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The Lasting Legacy of Rudine Sims Bishop: Mirrors, Windows, Sliding Glass Doors, and More

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Abstract

This essay profiles Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, the 2020 Distinguished Scholar Lifetime Achievement Award recipient. It begins with biographical information about Bishop and her career trajectory in education followed by descriptions of three of her landmark works and the ways a sampling of scholars have utilized and expanded upon them. The three works are the book *Shadow and Substance*: *Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction*, an article titled "Strong Black Girls: A Ten Year Old Responds to Fiction About Afro-Americans", and the groundbreaking article "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors". The essay concludes with thoughts from various individuals about the ways her scholarship has impacted them and the field.

Keywords

African American children's literature, cultural authenticity, diversity, Rudine Sims Bishop

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> I've often referred to Dr. Bishop as my "Fairy-God Scholar." Through her powerful insights, she is the one who gave us the spot-on vocabulary that so brilliantly articulates the need for children to see themselves reflected in books. And also, the critical need to offer kids an up-close look at the experiences of children unlike themselves. Windows. Mirrors. My "Fairy-God Scholar" coined this critical call to action. She's given so many brown-skinned kids a way to say: "Mirror, mirror on the wall—Black IS truly beautiful."
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> A. D. Pinkney (personal communication, January 4, 2021)

Presented for the first time in 2001, the purpose of the Distinguished Scholar Lifetime Achievement Award is to recognize an individual for a lifetime contribution that has had a significant impact on literacy theory, practice, and research. It acknowledges persons who have not been active participants of the Literacy Research Association but whose scholarship has had a major impact on the theory, practice, and research of its members. Previous recipients of this prestigious award include scholars such as Drs. Shirley Brice Heath, Marie Clay, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Luis Moll, Sonia Nieto, and Louise Rosenblatt. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, Professor Emerita in the College of Education and Ecology at The Ohio State University, is the 2020 recipient.

Our essay begins with biographical information about Bishop and her career trajectory in education followed by descriptions of three of her landmark works and the ways a sampling of scholars have utilized and expanded upon them. The three works are the book *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction* (Sims, 1982), an article titled "Strong Black Girls: A Ten Year Old Responds to Fiction About Afro-Americans" (Sims, 1983), and the groundbreaking article "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" (Bishop, 1990). The essay concludes with reflections from various individuals (e.g., scholars of children's literature, an executive director of a picture book art museum) about the ways her scholarship has impacted them and the field of literacy.

Biographical Information and Career Trajectory

Bishop grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania, and as early as the fourth grade knew she wanted to be a teacher. After graduating from high school, she attended West Chester State Teachers College and then began teaching in Bucks County, PA—at first in third grade and later in fifth grade. She earned a master's degree in Reading Education from the University of Pennsylvania. She also worked as a language arts supervisor in Upper Bucks County before heading off to Morgan State University to teach for 2 years. While at Morgan State, she attended a conference in Houston where she met Dr. Kenneth Goodman who encouraged her to pursue a doctoral degree in curriculum development at Wayne State University. After completing her doctoral program, she spent 1 year at the State University of New York at Buffalo before heading to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst where she worked until 1986. The legendary Dr. Charlotte S. Huck had recently retired from The Ohio State

University, and Bishop was hired as a full professor to fill Huck's position in the children's literature program there. When Bishop arrived at Ohio State, she was the second African American female full professor on the entire campus. At Ohio State, Bishop cochaired a highly respected children's literature conference for many years, along with Dr. Janet Hickman. She also taught a range of courses focusing on topics such as the history of children's literature, poetry, multicultural children's literature, and the history of African American children's literature. In addition, she served on the Randolph Caldecott and John Newbery Award Selection Committees. Later during her retirement, she chaired the Coretta Scott King Book Award Jury.

Over the course of her career, Bishop received many awards such as the Anne Devereaux Jordan Award (for outstanding achievement in children's literature) from the Children's Literature Association, the International Literacy Association's Arbuthnot Award (for outstanding college or university teachers of children's and young adult literature), the Carle Honors Mentor Award (for enriching the world of children's books) from the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, the Coretta Scott King-Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement (given to a practitioner "for substantial contributions through active engagement with youth using award-winning African American literature for children and/or young adults") from the American Library Association (http://www.ala.org/rt/emiert/virginia-hamilton-award-lifetime-achievement), and the National Council of Teachers of English Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts Award (for educators who have made lasting contributions to language arts in elementary education). She was inducted into the Reading Hall of Fame in 2001.

