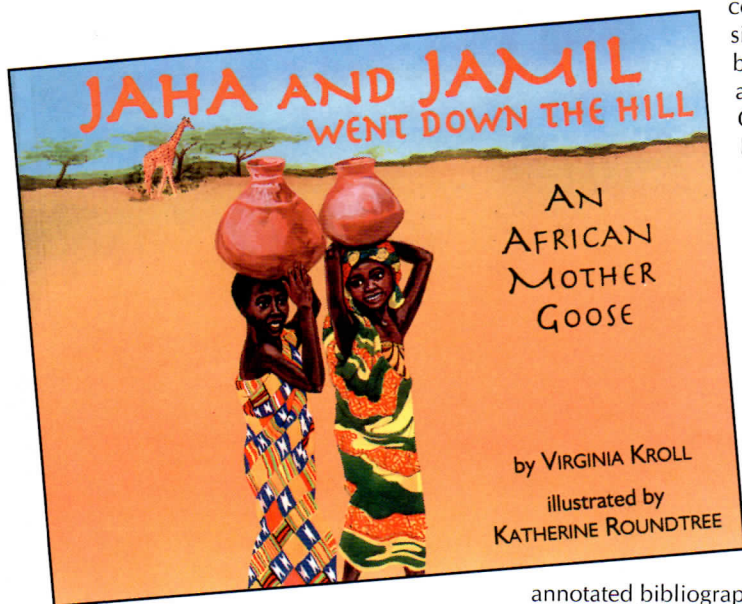


## Creating Multicultural Bookshelves

"Why do you have all these books, Mama?" my daughter asked. As a teacher's children, Taylor and Seanie are accustomed to piles of books. But these books were different. They showed faces of color. Sadly, this struck them as unusual.

It was February and I was researching books celebrating Black History Month. It wasn't easy. Books by or about people of color amount to only six percent of children's books on the market, according to the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Thankfully, the CCBC publishes *Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults: A Selected Listing of Books By and About People of Color*, a resource for finding books with multicultural themes. The second volume of its

annotated bibliography includes more than 350 books across 16 genres published in the U.S. between 1991 and 1996.

If January's announcement of the American Library Association (ALA) major children's book awards is any indication, better days are ahead for multicultural children's books. The premier award for picture books, The Caldecott Award, was given to *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*, by Simms Taback (for ages 4 to 8). Based on a Yiddish song from Taback's childhood, the story leads children through a game discovering all the things Joseph makes out of his overcoat. It also teaches the joys of making something out of nothing—a great lesson in our disposable world.

Harking back to simpler times is this year's Newbery Medal winner, awarded annually for the greatest contribution to children's literature. *Bud, Not Buddy*, by Christopher Paul Curtis (for ages 9 to 12), is a 1930s tale about Bud, "not Buddy," Caldwell, an orphan on the run, looking for the man he believes is his father: Herman E. Calloway, stand-up bass player

for the Dusky Devastators of the Depression. Curtis's humor, coupled with the voice he gives Bud, makes for a captivating journey from fantasy to reality.

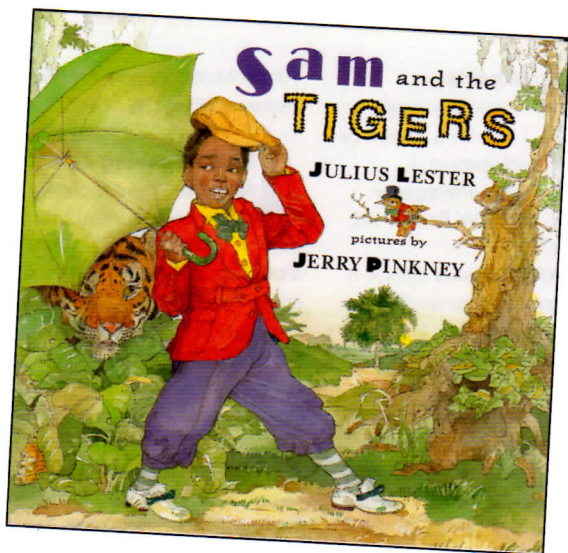
*Bud, Not Buddy* also earned the esteemed Coretta Scott King Award for narrative. According to the ALA, recipients of this award are "authors and illustrators of African descent whose distinguished books promote an understanding and appreciation of the 'American Dream.'" A separate Coretta Scott King Award for illustration exists; this year's award went to *In the Time of the Drums*, illustrated by Brian Pinkney (for ages 4 to 8).

