

## Black Children's Books

By Gail Berkley

"Children learn what they live" is the title of a popular verse often given to expectant parents or those who have recently had a new addition to their family. Daphne Muse, a Black Children's literature specialist at Mills College in Oakland, takes this phrase one step further and emphasizes that children learn what they read.

"When a child opens a book and it consistently portrays him in a secondary role, he will feel secondary," Ms. Muse stated last month during a lecture on "The Black Experience in Children's Literature" at the Women's Center on the campus of the University of California Berkeley.

When survey after survey is finding that today's children for a number of reasons are not learning their basic skills at school, the responsibility of the parents to see that their children receive the tools they will need to function later in life is increasing. One area where parents can aid their children is in the selection of books for them to read. As the holiday season is upon us, Ms. Muse suggested that books would be a favorable alternative to toys as gifts for children.

When a parent gives a child one of the many fine Black children's books, not only is the child bound to be more interested in furthering his reading skills, but he is at the same time getting a positive image of himself. The lack of this positive image can be most harmful to the child.

"I still feel what happened to me as a child, Ms. Muse confided. Even growing up in predominantly black Washington, D.C. She said the only Black author she read as a child was Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

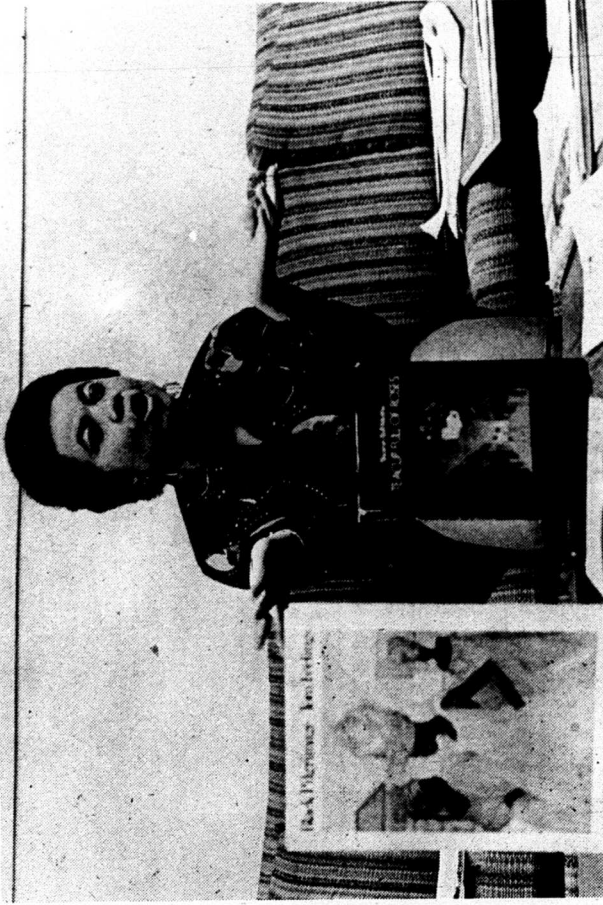
"If I had continued to hang with the Nancy Drew Books, I might have been in a very precarious position. I often wonder today what led me through."

Ms. Muse read a poem titled "How I Love Myself" which was written by a sixth grader at Malcolm X School in Berkeley to illustrate the positive affects on children - of reading good books. After a workshop on Black literature, the child wrote that she loved herself like cornbread loves black-eyed peas, and other lines in a similar vein. Before the workshop, Ms. Muse stressed, the children in the workshop didn't even know why their school was named Malcolm X.

ooo

When many of us think of Black Children's literature, the first book we come up with is Little Black Sambo and often the list stops there. But as Ms. Muse made her audience aware, there is a rich tradition and long list of Black Children's literature in the United States. In fact, "Little Black Sambo" is not Black literature at all...it deals with an East Indian child. Growing from an oral tradition, Black Children's literature

# Giving children the gift of identity



DAPHNE MUSE explains the positive attributes of Black children's literature during lecture on Berkeley campus of University of California. photo by Joffre Clarke

employs Black English and explicit graphics, some critics have spoken ill of it.

Graphics which show the little boy with a runny nose and another which shows the sister and brother in the bathroom together have disturbed some adults, but Ms. Muse said she always asks a child's opinion of a book before passing judgment on it. She has found that "children's reaction to the book is great."

"Mojia Means One" a Swahili counting book by Muriel Feindling, and Six Black Masters of American Art by Herman Bearden and Henry Henderson, are two educational children's books she recommended.

Books Unlimited at 1975 Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley, Marcus Bookstore, 540 MacAllister in San Francisco and New Day bookstore at 631 Divisadero, she recommended as good places to find Black and other third world children's literature.

Ms. Muse also encouraged her audience to make use of the public libraries in the area. The Berkeley Public Library's main branch on Shattuck and Center Streets, she said, has an excellent selection of books for children of all races. A bibliography is available at the desk in the Children's Room for Black, Chicano, Asian and Native American children's books, she noted.

