

Parting Words: Runaway Multiculturalism by Beverly Slapin

Brown, Margaret Wise. *The Runaway Bunny*. New York: Harper & Row, 1942. Unp. Illus. by Clement Hurd. Gr. Preschool—up.

Joose, Barbara M. *Mama, Do You Love Me?* San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1991. Unp. Illus. by Barbara Lavallee. Gr. Preschool—up. Inuit.

Joose, Barbara M. *Papa, Do You Love Me?* San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005. Unp. Illus. by Barbara Lavallee. Gr. Preschool—up. Maasai.

Oral or written stories about children or anthropomorphic young animals looking for boundaries appeal to young children all over the world. Sometimes these are “teaching” stories, giving young listeners or readers a safe place in which to think about the limits of what they can and cannot do.

In Margaret Wise Brown’s delightful *Runaway Bunny*, first published in 1942 and continuously in print since then, a little bunny verbally spars with his mama rabbit, testing her unconditional love by declaring his plans to run away from home. As the mama rabbit joins in the game, the bunny’s imagined escapades—from becoming a fish to a flower to a rock to a bird to a tree to a sailboat to a circus performer to a little (human) boy—finally land him at home, where mama reassures him that she’ll always be around to take care of him. In 1942, when much of the world was at war, mama rabbit’s calm reassurance resonated with young human children and, along with Brown’s *Goodnight Moon* in 1947, still does.

In 1991, Barbara M. Joosse teamed up with illustrator Barbara Lavallee to produce a *Runaway Bunny* redux with a contrived multicultural overlay. Entitled *Mama, Do You Love Me?* the emphasis is still on talking, but this time, the bunnies have been recast as humans—Inuit. As an Inuk child tests the limits of her mother’s love, mother’s answers (“I love you more than the raven loves his treasure, more than the dog loves his tail, more than the whale loves his spout”) are pushed (“What if I put salmon in your parka, ermine in your mittens, and lemmings in your mukluks?”), and finally, the child ends up on Mother’s lap with a doll on her lap, and Mother declaring, “I will love you forever and for always, because you are my Dear One.” While this kind of thing might be almost believable in a European or European-American cultural context, this is not typical of the way Inuit children and their parents communicate.

While Clement Hurd’s black-and-white line drawings and simply rendered watercolors beautifully complement *Runaway Bunny*, Lavallee’s watercolors are a weak attempt at imitating an Inuit art style. The nuances, the delicate details, are not there, and the cultural context is wrong. A child is shown playing with masks. There’s a flapping tent for shelter in deep snow. Happy little puppies are loosely tied to a sled. This kind of imagery mocks a people who live and thrive in a land where survival depends on the teachings of a millennia-old belief system, on the ability to hunt and fish and to get from place to place, on the ability to create adequate shelter. Joosse’s glossary contains numerous errors as well. For instance, ravens and

crows are not the same bird called by different names; they are different birds. Ravens (the birds) do not play an important part in Inuit culture; Raven (the Being) does.

Despite all of its failings, *Mama, Do You Love Me?* garnered much critical acclaim from the major review journals, and, according to the publisher, sales have topped the million mark.

Generally, young people in indigenous societies are *shown* their place and importance in the group. Large extended families of many grandparents, aunts, and uncles surround children with affection. A smile, a hug, a hand placed on a child’s head in blessing, an additional responsibility given, a giveaway to the community in a child’s honor, a change in a name to reflect growth—a child is not constantly reassured by *talk* of love because it is not necessary.

Now, Joosse and Lavallee have produced *Papa, Do You Love Me?*, an almost-clone of *Mama, Do You Love Me?*—this time transplanted to what they probably hope is even richer soil, in Africa. The characters here are Maasai. So of course there have to be Maasai cultural details: “I love you more than the warrior loves to leap, more than the bush baby loves the moon, more than the elder loves his stories. . . . I’ll love you as long as the wildebeest run on the mara, the hippopotamus wallows in mud, and the Serengeti rolls to the sky.” Poetic, yes; authentic, no. If a Maasai child relentlessly tested the limits of his father’s love like this, it is probable that a doctor would be sought out. And Lavallee’s paintings, while once again loaded with cultural details, are described as “graceful watercolors” that “feature a harmoniously balanced palette,” “rich in tone and hue, expressive line and expansive gesture. . . .” What the reviewers miss is that within this kind of artistic context comes an unfortunate tendency to fix people in time, generally long ago. In the case of *Papa, Do You Love Me?* the images of Papa in sandals and an elder wearing eyeglasses are too miniscule for young readers to discern that the characters live in this century. Finally, the constant use of the word “love” to describe humans and animals doing the things they naturally do demeans and trivializes the community with which the presumed child-reader audience may have no familiarity.

This formula of combining a “universal” (read Euro-specific) message with “exotic” pictures (read alien brown people and their otherworldly surroundings) continues to result in books about a world defined by white people, written by white people, illustrated by white people, published by white people, reviewed by white people, and marketed to white people as “multiculturalism.” The *Mama (Papa) Do You Love Me?* books are a kind of cookie-cutter cross-culturalism that doesn’t need to contain a gram of authenticity to make bank. Relentless dysconsciousness pays; *Runaway Bunny* has morphed into runaway multiculturalism.

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