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The Latest Chapter in an Old Story

Reissuing of tale conjures up racially troubled history

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Once upon a time, *there was a children's tale -- conceived in a letter -- about a clever little boy.*

The little boy outwits tigers who want to eat him by giving them his beautiful, brightly colored clothes.

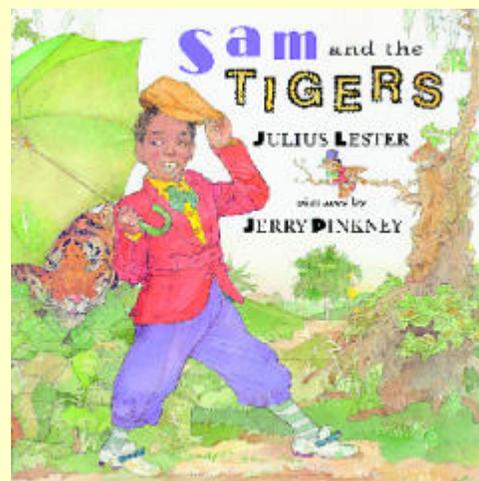
After fighting among themselves -- "Gr-r-r-rrrr!" -- the tigers chase each other, whirling round and round until they melt away, leaving behind a great big pool of melted butter.

The little boy's mother uses the butter to whip up stacks of the most lovely pancakes -- yellow and brown as little tigers ...

But lo and behold, there's more to this story, which was created by a Scottish mother for her two daughters and found an appreciative audience in England and later in this country.

This is no random children's fable, given the crude and stereotypical drawings that illustrate it and the racial slur used in its title and throughout its pages.

The book is "The Story of Little Black Sambo." And more than a century after its publication, a New York publishing house is reissuing the book that's been called "the most controversial children's picture book in history."



"Sam and the Tigers," published in 1996, is author Julius Lester's new telling of one of the most controversial books in children's literature.

The reissued version features new illustrations by Caldecott Award-winner Christopher Bing -- but the original text and title, including that stark racial epithet, are left intact.

Not on same page

Ask publisher Christopher Franceschelli of Handprint Books why he chose to update a book with such a deeply troubled past (and a title so offensive that it will be referred to here as "LBS"), and he urges you to read the note that he penned at the end of the book.

In "Some Thoughts and a Bit of History on the Publication of This Edition," Franceschelli acknowledges the "outrageously racist images" associated with the book but rhapsodizes about the beauty of the story itself, written by Helen Bannerman and published in 1899.

While expressing the hope that every child who reads this new version will learn the story's "complex history and dark shadows," Franceschelli writes: "But first and foremost, I hope that every reader will respond with the joy and excitement of discovering a satisfying and rewarding story."

During a recent phone interview, Franceschelli talks about the value of this "wonderful story," which he believes could lead to positive discussion.

"This is not a book that is disrespectful. It's valuable to have a book like this," he says.

Franceschelli, who is white, notes in the foreword that "LBS" was illustrator Bing's favorite story as a child. (Bing is also white.)

Franceschelli talks about passing the story on to a new generation. "I have a 6-year-old daughter, and I can be proud of reading it to her. ... She loves it."

He adds: "This is clearly an important story to many -- white and black. There is something positive to be gained here." Julius Lester, an author of children's books, has a different view of "LBS." In a phone interview from his home in western Massachusetts, Lester, who is African-American, recalls the mixed feelings he experienced after reading the book as a child.

"I felt kind of ashamed with the illustrations and the name," Lester, who is 65, says.

"This was in the mid-1940s, and at that time, there weren't any books with positive images of black children.

"On the other hand, I loved the idea of eating all those pancakes," Lester adds, his voice carrying a trace of that long-ago ambivalence. "But the way black was treated made me feel bad."

A new telling of the story

Lester sought to replace those negative memories and restore what he describes as "a great story" with his own version of the book.

Lester's "Sam and the Tigers," illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, was published in 1996. The story, which renames the characters and is told in a folksy, Southern voice, "takes away the demeaning aspects" in Bannerman's story.

(Coincidentally, the same year Lester's book was released, another adaptation of "LBS" was published. "The Story of Little Babaji," by Fred Marcellino, sets the tale in India, changes the characters' names and features noncaricatured illustrations.)

Lester says response to his book has been overwhelmingly positive. "People were certainly glad to have the story back," he says.

And some, including Lester's son, were happy to discover the tale for the first time.

"He's in his mid-30s, and he's part of the generation that grew up after the book was pulled off the shelves. He read it, and it became one of his favorites."

Lester, whose books include a new telling of "Uncle Remus," writes stories from a perspective that's often overlooked.

"For so much of the history of black people in this country, we were not able to speak in our own voices. I'm trying to give voice to those people who were not allowed to speak."

Lester is puzzled by the Handprint reissue. "I haven't seen Bing's book, but I understand that the illustrations are fine. But my question is this: Why does he need to use the original language? I don't understand."



