PEER-REVIEWED

Dovey Undaunted

The Social and Cultural Practices of Literacy in Tonya Bolden's Book

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Biographies and memoirs, which are the recorded experiences of others, can play a crucial role in formal literacy learning by offering a platform to develop the skills and literacies necessary to build legacies of self-empowerment. By showcasing key events, cultural objects, and social markers in individuals' lives, biographies become mirrors or windows for building character and shaping lives. They can also serve as a lamp illuminating paths for readers to be guided by others.[1]

Engaging with biographies can become a transformative experience for the next generation. Reading about significant people, whether aspiring to be a president, a social media influencer, or a construction worker, invites us to explore literacy-in-persons, to inquire about the ways that literacy practices are fundamental to individual and collective histories.

Gardner explains that "the past is instructive for understanding historical practices and the continuity of knowledge and care that should be considered part of the ideological framing of representations of Black people and their experiences in literature for children."[2] By engaging with texts centered on the lives of Black people, young readers are exposed to the literacy habits and practices that empower those who often face oppression and discrimination. These biographies may mention the books and newspapers the subjects read, or the schools they attended, but they can also convey underlying messages about how they navigated political situations, intonations, and expressions to seize opportunities.

This work aims to demonstrate how biographies for young readers exemplify the social and cultural practices of literacy and their legacies. Biographies and memoirs provide evidence of how literacy skills empowered Black people by enabling them to acquire wealth, maintain relationships, and maneuver through oppression, discrimination, and injustice. By reading about these lives, readers come to understand that a person's legacy of literacy, the result of their engaged interactions with literacy practices in day-to-day activities, leads to the realization of their potential beyond the constraints imposed by others.[3]

Validating the legacy of those in whose shadow we stand by examining the text of their life's story can provide young readers with the opportunity to validate their own experiences. The essential question here is: How do middle-grade biographies exemplify the social and cultural practices of literacy, and how do they contribute to the transmission of literacy skills and legacies within the Black community? To address this question, I explore Tonya Bolden's *Dovey Undaunted* (Norton 2021), an exemplary text that provides access to literacy-in-persons.

Literature Review

Literacy is a fluid concept with many definitions. The most relevant one here is that literacy is "a social and cultural practice that individuals enact in relationship to their contexts and communities."[4] In the literature, we can find concepts that give context for

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using these middle-grade biographies to trace legacies of literacy. Contemporary pedagogies suggest how these biographies can be used to affirm and connect with students' culture.

Johnson and Cowles' work develops the concept of literacy-in-persons that interprets "how individuals are always forming as literate beings, as they hone their literacy repertoires throughout their lives."[5] Botelho and Rudman furthers this process of becoming literate, a social practice that requires action.[6] Textualized examples of lives that convey significant activism and leadership can be found in the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano, and Maya Angelou.

In the Black community, literacy has historically been held in high esteem because it is regarded as a means to liberation. Reading and writing were skills that few enslaved Black people could develop, as those in control understood that slaves' literacy limited their masters' ability to dominate. Literacy empowered critically thinking humans while also providing the enslaved with the ability to access, store, and create information.

During slavery, Black people recognized that reading and writing were essential to freedom, and they did everything they could to acquire these skills and pass them on to the next generation. During Reconstruction, the demand for education, including access to schools and universities, and for more Black educators, became increasingly urgent.[7]

Gadsden investigated the expectations of older Black members of a rural South Carolina community to contextualize their perceptions toward the literacy development of their descendants.[8] This work provides insights into one particular group of African Americans and serves as a worthy consideration for the larger community. Some of the participants in the study were among the first generation to be born post-enslavement and articulated the notion that literacy derived its value from its correlation to overcoming struggle and oppression, both for the individual and the community. The participants described literacy as a power tool, a survival skill, and an economic instrument influenced by our personal and communal beliefs. From these conversations, Gadsden developed four dimensions of literacy that, when combined with literacy-in-person, can be applied to trace the social and cultural practices of literacy in middle-grade biographical works.

- **Literacy as Personal and Political Power**: is transformational.
- **Literacy as Survival**: is critical in negotiating in medical, legal, and financial matters, and necessary to 'read a room'—to be able to translate tone, inuendo, gestures, and racial composition.
- **Literacy as School Success and Education**: develops reading, writing, computing skills as well as specific trade skills.
- **Literacy as Legacy**: provides exposure to role models.

