

## PREPARING FUTURE LEADERS OF THEIR RACES —THE POLITICAL FUNCTION OF CHILDREN’S CHARACTERS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN PICTURE-BOOKS

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The aim of the article is to analyse the ways African American children’s characters are constructed in selected picture-books and to determine whether they have any impact on the conduct of contemporary black youth facing discrimination in their own lives. It also argues that picture-books are one of the most influential media in the representation of racial problems.

**Methods.** The subjects of the study are picture-books. The analysis pertains to the visual and the verbal narrative of the books, with a special emphasis being placed on the interplay between text and image as well as on the ways the meaning of the books is created. The texts are analysed using a number of existing research methods used for examining the picture-book format.

**Results.** The article shows that the actions of selected children’s characters, whether real or imaginary, may serve as an incentive for contemporary youth to struggle for equal rights and contribute to the process of racial integration on a daily basis.

**Conclusions.** The results can be considered in the process of establishing educational curricula for students from minority groups who need special literature that would empower them to take action and join in the efforts of adult members of their communities.

**Key words:** picture-books, text-image relationships, African American children’s literature, racism, political agents

### INTRODUCTION

The construction of children’s characters has always been at the center of children’s literary scholarship. Although there is no shortage of books addressing the construction of childhood in children’s literature, not enough has been written about children’s characters portrayed as political agents who, despite their young age and apparent lack of experience, can introduce social and political views into a text. Such characters usually represent a specific perspective,

which can be defined by their race, gender, social class and the place of origin. In the course of my analysis I will make references to Maria Nikolajeva's (2002) theoretical framework outlined in her study *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature*, in which she proposes a mimetic and semiotic approach to character construction. Mimetic characters are perceived as living people who represent particular social groups. It means that we can explain their actions by going beyond the text and using our background knowledge of their culture or social origin. Semiotic characters, on the other hand, are textual constructions. They seem to have no life outside the text, no meaning beyond the existing literary work. In children's literature criticism, specifically dealing with the books that address social and political issues, there is a general tendency to treat children's characters as mimetic and representative. Nikolajeva (2002, p. 10) explains the fact by saying that "in children's literature, the narrative agency is an adult, while the protagonist is a child." It means that all the views and ideas that the child represents come from the adult. Similarly, Vanessa Joosen (2018) approaches children's literature as a discourse produced by adults who have a great role in the production, mediation and reception of children's literature. Adult intentionality of children's literature is also stressed by Clementine Beauvais (2015), who does not fail to mention the fact that both mimetic and semiotic approaches are necessary to analyse children's characters.

### CHILD AGENCY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

African American children's literature, which has always been marked with political themes, is particularly known for explicit child agency. Historically, the first books for young black readers were written by authors of the same race who intended to resist a number of social and political issues of their time. Thus they constructed their characters as open-minded individuals who challenged the existing order. The concept of children as political agents and future leaders of their race was first proposed in the early twentieth century by the African American scholar and educator W.E.B. Du Bois. Knowing that black children were at a disadvantaged position in American society, he decided to promote his ideas of social advancement by means of press articles as well as children's literature. In the years 1920-1921 W.E.B. Du Bois edited *The Brownies' Book*, a children's periodical aimed at African American young readers, which included a variety of texts with black children being the main characters. One of the goals of the magazine was "to inspire them [coloured children] to prepare for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice" (Du Bois, 1919, p. 286). Generally it aimed to equip young black readers for service and leadership. As Christina Schaffer (2012, p. 52) observes, "The magazine wanted to turn the children into strong personalities to prepare them for their task of uplifting the race." Thus, to use Dianne Johnson-Feeling's (1996, p. 338) words, for the creators of *The Brownies' Book*, "becoming a whole human being

and becoming a responsible member of an African-American community, are distinguishable yet intimately related.”

W.E.B. Du Bois’s imperatives became an inspiration for many younger generations of African American authors. Even today, when African American children’s literature is no longer as politicised as it was several decades ago, they create characters who are strongly concerned about their African American identity and the future of their race. As Olga Davis (1998, p. 67) observes, black characters of today’s children’s books can be referred to as “agents of change” because they “may locate themselves in the history of America and learn that, even in oppression, there are ways of resistance and liberation.” Children’s characters attempt to find their own solutions to the social and political conflicts they find themselves in together with their families. It is not uncommon that they are the embodiments of the authors’ own beliefs and attitudes, and overcome the problems the authors encountered in their own childhood. Thus, they can be analysed within a broader context of American racial changes.

