fiction. *Foreign Exchange* is a collection of poems told from the perspective of several teenagers that focuses on the murder of a white girl named Kristen Clarke. *Zack* is the story of a biracial Canadian teenager with a Jewish father and an African-American mother who has never met his mother's side of his family. Zack eventually decides to travel to Mississippi to meet his maternal grandfather.

PROBLEMATIC ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE BOOKS

Sims (1982) writes, "The most telling criticism of white authors writing fiction about Afro-American experience has been that their own experiences growing up white in a society that confers automatic and inherent social superiority to that condition have determined the perspective from which they write" (12). In their attempts to shed light on issues such as prejudice and discrimination, these authors, as Sims noted, "may mean good, [but] they do so doggone poor." Thompson and Woodard (1985) state, "The credentials of the writer who undertakes a book about blacks must include a black perspective based on an appreciation of black experience. Good intentions are not enough" (40). According to Thompson and Woodard, the social conscience books "tend to reinforce the very attitudes they are trying to dispel" (41).

STEREOTYPES

Most of these 12 recent social conscience books contain both positive and negative stereotypes associated with African Americans. The depiction of blacks as musically gifted is an example of a positive stereotype. For instance, in *The Starplace*, Celeste's musicality is described as far beyond that of her schoolmates. After she sings in class for the first time, "no one seemed to be breathing" (63). The music teacher thanks Celeste "in a voice like someone would use to thank a person who has just donated a lifesaving kidney to them. It was as though she was thanking Celeste not just for being wonderful, but for restoring her faith in music and even humanity itself, at least at the junior high variety" (63-64).

In *Crossing Jordan*, Jemmie's grandmother sings, "I am a wayfarin' stranger just traveling through this world of woe" while painting the fence (13). She sings on at least three other occasions as well. In *Speed of Light*, Audrey Ina's housekeeper breaks into song while talking to family members and she "believed in signs" (23). This belief in the supernatural constitutes another common stereotype, as demonstrated by the maid Abilene's belief in signs in *Jericho Walls*:

"Look there," Abilene said. A bird fluttered against the window, staring in

with darting eyes, then turned and flew back to a nest in the crook of our tree. "Now, what you know 'bout that! Y'all got a mockingbird in the neighborhood. Him flutterin' against the window that away means he's trying to bring good luck." (25)

Broderick (1973) noted in her book *The Image of the Black in Children's Fiction* that blacks were frequently depicted as both musically inclined and superstitious. Although some people may not view a focus on blacks' musical talents as offensive, according to Broderick (1973) "the cumulative impact" of portrayals such as those aforementioned "is to reinforce the misconception that all blacks have rhythm" (134).

Another disturbing feature of several of these recently published social conscience books is the tendency of the authors to describe how large African-American females are even when they are minor, insignificant characters. For instance, in *Zack*, the author describes two female relatives that Zack sees at a picnic: "Sharon was the widest woman I had ever seen. Her huge buttocks rose and fell like pistons as she walked. Rose was big too, but her sister-in-law made her look almost slender" (140). In *Stealing Freedom*, the main character, Anna, describes her Aunt Mimi as "moving slowly because of her plumpness" (15). She later describes a black woman with whom she lives while traveling on the Underground Railroad as "plump as a baked apple" (199). This same woman "made a deep indentation in the mattress" when she climbed in bed with Anna, due to her "large form" (204).

It is interesting to note that one doesn't find any descriptions of large European-American females throughout the books. When descriptions focus solely on the size of large black women while ignoring the size of large white women, they begin to take on racial overtones. Would an African-American author be as likely to offer descriptions such as these considering the negative stereotypes of African-American women as obese? When one considers that the authors are white, the question becomes, "Are these overweight, superstitious characters who sing based on real-life individuals whom the authors know quite well, or do they simply reflect stereotypes associated with African Americans?"

