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African American Children's Literature That Helps Students Find Themselves: Selection Guidelines for Grades K-3

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# African American children's literature that helps students find themselves: Selection guidelines for Grades K–3

*Guidelines and suggested books  
can help teachers provide  
literature that reflects African  
American children's experiences.*

**L**iterature is a powerful medium. Through it, children construct messages about their cultures and roles in society. Literature offers them personal stories, a view of their cultural surroundings, and insight on themselves. When children read books that are interesting and meaningful to them, they can find support for the process of defining themselves as individuals and understanding their developing roles within their families and communities.

From the time they enter school, most African American children read literature that seldom offers messages about them, their past, or their future. All too often books used in primary classrooms contain too few African American characters, or they include characters who are African American in appearance only. Many of these stories say little about African American culture, or they present only the history of African Americans as slaves without including any “non-slavery” or modern representations. In short, today’s African American children often cannot find themselves in the literature they are given to read.

The purpose of this article is to suggest guidelines for selecting African American children’s literature of high literary and artistic quality for Grades K–3. To validate the importance of African Americans in society, the guidelines

are for all teachers, whether they have African American children in their classrooms or not. We also provide a list of selected recent books with an African American context that meet the same criteria for quality.

## **What if you can't find yourself?**

To read for years and not encounter stories that connect closely with one’s own cultural understandings and life experiences is problematic. One primary motivation for reading fiction involves the pleasure that can be taken in relating to characters, their lives, their problems, and their experiences. When readers frequently encounter texts that feature characters with whom they can connect, they will see how others are like them and how reading can play a role in their lives. A love of reading will result. Alternatively, when readers do not encounter characters who are like them, reading is likely to be frustrating rather than pleasurable. For children, repeated frustration is not likely to lead to personal affirmations and the development of a love of reading. If teachers continually present African American children with texts in which the main characters are predominantly animals and white people, it stands to reason that these children may begin to wonder whether they, their families, and their communities fit into the

world of reading. Our interviews with African American adults, remembering their early years in school, speak of this type of reading experience as being one of isolation. (All adult and student names are pseudonyms.)

For the first 15 years of my life, I didn't find myself in books, and I didn't relate to them. Once I discovered books and characters I could relate to, I gained the love of reading. (Tracey)

The joy of reading is in stepping into the experience of the characters. When the characters look like, talk like, think like, and act like us, it's easy to share in the experience. I think that after we've had that experience a few times, it becomes easier to understand the experiences of people who are less like us. But in becoming a reader, and learning to love reading, experiencing books that mirror our own lives is extremely important—which for me began when I became an adult. (Robin)

I didn't feel a strong connection between my world and classroom-related literature experiences. My learning experiences did not speak to me because people who looked like me weren't in the literature. I didn't value my experiences with literature in my early years of learning. (Tyrone)

Similarly, the third-grade African American students we interviewed voiced their preferences, needs, and concerns:

Well, we're black, and it doesn't mean that I don't like white people in stories, but I like seeing people in the book that are my same color. I like seeing black people in books because mostly they have white people in commercials and shows and stuff. And it's like in a book you can see black people. (Keisha)

It's not that I don't like white people or nothing, but you're glad because you don't see a lot of books that have black people in them. And it's not to be rude to white people, but you can imagine what they're [black people] thinking of...it might give you a better idea. Again, nothing against white people, but you like to see blacks because [white authors] portray black people like they don't got no manners or nothing. And white people, they know everything and they get a good education. But, that's not always true cause the black people, they get a good education too. But they portray us as not having any manners. When you see [black] people like that, [white] people think that we're stupid. (Marisa)

I like reading about my heritage and I like stories about black people. There isn't anything wrong with white people...they're just a different color. They're actually people, so they're the same as us, but a different color. But, I would like to see more, you know, black people in stories. (LaVon)

The problem of not finding oneself in books runs deep and wide in the context of schooling in the United States. Historically, the absence of black images in children's literature was birthed

### Recommended high-quality African American children's literature, K-3

Barnwell, Ysaye M. *No mirrors in my Nana's house*. 1998. Ill. Synthia Saint James. Harcourt Brace. ISBN 0152018255. US\$18.00.

