Facing the Black Child

The Bold Direction of Twenty-First-Century Picturebooks

MICHELLE H. MARTIN

Years ago, as a Clemson University assistant professor of English, I assigned a service learning project to my students, all of whom were upper-class education majors who would become classroom teachers within a few years of taking my Children's Literature course. Each student visited our local Head Start for three quarters of the sixteen-week semester to read one-on-one with a child.

To gain a deeper understanding of both the children and the project, I participated as well and read with two four-year-olds, Taneal and Shawndre, to whom I became so attached that I continued working with them through elementary school.

My most memorable encounter with these two girls was our reading of Doreen Rappaport and Bryan Collier's *Martin's Big Words* (Scholastic, 2001). When I read, "On his second day there, he was shot. He died," Taneal asked why.

Her grandma had told her Martin Luther King Jr. was a good man; why would someone shoot him? I assured her that he was a good man, but people didn't like that he was trying to make life better for African Americans like us. Accustomed to looking for the photo of the author and/or illustrator on the back flap, Shawndre asked if she could see a picture on the flap of the person who had shot Martin Luther King Jr. What stayed with me even more was our discussion of Bryan Collier's image of the young black girl whose face and torso appear over a fragmented image of the American flag.

The young readers commented on the girl's stern expression and direct gaze, and I asked them why they thought she was frowning. One answered, "Maybe she's not happy with the way America is treating her," and a discussion about discrimination ensued—one much more complicated than I had thought possible with four-year-olds.

Committed to exposing my book buddies to "mirror books," in Rudine Sims Bishop's terms,[1] I usually made sure the girls' readings included lots of books by and about people of color. But as an African American reader born in the mid-1960s, I had grown up with (almost exclusively) white children looking out at me from between the covers of the books I read. Hence, this confrontational gaze of the black child struck me as unusual and innovative.

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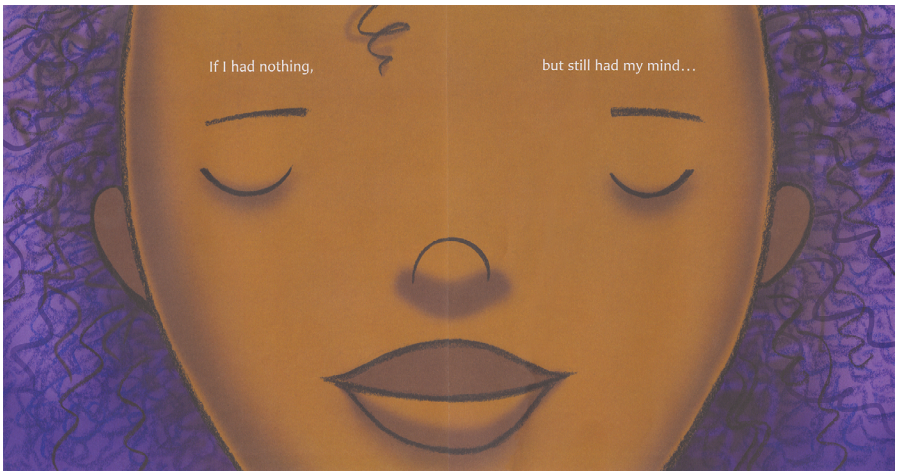

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I was accustomed to seeing images like Sophie's from Molly Bang's *When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry* (Blue Sky Press, 1999), which won a Caldecott Honor in 2000 and features a white, blonde-haired, blue-eyed sibling who gets so angry in a tussle with her sister over a stuffed gorilla that her whole face interrupts the story. Shown right of center, spanning the gutter and filling up nearly the entire page, her face illustrates just how much anger Sophie has. Sophie's piercing gaze, set against a bright red background, feels inescapable.

In Kes Gray and Nick Sharratt's *Eat Your Peas* (Abrams, 2006), a similar moment occurs. As Daisy, with brownish-red hair and a sugar-bowl haircut, insists more and more fervently that "I don't like peas," her mother just as fervently makes increasingly more ridiculous promises of what Daisy will earn if she will only eat her peas. Eventually, this promise involves "every supermarket, candy store, toy store, and bike store in the world," the moon, and Africa (really?), among other impossible bribes.

As the encounter progresses, Daisy's pink-cheeked face gets bigger and bigger, eventually taking up so much of the right page that only part of her hair fits onto the page. Having kids like Sophie and Daisy "in my face" to make a point felt normal, while having a black child meet me with a confrontational gaze felt bold.

I write book reviews regularly for professional journals, and within only the last several months, I have reviewed an unusual number of picturebooks by and about people of color in which illustrators insist that readers face a child of color—not from a profile or rear view but from a face-front or even full-body view and typically at the climax of the plot.

This phenomenon occurs in Vanessa Brantley-Newton's picturebook *Grandma's Purse* (Knopf, 2017); Matt de la Peña's *Love*, illustrated by Loren Long (Putnam, 2018); Samantha Berger's *What If . . .* , illustrated by Mike Curato (Little, Brown, 2018); and Derrick Barnes's *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut*, illustrated by Gordon C. James (Bolden/Agate, 2017). Each of these stories makes an important contribution to contemporary picturebooks by and about people of color, and I believe it's no mistake that they all make the faces of black and brown children the center of focus at the highest point of emotional intensity in each story.

In *Grandma's Purse*, the protagonist enjoys her Mimi's visits so much, in part because of what she finds in Mimi's purse each time she comes. This purse, a patchwork of colors with what look like multicolored ribbons bursting out of it (but could represent the purse's magic), contains items like lipstick, bobby pins, and candy, but it also carries photos of family members Mimi holds dear.