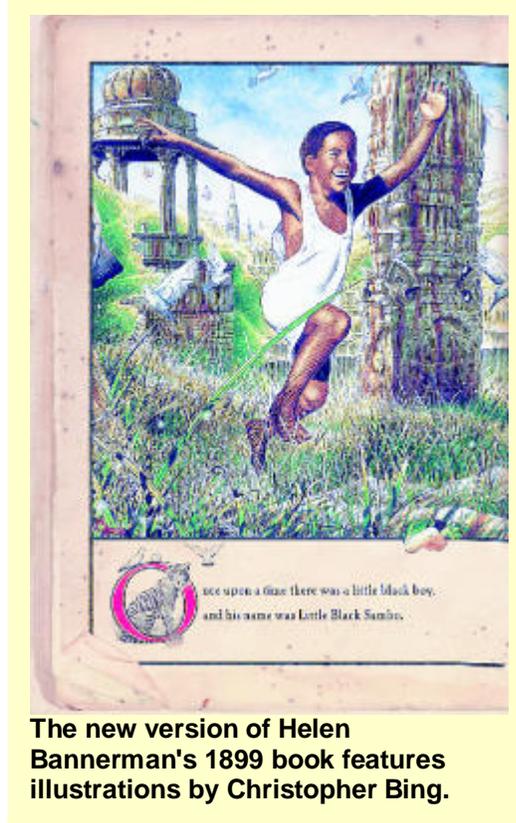
Merely naive ... or racist?

Franceschelli believes that the proper way to update this book is to use the original language, including the racial epithet.

In a recent Associated Press story, Franceschelli said he kept the story intact because "We can't whitewash and erase history" but he hopes he can "forge a better understanding of it."

After conducting some research, Franceschelli is satisfied that Bannerman's naming of the boy in her story was not intentionally racist. He says that "Sam" was a common prefix for an Indian boy's name.

As for her crude and stereotypical drawings -- which became even more blatantly racist in later, pirated editions -- Franceschelli has an explanation for those, too, calling the style "naive and uneducated."



The new version of Helen Bannerman's 1899 book features illustrations by Christopher Bing.

"They also bear the myopia that all children of color look alike, whether they're Indian or African," he says. "She certainly was looking through the tinted lens of her era."

John Thorp rejects attempts to make Bannerman's book more acceptable. Thorp is director of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia in Big Rapids, Mich. The museum, located on the campus of Ferris State University, aims to promote racial understanding and scholarly examination of historical and contemporary expressions of racism.

"I believe that she was entertaining her children (in writing the story). But the racism was very much a part of that," Thorp says.

And if Bannerman was looking at the world through the lens of her time, Thorp says this reissue seems to be wearing rose-colored glasses.

"It's a conscious effort to wrap it up in nostalgia," he says of the new book, which has a faux weathered look, complete with old-fashioned lettering on the cover, "yellowed" and "water-marked" pages -- and a photo sketch of the illustrator dressed in turn-of-the-century British colonial dress.

Thorp offers some history, explaining that the name Bannerman gives the little boy is a pejorative used to refer to African-American males as lazy, childlike and needing

protection and direction. He notes that at the time of the book's publication, the word was an established anti-black epithet. "I think she (Bannerman) was aware that Sambo was used to put people of color down and keep them in their place. It was probably innocent from her point of view because everybody said it ... "

He adds: "People say 'Chill out; we're past that.' But until you know how deep and painful this past is ... When you see the history, you'll say, 'Wait a minute -- there's no way you can make "Sambo" acceptable.' "

Still, Thorp admits he wasn't too surprised by the reissue of "LBS," a book that was dropped from many reading lists in the 1940s and 1950s but has seen a resurgence in popularity in the mid-'90s.

Dismayed, yes, but not surprised.

Thorp recalls a recent trip to New Orleans for a conference, where he discovered that racist memorabilia once consigned to the back of the antique shop was on display in the front window.

"It's a very great concern. More and more of the racism is becoming overt."

Understanding the book

In the past, librarian Cheryl Ashe of South Bend has argued that "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" shouldn't be pulled from school shelves, despite its use of the n-word.

"When I see that black students get upset about the use of that word, I always defend the book. I would tell them, 'If they feel bad reading it, how do they think that Jim felt being called that all the time?' " Ashe, who is African-American, says.

Ashe believes that "any English teacher worth his or her salt" could help students navigate such sensitive material, put it in proper context and reach a better understanding.

But she thinks that "LBS" is different, mainly because of its target audience. "This is really a book written for, I'd say, very young children -- it's really considered a picture book.

"My question is whether or not a child that age has the capability of understanding the whole ramifications of this book."

Ashe is clearly ambivalent about "LBS," which she says depicts a courageous child.

"The story itself wasn't derogatory. ... But the pictures made him into stereotypes of African-Americans. ... I don't know why they couldn't have changed the title."

No matter the book's title, Margaret Porter, a reference librarian at the University of Notre Dame's Hesburgh Library, doesn't understand why anyone bothered to revisit this story.

"Why reissue a book like that, even with new illustrations, when there is so much wonderful children's literature out there? There's so much gorgeous stuff out there that depicts children from all over the world," says Porter, the mother of grown children who are biracial.

"Do I support a library getting a copy of this book? Well, yes, if we're going to form opinions, we have to see the book. ... But it's not a book I would buy for my grandchildren."

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