There were no mirrors in Nana's house for her granddaughter to look into and judge herself against another culture's definition of beauty. This story about inner beauty teaches how to love yourself just the way you are, and not to compare yourself with other forms of beauty.

Curtis, Gavin. *The bat boy and his violin* (1999 Coretta Scott King Honor Award). 1998. Ill. E.B. Lewis. Simon & Schuster. ISBN 0689800991. US\$16.00.

A young boy loves to play the violin, but his father needs a bat boy for his baseball team, not a violin player. The boy decides to play his violin in the dugout, and he manages to inspire the players.

English, Karen. *Big wind coming!* 1996. Ill. Cedric Lucas. Albert Whitman. ISBN 0807507261. US\$14.95.

Sarah Ann's family prepares for a hurricane by boarding up windows and storing water for the family. During the harsh winds, Sarah Ann realizes that she left her favorite doll outside and runs off to find her. There is considerable damage, but somehow the doll is found safely after the storm.

Gilchrist, Jan Spivey. *Madelia*. 1997 Dial. ISBN 0803720521. US\$14.99.

Madelia can't wait to go home from church to play with her six new jars of watercolors. As Madelia thinks about what she is going to paint, she waits impatiently for the sermon to end. Suddenly, Madelia becomes inspired and knows precisely what she will do.

Holman, Sandy Lynne. *Grandpa, is everything black bad?* 1999. Ill. Lela Kometiani. The Culture Co-op. ISBN 0964465507. US\$18.95.

This picture book describes how a little boy named Montsho looks around his environment and notices that things associated with blackness are bad. Montsho learns to appreciate his dark skin when his grandfather teaches him about his African heritage.

Howard, Elizabeth Fitzgerald. *When will Sarah come?* 1999. Ill. Nina Crews. Greenwillow. ISBN 0688161804. US\$16.00.

While his sister Sarah goes off to school, Jonathan stays at home and plays throughout his busy day. As he anxiously listens and waits for Sarah to come home, he rides his firetruck, watches mail falling through the mail slot, plays with his teddy bear, and listens to the sounds of the tree trimmers. Jonathan finally hears the sound of Sarah's yellow school bus. His sister is finally home!

Howard, Elizabeth Fitzgerald. *What's in Aunt Mary's room?* 1996. Ill. Cedric Lucas. Clarion. ISBN 0395698456. US\$14.95.

Susan and Sarah help their aunt locate a key that unlocks the door in Great-Aunt Flossie's house. They are surprised to discover a family Bible in which Susan is given permission to write her own and Sarah's name.

Hru, Dakari. *The magic moonberry jump ropes*. 1996. Ill. E.B. Lewis. Dial Books for Young Readers. ISBN 0803717547. US\$14.99.

(continued)

## Recommended high-quality African American children's literature, K-3 (continued)

April and her sister love to jump Double Dutch. But nobody in the neighborhood wants to jump rope, until Uncle Zambesi arrives with a pair of brightly dyed jump ropes from Africa and claims that they will grant wishes.

Lester, Julius. *Sam and the tigers*. 1996. Ill. Jerry Pinkney. Dial Books for Young Readers. ISBN 0803720289. US\$15.99.

This is a retelling of Helen Bannerman's *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1923, HarperCollins). In this story a little boy named Sam (in fact all of the characters are called Sam) out-smarts a gang of hungry tigers. The tigers turn into a pool of butter, and that night Sam and his family have tigerstriped pancakes for dinner.

McKissack, Patricia C. *The honest-to-goodness truth*. 2000. Ill. Giselle Potter. Atheneum. ISBN 0689826680. US\$16.00.

When a young girl is caught in her first lie to her mother, she decides to tell only the truth. Soon, she begins to spread the truth all over town about how Thomas didn't have enough money for lunch and needed to borrow some from the teacher. She learns there's a right and wrong way to tell the truth.

Medearis, Angela Shelf. *Rum-a-tum-tum*. 1997. Ill. James E. Ransome. Holiday House. ISBN 0823411435. US\$16.95.

In the late 1800s, a young girl wakes to the festive, celebratory sounds of street vendors busily selling their produce on Market Street in New Orleans, Louisiana. She is mesmerized by Creole women in red bandannas, baskets of richly colored fresh fruits and vegetables, and a jazz parade that lights up the town.