Bishop's books, including one published under the surname of Sims—her name before marrying Dr. James J. Bishop—are *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction* (1982), *Presenting Walter Dean Myers* (1991), *Kaleidoscope: A Multicultural Booklist for Grades K–8* (1994), *Wonders: The Best Children's Poems of Effie Lee Newsome* (1999), and *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature* (2007). Bishop's life's work was built on the premise that all children—African American children especially—need literature that provides opportunities for them to read and learn about the African American experience in all of its diversity and complexity. Bishop (2003) argued for these books to be culturally authentic. In regard to cultural authenticity, she wrote that it "has to do with the success with which a writer is able to reflect the cultural perspectives of the people about whom he or she is writing" and whether or not an author "makes readers from inside the group believe that the writer 'knows what's going on'" (p. 29). The three landmark exemplars highlighted in this essay speak to her life's work and the importance of culturally authentic African American children's literature being made available to all children.

Landmark Works

Shadow and Substance

As a doctoral student at Wayne State University, Bishop taught undergraduate children's literature courses. Once in the early 1970s, she and other doctoral students who taught these courses were asked to help at a book fair. Bishop noted there was a set of books about African Americans that Dr. Donald J. Bissett, the director of the children's literature program, had named the "Darker Brother" collection after a line in Langston Hughes's famous poem titled "I Too." Bissett suggested that he and Bishop write an article about the books from their differing perspectives: hers as an African American woman and student and his as a White man and children's literature scholar. Bishop (2012) wrote, "At the time, I was focused on my dissertation, and Don and I never got around to writing that piece, but the seeds of a scholarly vocation had been planted" (p. 5).

The research conducted in *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction* (Sims, 1982) was inspired by Bissett's suggestion years earlier. Sims (1982) conducted an analysis of 150 contemporary realistic titles published from 1965 through 1979 featuring African Americans. Her analysis was guided by three foci: the audience for these books, "the extent to which a distinctive African American cultural experience was reflected," and the "author's implicit cultural perspective and ultimately its effect on the treatment of the books' themes and characters" (p. 7). Three literary categories or typologies emerged during the analysis: social conscience, melting pot, and culturally conscious. Social conscience titles were mainly written by White authors, and their purpose seemed to be to make Whites aware of issues that Blacks experience, such as discrimination and other types of racial conflict. Oftentimes, racial issues were presented in superficial ways that failed to address systemic racism. Sims found that distinguishing characteristics of books in this particular category included White villains, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and recurring clichés (e.g., the fatherless home). In regard to the social conscience books, Sims noted, "they may mean good, but they do so doggone poor" (p. 29). Melting pot books were those in which—were it not for the skin color of the characters—they could be any race and the story would not be altered. Sims wrote, "the melting pot books ignore all differences *except* physical ones: skin color and other racially related physical features. The result is that the majority of them are picture books" (p. 33). Sims noted the books in this category seemed to be intended for Black and White readers—unlike the social conscience books which appeared to be aimed mainly at White readers. One classic title that is representative of the melting pot category Sims recognized in her analysis was *The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1962). These stories generally did not focus on issues such as discrimination or racial prejudice, and they did not offer "any distinctly Afro-American experiences or traditions" (p. 34). Sims wrote that although the "melting pot books represent a major improvement over invisibility and over most of the social conscience books" (p. 45), "[t]o ignore linguistic and

sociocultural characteristics of a large group of children may be another means of conferring a kind of invisibility on them" (p. 46).

The last category was culturally conscious books, which Sims (1982) argued, "come closest to constituting a body of Afro-American literature for children" (p. 49). These books did reflect the cultural distinctiveness associated with African Americans. Sims wrote:

> 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. At minimum this means that the major characters are Afro-Americans, the story is told from their perspective, the setting is an Afro-American community or home, and the text includes some means of identifying the characters as Black—physical descriptions, language, cultural traditions, and so forth. (p. 49)

The majority of the authors of culturally conscious titles were Blacks such as Virginia Hamilton, John Steptoe, and Lucille Clifton.

