

Freedom's Journeys Through *Shuttered Windows* (1938), *Words by Heart* (1968), and *True North* (1996)

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Young Adult Literature Featuring Black, Female Protagonists

Can an author accurately and authentically write beyond her personal ethnic and cultural boundaries? This question spans across more than 60 years of literature written for adolescents. In order to examine this issue further, as well as to glean a perspective of young adult literature featuring Black female protagonists, I explored three books about Black females that are written by White women: *Shuttered Windows* (1938) by Florence Crannell Means, *Words by Heart* (1968) by Ouida Sebestyen, and *True North* (1996) by Katherine Lasky.

Florence Crannell Means' *Shuttered Windows*

Shuttered Windows by Florence Crannell Means is a period piece (Kingman 446) set in the 1930s that remains a valuable part of social history (Helbig and Perkins 338). The story introduces Harriet, a young Black orphan from Minnesota who journeys to the Carolina lowcountry's tidal islands to visit her grandmother. While there, Harriet decides to stay and attend an all-Black girls' school on the island. Her decision opens the door for Harriet and her grandmother to forge a closer relationship while, likewise, Harriet grows fonder and closer to a neighboring young man, Richie. The book reveals Harriet's inner growth and her ultimate decision to become a teacher instead of a musical composer (Rahn 106) and to remain in South Carolina with Richie. As they build their new world together, the young couple will strive to create a better quality of life for poor, southern Blacks (Hendrickson 285).

In *Shuttered Windows*, Means has created noteworthy characterizations (Rahn 104-105) that exhibit her talent in placing her characters first within the story (Kingman 446). Harriet is "strong, proud, and beautiful" (Rahn 104) while Granny and Richie, although poor and less well-educated, are kind and intelligent. Throughout the book's pages, Means expertly chisels Granny's royal persona within an illiterate frame and crafts respect for Harriet's heritage and history. Interestingly, *Shuttered Windows* seems to foreshadow the forthcoming social revolution alongside this rich heritage tapestry (Rahn 106).

Florence Crannell Means was one of the first writers to fill a new niche, books for young adults (Kingman 446). Born in New York in 1891, Means grew up in a household accepting of many nationalities. She was influenced by religious faith, strong family support, and direct experiences

with a variety of cultures and races. Primary to Mean's work is her painstaking authenticity of background (Rahn 108). By her death in 1980, Means had written more than 40 books in which she "had championed the cause of cross-culturalism in the United States" (Anderson 87). Her purpose in writing multicultural perspective books, such as *Shuttered Windows*, is "Not so much in helping girls understand their own group as in understanding another's" (Rahn 108). Similarly, Means "sees her role as interpreter of one group to another" (114), helping "readers to step into the shoes of another race" (115). Her accurate observations reflect intelligent, young Black women's thoughts and words during the 1930s (Rahn 108) and reveal their struggle for dignity, security, and education (Kingman 446).

Ouida Sebestyen's *Words by Heart*

An all-white western town in 1910 is the setting for Ouida Sebestyen's *Words by Heart*. Sebestyen's careful rendering of characterization (Greenlaw 581) introduces us to Lena, a twelve-year-old Black female who idolizes her father, Ben, and loves her stepmother, Claudie (Drew 382). Three themes intertwine within the text: striving for perfection, death and rebirth, and family, especially the father-daughter relationship which is central to *Words by Heart* (Monseau 30-33). Plot conflicts reveal Lena's struggle between the "natural inclination to rail against injustice, on the one hand, and her deep-seated desire to please and emulate her father, on the other" (Monseau 22). Some critics debate that Lena's "close identification with her father results in her being silenced as a young woman" (Monseau 25). This "disintegration of spirit" (Monseau 25) seems somewhat familiar to Harriet's acceptance of the traditional female occupation, teaching, instead of the more innovative field of music composition.

In *Words by Heart*, Sebestyen has "created a novel that combats hatred with love, that champions freedom through suffering" (Monseau 36). As a writer, Sebestyen relays stories of family and love and of people struggling to understand and accept each other, an "acceptance worth fighting for" (Greenlaw 581).

Katherine Lasky's *True North*

Katherine Lasky, an Indiana-born Jewish author of Russian decent, is respected for her well-researched books and accurate representation of theme (Garrett 373). In one of her works, *True North*, Lasky drives the tale of two girls:

Lucy, an off-spring of Boston's high-society, and Afrika, an escaped slave traveling freedom's Underground Railroad. Their two worlds collide when Lucy discovers Afrika hiding inside her grandfather's house and bravely steers Afrika through freedom's next steps. Set between Boston and Virginia, the novel portrays both the tyranny of slavery and its Northern support by self-serving industrialists. Dramatically compelling in both action and emotion, Lasky describes Afrika's quest for safety and Lucy's desire to reach past wrongdoings and reject the blindness of apathy. Even across decades, Lucy and Afrika remain indelibly linked together by the horrors and sweetness of freedom's journey.

The Power of Literature

Literature is a powerful tool for transmitting historical and ideological interpretations (Johnson 8). One purpose of reading, writing, and sharing African-American literature is to pass along the rich history, mutual respect, and cultural and social awareness. In doing so, the survival of African-American communities is ensured, building successful foundations for the youngest members (Johnson 1-2). By exposing Black youth to African-American literature, this important foundation is formed from African-American experiences and sensibilities. "We utilize children's books as agents of socialization, politicization, and of formal education" (Johnson 1). Florence Crannell Means, writing during the 1940s, pioneered efforts toward merging an understanding among the mosaic groups of America's youth (Hendrickson 282-283). Consequently, reading ethnic literature, "expands the cultural awareness of all students" (Mitchell 97).