Miller, William. *The piano*. 2000. Ill. Susan Keeter. Lee & Low. ISBN 1880000989. US\$15.95.

This story, set in the early 1900s, is about a unique friendship between a little girl named Tia and her employer, an elderly woman named Miss Hartwell. Tia loves music; Miss Hartwell teaches her how to play the piano. In return Miss Hartwell is given a rare and precious gift.

Mollel, Tololwa M. *My rows and piles of coins* (2000 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Award). 1999. Ill. E.B. Lewis. Clarion Books. ISBN 0395751861. US\$ 15.00.

A little boy works very hard and saves his money to buy a new bike, only to discover that he doesn't have enough.

Nolen, Jerdine. *Big Jabe*. 2000. Ill. Kadir Nelson. Lothrop, Lee & Shepard. ISBN 0688136621. US\$ 15.95.

In this modern tall tale, Addy, a house slave on Simon Plenty's plantation, finds a little boy floating down the river in a basket. Addy is taken by the boy's ability to call fish to jump out of the river and into her wagon. In no time at all, the little boy grows into a giant named Jabe, who has the strength of 50 men and the ability to transport slaves away to freedom.

Orgill, Roxanne. *If I only had a horn: Young Louis Armstrong*. 1997. Ill. Leonard Jenkins. Houghton Mifflin. ISBN 0395759196. US\$16.00.

This autobiographical picture book describes how young Louis Armstrong received his first instruments. Before playing the trumpet, he played the bugle and the cornet. His first musical success occurred in the Colored Waifs' Home Band.

Pinkney, Andrea D. *Duke Ellington: The piano prince and his orchestra* (1999 Caldecott Honor Award & 1999 Coretta

(continued)

from the social structures that slavery imposed. The inaccurate images of African Americans that appeared in literature from 1830-1900 were nurtured by stereotypes, a publishing industry that was not invested in authentic portrayals of African Americans, and lack of understanding (MacCann, 1998). There was very little change in characterizations of African Americans or the number of texts featuring authentic African American characters from 1900 until about 1970 (Harris, 1997). As a result, historically, the vast content of children's literature connoted a clear message: African American children are not valued in society, and books have little to offer them that is personal, relevant, and affirming (Harris, 1993; Sims-Bishop, 1987).

Given the absence and misrepresentation that so many African Americans—young and old—feel about the literature of their youth, we searched for African American children's literature of high literary and artistic quality for Grades K-3. Our plan was to locate literature that establishes African American children as children, authenticates their own world (Clifton, 1981), and—most important—speaks to these children about themselves and their lives (Harris, 1990; Sims-Bishop, 1993).

But how much of this literature is available? Where do you find it? How do you select high-quality African American literature that will lead to affirming reading experiences in which children will be able to relate to stories and characters?

## How much African American children's literature is available?

The number of African American children's books steadily increased in the latter part of the 20th century, especially in the 1990s (Harris, 1997; Rand, Parker, & Foster, 1998; Sims-Bishop, 1997). In real terms, however, the increase was very small. For example, in 1998 approximately 4,500 books were published in the United States for children (Horning, Moore-Kruse, & Schliesman, 1999). Only 3% of these books featured African Americans as main characters or focused on African American culture (Rand et al., 1998). Of this 3%, only two thirds of the books were created by African American authors or illustrators (Horning et al., 1999).

Here is the bottom line: Very few books with African American protagonists are published for children. Our bottom line reduces this number even further: How many of these books are high-quality works of literature for African American children?

## What are the characteristics of “good” African American children’s literature?

The answer to this question is complex. “Goodness,” as it turns out, depends on a number of factors: How the literature evolved, readability, marketing, and audience appeal are essential considerations (Temple, Martinez, Yokota, & Naylor, 1998). For our purposes, two interrelated layers mark the characteristics of good African American children’s literature: those characteristics general to all children’s literature and those specific to African American children’s literature.

