

Expanding the Canon: Classic African American Young Adult Literature

There are a number of young adult books generally considered to be traditional and contemporary classics.¹ A few examples include *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton (1967), *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier (1974), *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden (1982), and *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999). Harris (1990) writes, “Unfortunately, literary canons tend to include a preponderance of books that reflect the experiences, values, perspectives, knowledge, and interpretations of Whites, particularly Anglo-Saxons” (p. 540).

Rarely are books that are written by and about African Americans, or by other groups of color, referred to as classics in the children’s and young adult literary canon, “even though many exhibit extraordinary merit, expand or reinterpret literary forms, or provide a forum for voices silenced or ignored in mainstream literature” (Harris, 1990, pp. 540–541). For instance, in a study that aimed to determine the favorite classics of students in the upper elementary grades, *Charlotte’s Web* (White, 1952) was selected as the top choice (Wilson & Abrahamson, 1988). We were not able to identify any of the other titles (e.g., *Heidi* [Spyri, 1885] and *The Hobbit* [Tolkien, 1937]) that were presented to the children to vote on as their favorites as

being written about or by people of color. We believe that there are a number of young adult books written by and about African Americans that can be considered classics.

In this article, we will examine the term “classic” and how it is defined based on scholarship, as well as explicate our methodology and the procedures used for interviewing numerous experts about what they consider to be classic African American young adult texts. Then we will explain the three main categories into which we placed the African American young adult books deemed classics and conclude with future implications and reasons as to why this research is significant.

How Is a Classic Defined?

There is no concise definition of the term “classic.” Rudine Sims Bishop writes that a classic “is a book with a theme and a literary style that stands the test of time” (personal communication, January 8, 2008), while Dianne Johnson considers a classic to be “a text of enduring and timeless value to the extent that it offers insight into and illumination of our cultural, historical, political, and imaginative experience—broadly defined” (personal communication, February 6, 2008). As far back as 1910, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1910) grappled with this issue and wrote that “a true classic . . . is an author who has enriched the human mind, increased its treasure, and caused it to advance a step” (p. 129). Violet J. Harris notes:

I define a book as classic in two ways, traditional or contemporary. Some criteria for both include literary and/or artistic

1 While it is commonplace for secondary teachers to share classic adult books (e.g., *A Tale of Two Cities* [1859] by Charles Dickens, *Moby Dick* [1851] by Herman Melville, and *The Great Gatsby* [1925] by F. Scott Fitzgerald) with high school students, this article focuses on literature created specifically for a young adult audience.

merit as determined by experts, selection by readers over several generations, and books in the vanguard of creativity that reach a small audience but challenge, advance, or reinterpret prevailing themes, characterizations, language, and so forth. The definition is expansive and does not allow for restriction or inclusion based on characteristics of the author or the author's culture(s). (personal communication, March 22, 2008)

Harris's definition is especially pertinent in that it challenges the idea that only books written by authors who are members of mainstream cultural groups should be considered classics, an important assertion that undergirds this article.

Likewise, Lawrence R. Sipe (1996) argued that when designating books as classics, it is important for educators, librarians, parents, reviewers, and others "to consider what implicit, unspoken criteria are being used," as "only then can we critically examine our own criteria and possibly modify, refine, or develop new, more thoughtful ones" (p. 31). So, for example, scholars and librarians with expertise in young adult literature can reflect upon whether all of the books they consider to be classics are written by Whites, and if so, why this is so in spite of the large, noteworthy bodies of work created by African American authors such as Angela Johnson, Walter Dean Myers, and Jacqueline Woodson. Sipe also believed that readers play a considerable role in the designation of books as classics, perhaps more so than the actual works themselves. It could be argued that educators, in particular, play a crucial role in the designation of books as classics by their acceptance and continual use of certain titles, recommendations to parents, summer reading lists, etc. Though there may be variances across scholars in terms of how to define classics, there are some commonalities, which include factors such as "holding power" (Winfield, 1986, p. 26) or enduring and timeless appeal across generations, "being landmarks or breakthroughs in some way" (McNair, 2010, p. 97), exceptional writing, and literary innovation.