A large number of contemporary black children’s authors set their stories in the critical moments of African American history such as the Harlem Renaissance period and the Great Crisis of the 1920’s and 1930s, or the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The main characters of the stories are usually young African Americans who experience different forms of racial discrimination. While some of them are fictional figures imbued with unusual imagination and courage, necessary for the political functions ascribed to them by the authors, others are based on historical figures who contributed to important social change in the country. The following analysis will focus on both real and imaginary characters who are presented as agents of change in several picture-books by African American author and illustrator Faith Ringgold, and in the autobiographical story by Ruby Bridges (1999), *Through My Eyes*, illustrated with real press photographs of the epoch. It will try to decide whether their true identity has any impact on the way they are perceived by the readers. Do they serve as an incentive for contemporary youth to struggle for equal rights and contribute to the process of racial integration on a daily basis? Can we classify them as mimetic or semiotic characters?

### AFRICAN AMERICAN PICTURE-BOOKS

All of the selected children’s books belong to the genre of picture-books<sup>1</sup>, in which illustrations and text are equally important. As Joseph Schwarz (1982, p. 195) observes, art and text are inextricably linked to create the meaning of the picture-book “in the sense that it [picture-book] communicates its message in a way which is untranslatable into any other form of aesthetic expres-

1 It is necessary to make a distinction between the terms “picture book” and “picture-book,” with the first one being defined as any book containing illustrations, whereas the other one being reserved for books in which words and pictures are equally important. Writing the term as one word reflects the unity of words and pictures.

sion." In picture-books, characters belong to both verbal and visual narratives, which convey their physical and psychological traits as well as political and moral views. Nikolajeva and Scott (2006, p. 12) stress the importance of analyzing both narratives. Rather than being two mutually independent narratives, words and pictures fill each other's gaps and expand what is presented in the other medium. Picture sequences, like words, can be very dynamic and constitute a coherent plot. Thus, the visual material cannot be ignored in the examination of characters. Except for the external description, illustrations can convey a lot of information about the characters' actions and their relationships with other individuals. Their position in a page, their size or gestures, to a large extent, indicate their function in the story.

In some picture-books visuals can be even more telling than the text. It is especially true in the case of African American children's books where illustrations are frequently added for political reasons – to reject pejorative meanings of words and images used to describe African American people, as well as strengthen African American identity. Thus, in order to debunk negative stereotypes, young African American characters take on a leading role in their community and outsmart their white peers as well as adults. Some fictional characters are also equipped with supernatural powers which enable them to overcome a variety of difficulties.

### RINGGOLD'S FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

Faith Ringgold's children's books abound in sophisticated young African American characters who represent social and political attitudes of their author. Ringgold is one of the most famous contemporary African American authors and illustrators, as well as a feminist and a social activist. She has written and illustrated over a dozen of children's picture-books, and is still working on her new ideas. Ringgold contextualises historical facts within fictional stories of young characters discovering the history of their forefathers. Interestingly, the boundaries between fiction and biographical fact are clearly crossed here as the stories are invariably her own. For instance, *Tar Beach* is based on her experiences of growing up in New York's black district of Harlem, a place which had a great impact on the author's sense of reality. As Jennifer Wolcott (1998, p. 22) points out in her article "Faith Ringgold's Patchwork Sojourn," Ringgold finds her deepest inspiration from people living in her Harlem community who never gave up but were able "to rise above adversity." Living in a Harlem community of the Depression era was synonymous with being relegated to the many racial, sexual and economic obstacles. However, in Ringgold's stories, it does not mean conformity on the part of blacks as many of her characters transcend the boundaries of place assigned to their race.

Set in the early 1930s, *Tar Beach* (1991) tells the story of a typical African American family with two children, Cassie and Be Be (Fig. 1). They live in one of Harlem's tenement houses characterised by poor conditions, lack of space

and necessary resources, but with a strong community spirit. The family's father lost his job as a construction worker because he was black and was excluded from the trade unions. Paradoxically, it was he who built the Union Building, which now he has no right to enter. The mother of the family struggles with the family's lack of financial resources by leading a modest lifestyle. Their daughter, Cassie, is not resigned though. One starry night, as her parents are having dinner with their neighbours on the roof of their apartment block, which they call "tar beach," the girl imagines that she can improve the situation of her family by flying to the stars above the roof of the building.