*General characteristics.* Characteristics of excellence in children’s books are a result of the literary and artistic craft of the author and illustrator. The skills with which authors and illustrators use the tools of their medium to tell the tale are the most essential characteristics that distinguish good children’s literature from the rest. “To know what ‘good books’ are for different children requires some intelligent way of talking about goodness and mediocrity in books—an accepted set of terms for looking at the literary features of children’s books” (Temple et al., 1998, p. 7). By drawing upon Temple et al.’s (1998) framework on the qualities of children’s literature, and Huck, Hepler, Hickman, and Kiefer’s (2000), Cullinan and Galda’s (1994), and Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson’s (1999) guidelines for evaluating children’s picture books, we outlined the characteristics of an author’s and illustrator’s craft that mark high-quality children’s literature.

In seeking well-developed narratives for primary-grade children, readers should look for works that contain the following characteristics.

1. Books should include memorable, well-portrayed characters; in contemporary stories these characters are usually children the same age as the child reader.

2. Books should present a plot that provides interesting events in an understandable sequence.

## Recommended high-quality African American children’s literature, K–3 (continued)

- Scott King Honor Award). 1998. Ill. Brian Pinkney. Hyperion Books for Children. ISBN 0786801786. US\$15.95.  
This biographical picture book illustrates the life of the legendary jazz composer Duke Ellington.
- Pinkney, Andrea D. *Bill Pickett: Rodeo-ridin’ cowboy*. 1996. Ill. Brian Pinkney. Gulliver. ISBN 0152021035. US\$6.00.  
This biography describes how Bill Pickett became the most famous black rodeo performer who ever lived and the first African American to be inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.
- Schroeder, Alan. *Minty: A story of young Harriet Tubman* (1997 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award). 1996. Ill. Jerry Pinkney. Dial Books for Young Readers. ISBN 0803718888. US\$16.00.  
This fictionalized account based upon real events profiles the early life of Harriet Tubman and her relationship with her parents. The story describes how she became a conductor on the Underground Railroad.
- Siegelson, Kim. *In the time of the drums* (2000 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award). 1999. Ill. Brian Pinkney. Hyperion Books for Children. ISBN 078680436X. US\$15.00.  
This story is based on the Gullah legend of a slave rebellion at Ibo’s Landing in South Carolina. Mentu’s grandmother Twi was born in Africa and remembers her experiences well. Twi teaches her grandson many things, including how to play ancient rhythms on a goatskin drum. One day, slave ships arrive at Mentu and Twi’s island. The slaves refuse to get off the ships because they know they are not home. Twi knows she must take her people back to Africa, so together Twi and the slaves walk into the ocean for home. Mentu is left all alone, but he grows up strong, begins a family of his own, and teaches them all that his grandmother taught him.
- Sierra, Judy. *Wiley and the hairy man*. 1996. Ill. Brian Pinkney. Lodestar Books Dutton. ISBN 0525674772. US\$15.00.  
This African American folk tale describes how Wiley and his mother outsmart the Hairy Man by tricking him into doing things for them. But Wiley’s mother warns him that he must trick the Hairy Man two more times in order for the beast to go away forever.
- Steptoe, John. *Creativity*. 1997. Ill. E. B. Lewis. Clarion. ISBN 0395687063. US\$15.95.  
An African American child learns to appreciate his similarities and differences with his friend Hector from Puerto Rico. Once Charlie befriends Hector he helps him adjust to the new school and neighborhood. Charlie even tries to help Hector with his English.
- Stewart, Dianne. *Gift of the sun: A tale from South Africa*. 1996. Ill. Jude Daly. Farrar Straus & Giroux. ISBN 0374324255. US\$15.00.  
This South African tale describes how a farmer named Thulani wants to do no more than lie in the sun all day. After a series of lopsided exchanges with others to make his life easier, he finds that his crop is worth something after all. A pocketful of sunflower seeds proves to be very beneficial.
- Tarpley, Natasha. *I love my hair*. 1998. Ill. E.B. Lewis. Little, Brown. ISBN 0316522759. US\$15.95.

(continued)

### Recommended high-quality African American children's literature, K-3 (continued)

This picture book celebrates African American identity through hair. Every night before bedtime Keyana sits down with her mother to get her hair combed. It hurts, but her mother gently reminds her of all the different ways that she can wear her hair.

Thomas, Joyce Carol. *I have heard of a land* (1999 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Award). 1998. Ill. Floyd Cooper. HarperCollins. ISBN 0060234776. US\$14.95.