Methodology

To amass a sampling of African American texts considered classics, a number of experts across various disciplines were asked to complete a brief survey. Invited respondents were chosen based upon their expertise in children's literature with a special emphasis on knowledge of books written by and about African

Americans. These scholars completed the survey: Rudine Sims Bishop, Lesley Colabucci, Violet J. Harris, Dianne Johnson, Jonda C. McNair, Lawrence R. Sipe, and Henrietta M. Smith. Dr. Henrietta M. Smith is a Professor Emerita of Library and Information Science, and Dr. Dianne Johnson is a professor of English. The remaining scholars are (or were at the time) professors of Education. The survey respondents lived in various parts of the United States, including Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, South Carolina, and Illinois. The two White survey respondents held in-depth expertise in children's literature of all kinds, including African American children's literature. The remaining respondents are Black with specific scholarly expertise in children's literature written by and about African Americans.

Several of these survey respondents have written scholarly texts about African American literature, such as *Telling Tales: The Pedagogy and Promise of African American Literature for Youth* (Johnson, 1990) and *Free within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature* (Bishop, 2007). In addition, most of these scholars have extensive experience serving on book award selection committees, such as the Pura Belpré, Randolph Caldecott, John Newbery, and Coretta Scott King award committees. In fact, Rudine Sims Bishop is currently serving on the 2015 Coretta Scott King Book Award jury.

All survey respondents were asked to: 1) define the term "classic"; 2) identify and list books written by and about African Americans published after 1950 that they considered classics (no list of titles to select from was provided to them); and 3) select two of the books they identified and speak specifically to what it is about these particular texts that makes them classics. The surveys were completed via e-mail, though one participant did send her response via snail mail. We chose 1950 as a cut-off date because we wanted to ensure that the majority of the books identified would be in print and easily accessible to teachers. Also, we recognize that young adult literature is not considered to have come of age until the late 1960s and early 1970s (Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013).

The survey respondents identified a total of 85 books. We then selected titles that were identified as classics *by at least two survey respondents*. This criterion was intended to avoid including a book that represented an idiosyncratic selection from a respondent

and to ensure a basic degree of inter-rater agreement. This narrowed our list to 44 texts, the majority of which were picturebooks and middle-grade novels. Six young adult books were named by at least two survey respondents as classics. We examined these six books as our final data set. They include: *Miracle's Boys* (Woodson, 2000), *Toning the Sweep* (Johnson, 1993), *His Own Where* (Jordan, 1971), *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1995), *Monster* (Myers, 1999) and *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (Hamilton, 1985).

The remaining 38 titles were picturebooks or middle grade novels (e.g., *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* [Taylor, 1976], and *Elijah of Buxton* [Curtis, 2007]) that could be appropriate for some young adult readers.² It could be argued, too, that some of the young adult books (e.g., *Fallen Angels* [Myers, 1988], *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* [Woodson, 1994], and *The Skin I'm In* [Flake, 1998]) identified by only one survey respondent are indeed (or destined to become) classics. It could also be argued that some titles (e.g., *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* [Childress, 1973]) that were not listed by any of the respondents are classics, too. The purpose of this study was not to identify all African American classic texts or to derive a definitive list, but to assert that there *are* classic young adult books written by and about African Americans and to identify a sampling of them.

Drawing from the responses of those surveyed as well as relevant scholarship, we utilized qualitative analysis to develop three categories in which to place the six selected African American young adult books. Over a period of several months, we read across all of the respondents' survey data, as well as scholarship (e.g., books and articles) related to classic literature, and looked for key terms and themes (e.g., universality) that surfaced repeatedly. The three resulting categories include: universal experiences from an African American perspective, breakthrough books, and literary innovation. In some cases, we noted that there was overlap, but we chose to place books in a single category based on their predominant aspects.

2 Table 1 lists middle grade books identified as classics by at least two survey respondents that we believe are suitable for a young adult audience.

Universal Experiences from an African American Perspective

The two books representing our category of universal experiences are *Miracle's Boys* by Jacqueline Woodson (2000) and Angela Johnson's *Toning the Sweep* (1993). Universal books, while infused with authentic cultural practices and depictions, still provide readers from all backgrounds ways to genuinely connect to the stories. We argue that the overriding themes presented within the narratives are universal in nature. These themes embody the potential to resonate with readers regardless of ethnicity or racial background. In response to whether African American universal books exist, young adult author Angela Johnson offers the following explanation:

I believe we're all connected. One of the big problems in this country is people don't always feel that they are connected. We're all on this road together, bumping into each other, and we're all so connected. We have been thrown in this place.