The young characters in Ringgold's second picture-book, *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (1993), are equally defiant (Fig. 2). The story features two young cousins, a girl named Melody and a boy named Lonnie, who are visiting their aunt for dinner. While the adult members of the family are sitting at the table, the children go upstairs, where they discover their aunt's paintings on the walls of the attic. The pictures present well-known African American women who begin to talk to the children about their achievements for the black race. Among others, there is educator Mary McLeod Bethune, sculptor Augusta Savage, writer Zora Neal Hurston, and Harriet Tubman, who helped hundreds of African Americans escape slavery.

In both of the books, gender of the young figures is particularly essential. The main characters are girls, not because the books are addressed to female readers, but for political reasons. Ringgold's primary aim of writing her children's books is the debunking of stereotypes typically applied to African American women, and thereby empowering herself and other black women. Thus female characters and their successes definitely outnumber those of black men. Even if these are child characters, girls have more agency than boys. The girls appear as the embodiments of the historical African American women asserting their authority as leaders. If the characters appear in pairs, it is always the girl who is leading the boy, which is most visible in the illustrations. For instance,

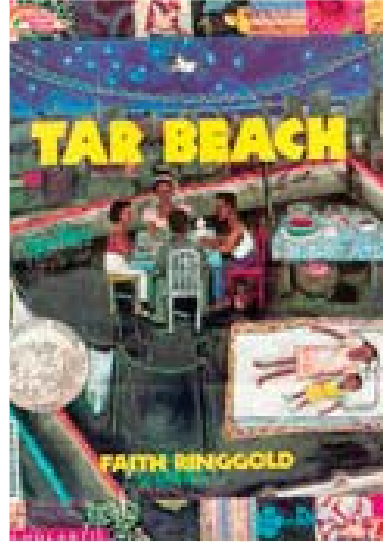


Figure 1. Faith Ringgold, *Tar Beach* (1991)

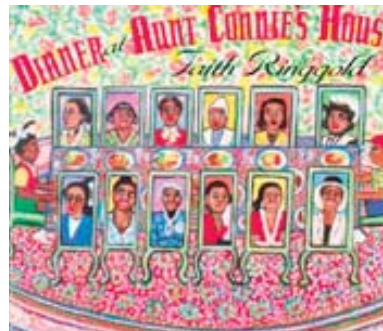


Figure 2. Faith Ringgold, *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (1993)

the first significant illustration in *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* depicts a lively scene showing the main characters running upstairs to the attic, with the boy following the girl, who, except for the famous African American women, appears as the central figure in the story. The fact that men remain in the background of the story cannot be overlooked as there are a couple of situations ascribing more authority to female characters. The women in the portraits, while encouraging the children to enter the attic, address the girl rather than the boy: "Come in, Melody. We would like to talk to you" (Ringgold, 1993, unpagged). Moreover, it is Aunt Connie, the author of the portraits, rather than her husband, who is the host of the family meeting. She seems to have invited her relatives in order to share with them her knowledge of black history and her determination to continue the tradition of black struggle.

Interestingly, too, all those black male characters seem to accept the women's leadership truly appreciating their accomplishments. The boys appearing in the stories together with their sisters or female cousins represent this kind of relationship. Be Be, a young boy following his sister Cassie in *Tar Beach* and other Ringgold's picture books (*Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad*), truly adores his sister for experience and natural leadership qualities. Similarly, Lonnie, the black boy in *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House*, trusts his cousin Melody in that she will lead him throughout his whole life. At the end of the story, after talking to twelve African-American women, the children make predictions about their future:

Lonnie: When I grow up, I want to sing in opera houses all over the world. I know it will be hard, but not as hard for me as it was for Marian Anderson.

Melody: I want to be president of the United States when I grow up so I can change some of the things that make people's lives so sad. I know I can do it because of these women. (Ringgold, 1993, unpagged)

The girl's ambitions are quite impressive, if utopian—she aspires to overcome the borders of race and gender and hold the highest position in the country—whereas the boy seems to appreciate the achievements of African American women and accept their leadership. Such images have obvious political intent as they modify traditional gender roles.