Set in the late 1800s, this lyrical tribute describes what it was like for African American pioneers to journey westward to Oklahoma to begin a new life. Newly freed slaves were anxious to receive railroad tickets to travel to a place where all people were promised free land and a new beginning.

Wilkins, Verna Allette. *Dave and the tooth fairy*. (1998). Ill. Paul Hunt. Gareth Stevens. ISBN 0836820894. US\$21.00.

Dave's wobbly tooth finally comes out when he sneezes. But he doesn't know where it went. His grandfather and the tooth fairy get a shock when they look under his pillow later that evening.

Woodtor, Dee Parmer. *Big meeting*. Ill. Dolores Johnson. Simon & Schuster. ISBN 0689319339. US\$16.00.

During the midsummer heat, families from all over cross the wooden bridge at Pigeon Creek and travel to grandma and grandpa's home for a special reunion. They gather at church for fellowship, to learn about their heritage, and to celebrate the gospel.

Plots produce conflict to build excitement and suspense. For primary-grade readers plots should be direct and clear so that children will not have difficulty following the sequence of events, yet plots should be complex enough to capture the attention and lead to predictions, questions, and wonderings. In realistic stories the plot should deal with problems, events, or issues that children will understand and to which they can relate.

3. Books should incorporate well-crafted language that is concrete and vivid—the language should read smoothly and reflect the mood of the story.

4. Books should contain a worthy and truthful theme. Further, the illustrator's work should catch the attention of the reader, move the story forward, and enhance the meanings and tone presented by the author.

Table 1 outlines these characteristics, along with key questions, so they can be readily used to rate (from 1–5) the overall quality of a children's book.

*Specific characteristics.* In addition to these general considerations for selecting high-quality

children's literature, there are specific guidelines to note with regard to the selection of the most appropriate African American children's literature. We have developed a more detailed set of guidelines aimed specifically at African American children's literature, based upon the work of Sims-Bishop (1997), Banks (1991), our own experiences, and those of teachers with whom we have collaborated. There are specific authors and illustrators who have established solid reputations for publishing culturally sensitive literature for children. While we would not recommend that selections of African American literature for children come exclusively from these works, familiarity with these authors, illustrators, and their works is very helpful in becoming accomplished at selecting high-quality texts to share with children.

As general guidelines (in addition to drawing from works by established well-known African American authors and illustrators) we recommend that teachers and parents look for books that have the following characteristics.

1. Books should include characters who are well developed and portrayed in authentic, realistic contexts.

2. Books should use language that is authentic and realistic, particularly dialogue that correctly portrays African American dialect appropriate to the character.

3. Books should incorporate illustrations that portray African American and other characters and settings authentically and realistically.

4. Books should present accurate information.

We have found these guidelines, as outlined in Table 2, to be workable tenets for the selection of high-quality African American children's literature. While all of these story elements may not be found in every good African American children's book, the more elements that are found, the greater the likely appeal for all children. These guidelines also include key questions and a rating scale (from 1–5) to evaluate the quality of African American children's literature.

### How do the characteristics apply to a specific piece of literature?

To illustrate how these general and specific characteristics work in practice, we applied them to the African American children's biography

**Table 1**  
**General characteristics of high-quality primary-grade picture books**

Feature	Questions	Rating				
Character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the story contain a memorable character who is about the same age as the students?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High
Plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the plot direct, clear, and stimulating?</li> <li>• Will students understand the problems, events, and issues?</li> <li>• Will students be able to easily follow the sequence of events?</li> <li>• Will students enjoy the story?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High
Well-crafted language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the story contain natural, vivid language?</li> <li>• Do the words evoke clear, concrete images of characters and actions?</li> <li>• Does the language reflect the mood of the story?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High
Worthy, subtle, and truthful theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the story's theme one that students will find worthy, subtle, and truthful?</li> <li>• Will the theme interest students?</li> <li>• Is the author's intended message understandable without being heavy-handed?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High
Quality of illustrations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the illustrator use elements of media, design, and style in original and expressive ways?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High
Function of illustrations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the illustrations establish the mood, theme, and setting as the story unfolds?</li> <li>• Do they add or clarify information?</li> <li>• Do they enrich the story?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High

*Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra* by Andrea Davis-Pinkney and Brian Pinkney (Hyperion, 1998). Although biography is nonfiction, it can be evaluated similarly to fiction due to its narrative form. However, there is an additional requirement for biography—accuracy.