In studying literacy in a formal school setting rather than in the community, Gloria Ladson-Billings developed culturally relevant pedagogy, "that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes."[9] While the community in South Carolina viewed literacy as a tool necessary for integration, Ladson-Billings sees it as a tool to challenge and change US society. Through cultural sustaining and culturally relevant pedagogies, literacy, reading, and writing expand to encompass dynamic multiliteracies—digital literacy, financial literacy, race literacy, environmental literacy, and more—that are necessary for self-empowerment. Biographies that portray Black lives will make visible the many literacies found in culturally responsive teaching, a pedagogy that stresses the use of story in learning. Biographical stories can function within this framework because they exist as recorded narratives helping readers of all races and ethnicities learn through others.[10]

Introducing Tonya Bolden

Tonya Bolden is an African American educator and award-winning author born and raised in New York City. She attended public school in Manhattan until her mother researched how to get Tonya and her sister into a private school.[11] Tonya recalls that when growing up, her parents might not meet her requests for candy or gum, but they would indulge her long list of book requests from the school's book sale.

From her parents and her grandmother, she received the message that reading was power. Bolden graduated magna cum laude from Princeton University with a degree in Slavic languages and literature with a Russian focus. She earned an MA in the same fields from Columbia University. Bolden began writing children's books in 1992 and has gone on to win awards that include the Bank Street College of Education Best Book of the Year for *Emancipation Proclamation: Lincoln and the Dawn of Liberty* (Abrams, 2013); NCSS Carter G. Woodson Book Award for *Searching for Sarah Rector: The Richest Black Girl in America* (Abrams, 2014); NCTE Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children for *M.L.K.: Journey of a King* (Abrams, 2007); and James Madison Book Award and Coretta Scott King Author Honor for *Maritcha: A Nineteenth Century American Girl* (Abrams, 2005). She has twice been an NAACP Image Award Nominee, for *Searching for Sarah Rector: The Richest Black Girl in America* (Abrams, 2014); and *Beautiful Moon: A Child's Prayer* (Abrams, 2014).

As a child, Bolden was not particularly fond of history. She remembers this when she's writing and takes the time to ask from a child's perspective, "What does this have to do with me?" Bolden writes for young readers who do not always see their hopes and dreams in books by making visible the lives of ordinary people. In studying Black lives, Bolden began to understand the lives of her own grandparents, and this provided Bolden with a context for her own life.[12] By viewing the biographies that she writes as literacy-in-person, young people consider how actions and reactions shape lives. The process begins by learning about the person's life, where they grew up, and went to school.

Literacy as Personal and Political Power

Dovey Johnson Roundtree's story, as told by Bolden, is book-ended with the murder case in Washington, DC, in which she defended Raymond Crump Jr., a Black man. This was one of the biggest court cases of her career. As Bolden describes the crime, she presents the individuals involved in the case through their occupations; what kind of work they do. Not only does this relate their class and income level but their degree of literacy and their agency in the community. From the beginning, we are directed to perceive how literacy situates us.

Then, readers learn about Dovey. She was born in Charlotte, NC, on April 17, 1914. Her father died when she was less than a year old, leaving Dovey to live with her mother and her grandparents in one of the city's Black enclaves. Bolden lists the numerous ways the family's matriarch, Grandma Rachel, contributed to the family and community. The literacies she developed leading the choir, taking in laundry, managing the family's limited budget, baking communion bread, helping her husband in his store, and making communion wine would surpass those acquired from her formal education.

Dovey's level of literacy positioned her to refute the single story for Black women in the early twentieth century. She's not remarkable because she's exceptional; her success is hard-earned. Her family was financially challenged, but they were not poor; not lacking in access to resources. Dovey is remarkable because of the actions she took on behalf of her community.

Literacy as School Success and Education

Equating reading, writing, and computing with academic success is a given in the Black community. "Literacy is something Black folks have considered integral to community progress: it is not simply an individual pursuit."[13]

Dovey attended public schools in Charlotte and was encouraged by one of her teachers to attend Spelman College, a historically Black women's college in Atlanta. When one of the families for whom her mother worked as a domestic laborer was transferred to Atlanta, Dovey was able to move with her and attend Spelman.

After several financial setbacks, Dovey required several years to complete her undergraduate degree with a double major in English and Biology. She went on to become a full-time teacher, a member of the US Armed Forces as a member of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), a law student at Howard University, a lawyer, and an ordained minister.

Dovey's biography is one that exhibits how ordinary people can build literacy skills necessary to overcome obstacles and do great things as part of everyday life. Bolden most often writes stories such as this that center on everyday people. By asking readers what motivated Dovey to finish college and then identifying the obstacles she had to overcome, it will have the potential to inspire young readers to work to achieve their dreams.

Literacy as Survival

Literacy skills, ways of knowing, have often translated to survival skills incorporating the decoding of semiotics that were embedded throughout daily life. Enslaved African Americans "relied heavily on oral and aural systems of information."[14] Dovey knew that not only her success, but that her survival as a Black woman depended upon her ability to read all the text that surrounded her.

Bolden details that as a child, Dovey read Christian scriptures and *The Book of Knowledge Children's Encyclopedia*. In college, she read Spelman's *The Campus Mirror* and many of the works of Shakespeare, and in her work life, she read codes, manuals, textbooks, and correspondence in her work world.