Another award honoring diversity is The Pura Belpré Award, "presented to a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms and celebrates the Latino cultural experience," according to the ALA. This year's recipient for narrative is *Under the Royal Palms: A Childhood in Cuba* by Alma Flor Ada (for ages 9 to 12). The illustration nod went to Carmen Lomas Garza for *Magic Windows: Ventanas Mágicas* (for ages 4 to 8). To learn about former recipients of these and other awards, visit [www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org).

The folk tale genre is another path to multicultural literature. The challenge lies in finding authors and illustrators who keep the integrity of the original tale without depicting characters in culturally stereotypical manners. I stumbled across such an author at a recent Children's Literary Event sponsored by the







Arizona Kidney Foundation. His name is Aaron Shepard and his talent lies in his delightful retelling of obscure folk tales.

*The Crystal Heart: A Vietnamese Legend*, by Shepard and illustrated by Joseph Daniel Fiedler (for ages 4 to 10), tells of a young woman torn between her affection for her suitor's singing voice and her aversion to his physical appearance. Shepard's *Forty Fortunes: A Tale of Iran*, illustrated by Alisher Dianov (for ages 4 to 10), is a humorous story that will be especially appreciated by children ages 7 to 9. For more information about Shepard's tales from Pakistan, Finland, India, Russia, Norway and other places, visit [www.aaronshp.com](http://www.aaronshp.com).

A variety of voices makes for beautiful poetry. In *Brown Angels: An Album of Pictures and Verse* (for ages 4 to 12), Walter Dean Myers assembles turn-of-the-century photographs of African-American children and pairs them with his unforgettable verse. A picture of an "angel" in her Sunday best appears in the book with these words:

For I am dark and precious  
And have such gifts to give  
Sweet joy, sweet love,  
Sweet laughter  
Sweet wondrous life to live

*Sol a Sol: Bilingual Poems*, written by Lori Marie Carlson and illustrated by Emily Lisker (for ages 4 to 8), offers 14 poems in English and Spanish celebrating a Latino family's daily life. These poems are a treat for the eyes and ears, thanks to Lisker's vivid acrylic illustrations.

Native American beauty is represented in *The Earth Under Sky Bear's Feet: Native American Poems of the Land*, written by Joseph Bruchac and illustrated by

Thomas Locker (for ages 4 to 10). It features 12 poetic stories about Earth from the perspective of Sky Bear (a.k.a. the Big Dipper), who sees all as he circles Earth each night.

If children of color are under-represented in children's literature, this is strikingly apparent in traditional Mother Goose rhymes. Author Virginia Kroll and illustrator Katherine Roundtree add color to Mother Goose with *Jaha and Jamil Went Down the Hill: An African Mother Goose*. As the author's note states, verses are "those that Mother Goose might have written, had she visited Africa."

Like many other adults, I read *Little Black Sambo* as a child and loved the story. I was too young to realize that the illustrations and name "Sambo" perpetuated negative stereotypes. Thankfully, author Julius Lester and illustrator Jerry Pinkney created *Sam and the Tigers*, a new telling of the older, more controversial tale. *Sam and the Tigers* takes the best of the original story—small conquering big and the fantasy of eating tiger-striped pancakes with tiger butter—and gives it a fresh, culturally sensitive context.

Researching books for Black History Month provided a welcome wake-up call, reminding me to branch out—year round—when making selections for my family's bookshelves.



Mary Anne Duggan is a teacher mentor specialist for the Scottsdale Unified School District and the mother of Taylor, 11, and Seanie, 9. Reach her by e-mail at [bookbag@razkids.com](mailto:bookbag@razkids.com).



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