Table 1. Additional African American classic literature for young adults

Title	Author	Publication Year	Publisher	Category
<i>Elijah of Buxton</i>	Christopher Paul Curtis	2007	Scholastic	Breakthrough
<i>Lonesome Boy</i>	Arna Bontemps	1955	Houghton Mifflin	Literary Innovation
<i>M.C. Higgins the Great</i>	Virginia Hamilton	1975	Aladdin	Breakthrough
<i>Middle Passage</i>	Tom Feelings	1995	Dial	Literary Innovation
<i>North Town</i>	Lorenz Graham	1965	Crowell	Breakthrough
<i>Return to North Town</i>	Lorenz Graham	1976	Crowell	Breakthrough
<i>Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry</i>	Mildred Taylor	1976	Dial	Breakthrough
<i>Scorpions</i>	Walter Dean Myers	1988	Harper & Row	Breakthrough
<i>South Town</i>	Lorenz Graham	1958	Follett	Breakthrough
<i>Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</i>	Christopher Paul Curtis	1995	Delacorte	Literary Innovation
<i>Whose Town?</i>	Lorenz Graham	1969	Crowell	Breakthrough

There has to come a time where we say, “It doesn’t really matter if he’s black or if he’s Asian or if he’s white. This is a universal story.” In the end what I want is for anyone to be able to pick up one of these books and it doesn’t matter: the color of the children, where they live. All of these stories are everyone’s story. If anyone can pick my book up and say, “Yes, this is just a wonderful story; I’ve felt this; I knew someone who felt this,” then I’ve done what I was supposed to do. What else is there? (TeachingBooks.net, 2005, para 51)

While books with universal experiences address a wide range of themes, the two books selected by our experts focus on the recent or impending death of a beloved parent.

In Woodson’s *Miracle’s Boys* (2000), the three lead characters (brothers Charlie, Lafayette, and

Ty’ree) must carry on after the unexpected loss of their mother to diabetes, a pervasive disease within the African American community. Having already endured their father’s tragic death, the three boys face learning to cope with abandonment and a daunting parentless existence. Their ability to go on despite the tragedies they have endured represents a miracle, so to speak.

Angela Johnson, a recipi-

ent of the Coretta Scott King Author Award for *Toning the Sweep* (1993) and other books, writes through the voice of Emmie, the protagonist. During Emmie’s visit to Grandmother Ola at her home in the desert, Ola prepares to move because she has an incurable illness that prevents her from continuing to live alone. Throughout the book, Emmie reminisces with her mother and Ola’s close friends without openly acknowledging the impending loss of her grandmother.

Across the two stories, death is conceived of differently—in one, tragically, and in the other, through a slow contemplative process characteristic of an incurable disease diagnosis. The internal dialogues of the characters capture their struggles to understand death, healing, and moving forward. For example, the inevitability of her grandmother’s passing causes Emmie to recall insights shared by her father:

I miss daddy now. He told me that all we are is soul—most of us. I want to believe it. If you believe that, then when people die and are buried, you’ll never miss them. You can sit and think about them. Your heart will never hurt for them, “cause all they ever were was soul.” (1993, p. 66)

Similarly, Lafayette, one of the three brothers in Woodson’s *Miracle’s Boys*, clings to his aunt’s figurative advice, “My great-aunt Cecile’s all the time saying dead don’t have to mean dead and gone, and I like to believe that” (p. 19).

Both stories suggest a reliance on intergenerational and cross-generational family support to accept the tragedies and appreciate joyful times of the past. The stages of grief unfold in specific, although universal, ways. First, the characters experience denial, followed by guilt and anger, and then a gradual transition to acceptance. In the final chapter of *Miracle’s Boys* (Woodson, 2000), the brothers decide not to keep erasing memories of their mother. They begin to recall her fondly:

“Mama used to say she’d buy three more of us if she was rich enough,” Ty’ree said. Charlie pulled me a little bit closer to him. After a long time had passed, he said, “What else did she use to say?” When Ty’ree started talking, his voice was low and even, like he was reaching way back to remember. Me and Charlie leaned forward, leaned into our brother, to listen. (pp. 130–131)