The story describes the life of legendary Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington and provides a glimpse into one of the liveliest eras of American music history. In this tribute to the jazz legend, the music is portrayed through illustrations that represent constant motion with vivid spirals, waves, and colorful swirls. Table 3 illustrates how we applied the general characteristics of children’s literature to the story. Our rating for each of the characteristics is noted in Table 3.

*Character.* The text is realistic and engaging as it introduces a young Duke Ellington who does not enjoy playing the piano because he finds it boring. As the story progresses, Duke becomes a teenager and begins incorporating sounds and rhythms that he finds exciting. Over time, Duke develops a unique style that transforms the music industry.

*Plot.* The book chronicles Duke Ellington’s musical career. The story begins with his childhood—he was born in 1899 in Washington, D.C.—and ends when he became an adult and played at New York City’s Carnegie Hall on January 23, 1943. The story is presented chronologically, so it is easy for children to follow; however, it is written so as to keep children

**Table 2**  
**Specific characteristics of high-quality African American children's literature**

Feature	Questions	Rating				
Character portrayal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the author identify the characters as African American?</li> <li>• Does the author include current and accurate information about African American beliefs, traditions, shared values, and other cultural referents?</li> <li>• Does the author present realistic and positive images of African Americans?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High
Language use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the dialogue correctly portray African American dialect?</li> <li>• Is the language authentic and realistic?</li> <li>• Will students understand, identify with, and accurately reflect upon the characters' language?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High
Illustration authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the illustrations reflect reality?</li> <li>• Do they reveal variety in settings and African American physical features and coloring, or are characters merely colored brown?</li> <li>• Do the illustrations present positive images of African Americans in aesthetically pleasing ways?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High
Information accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the story contain a motif or an authentic aspect of African American history?</li> <li>• Is the information accurate?</li> <li>• Does the story add a distinctive voice or worldview?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High

wondering about what will happen and where the story will lead.

Students will enjoy the story because it addresses a problem that is common for many children. Duke Ellington was introduced to a new skill, and, although he understood that practice was essential in developing this skill, he found that practice was very boring. Duke addressed the problem in a unique way that involved setting and accomplishing personal goals (facets of a child's life that parents and teachers alike impress upon young children). Duke Ellington became successful because he was talented and had the resourcefulness and encouragement to build upon his talents.

*Well-crafted language.* The story contains natural, vivid language used in culturally appropriate, soulful, descriptive ways. For example, one line reads, "Duke's Creole Love Call was

spicier than a pot of jambalaya. His Mood Indigo was a musical stream that swelled over the airwaves" (p. 11).

*Worthy, subtle, and truthful theme.* Students will identify with and remember the theme of the story—growing up and finding yourself—because it is presented in an entirely believable way. In addition, this is an appropriate literary element for young readers to reflect upon as they look at themselves and their own processes of growing up and finding themselves as individuals with unique talents and qualities.

*Quality of illustrations.* The illustrator uses the elements of shape, color, texture, rhythm, variety, space, paint, expressionism, and representation in divergent, self-expressive, artistic ways.

*Function of illustrations.* The illustrations are eye catching. The bold, vibrant colors and intricately detailed scenes set the mood and add



**Table 3**  
**General characteristics of high-quality primary-grade picture books applied to *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra***

Feature	Response	Rating				
Character	• The story begins with a child protagonist (Duke Ellington) and follows him in his adult life through his musical career.	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	⑤ High
Plot	• A chronological plot follows the challenges and successes of Duke Ellington's life.	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	⑤ High
Well-crafted language	• The language is used in ways appropriate for understanding jazz.	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	⑤ High
Worthy, subtle, and truthful theme	• Students will identify with the theme of growing up and finding yourself.	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	⑤ High
Quality of illustrations	• The illustrator uses the visual elements of line, shape, and color effectively.	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	⑤ High
Function of illustrations	• The illustrations are integral to the story and extend the text.	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	⑤ High

luster to the story. The dancers leap off the page while the visual interpretations of the music serve as devices that transport the reader to this era of music history.