These three categories or typologies have been applied by others in various contexts. For example, McNair (2003) examined 12 social conscience books published between 1998 and 2002 and found that 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" (p. 31). Quiroa (2004) applied the concept of "culturally conscious" books within the context of a study that examined Mexican American youth responding to Mexican American children's literature. Quiroa used the characteristics of this typology for book selection—purposely selecting "culturally conscious" Mexican American children's literature. Cart and Jenkins (2006) utilized the typologies to examine gay, lesbian, and queer (LGBTQ) young adult literature. In regard to *Shadow and Substance* (Sims, 1982), children's literature scholar and Professor Emerita at the University of Minnesota, Dr. L. Galda (personal communication, February 21, 2021) noted that it helped her "learn to read both individual books and the field itself with a more critical eye." Children's literature expert and Professor Emerita at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, Dr. Violet J. Harris (2007) wrote that the impact of *Shadow and Substance* "can be found in numerous dissertations, articles, and books examining not just African American literature for youth but also Asian Pacific American, Latino/a, Native American, and LGBTQ literature" (p. 154) and that Bishop's book is "without a doubt, . . . a classic" (p. 154).

Osula and Her Preferences

In 1983, Sims published a landmark article about a girl named Osula's reading preferences. The title was "Strong black girls: A ten year old responds to fiction about Afro-Americans." Brooks and McNair (2009) described this as "one of the first

investigations of a reader's responses to contemporary African American children's literature" (p. 144). Osula expressed a preference for books about Black girls. She shared a listing of some of her favorite titles which included numerous melting pot books by Ezra Jack Keats and culturally conscious titles by authors such as Lucille Clifton and Mildred D. Taylor. Sims noted that Osula responded in a positive manner to: "(a) experiences which related to her own, (b) distinctly Afro-American cultural experiences, (c) Black female characters with whom she could identify, (d) characters who were strong, active, clever, (e) humorous situations, (f) lyrical language, (g) aesthetically pleasing illustrations" (p. 25). Harris (2007) wrote that Sims's research revealed how "Osula's book selection was circumscribed by the limited availability of children's literature about Blacks" (p. 155). Osula wanted to read books that spoke to her personal experiences, highlighting the fact that for many children who looked like her, their options for "mirrors" were limited—unlike those for White children.

Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors

Of all the work that Bishop produced, the piece that is likely referenced or cited the most is her thought-provoking article, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." Though this analogy might seem deceptively simple, it is complex and has stood the test of time in its profound message which has impacted teachers, librarians, publishers, editors, and many others. Harris (2007) wrote that these words became a "succinct metaphor for some of the primary purposes of sharing multicultural literature with children" (p. 153). A portion of this widely cited article reads:

> Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Bishop, 1990, p. ix)

Bishop's analogy speaks to the importance of all children being able to see images of themselves and others in the books that they read. Though in the article she used the analogy mainly in regard to race, it should be noted that the analogy can be thought about in ways that move beyond race. McNair (2016) wrote, "As there are multiple aspects to our identities, consequently there are a number of ways in which we can see ourselves reflected" (p. 379). For example, African American children vary in regard to identity markers such as socioeconomic status, disability, sexuality, and so on. Like race, these identity markers should be reflected in the books that children read. All these various identity markers can and should be seen in mirrors.

Bishop's analogy has been used by many scholars and some have even added to it (Botelho, 2021; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Möller, 2016; Reese, 2018; Smolkin & Young, 2011; Tschida et al., 2014). Tschida et al. (2014) utilized the concept of "mirrors and windows" along with novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) concept about the danger of a single story becoming *the only story* to support their preservice teachers in making text selections. They wrote that these two concepts, when brought together, "stretch and reinforce each other in productive ways that support our students' attempts at making their book selections more critical and equitable" (p. 29). Native American children's literature scholar Dr. Debbie Reese contends that as a child she was raised to understand that some stories are not to be shared with outsiders. She wrote,

> To capture this concept, I have been adding a "curtain" to Bishop's (1990) "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" metaphor when I talk or write about Native stories. This is a way to acknowledge and honor the stories behind the curtain—those that are purposefully kept within Native communities. (Reese, 2018, p. 390)

Dr. Jonda C. McNair created a "Mirrors and Windows" children's literature newsletter, which has been published since 2012 (https://www.collaborativeclassroom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Spring_2020_Mirrors_Windows_Newsletter.pdf). On the first page of each newsletter, McNair writes:

> As a doctoral student at The Ohio State University, I had the privilege of being mentored by Dr. Bishop. Her commitment to equity issues in relation to children's literature has significantly impacted my scholarship. I have titled this newsletter "Mirrors and Windows" because it is my intention to provide children with opportunities to see images of themselves and others in the featured books.