One of the most powerful images in Ringgold's picture-books is the illustration of girl characters flying in the sky, which is included in several stories. Although this gesture may have a slightly different meaning in each of the books, in general, it can be said that it is a symbol of empowerment given to young African American girls. This meaning is best expressed in *Tar Beach* as the girl is flying over the George Washington Bridge and is simultaneously considering the chances of changing the situation of African Americans in the U.S. Cassie seems to be able to change the social order of the 1930s. She is depicted flying above the buildings and the bridge as if she were ruling the Harlem community. It is a highly symbolic scene in which she says: "Now I have claimed it [the bridge]. All I had to do was fly over it for it to be mine forever. ... I can fly. That means I am free to go wherever I want for the rest of

my life" (Ringgold, 1991, unpagged). By the act of flying she wants to find a job for her father, a construction worker denied access to the labour unions due to his African American origins, and thus improve the economic situation of the whole family.

Children's participation in family meetings is further evidence of their agency. In *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House*, there are two different images of the family dinner. On the cover of the book, the children are sitting at the opposite sides of the table with the portraits of the famous African American women, whereas inside the book the characters are dining and listening to Aunt Connie talking about the achievements of black women. The fact that children are invited to take part in this festive event together with adult members of the family gives them a chance to share family stories and to learn how to continue the black struggle initiated by their forefathers. The scene of a family dinner is also present in *Tar Beach*. First, it appears in the girl's dream of her family living a different life. The illustration depicts the main character with her parents and her brother sitting in a nicely decorated room and having a special dinner. In the same story, black characters meet together not only to recall their past but also to support each other. Such gatherings give them a sense of community in which they can feel free despite the many obstacles they face in their real lives. In *Tar Beach*, Cassie's family regularly meet their neighbours and enjoy themselves on the rooftop of their apartment block in New York, the only place where they can actually spend their free time on hot summer nights. Interestingly, it is almost a rule that the child characters secretly leave the family meetings in order to discover more about their past.

Secrecy, like the motif of flying, is an important part of the African American tradition of resistance and struggle. In the slave community secrecy was a defensive mechanism and it manifested itself in a myriad of codes incorporated by black women into their speech, writing as well as art works. As Ringgold continues the tradition of resistance in her art and literature, secrecy is a permanent element of her rhetoric. For many of the child characters, the only chance to travel back in time and discover their history is to leave their homes secretly. Like slaves, they pursue their quest for freedom by diverting the eyes of those who might recognise them. For instance, Lonny and Melody in *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* secretly leave their relatives in the dining room and run upstairs to discover the long hidden facts of their history from the portraits of famous African American women. Upon taking the portraits downstairs into a more visible place, which is an act of revitalising the past, the children again talk to the women in secret. Finally, the two are secretly fantasising about their future as a married couple. The accompanying text goes as follows:

Lonnie: But what will our children think of Aunt Connie's secret, Melody?

Melody: Our children will love the secret. We will have delicious family dinners, and they will be magical just like Aunt Connie's, and our children, Lonnie, will be just like us. (Ringgold, 1993, unpagged)

Thus they do not only discover the “secret,” but recognise its significance — they imagine how they will also have their own children learn about it. In a similar way, in *Tar Beach*, the children secretly escape from their homes by the act of flying, which gives them the opportunity to rediscover their past and engage in dreamlike ideas of the present. Cassie explains what flying means to her:

I'll take Be Be with me. He has threatened to tell Mommy and Daddy if I leave him behind. I have told him it's very easy, anyone can fly. All you need is somewhere to go that you can't get to any other way. The next thing you know, you're flying among the stars. (Ringgold, 1991, unpagged)

Flying is certainly what the children keep as a secret. It is a magical act of discovering the past strictly connected with a sense of freedom.

Ringgold's stories seem to have a great value for African American children as they can see positive images of children like themselves, which may increase their self-esteem and influence their perception of the world. The significance of children's literature produced within the historical context of black culture is recognised by Olga Davis (1998, p. 76) who says: “Providing children a space to locate themselves in history makes them present as agents in the struggle for self-definition and cultural identity. Their learning, then, becomes a pedagogy of empowerment and liberation.” Another thing which marks the relationship between the narrative and cultural identity is the rhetoric of black family tradition. The stories of their ancestors as well as the illustrations depicting family life provide children with a chance to understand who they are to become and what role they are to play in society. For instance, Melody, in *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House*, being exposed to a variety of female models in her family, finds her place in the contemporary multicultural reality with what her fore-sisters have worked out as the true image of black womanhood. Cassie, in *Tar Beach*, has the power to liberate her father, which is a fulfillment of Ringgold's vision of a black female activist.