Historical Perspective on African-American Publications

African-American literature for Black youth, by Black authors, began in 1887 with a monthly magazine, *The Joy*, founded by Mrs. A. E. Johnson (Johnson 2). A focus on books about minority characters between 1966 and 1974 resulted in four Newbery Award winners and eleven Honor recipients. By 1975, Newbery reflected a shift in attitude concerning books written about minorities by non-minority authors; such books began to disappear. Consequently, books written, praised, and honored before this shift were retrospectively targeted by harsh criticism. Florence Crannell Means, certainly controversial in her own time, is perhaps faced with even greater negativity by today's standards even though her novels, now historical, give us insights into the Black experience of the 1930s (Rahn 108).

Society as Reflected in Literature About African-Americans

According to Haskins, "being black in America has always required a strong spirit" (88) and "being born black in America also carries a greater chance of being born poor" (91). African-American youth do not expect happy endings; fairy tales are not realistic models for their world (Johnson 2). Sebestyen's *Words by Heart* challenges the misconception that extreme racism existed only in the South (Miller-

Lachmann 74). Likewise, Lasky's *True North* provides the perspective that Northern economists profited by Southern slavery (cheap labor, more profit on finished products).

Black females, victims of both a White racist society and a Black sexist community, face six challenges: invisibility, negative self-image, sexual and other violence, drug abuse and crime, lack of faith in Black men, and loss of voice (Groves 51). Negative self-image and loss of voice are prominent issues that protagonists struggle with in Mean's *Shattered Windows*, Sebestyen's *Words by Heart*, and Lasky's *True North*. At the conclusion of each book, the central Black female has an improved self-image and a greater or more stable voice.

Adolescent females, as a group, experience loss of voice and seek identification with a group. Unfortunately, African-American girls begin to lose their voice earlier than white

adolescent females. Young adult novels, therefore, are crucial vehicles for vicarious insights (Groves 62).

Authorship and Authenticity

After Barbara Rollock compiled *The Black Experience in Children's Books* in 1984, she received so many questions about the racial identity of authors that in subsequent editions she includes an index of author identities (Johnson 3). Perhaps the best known controversy over white authorship is Bob Dixon's statement about Ezra Jack Keats' *The Snowy Day*: "[The characters] are black enough, but it's only skin deep. Nothing would be affected in Keats' stories if the characters were white" (Johnson 7). Hence, an outsider's point of view results in the objectification of Black America. The need for Black novelists to speak to Black children was first answered by the 1931 publication, *Zeke* by Mary White Ovington, one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In the early 30s, however, Black writers did not have wide access to the publishing industry. Few writers followed Ovington's lead.

Rudine Sims Bishop believes that *Words by Heart* is "flawed because it presents an outsider's perspective on Black lives and fails to recognize the political, racial, and social realities that shape the Black experience in this country" (Monseau 27). Donelsen and Nilsen (in Monseau 29) label this kind of remark as a form of censorship. Bishop's argument is that "only persons from a particular culture group may write about that group" (Hade 115). Clearly, this opens the debate on whether a person can write about another culture (Harris 112). Katherine Lasky says "yes" and "warns against 'a kind of literary version of ethnic cleansing, with an underlying premise that posits that there is only one story and only one way to tell it'" (Harris 114). Lasky issues further warnings about the "self-styled militias of cultural diversity" (*To Stingo With Love* 2). Ponder those statements in light of critical receptions of Means' works and that of Mildred Taylor, an award-winning African American author of young adult books. Dorothy Broderick slashes Means' moderate approach as a way of keeping African-Americans in their place (Hendrickson 287-288) while Taylor's

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Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry is treated as a "significant masterpiece of the twentieth-century American fiction" (Moss 410) and Taylor is praised for "her skill in representing African-American speech, her ability to write convincing dialogue, and her ability to weave social and historical information into the dramatic and emotional contexts of her narratives" (410-411).

Lingering Thoughts

In response to Lasky's warnings, Rudine Sims Bishop writes that she seriously doubts that anyone will criticize [Lasky] for daring to take on the perspective of a 14-year-old 19th century fugitive slave. Someone may, however, criticize the way in which she portrays that fugitive slave, and that is something I think any critic has the right to do (Bishop viii).

Lasky, in a counter reply, charges that Bishop's evaluative framework "has been used to ward off what some perceive as interlopers" but reflects that both she and Bishop share a common goal: "good books for young people by all artists regardless of ethnic or racial background" (Letter vii). Citing Gates, Lasky declares that "No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn to inhabit another world" (Letter viii).

Perhaps, as noted by Anderson, "It is bridges, not barriers, that we need" for assisting cultures in "crossing over to each other" (90). Maybe Means knew this well as she reflected upon her own work:

The books about minority groups have had varied motivations—more than any other the desire to introduce one group of people to another, who otherwise might never know them, and so might regard them with the fear which is bred of lack of knowledge, and which in its turn breeds the hate, the prejudice which I have seen blazing out in destructive force (Anderson 90).

Our journeys across ethnic and cultural boundaries, supported by young adult authors such as Means, Sebestyen, and Lasky create pathways toward greater understandings of ourselves in the 20th century as we labor to create a safer, braver 21st that is more accepting. Using the power of young adult literature, we can learn from our past journeys and better connect our future—together.

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