Two librarians attending the lecture spoke up and said that the Martin Luther King Library on 9th Avenue and E. 14th Street in Oakland and the Richmond library also have good selections of Black children's books.

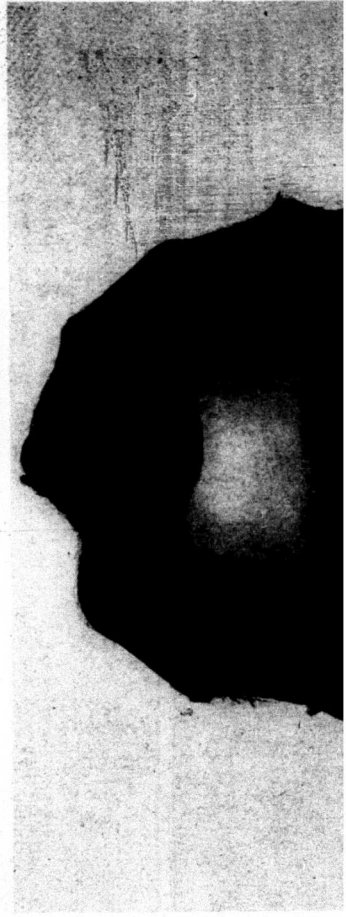
A gift of time is very precious. For a memorable gift that will pay off for years to come, parents might make a date with their children to visit the library. Here the child can apply for a free library card which will bring many hours of enjoyment.

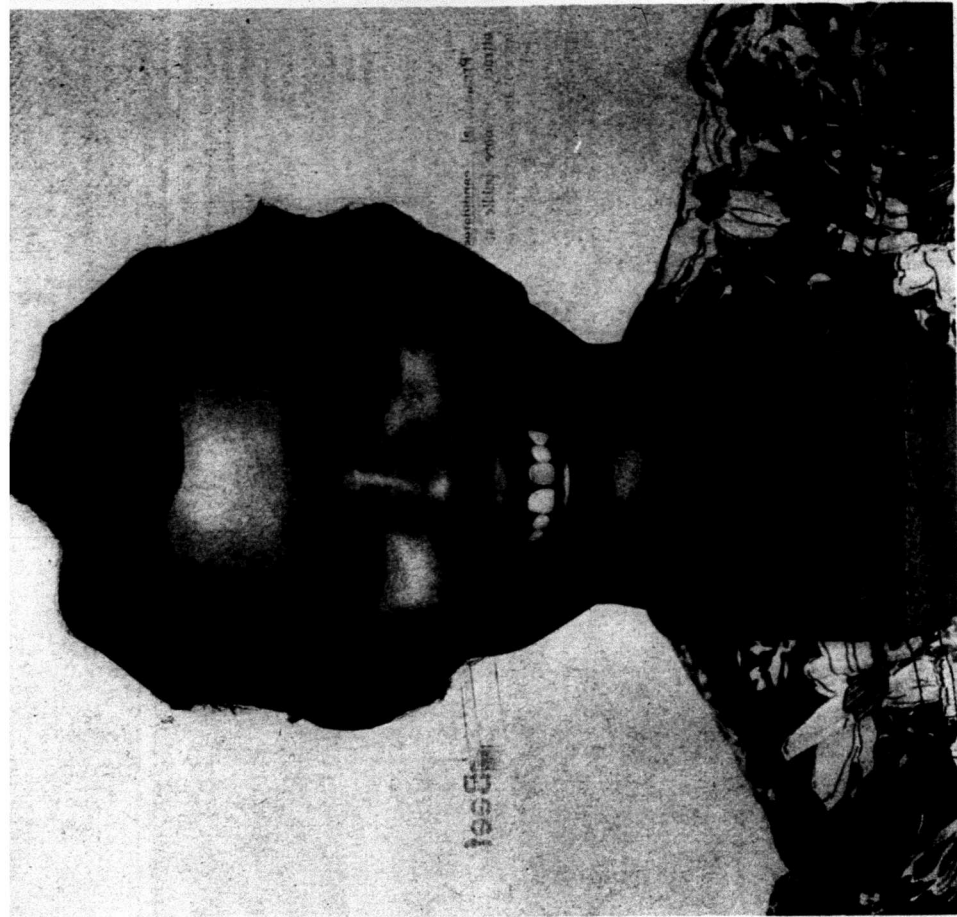
Persons wishing a copy of Ms. Muse's bibliography of children's books may contact the POST at 763-1120 or stop by 630 20th Street. The books are broken down into categories for different age groups.

The list of quality Black children's books is a long one but Ms. Muse singled out several books for special mention. Louise Meriwether's "Don't Ride the Bus on Monday" is the story of Rosa Parks, the woman whose refusal to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, started the Bus boycott there which led to desegregation of the buses in the mid-1960's.

This book Ms. Muse said is important because besides its historical significance it presents Mrs. Parks "as a real person who lived a real life and was part of a real condition and circumstance." Too often, Ms. Muse explained, heroes and heroines in Children's literature are treated as if they are superhuman.