The newsletter contains reviews written by preservice teachers of recently published and older culturally diverse titles spanning various genres for children in Grades K–6. In addition to reviews, the newsletter features profiles of notable authors and illustrators—with an emphasis on people of color—and children's artwork/writing in response to books.

Impact on the Field

In order to gauge Bishop's influence on the field of literacy, we reached out to a number of individuals—from children's literature scholars to the executive director of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art. Dr. K. G. Short (personal communication, March 1, 2021), Professor at the University of Arizona, wrote:

> The field has benefited greatly from Rudine's ability to create frameworks and metaphors that provide a way for others to make sense of complex issues. Her metaphor of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors and her framework of evaluating books

> according to the categories of social conscience, melting pot and culturally conscious, as well as her distinction between culturally specific and culturally generic books have been highly influential for so many scholars and educators. They have been used by researchers to frame their own research and scholarship but also have provided a means for teachers and community members to understand the key issues involved in literature as a cultural expression.

Similarly, N. Glass (personal communication, May 11, 2021), the Founder and Executive Director of TeachingBooks.net, when asked how Bishop has impacted his work responded that she "created invaluable tools that offer both clarity on evaluating multicultural texts, and an accessible language so that every reader can see, affirm, and/or learn about culture in the books they read." Filled with more than 255,000 resources such as meet-the-author recordings, book award listings, and tools to search for titles across genres, topics, age range, and cultural areas such as race, gender, and disability, TeachingBooks.net is a "literacy service used daily to instill a love of reading by students, educators, and families in over 33,000 schools, thousands of public library branches, and hundreds of teacher education institutions" (TeachingBooks, n.d., "On A Personal Note" section).

Both Short and Glass acknowledge the value of Bishop's conceptual tools to foster critical thinking around issues of diversity, authenticity, and children's literature.

V. J. Harris (personal communication, May 8, 2021) wrote:

> Some scholarly texts acquire esteemed status beyond academia. For example, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) pioneered urban sociology and critical ideologies about race respectively. These two books resonate with even greater relevance and resonance today. The phrase, "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" is as familiar to many as Du Bois's idea about double consciousness (arguably, a precursor to theories about multi-identities).

A. Kennedy (personal communication, January 26, 2021), the Executive Director of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, wrote:

> I first learned about Dr. Bishop and her powerful work advocating for diversity in children's books when I came to The Carle more than a decade ago. Recognizing how critical her message was, our educators shared and discussed her writings frequently. So, it has been thrilling for the staff here in recent years to watch her message grow into an entire movement—one that has prompted so many important conversations and new books.

The Eric Carle Museum has, over the years, regularly featured exhibits highlighting numerous illustrators of color (e.g., Jerry Pinkney, Kadir Nelson, Ashley Bryan), and this practice, we suspect, is influenced to some degree by the fact that the museum educators and staff are readers of Bishop's scholarship. In an interview with McNair and Hoover (2021), Kennedy noted, "For the last five or ten years, we've exhibited a

much wider range of artists and styles—more younger artists, more women, more artists of color" (p. 276). The reflections of Kennedy and others reveal the widespread influence of Bishop and how her work has impacted so many involved in literacy and children's literature.

Conclusion

In the words of Dr. Violet J. Harris, we agree that "One cannot or should not speak or write about multiculturalism, diversity, intersectionality, and so on without referencing Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop." Likewise, Professor Emerita at the University of Minnesota, L. Galda (personal communication, February 21, 2021) noted that Bishop's "work was and is a tremendous contribution to the children's literature community." Bishop has given the field of literacy at least two important gifts: an accessible analogy that articulates the value of all children seeing themselves and others in their literature *and* the need to look closely at the literature for consideration of issues related to authenticity and the cultural details that make bodies of work such as African American children's literature distinct. This makes her one of the most influential literacy scholars of the 21st century. Bishop is indeed a "Fairy-God Scholar," and not just for children's book author and editor Andrea Davis Pinkney but for many others. We argue that the most important beneficiaries of her work have been African American children; as a result of interacting with and learning from teachers, museum directors, and librarians who have taken Bishop's words to heart, they can look at mirrors and realize that Black *is* indeed beautiful.

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