While the universal theme of death and dying gets depicted in both stories, different portrayals of African American life are captured. Lafayette’s family resides in an urban city and comes from a low-income household (Woodson, 2000). Their urban traditions commemorating death and funerals vary distinctively from the family in *Toning the Sweep* (Johnson, 1993). Ola’s family comes from Southern origins, and they embrace particular cultural traditions such as the long-standing death ritual evoked through the title—toning the sweep, a tradition of striking metal after a loved one passes away, “to ring the dead person’s soul to heaven” (Johnson, 1993, p. 65). At the same time, Ola practices the learned customs and traditions consistent with the Southwestern desert life she adopted after leaving the South.

These two stories embody layers of cultural specificity that might cause one to question whether a book with universal experiences can resonate with African American as well as non-African American readers. Woodson has spoken regrettably about the

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“... inability of publishers, judges and readers to recognize the universality of the black protagonist” (2001, p. 58). To that point, we argue that the rich cultural milieu found in these two books deepens the theme of death and dying by making the stories believable and relatable no matter your race or ethnicity.

Breakthrough Books

We selected two illustrative texts to represent the category of “breakthrough.” These books, *His Own Where* (Jordan, 1971) and *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1995), depict linguistic and sexual practices that have caused shame within and against those in the African American community. June Jordan and Jacqueline Woodson provide windows into these practices by calling forth questions about identity and compelling readers to confront their own biases. Both stories unfold around forbidden love relationships between two unsuspecting people. Because ambiguous questions about identity and morality are evoked, family members respond to the relationships with angst and anger.

His Own Where (Jordan, 1971), not a well-known book or read in today’s contemporary classrooms, exemplifies our breakthrough category because of a unique stylistic decision made by June Jordan. Jordan told this contemporary story through characters speaking African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Bishop has written that:

One of the most notable features of this brief novel is its language. Reflecting the Black Arts Movement emphasis on oral language, it was written entirely in a lyrical, stylized rendition of what Jordan called Black English. (2007, p. 213)

At the time of publication, this novel was selected as a finalist for the National Book Award (Bishop, 2007).

The story is a portrayal of urban life that examines issues of young love, abuse, and abandonment through the linguistic vernacular of two urban teenagers. While visiting his ill father each day in the hospital, Buddy falls in love with Angela, the 16-year-old daughter of a nurse. Angela endures physical abuse by her father in retribution for engaging in alleged sexual behaviors with Buddy.

Throughout the story, Buddy stands out as a courageous and thoughtful young man who fights against societal stereotypes that sometimes come from the Black community. Buddy becomes Angela’s protec-

tor and summons the courage to enjoy his budding relationship despite his father’s decline. Expressed eloquently through AAVE, the excerpt below reveals Buddy’s questioning of how his life has unfolded:

His life form into habits following his love. Angela and the hospital and his father all roll into hours that he spend with them. Now every night he be walking Angela home from the hospital and then he go back there and stay there at the hospital watching his father/ the body of his father on the hospital bed until they make him leave. (Jordan, 1971, p. 23)

During the seventies, and even up until the present, the language comfortably expressed in the African American community garnered interpretations by mainstream society as “broken English” or “ignorant speech.” As a language and literacy community, scholars were less familiar with terms such as “code switching” or “linguistic diversity” to specify the cross-fertilization of language in context. At the time the book was written (early 1970s), sociolinguists and anthropologists (Smitherman, 2000) found themselves in the midst of heated controversial debates to define and legitimize AAVE as a language or, at a minimum, a legitimate speech vernacular.

In Jordan’s breakthrough book, Buddy’s internal monologues courageously happen in the everyday vernacular he uses to make sense of his life. As a contemporary rather than historical narrative where varied language use more commonly appears, Jordan’s stylistic decision altered the parameters of possibility in the emerging growth of young adult literature.

Like Buddy, Melanin Sun, a 14-year-old youth in Jacqueline Woodson’s book, *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995), is a remarkable protagonist. In this story, Melanin’s African American mother falls in love with a White woman. As the second book in this category, we believe it is breakthrough for reasons similar to those given for *His Own Where* (Jordan, 1971). At the time of publication, no other

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young adult African American writer had depicted homosexuality between two women of different racial backgrounds.