ACTIVE WHITES/PASSIVE BLACKS

Another recurring aspect within these books is the active white standing up for the passive black. Although there is nothing wrong with whites working alongside blacks in the struggle for racial equality, something is seriously wrong with whites being depicted as active agents for change while blacks stand by passively. In *Speed of Light*, for instance, at a town meeting to discuss hiring a black police officer, Audrey Ina's father does all of the talking, while Mr. Cardwell, the prospective police officer, and his family stand at the back of

the room and say nothing. In *The Starplace*, Frannie stands up for Celeste on several occasions while Celeste stands by passively. For instance, while Celeste is auditioning for a singing part, several students attempt to sabotage her performance by coughing, dropping notebooks, and giggling until Frannie “ran down and saved the day” by causing a disturbance of her own (129). Her quick action forces several of the students to leave the audition so Celeste can sing without interruption. Celeste doesn’t say or do anything other than stop singing and almost begin to cry.

On another occasion, Celeste is refused shoes, for sanitary reasons supposedly, at a bowling alley. According to Frannie, “Celeste’s eyes were bright with embarrassment. I could feel her straining to escape back through the crowd, so I grabbed her by the sleeve to make her stay” (161). Frannie then explains to the clerk that she and Celeste are at the bowling alley with the school. Again, Celeste doesn’t stand up for herself.

In *Bright Freedom’s Song*, the white protagonist, Bright, also appears to save the day by volunteering to transport a freed slave named Marcus along with other black slaves by wagon at night to a safe location on the Underground Railroad. Bright exclaims, “A Negro out at night all alone with a wagon hiding slaves?...I have the best chance to get them away from here” (115). Maybe it was dangerous for blacks to be alone traveling at night, but Marcus is a free, educated man who appears competent enough to transport slaves on his own. Consider Harriet Tubman, who most likely was alone at night many times with runaway slaves, yet she was one of the most successful conductors on the Underground Railroad.

BEAUTY STANDARDS

In several of these social conscience books, physical features associated with African Americans are depicted in a negative manner while the physical features associated with European Americans are described positively. For instance, when Bright, as a young child, sees a black slave hiding in the family’s henhouse for the first time, she exclaims, “The devil is in the henhouse. I saw it. With two big eyes” (6). Zack, a biracial teen, offers the following account of his African-American mother:

In spite of what Dad thought my mother wasn’t beautiful. Her nose—which I had inherited, lucky me—was a little too prominent and broad, the curved nostrils too wide. But she was pretty, with velvety, black unblemished skin, big eyes and a deep honey-mooth voice. (26)

While Zack insists his mother is pretty but not beautiful, which is itself puzzling, one is struck by his impression of her wide nostrils.

In *Foreign Exchange*, the girl who is considered the prettiest of all, Kristen Clarke, has blonde hair and blue eyes. The

girls are jealous of her, and the boys, black ones included, think she is hot. Similarly, in *Crossing Jordan*, Cassie’s sister is depicted as being “pretty as an angel,” although the physical descriptions of her speak only of her long blonde hair (23). Cassie is jealous of her sister, and even Jemmie, an African American, tells her “that sister of yours has the prettiest hair in the world” (38). This statement is reflective of the author’s ethnocentric standards. African Americans do not look on blonde hair in the same manner in which European Americans view it.

LANGUAGE

The dialogue of the black characters in several of these social conscience books was questionable and appeared inconsistent and culturally inauthentic. For instance, in *Bright Freedom’s Song*, Marcus, the free and educated former slave, speaks in the following manner with Bright:

You do be right smart...Yes, your papa and I have been friends for many years. I owe him my life and my freedom, the lives of my wife and others, too. And I believe that he owes me his freedom as well...Slaves come in all sizes and all colors in some places, Missy.... Here and now, people like me be slaves. But white people have been slaves in the past. Some are still slaves, though they are not called by that name. The Children of Israel were slaves of the Egyptians until Moses led them out of bondage. Yes, your papa was once bonded. But I reckon it be your papa’s place to tell you his side of this story. You better ask him....I be not sure what I should tell one so young. (16)

Later in the same conversation Marcus begins to tell Bright about his own past.