### THE NONFICTION CHARACTER OF RUBY BRIDGES

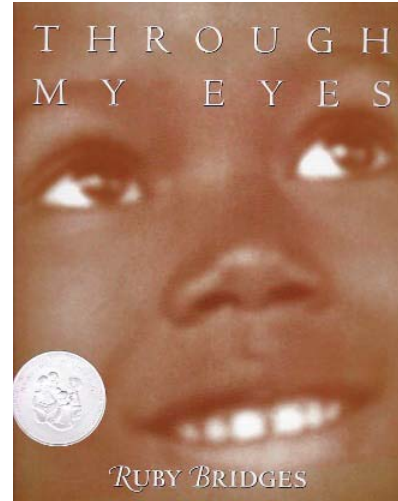
Child characters are shaped in a slightly different way in nonfiction picture-books, for instance in photo books, where real photographs are used as book illustrations. Even though some of the presented characters may seem anonymous, as they remain unnamed, they are definitely real. Being part of the historical material makes them plausible beyond the plot of the book. Some of these characters are named, though. Ruby Bridges was a popular character long before her autobiographical picture-book, *Through My Eyes* (1999), was published (Fig. 3). Ruby was a six-year old black girl from New Orleans, Louisiana, who was sent as the first African American child to a white elementary school which was supposed to become racially integrated in 1960.

The story focuses on the child's suffering due to the initial hostility she experienced from the school authorities, teachers, fellow students and their parents,



who kept protesting in front of the school and emotionally abusing young Ruby. Thus, unconsciously she found herself in the center of important political changes. Her performance, marked with determination and courage, set an example for thousands of other black kids. She proved that fear cannot prevent one from achieving their goals. The words of Ruby's mother, published in another children's book, stress the agential character of her daughter:

Our Ruby taught us all a lot. She became someone who helped change our country. She was part of history, just like generals and presidents are part of history. They're leaders, and so was Ruby. She led us away from hate, and she led us nearer to knowing each other, the white folks and the black folks. (Coles, 1995, unpagged)



**Figure 3.**  
Ruby Bridges, *Through My Eyes*, 1999

All the documentary photographs included in Bridges' autobiography provide more information about the girl's agency than the verbal narrative. Without reading the text, readers can easily recognise the child's central position in the struggle of school integration. The photographs constantly remind readers that these events actually happened, which can be further explained by focusing on the difference between a traditional picture-book and a photographic picture-book, also known as a photobook. The second genre is meta-textual. Unlike pictures in the illustrated books, photographs are part of the outside world rather than the fictional one of the narrative. Moreover, a photograph is a material thing. It is not fiction. The author of photobooks, though, can place photographs into a new context, especially when the verbal narrative is added to them or when the images are arranged together with other visuals. Thus old photographs placed in totally different settings can make arguments about historical time. According to Katharine Capshaw (2014, p. XVII), they often "draw correspondences between events across time or (...) make a case for the pressure of history on unfulfilled concepts of justice and inequality. These books play with documentary photography in order to make the past present and insistent." Photobooks have a transformative impact on the readers by provoking them to respond to the historical material included in the book in a new way. The new arrangement of historical materials makes the readers active interpreters of old ideas and images.

Having selected a number of iconic photographs, Bridges (1994) combined them into a narrative series and added a voice of her own as the six-year-old girl. Although the written text focuses on the child's suffering and trauma, it makes her an important agent of political change. Initially we can recognize Ruby's resistance to the integration process, especially as she pronounces the

following words: "When I was six years old, the civil rights movement came knocking at the door. It was 1960, and history pushed in and swept me up in a whirlwind" (Bridges, 1999, p. 4). Having gone through a number of performance tests, which brought her into the integration process, Ruby adds: "They pressured my parents and made a lot of promises" (Bridges, 1999, p. 4). Soon afterwards we realise that the young girl was not mature enough to comprehend the political context of the integration process. This is how she comments on the crowds attacking her in front of the school: "There were barricades and people shouting and policemen everywhere. I thought maybe it was Mardi Gras, the carnival that takes place in New Orleans every year" (Bridges, 1999, p. 4). Her naive descriptions somehow indicate her willingness to withdraw from the struggle of integration. Interestingly, the photographs accompanying the first part of the verbal narrative focus more on the white people present on the premises of the school rather than on herself, the main agent of change. As Capshaw (2014, p. 250) observes, "Not only do these images refuse triumphalism, they also place the focus not on the little black girl in the white dress but on white terrain, white debate, and white hatred." Ruby's indifference to the whole situation changes dramatically once she exits the school on the first day. She faces a mob of white people shouting out racist slogans and holding symbolic artefacts. For the first time Ruby expresses her fear when she notices a white boy in the crowd holding a black doll in a coffin. The scene speaks for the martyrdom of the child, who, in the long run, will triumph as a winner.

