

Racism and the books your children read

A review of some of the standbys of children's literature.

By Allen E. Ivey

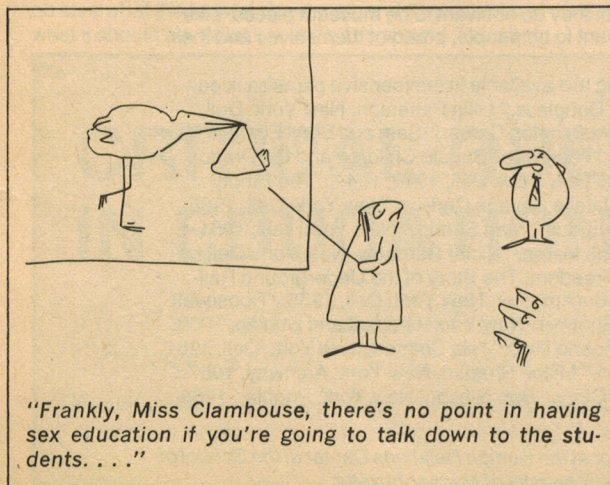
If you are concerned about your children's attitude toward those of another race, you might find a visit to your home bookshelf interesting. Helping my eldest son clean his room, I came upon an old favorite of mine, the "Bobbsey Twins in the Country," and opened it at random. The twins were going to take "dear old Dinah," their "good-natured colored girl" with them on a trip to the country. When Dinah discovered she was to be taken to the country with the twins, she exclaimed,

"Farming! Ha! Ha! Dat I do like. Use to farm all time home in Virginie!" the maid declared. "And I like it fust-rate! Yes, Dinah'll go and hoe de corn and" (aside to Bert) "'steal' de watermelons."

This is the book I bought my child? And there are 33 Bobbsey books on the shelf! Perhaps the Bobbsey twins are not all that cultured, but we had developed a practice of providing any books the boys liked to read. And the Bobbsey twins (sadly) were one of their favorites. Recent Bobbsey twins books have tried to present Dinah in a less stereotyped view, but she remains the same fat, friendly maid to wealthy whites.

If racism is endemic in our society, it is especially so in children's literature, particularly that of the past. Stereotyped pictures of blacks and other minority members have been presented to children as a part of the American myth structure. Look on your child's shelf; you'll find plenty there to be concerned about.

What is racist about the example above? Isn't it true that many wealthy people had (and have) black maids? Perhaps the bit about stealing watermelons is a bit much, but don't a lot of blacks talk that way? By portraying blacks predominantly in servant and subsidiary roles, the media maintains the stereotyped picture of blacks as existing only in lowly roles and that "good" blacks serve the white man. It is hard for a child to build admiration and identification with Dinah. For, despite her warmth, it is always



clear that she is beneath, subordinate to, the "white folk."

I next turned to "Robinson Crusoe," friend of my youth. Here I find Robinson peering down on some natives:

"I presently found there were no less than nine naked savages sitting round a small fire they had made, not to warm them, for they had no need of that, the weather being extremely hot, but, as I supposed, to dress some of their barbarous diet of human flesh which they had brought with them, whether alive or dead I could not tell."

Robinson later did find his man Friday, a good "nigger," who did the white man's bidding. The word nigger is used as it denotes something less than human (i.e., white) and much of children's literature refers to people of other cultures as somewhat less than human.

"Dr. Doolittle" offers little consolation. Perhaps you recall the Black Prince, son of the King who had locked the good doctor and his animals in a den for trespassing. Prince Bumpo is reading when Chee Chee and Polynesia, animal friends of the doctor, come upon him. "If only I were a *white* (italics the author's) prince!" he said. The prince is sad because a beautiful princess refuses to marry him because he is black. Hearing this, the birds offer to make him white if only he will help them get away. The doctor makes up some medicine and administers it to the prince whose face "turns white as snow, and his eyes, which had been mud-colored, were a manly grey." As the doctor and his friends take leave of the prison, Dab-Dab the duck says angrily, "We never did them any harm. Serves him right, if he does turn black again! I hope it's a dark black!" And now we are praising Dr. Doolittle in a popular Walt Disney movie!

Just as I had finished these discoveries, my younger son came in carrying his favorite book, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," which he had just completed reading for the sixth time. This book was then first on the N.Y. Times best-seller list for children's books. Surely this 1964 work would offer more encouragement and a more realistic and optimistic picture of man's relation to man. It is a book about Charlie, a poor boy who wants to win a visit to Willie Wonka's chocolate factory. Eventually he does win the visit. The author paints a fascinating fantasy of the factory. But in chapter 16, we come to the Oompa-Loompas, pygmies from Africa, whom Warren Wonka has saved from starvation (they only ate green caterpillars in Africa) by bringing them to the factory where they do all the work in return for all the chocolate they can eat. Warren Wonka's dialogue is particularly expressive:

"So I shipped them all over here, every man, woman, and child in the Oompa-Loompa tribe. It was easy. I smuggled them over in large packing cases with holes in them and they all got here safely. They are wonderful workers. They all speak English now. They love dancing and music. They are always making up songs. I expect you will hear a good deal of singing today from time to time. I must warn you, though, that they are rather mischievous. They like jokes. They still wear the same kind of clothes they wore in the jungle. They insist upon that. The men, as you can see for yourselves, across the river, wear only deerskins. The women wear leaves, and the children wear nothing at all. The women use fresh leaves every day. . . ."

"Daddy!" shouted Veruca Salt (the girl who got everything she wanted). "Daddy!" I want an Oompa-Loompa! I want you to get me an Oompa-Loompa! I want an Oompa-Loompa right away! I want to take it home with me! Go on, Daddy! Get me an Oompa-Loompa!"

"All right, Veruca, all right. But I can't get you one this second. Please be patient. I'll see you have one before the day is out."

At the end of the book, we find that after a series of trials, Charlie is the best child in the group because he does what he is told. As a reward, he is to inherit the chocolate factory and it will be his job to assume the burden of taking care of the Oompa-Loompas. This book is, incidentally, faithfully portrayed in the critically acclaimed children's movie, "Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory." The major difference between the book and the movie is that the