I ran. As fast as I could I went, but men wearing face paint I had never seen caught me. One of them threw me over his shoulder. The next morning we came to his village. He spoke to me but I did not know his tongue. As I learned to do the hard and dirty work of his village, I learned to speak and understand his tongue. I was the slave of my father’s enemies. The man who owned me made me work hard, but he did not beat me. From him, I learned that his people had killed my family...I lived there for a few harvesttimes and grew to

be a man. Then another people came in war to attack the village and killed my master. The winners of that war sold meto slavers. (17-18)

All of a sudden, Marcus is able to speak perfect “standard” English without the use of any “be’s.” Although it is common for educated African Americans to code switch depending on the context, Marcus’s speech is notably different within the same context.

In *Crossing Jordan*, Jemmie frequently uses the word “girl” in her speech to begin and end sentences. Consider the following passage:

“Do you like to run?”

“Run? Girl, I don’t run, I fly.

Can’t nobody beat me.”

“Bet I could.”

“Dream on, girl.” (15)

While the word “girl” is used in this manner by some African Americans, it appears so much in Jemmie’s dialogue throughout the book that it begins to sound culturally inauthentic. Just as Jemmie uses the word “girl” in her speech, her grandmother uses the words “Lord” and “child.” There is a fine line between how some blacks talk and how some white authors think some blacks talk. However, it must be noted that blacks are linguistically diverse. Many African Americans speak “standard English” consistently while other African Americans, myself included, switch back and forth between “standard” English and black vernacular depending on the context.

WHITE PERSPECTIVE

There were numerous details within these social conscience books that I considered reflective of white perspectives. I am fully aware that whites are not monolithic; however, I believe that there are certain viewpoints that are more common among whites than people of color. For instance, in *Jericho Walls*, there is an episode involving *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that seems troubling, implausible, and indicative of the white author’s perspective. Jo, the white daughter of the preacher, introduces her friend Lucas to this book, and the two of them begin reading it together. Surprisingly, there is no discussion or dialogue between the two of them in regard to Mark Twain’s repeated use of the word “nigger.” I find it difficult to believe that during the 1950s in Alabama, Lucas would not have voiced any complaints about the constant use of the word. Although literary critics contend that Twain was being satirical, I doubt if these two children would have taken this into consideration. After reading the book, they decide to build a raft, and Lucas tells Jo that he wants to be Huckleberry, to which she replies, “You can’t be Huckleberry....You ain’t white. You’re colored, so you have to be Ole Jim” (79). Lucas insists that he does not want to be Jim, and Jo responds by saying, “You shut up, Lucas! I say you gotta be Ole Jim” (79). While aware of why Lucas might have wanted to be the main character instead of his black

sidekick, the author doesn’t seem to realize that the use of the word “nigger” may have been especially uncomfortable for a black person living during the era of segregation.

Zack contains a number of misconceptions. The author assumes that people of all races can pull themselves up by their bootstraps with hard work. Zack’s father makes the following comment to his son as an explanation for why “the Jews are still around”: “Because, when things get bad, the Jews don’t sit around in bars...or loiter on street corners... moaning and complaining about being oppressed” (51). This way of thinking implies that certain groups of people, such as African Americans, could do more to improve their condition with hard work, and it reflects the bias of the author, a European American. This belief in meritocracy is more common among European Americans than people of color. Although there is anti-Semitism in American society, Jews of European ancestry have the luxury of benefiting from white privilege, which offers them numerous advantages over other groups whose members can’t “pass” for white.

Another characteristic of the white perspective is the depiction of whites as color-blind. Zack dates a white girl, and on one occasion she invites him over to her house. He asks her if her parents are aware that he is biracial, and she responds by telling him that they don’t care. Zack visits her home and meets her parents without any problems.