Dovey developed her reading, writing, and computation skills in the schools and training programs she attended, but her family and community taught her what a Black woman needed to know to survive. The way she learned to read the world was influenced by the systems and structures embedded in her family and her community. The way that Dovey learned to read the world was through multiple lenses of her race, gender, and class.

It is not often that young people read stories of Black women from this era that express the many literacies necessary to survive. Identifying the socio-political aspect of Dovey's life, of the literacy in her person, enhances young readers' cultural competency. There were lessons that taught her that when she was falsely arrested while in college, the only person who could help her was Mary May Neptune, a white woman, and not the Black socialites with whom she was more familiar.

Not only did Dovey have degrees from institutions of higher learning, but also she could read people and situations in ways that allowed her to carve out her own safe space, speak her own voice, and fight for her community's liberation.

The first time Dovey met Raymond Crump, he was in the DC jail, and had been locked in solitary confinement. Dovey gave him one of her business cards with instructions about what to do if he was in trouble.

"Dovey had picked up quick on the disgust the white prison guards felt for Ray."[15] She was concerned that Ray might be psychologically and physically abused by those who held him in jail and that this might break Ray. "Ray who years earlier had suffered a bad beating during a holdup. It left him prone to horrible headaches, even blackouts. And Dovey suspected that Ray's mind was also messed up from alcohol abuse."[16]

Literacy as Legacy

As Gardner reminds us, intentionally connecting young people to their past creates the opportunity to provide them with social and emotional dispositions necessary to navigate racism.[17] Bolden took us back to the community that supported Dovey throughout her life. It began at home with her mother, her Grandma Rachel, and Grandpa Clyde. Eventually, it extended to A. Philip Randolph, Pauli Murray, and Mary McCloud Bethune, who were all members of the Black elite, existing at times as gatekeepers with literacies that were critical not only to Dovey's success but to that of the community.

Realize how these facets of the Black community are positioned, and the levels of literacy of its members. Consider the assets, attributes, and resources located within its space, and their legacies become apparent.

Dovey's Grandma Rachel introduced her to Bethune. "Straightaway young Dovey sensed in Bethune something powerful, almost regal. Ebony-skinned and crowned with an enormous feathered hat that matched her silk suit, she spoke in a voice so rich, so cultured, so filled with authority that it held me fast."[18] Dovey had learned to read not only Bethune's dress and diction but also the esteem in which she was held by Grandma Rachel. Through implicit lessons in the church, the neighborhood, and the family, Dovey would learn that Black people take care of each other. When she became an attorney, the first thing Dovey did was to commit to free legal services for the National Council of Negro Women, founded by Bethune.

"It was, in my mind, the least I could do by way of paying her back. She'd brought me into an army that for all its discrimination had given me a voice and a role in shaping history."[19] Her literacies sourced in the community had personal and communal value because it ensured liberation.

Pauli Murray had a strong influence on Dovey becoming an attorney. "As I studied her, watched her quarterback discussions with her Berkeley colleagues, soaked up her cerebrations on the Constitution and the wrongs it could right if properly applied, I felt the power of an intellect that swallowed me up."[20] Dovey had *read* her.

As Gadsden wrote, literacies are "influenced by beliefs converged through family systems, from one generation to the next."[21] The stories her grandfather told her stuck with Dovey, as do those we all hear from family members. The stories are tools to teach values while setting moral compasses. In having studied the law and in having experienced the de facto law that was enacted upon the Black community, Bolden coalesced the historic information Dovey acquired into her person, the literacy-in-person, that Dovey was becoming. This Dovey was quite capable of the work she knew she had to do.

Tonya Bolden Bibliography

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Conclusions

In *Dovey Undaunted*, Bolden delivers a legacy of hope and possibilities while exposing challenges in ways not often expressed. Dovey, from her humble beginnings, was able to develop a variety of literacies that empowered her to alleviate oppression in her community. Bolden develops a critical space where young readers can consider everyday situations, relationships, and opportunities in ways that are meaningful to them.

Why would Dovey Johnson Roundtree's life matter to young people? Bolden shines a light on Dovey to align readers with the urgency of meta literacies in ways that matter to the individual and to the community. This story exists as an example of literacy-in-person because Dovey transformed herself and the world around her. Young readers see some of the many ways that reading text is more than engaging with printed words. This can be quite empowering to students who want to develop other literacies. This example from the past suggests continuity in communal values while at the same time allowing for change.

Librarians and educators should include African American biographies in their toolkit of culturally relevant materials. Young readers can begin to consider a variety of ways to access literacies that exist in their communities and can find ways to express their own biographies. &

This work grew from a Charlotte Zietlow Grant the author received in 2013 from Indiana State University.

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