In the most obvious ways, this story addresses the love experienced by lesbians. At the same time, however, it also addresses Melanin's grappling with his own identity in light of his mother's new relationship. Not only are issues of sexual orientation taken up, but Melanin must also examine his manhood and Black identity. With regard to the salient themes addressed in this novel, Woodson explains the following:

The book is about a boy who is trying to figure out who he is, like so many adolescents are trying to figure out who they are. So yes, Melanin Sun's mother is gay, and this is what his struggle is this particular summer, as he wonders about the fact that his mother has just come out and what this might mean about him. In the last part of the book, Melanin Sun says, "I didn't know what would happen tomorrow or the next day or the next . . . but I was sure of me and maybe that's all that matters." (Hinton, 2004, p. 28)

The community in which Melanin lives consists of Dominicans and African Americans. It is described as one of the few that would take in a youngster and single mom of their racial background and Melanin's deep, dark skin color. Melanin's reactions to his mother's decisions are amplified by the shame and embarrassment he believes his community

will evoke within him. For example, when sitting with his mother's White girlfriend on the beach, Melanin contemplates the inner resolve he'll need to ignore others' views of such an unexpected relationship:

We sat there without saying anything for a long time. . . . But I didn't care anymore what people were thinking. Some part of me was starting to move inside of myself, shutting out all those nosey eyes and nasty things people can think to say. (Woodson, 1995, p. 124)

Jacqueline Woodson does not steer away from provocations about difference in her books. In fact, many of them push readers to ask *Why do we view and label others in particular ways?* Woodson writes stories that provide multidimensional perspectives of what it means to be an African American, a boy or girl, straight or gay, rich or poor, etc. Very little about her characters' identities remain static, assumed, or taken for granted. We suspect that this aspect of her work likely characterizes not only *The Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995) but much of her other writing as breakthrough.

Literary Innovations

The two young adult books selected for this category are exceptional in terms of literary innovations, such as style and language: *Monster* (Myers, 1999) and *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (Hamilton, 1985). *Monster* is the story of a teenager named Steve Harmon who is on trial for murder after supposedly participating in a botched armed robbery by serving as a lookout. *The People Could Fly* is a collection of 24 folktales focusing on a range of topics related to the Black experience.

Monster (Myers, 1999) was the first recipient of the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, which makes it a breakthrough or landmark title in some respects; however, we believe that what was most conspicuous about this book was its innovative literary style. Steve is 16 years old and locked up in a juvenile detention center when he decides to tell his story in the form of a movie, complete with voice-overs, camera shots, and credits. His journal entries, represented in a font that resembles actual handwriting, are interspersed throughout the book. A portion of the text reads:

Maybe I could make my own movie. I could write it out and play it in my head. I could block out the scenes like we did in school. The film will be the story of my life. No, not my life, but of this experience. I'll write it down in the notebook they let me keep. I'll call it what the lady who is the prosecutor called me. **MONSTER**. (Myers, 1999, pp. 5–6)

It is the telling of Steve's experience in this manner that makes the book innovative from a literary standpoint. Dianne Johnson described this book as a classic ". . . because it is an inventive, literary critique of the plight of late twentieth century black boys" (personal

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communication, February 6, 2008). Myers touches on the plight of Black boys by highlighting the imbalance in terms of detention rates for some groups of color. At one point, the book focuses on the inside of the cells and the sounds that the inmates make, noting that “Most of the voices are clearly Black or Hispanic” (p. 7). The text indicates when the camera is fading in, focusing on particular scenes, and cutting from one to another. The movie is described as being written and directed by Steve Harmon, and key figures, including the prosecutor and his “Defense Attorney with Doubts” (p. 10), are listed in the way that actors and actresses in a movie would be. The text also notes specifics about the “set design,” as well as props and wardrobe descriptions: “handcuffs, and prison outfits by the State of New York” (p. 11). Myers writes about an experience that speaks to a pressing issue in American society with racial and socioeconomic underpinnings, and he does so in an innovative format that is unique and appealing to young adult readers.