Table 4 demonstrates how we applied the specific characteristics of African American children's literature to the story. The ratings for the characteristics are noted in Table 4.

*Character portrayal.* The author identifies the characters as African American and presents a positive, realistic message about Duke Ellington's musical career. Duke Ellington's desire was to celebrate the history of African American culture through his music. He accomplished this goal through songs about "the glories of dark skin, the pride of African heritage, and the triumphs of black people from the days of slavery to years of civil rights struggle" (p. 26).

*Language use.* The story is a narrative in which African American dialogue true to the characters is used in several parts of the story. For example, a section reads, "Yo, you got the Duke?" "Slide me some King of the Keys, please!" and "Gonna play me that Piano Prince and his band" (p. 23). This dialogue represents African American dialect that is historically accurate for the period of time in which Duke Ellington lived. Had the entire story been written in this way, it might have been difficult for many

students to understand. Instead, the author has chosen to intersperse this type of dialect in the text, providing readers with a perspective on African American language use in the world of Duke Ellington and, thus, helping the reader enter the world of Duke Ellington.

*Illustration authenticity.* The illustrations in the story reveal variety in African American physical features and coloring. For example, Duke is referred to as having "honey-colored fingertips" while other characters appear to be darker in color—a reflection of reality (p. 21). The illustrations also present positive images of African Americans as in the scenes portraying New York City's Carnegie Hall and the Cotton Club in Harlem.

*Information accuracy.* The book contains authentic information about Duke Ellington's musical career. The story highlights the African American experience by describing how African Americans supported and enjoyed listening to Duke Ellington's music. At the end, the author includes facts about Duke Ellington's life and provides the sources used to obtain the information.

### **Valuable book, valued readers**

The guidelines presented in this article provide a way for teachers and parents to thoughtfully

**Table 4**  
**Specific characteristics of high-quality African American children's literature applied to *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra***

Feature	Response	Rating				
Character portrayal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The author presents accurate and positive images of an African American whose outstanding musical career is portrayed.</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	⑤ High
Language use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The dialogue accurately portrays African American dialect of the time.</li> <li>The language of the text is rich and flows well.</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	⑤ High
Illustration authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The illustrations reveal variety in African American physical features and coloring.</li> <li>The illustrations reveal a variety of settings.</li> <li>The illustrations present positive images of African Americans.</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	⑤ High
Information accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The story contains authentic, accurate information about Duke Ellington's musical career.</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	⑤ High

and purposefully evaluate the quality of African American children's literature for the primary grades. Determining quality, in this case, lies in the ability to select literature that is affirming and liberating to children. Historically, African American children did not have literature that reflected their experiences. To find the best of this literature, then, is to help these children find themselves in books. To read literature that mirrors themselves and their lives is to feel valued—to have power.

When African American children encounter literature that offers messages about them, their culture, and their roles in society, they have enhanced opportunities to reflect upon themselves as people and their own development. Culturally sensitive stories, views, and insights can allow children to realize that literature has value for them as individuals. To select a balanced collection of stories, we included in our bibliography (see Sidebar) literature that plays and riffs with everyday events of African American life and literature that represents accurate, authentic accounts of slavery. With repeated exposure to engaging literature in which children find themselves establishing personal connections with characters, the likelihood is great that reading will become an appealing activity. Over time, the

love of reading may empower students both as readers and as individuals.

For teachers and parents interested in finding African American children's literature, we have carefully crafted an annotated bibliography of books from 1996–2000 that meet our selection guidelines for high-quality African American children's literature. We suggest the bibliography be used as a starting point in selecting literature, and note that the list should be expanded according to individual needs and preferences. The books are recommended for beginning, young, and early intermediate readers (K–3). The title, author, illustrator, year, summary, publisher, ISBN (International Standard Book Number), and price are provided for each book. The books are arranged in alphabetical order beginning with the author's last name.

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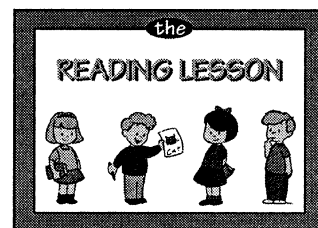
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