The last item that the protagonist pulls from the purse is a miniature version of Mimi's purse—a gift just for the granddaughter. The face-front image of this young girl appears after she has donned absolutely everything she finds in Mimi's purse—bobby pins, lipstick, earrings, "smell-good," and more. Taking up the majority of the right page, she smiles out at the reader, face swallowed up by Mimi's sunglasses, clearly happy to be in the admiring presence of and spending quality time with her Mimi. Her brown face and nappy, barretted hair, along with Mimi's kente cloth skirt and black doll, remind readers that this isn't just any girl—she's a black girl,

and one whose Mimi affirms her identity as a child of color.

In *What If . . .* the young brown-skinned protagonist with purple hair asks what would happen if her drawing pencil disappeared. She says it wouldn't matter. She'd draw in the dirt, tear wallpaper, carve wood, and even create art out of the contrasts between darkness and light. As she goes on an imaginative journey—a type of journey, it should be noted, afforded very few black and brown protagonists throughout the history of African American children's picturebooks—she uses her art materials and her imagination to travel to faraway places. Yet, when she returns home, observant readers will see that the objects integral to her fantastic journey all sit in her room. In the text accompanying the face-front image, the protagonist says, "If I had nothing, but still had my mind . . . ," whereupon readers open up the gatefold illustration to a four-page spread of her fantasies in full bloom. Hence, her closed eyes and peaceful expression suggest how comfortable she is with creating other worlds in her mind. Her broad lips, brown skin, and kinky hair give readers accustomed to seeing Fancy Nancy and Eloise as the poster children for imagination and imaginative play another option for who also belongs at the generative core of these flights of fancy.

In de la Peña's *Love*, both the author and illustrator emphasize how complicated love can be. Even when a little boy sits underneath the piano, head on his knees, snuggled up to his dog while his parents have a fight that seems to have turned violent, still the boy's parents love him. When something as catastrophic as a terrorist attack happens and nobody is explaining to the kids why everyone is staring at the TV in disbelief, love lives within that family.

As the image of the brown-skinned, brown-eyed girl directly addresses the reader visually, the narrator says, "And the face staring back in the bathroom mirror . . . this, too, is love." The fact that this line culminates the commentary on many different types of love suggests the importance of self-love and self-acceptance, especially when the face looking back in the bathroom mirror is brown.

Reproduced with permission from *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick J. Barnes, illustrations by Gordon C. James, © 2017, a Denene Millner Book, Agate Bolden.

Finally, in the "winner-take-all" picturebook of the 2018 American Library Association's Youth Media Awards, *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes and illustrated by Gordon C. James, readers get not just the face but the full torso of the unnamed protagonist in a portrait spread that interrupts this landscape-oriented book. More than any other text in this article and perhaps even more than any other recent African American picturebook, the black male protagonist in this book positions himself in the reader's face from the first to the last page. Narrated in second person—"Every person in the shop will rise to their feet and give you a round

of applause for being so FLY!"—the narrator makes the readers' participation inescapable; he is talking directly to you and often also looking directly at you. Steeped in bravado and hubris—"[A fresh cut] hooks up your intellectual."—he exudes self-confidence.

Hyperbolic to the core—"He'll drape you like royalty with that cape to keep the fine hairs off of your neck and your princely robes"—he raises a quotidian weekly or bi-weekly haircut to the level of an activity worthy of a standing ovation. Even more significantly, he also notes that many details of his haircut make him smarter and better prepared for academic excellence. Rare indeed is this connection in an American picturebook of any kind between a black kid's self-care and scholastic aptitude.

Why are there so many books now that insist readers look at the black and brown child? Why are there so many books that position children of color as subjects at the center of their own small universes?

I believe these books would not have been possible without #BlackLivesMatter and probably #WeNeedDiverseBooks, #WeNeedDiverseReviewers, #ReadingWhileWhite, and other movements both within the children's book industry and within contemporary American culture.

First, the appearance of this many picturebooks by and about people of color in this narrow a time span has only recently become possible. The Cooperative Children's Book Center's (CCBC) statistics have ceased to surprise us; we know how hard it is for authors and illustrators of color to publish within the mainstream children's literature industry, especially first-time writers and artists. What these books bring into our 2018 conversations are reminders that not just white police but regular Americans need to see children of color. When white police officers don't see them, they assume them armed and dangerous and shoot and kill them. When white children and their parents don't see children of color, they stand aside and watch or walk briskly away instead of standing up and stepping in when they witness black and brown children suffering injustice. This bold new direction in twenty-first-century picturebooks addresses perpetrators of racism and bystanders alike with confrontational, proud representations of black and brown children who have stories they want you—all of you—to hear.

The average white American knows next to nothing about African American hair and the practices and rituals surrounding its care. In creating and publishing *Crown*, master craftsmen Barnes and James not only have joined Alexis De Veaux (*An Enchanted Hair Tale* [Harper & Rowe, 1987]), Natasha Anastasia Tarpley (*Bippity Bop Barbershop* [Little, Brown, 2002]), bell hooks (*Be Boy Buzz* [Jump at the Sun, 2002]), and a handful of others in moving something as sacred as the African American barbershop into the mainstream of children's literature, but they also have made history by winning both Coretta Scott King Awards as well as Newbery and Caldecott honors. As a result, people who, up till now, haven't been listening to what black and brown children have to say, and people who haven't been seeing them and their self-confidence and their pride, will have to sit up and start paying attention. And if you don't get it the first time, authors of color will keep putting our children in your face again and again and again.

Given that in 2050, the minority will be the majority and that infant children of color are already in the majority,[2] here's what the black and brown characters in these books are saying: *See us. We aren't going anywhere!*

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