The People Could Fly (Hamilton, 1985) includes folktales divided into four sections that focus on animals, the extravagant and fanciful, the supernatural, and freedom from slavery. Bishop (2007) wrote that “this was the book that revived interest in African American folktales as children’s literature, over and above the numerous African folktales that have been published as picture books and in compilations” (p. 200). Hamilton captures the enduring and irrepressible spirit of Africans who, in spite of the horrific circumstances of slavery, managed to tell stories, generate riddles and jokes, and sing songs. She wrote that “no amount of hard labor and suffering could suppress their powers of imagination” (p. x). What makes this book innovative is its use of language and the manner in which Hamilton subverts the ways it was used by others such as Joel Chandler Harris when telling similar tales. Harris writes,

I consider Virginia Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly* a classic because of its artistic merit. Hamilton re-envisioned African American folktales and usurped the stereotypic “plantation dialect” with language that more closely represented the natural progression of language from pidgin to Creole to African American Vernacular English. The linguistic style more clearly captures the cadences and rhythms of AAVE. (personal communication, March 22, 2008)

In a folktale titled, “How Nehemiah Got Free,” part of the text reads:

In slavery time, there was smart slaves and they did most what they wanted to do by usin just their wits. Hangin around the big house, they kept the slaveowners laughin. They had to “bow and scrape” some, but they often was able to draw the least hard tasks. Nehemiah was a one who believed that if he must be a slave, he’d best be a smart one. No one who callin himself Master of Nehemiah had ever been able to make him work hard for nothin. (p. 147)

This language, unlike that of Joel Chandler Harris, is intelligible, and it depicts Nehemiah in a savvy light as a slave who is challenging the unfair system in which slaves are forced to toil long hours for no pay. Hamilton’s use of language reflects the linguistic patterns of Blacks but in a respectful manner that recognizes their dignity, humanity, and intelligence.

Conclusion

Schoolwide and classroom libraries that hold the books we have discussed here offer readers of all backgrounds exposure to a wide variety of genres, writers, and perspectives. However, their unique value to African American youth cannot be underestimated. Myers (2014) explains the feelings of African American readers who notice their lives represented in books:

They have been struck by the recognition of themselves in the story, a validation of their existence as human beings, an acknowledgment of their value by someone who understands who they are. It is the shock of recognition at its highest level.

The authors of the books selected warrant particular mention here as well. Most of these authors work (or did so before their deaths) passionately to expand the readership of their stories while simultaneously trying to convince publishers of their value. They are acclaimed writers committed to an industry that publishes a relatively small percentage of books each year by and about African Americans (Cooperative Children’s

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Book Center, n.d.). Anecdotal evidence suggests, for example, that these books even remain difficult to find in chain bookstores such as Barnes & Noble.

For educators interested in expanding the typical canon of classics purchased for their classroom libraries or incorporated into their literature-based pedagogies, we encourage use of

the heuristic we discuss in this piece. Both teachers and scholars can examine books relative to their universal appeal, breakthrough characteristics (e.g., use of language, unique themes), and literary innovations.

Although only applied to African American literature in this article, we believe this heuristic is useful for books written about all racial and ethnic groups.

We also encourage educators to be informed by the literacy practices and responses of the readers within their reach. Certainly, many teachers can identify books that consistently stand out to their students for a variety of compelling reasons. Relying on readers a bit more enables a nuanced and contextualized consideration of a classic

story to take hold. As former classroom teachers, we realize that some of the books highly favored by the urban youth we taught never reached the status of a classic.

In our effort to identify classic African American young adult literature, we knowingly push the boundaries related to the identification of these books. While we do not argue against the notion of a classic, we regrettably contend that a number of classic books written about diverse groups (like those presented in this article) remain ignored. The six books reviewed throughout this manuscript represent, in our view, the very best in young adult books written by and about African Americans. We've identified three categories

(universal experiences, breakthrough, and literary innovations) that group classics from a literary tradition now decades old (Bishop, 2007). Teachers or librarians who maintain the typical view of a classic, knowingly or perhaps unknowingly, participate in perpetuating a narrow view of a literary classic that arguably sends subtle messages to young people about whose stories remain worth telling. And while this article addresses African American young adult literature, an expanded view of a classic would necessarily include noteworthy books from other multicultural literary traditions such as Latina/o, American Indian, and Asian American that will engage young adult readers for decades and decades to come.

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