In the novel-in-verse *Foreign Exchange*, Kwame, a black student, states, “I hope Jason, the guy I’m staying with,/ Does not see me only in terms of black and white./I really hope he is color-blind” (96). This statement is reflective of the author’s point of view and not that of most African-American males, who are quite aware that Americans are not color-blind. Jensen (2001) states:

At this moment in history, being color-blind is a privilege available only to white people. Non-white people do not have the luxury of pretending that color can be ignored. When an African American man is stopped on the street, he has to be conscious of what his color means to white police officers who may associate blackness with criminality. (20)

Another feature indicative of the white perspective is a superficial understanding of racism on the part of the authors. For example, in *The Starplace*, the story concludes:

None of us—not one of our group—hung around Quiver after high school graduation. In fact, we scrambled out of there like we were being chased. After Celeste, we all understood deep in our bones that if a place refuses to be a launch pad for one person, it can’t function as a launch pad for anyone. (213)

The author makes it appear as if the racism in *Quiver* was an anomaly that the good-hearted characters could choose to escape. I would argue, as do critical race theorists, that racism is a normal and permanent component of American life (Bell, 1992).

Another example of this treatment of racism appears in *Darby*. After Darby asks her mother if her great-granddaddy had owned any slaves, her mother replies:

Neither of your great-granddaddies ever did. Nobody in our family owned any property before the war. But the fact of the matter is that everybody working a farm had them. It was just the way. They lived from the land and to do that they needed help. There wasn't any sort of hate or anger involved, which is what everyone seems to have forgotten. (143)

At the same time as she seeks to absolve the family's ancestors, Darby's mother seems unable to make the important distinction between "help" and slave labor. She also fails to realize that racism is not necessarily about hate and anger, but instead is about a system of privileges that functions to the benefit of whites and to the detriment of blacks and other people of color.

Also indicating a white perspective is the tendency to allow black protagonists, usually slaves, to divulge their personal information and life stories to whites whom they hardly know. For example, in *Bright Freedom's Song*, Bright asks several personal questions of Marcus after meeting him for the first time. She tells him, "We are friends....I would not say words that would take your freedom, I promise" (19). Marcus responds by saying, "We are friends, little one....I trust you to keep our secret" (19). In *North by Night*, a pregnant slave named Cass confesses to Lucinda, a white abolitionist, that she is pregnant by her master, along with other personal information. Similarly, in *F Is for Freedom*, a young white girl named Manda says to Hannah, a slave, "first tell me how you got away and what made you decide to try and go" (49). Hannah then provides the details. Even in today's society, without the threat of being captured and returned to slavery, there are certain topics that many African Americans don't discuss in "mixed company," and it certainly seems unlikely that black slaves who were on the run would be as open and exhibit such blind trust in whites.

In a number of the stories in which African Americans are confronted with racial bigotry or discrimination, they are depicted as being totally forgiving of racism, as if passivity is the solution. In *Starplace*, Frannie's brother, Mitch, says to Celeste, "I'm not listening to her when she talks! She's got the wrong skin on!" (117) Celeste responds by saying "Really Frannie, don't be hard on Mitch! I'll keep trying to win his confidence. Dr. King says peaceful resistance is the only way to open a closed mind and calm a fearful heart!" (122) In *Crossing Jordan*, Jemmie's mother becomes angry when she sees the fence that Cassie's father has put up between the

two houses. Jemmie's grandmother remarks, "Leona, honey, let it go. Like Jesus says, turn the other cheek. Love thy neighbor" (8).