"Listen to the Fig Tree," the story of a blind teenage girl, Ms. Muse recommended for anyone concerned with trying to get a child to learn what rape is about and why it is awful."





**"Most times I'm in a hurry.  
I like Bank of America  
because the service is pretty fast."**

Ms. Muse singled out several books for special mention. Louise Meriwether's "Don't Ride the Bus on Monday" is the story of Rosa Parks, the woman whose refusal to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, started the Bus boycott there which led to desegregation of the buses in the mid-1960's.

This book Ms. Muse said is important because besides its historical significance it presents Mrs. Parks "as a real person who lived a real life and was part of a real condition and circumstance." Too often, Ms. Muse explained, heroes and heroines in Children's literature are treated as if they are superhuman.

"Listen to the Fig Tree," the story of a blind teenage girl, Ms. Muse recommended for anyone concerned with trying to get a child to learn what rape is about and why it is awful.

"My Special Best Words," by John Steptoe is written in Black English. The book deals with a single parent family in which the father is the head of the household. Because the book

AT ALL HANDY SPOT RACKS



8 OZ.

**143**

was written by a sixth grader at Malcolm X School in Berkeley to illustrate the positive affects on children - of reading good books. After a workshop on Black literature, the child wrote that she loved herself like cornbread loves black-eyed peas, and other lines in a similar vein. Before the workshop, Ms. Muse stressed, the children in the workshop didn't even know why their school was named Malcolm X.

000

When many of us think of Black Children's literature, the first book we come up with is Little Black Sambo and often the list stops there. But as Ms. Muse made her audience aware, there is a rich tradition and long list of Black Children's literature in the United States. In fact, "Little Black Sambo" is not Black literature at all...it deals with an East Indian child.

Growing from an oral tradition, Black Children's literature really took off in the 1960's. A whole new group of authors cropped up including Sharon Bell-Matthis, Julius Lester, Virginia Hamilton, Louise Meriwether and Tom Feelings. These authors joined a list of Black writers which dates back to the late 19th century. Prominent among the older writers, Ms. Muse cited Langston Hughes and Shirley Graham Dubois.

White authors sensitivity also increased in the 1960's, Ms. Muse continued. "They had to stop and look at what they had been doing before on Africa, Black and other third world children."

Ms. Muse credited the Council on Interracial Children's Books and other groups with helping to keep books qualitatively good. Part of the credit goes to Blacks who have joined the groups, she added.

**THERE ARE ADDRESSES  
OF NATIONAL AND  
STATE LEGISLATORS**

U.S. Senators-Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510.  
Sen. Alan Cranston, Sen. John Tunney,  
Congressmen-House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515.  
Rep. George Miller 111, 7th District, representing all of Contra  
Costa County except Orinda, Lafayette, Rheim Valley, Moraga  
and parts of El Cerrito; Rep. Ronald V. Dellums, 8th District,  
Albany, Berkeley, Orinda, Lafayette, Rheim Valley, Moraga and  
parts of El Cerrito; Rep. Forney H. Stark, 9th District,  
representing Alameda, San Leandro, San Lorenzo, Castro Valley,  
San Ramon, Dublin, Suisun, Pleasanton, Livermore, Altamont and  
part of East Oakland; Rep. Don Edwards, 10th District,  
representing Hayward, Mt. Eden, Union City, Fremont, Newark,  
Millbrae and part of San Jose.

Legislators and Assemblymen-State Capitol, Sacramento,  
Calif. 95814.  
State Senators-John Neidely, 7th District, all of Contra Costa  
County except Orinda, Lafayette, Rheim Valley and Moraga;  
John Halmdani, 8th District, San Leandro, Castro Valley,  
Livermore, San Lorenzo, Mt. Eden, Union City, Dublin, Pleasanton,  
Hayward, Suisun and Altamont; Nicholas C. Perris, 9th District;  
the Fremont area of Southern Alameda County, north, central and  
west Oakland, Berkeley, Alameda, Albany, Piedmont, Orinda,  
Lafayette, Rheim Valley and Moraga.

State Assemblymen-Daniel E. Boothwright, 10th District, central  
and eastern Contra Costa County, including most of Walnut Creek  
and Concord; John T. Knox, 11th District, western Contra Costa  
County, including Martinez and Pleasant Hill in the central  
county; Ken Meade, 12th District, Albany, Berkeley, Piedmont,  
Orinda, Lafayette, Rheim Valley, Moraga and the Oakland hills;  
John J. Miller, 13th District, west Oakland, Emeryville and  
Alameda; Bill Lockyer, 14th District, San Leandro and Castro  
Valley; S. Floyd Morf, 15th District, Hayward, San Lorenzo, Mt.  
Eden, Union City, Dublin, Suisun, Pleasanton, Livermore and  
Alhambra; Alister McAllister, 25th District, Fremont, Newark.