The girl's relationship with her white teacher, Mrs. Henry, is equally important to the story. Surprisingly, it is her, a white woman, who first calls little Ruby a hero and a star: "They [contemporary children] feel they finally have a hero who is like them. Ruby's story allows children to feel they, too, can do very important things and they, too, can be heroes. (...) Ruby was a star" (Capshaw, 2014, p. 44). This triumphant statement is emphasised with full-page images of Ruby entering the school. As Capshaw rightly observes, "These iconic photographs, unframed and bleeding to the edge of the page, signal the impossibility of the intimate containment of friendship and anticipate the failure of the friendship orthodoxy to solve interracial tensions" (Capshaw, 2014, p. 256).

However, Ruby's perspective on her contribution to school integration is totally different. In the book's afterword, "Let Me Bring You Up to Date," Bridges is highly critical of the mythology of her politicised childhood. She concludes: "Still, I sometimes feel I lost something that year. I feel as if I lost my childhood. It seems that I have always had to deal with some adult issues" (Bridges, 1999, p. 56). Although she may have missed the carefree period of childhood, now as a social activist she knows it was worth the effort: "Now I know it was meant to be that way. People are touched by the story of a black child who was so alone" (Bridges, 1999, p. 60). In the last section of the book, Bridges focuses on the current situation of her New Orleans school, which is "segregated" again due to the lack of funding to keep it up to appropriate standards. She believes black children still need to act, and every single life devoted to this cause can lead to social change.

Although a lot of young African Americans were involved in the Civil Rights movement, it was not until the 1990s that it became the topic of children's literature. The authors' interest in the theme emerged as a result of the public debates on racial and ethnic diversity. The concept of multiculturalism became an important aspect of American education, including the educational publications. Children's authors joined the debates with their books offering a new approach to the history of the Civil Rights movement. The growth in the publication of children's photobooks also coincided with the debates about the social collapse of the urban populations, particularly African American communities. Thus the books emerged as the uplifting narratives offering alternative stories of black life in America. Including the images of engaged black child characters was frequently the authors' response to the pejorative media representations of black youth. Instead of the pictures of troublemakers, young black people started to be presented as important agents of political change. As Capshaw (2014, p. 221) points out, "Civil rights texts for children by people of colour are a response to being 'written off the map' - the map of social power, of cultural dignity, and of American identity."

## CONCLUSIONS

Irrespective of the fact whether the child characters are fictional or not, they are always constructed on the basis of the author's experiences and opinions. Historical characters are at the mimetic end of the child construction continuum. Imaginary figures, on the other hand, do not belong to the other end of the spectrum. Saying that they can be treated as semiotic constructs would be too naïve a statement. Even if the characters' existence cannot be justified beyond the text, they oscillate between the semiotic and the mimetic approaches. As Nikolajeva (2005, p. 165) rightly observes, character "is always a social and cultural construct and must be treated accordingly."

Although some African American child characters might be seen as implausible, there is no question of their social and political functions. Characters constructed as engaged citizens open up discussions about race and children in the U.S. society, a theme which is frequently silenced in mainstream cultural and political debates. Capshaw comes to the following conclusions about photobooks like Bridges' autobiography: "Like signs, many photographic books urge civic action, a critical involvement in the images that constitute black identity and history. They urge readers to feel, to think, and to act" (Capshaw, 2014, p. 272). Depending on the publication and its availability, the books do generate response from different groups of readers. It is the figure of the child character rather than the plot of the book that evokes empathy in them and makes them care about the historical events. Thus the power of the literary figures cannot be underestimated.

Once introduced into school curricula, the books can serve as effective educational tools. They can open young people's minds and make them realise

that racism still exists in America. Although many of the books are set in the past, they are of great importance today. They teach young people about the obstacles African Americans experienced several decades ago. This knowledge will foster in today's youth an appreciation of the present socio-political conditions. For African American readers the books are not only educational but also empowering. Like the books' child characters, they may realise that they can improve their social status only if they participate in the continuing racial struggle. Finally, the books give them a sense of agency and make them believe that they can have an impact on the future of America. To use W.E.B. Du Bois' words, the books "inspire them [young Americans] to prepare for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice" (Du Bois, 1919, p. 286).

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