The last recurring feature reflective of white perspective is the portrayal of blacks as being content with substandard living conditions. In *Stealing Freedom*, when Anna speaks with slaves from other plantations, one of them states, "My master wasn't too bad" (104). Another slave remarks, "Master Cahell, he fed us good" (105). On another occasion, when Anna asks her father if the way they are treated as slaves is fair, her father responds by saying, "What is fair is up to the Good Lord, not to us" (44). According to MacCann (1985), "this is a classic example of white perspective: the claim that blacks have no expectation of justice or a good life here on earth" (178). In *F Is for Freedom*, the slaves are made to eat in the closet for fear that they will be spotted by slave catchers. When they are told that they will have to eat in the closet, one of the slaves responds, "Your cooking's gonna taste as good in a closet as it does at your table. I know, 'cause we here can smell it....Now quit your worrying about us, we're fine as beetles in a bottle full o' leaves" (80). Unlike the authors of social conscience books, black writers of historical fiction such as Margaree King Mitchell, Christopher Paul Curtis, Patricia McKissack, Karen English, and Mildred D. Taylor depict African Americans, even those living under the direst circumstances, as people with pride, courage, and determination, not people to be pitied.

CONCLUSION

Considering the number of social conscience books that have been published over the last five years, it appears that there may be a resurgence of them. It is worth noting that Sims analyzed only contemporary realistic fiction, whereas most of the books that I analyzed are historical fiction, taking place around the Civil War or in the civil rights era. It is interesting to note that present-day white authors who confront racial issues within their books tend to focus on these two time periods. I would contend that a simplistic understanding of racism on the part of many white authors accounts for this, in that these periods are seen to highlight both the evils of racism and the potential for good-hearted whites to confront these evils.


Many of the problems Sims noted in books published between 1965 and 1979 are present in their recent counterparts. These include racial stereotypes, improbable episodes, contrived endings, literary mediocrity, and a heavy-handed presentation of the message or theme. Some of the books exhibit these flaws to a greater degree than others, as pointed out in the above sections. Hopefully, the fact that most of them were not well written and engaging will serve as a deterrent for young readers.

Although it may seem unfair and overly critical to pick out details, it is crucial to "read against" texts in order to uncover their hidden racial assumptions, however subtle they may be. Children's books serve as a vehicle for social-

ization and the formation of values, beliefs, and worldviews. Hollindale (1988) states:

It might seem that values whose presence can only be convincingly demonstrated by an adult with some training in critical skills are unlikely to carry much potency with children. More probably the reverse is true: the values at stake are usually those which are taken for granted by the writer, and reflect the writer's integration in a society which unthinkingly accepts them. In turn this means that children, unless they are helped to notice what is there, will take them for granted too. Unexamined, passive values are widely shared values, and we should not underestimate the powers of reinforcement vested in quiescent and unconscious ideology. (12-13)

Most of these books perpetuate stereotypes, and all of them exhibit a European-American perspective of the black experience. Unfortunately, several of them received favorable editorial reviews. *Crossing Jordan* was selected as an American Library Association (ALA) Notable Book, while *Speed of Light* won the Sydney Taylor Award for the positive depiction of a Jewish experience. Although *Speed of Light* did show sensitivity to the Jewish experience, it was insensitive to the African-American experience. *The Starplace*, by far the worst of all the social conscience books, was described in *School Library Journal* as "a wonderful, well-written, multilayered novel with lots of appeal."

It is books such as these that induce African Americans to question the capability, if not necessarily the right, of white authors to depict accurately the black experience, although many people, mainly whites, become incensed and view this as a form of censorship. It is unlikely that social conscience books will ever disappear. Kohl (1995) contends that it is virtually impossible to shield children from all the problematic aspects of American society such as Barbie dolls, G.I. Joe toys, and racist children's literature. Therefore, it becomes necessary for educators and parents to help children develop a critical consciousness so that when they encounter books such as *The Starplace*, *Crossing Jordan*, and *Speed of Light*, they will not be manipulated into "an unconscious acceptance of their values" (Nodelman, 1996; 120-121). Nodelman writes, "rather than allowing ourselves to become immersed in a text to the point of accepting its description of reality as the only true one, we can define its values and so arrive at a better understanding of our own" (121). 

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