

WRITING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: USING THE
BROWNIES' BOOK AS A MODEL PLATFORM TO
NURTURE A NEW GENERATION OF WRITERS

By Ebony Joy Wilkins

Childhood reading is what led me to believe that the whole world was mine to explore, and that no one could limit me –or any child –to only a small part of it. *The Brownies' Book* gave many 'colored' or 'Negro' children, as we then were called, that same sense of boundless possibility.¹ –Marian Wright Edelman

In 1920 Franklin Lewis, an ambitious boy from Philadelphia, penned a letter to the editor of *The Brownies' Book* hoping to get some of his life questions answered. He wrote, "My mother says you are going to have a magazine about colored boys and girls, and I am very glad. So I am writing to ask you if you will please put in your paper some of the things which colored boys can work at when they grow up."² Lewis also expressed his hopes of one-day planning houses for men to build. His friends mocked the idea. They had never seen a colored man in such a position and Franklin wanted to know why. *The Brownies' Book*, reading material targeted toward Black children to promote a rich exchange of information, was the first of its kind. It was a catalyst for a new genre of literature celebrating Black History, self-love, and achievement of young readers and writers.

Between January 1920 – December 1921, many letters similar to Lewis's poured into the editors of *The Brownies' Book* magazine from young readers and writers aged six to sixteen who asked similar questions, requested library suggestions, gave feedback on Brownies' issues, and offered ideas for future stories. *The Brownies' Book* promoted this type of exchange of ideas for the "Children of the Sun," as W.E.B. Du Bois, the founder of the Brownies' Book, more affectionately referred to children of African descent. The monthly magazine also had sections for families, for editors' works, stories, poems, folktales, entries from contributing writers, and international news to encourage appreciation of many cultures.

Du Bois, together with Professor Granville Dill and Jessie Redmon Fauset, created *The Brownies' Book* to provide positive portrayals of Blacks, to celebrate Black history, and to instill a sense of pride for African American children. However, they accomplished so much more as they ushered in a new genre of African American children's literature. Prior to inception of the Brownies' Book in 1920,

few stories included characters of color. Books like *The Story of Inky Boys*³, *The Story of Little Black Sambo*⁴, and the many versions of *Ten Little Niggers*⁵ were full of tales about boys with dark skin, without a personal regard or appreciation for their culture, race, or voices. The characters in these stories were viewed as passive, their voices silent, their identities demeaned, and their features enhanced in comedic fashion.

The Brownies' Book provided an entry point for new voices to represent African American children in a positive light. One noteworthy contributing author was high school student, James Langston Hughes, of Joplin, Missouri. Langston Hughes submitted his poems, "In a Mexican City," "Thanksgiving Time," "Autumn Thought," and "Winter Sweetness" to *The Brownies' Book*. Like Franklin Lewis, Hughes expressed concerns about his potential and future aspirations. He was vocal about the treatment of African Americans and wrote about his concerns in his novels, plays, short stories, essays, television scripts, and more. *The Brownies' Book* opened doors for Hughes to share his art form. He went on to become one of the most celebrated Black writers of all time, penning books for children, two autobiographies, and countless poems.

W.E.B. Du Bois, a writer, author, and professor and the first Black Ph.D. graduate of Harvard University, felt strong responsibility to foster the talents of African Americans like Lewis and Hughes. He made it his life's work to help rebuild an entire nation of people to greater achievement. In *The Souls of Black Folk*⁶, Du Bois writes about redefining blackness and the importance of education and equality for blacks. He set the example for the importance of weaving Black History into one's daily life, encouraging children to learn and commemorate while contributing and passing along the stories of African people. He traveled the world, held numerous teaching positions, and founded a handful of periodicals, all aimed at empowering and changing the landscape for African Americans. *The Brownies' Book*, Du Bois's fifth periodical, gave many young African Americans a voice.

After two years and twenty-four issues, *The Brownies' Book* printed its last edition in December 1921. In a letter signing off, Du Bois apologized for its untimely end, but reminded readers of the joy and knowledge provided over the two-year run of the magazine. Although *The Brownies' Book* was no longer in print, its impact and uplifting message would be felt for generations to come. *The Brownies' Book* served its purpose and opened the door, to new definitions, to new voices, to new portrayals, to a renewed spirit, and to a new landscape of African American children's literature.

Several stories for young readers have appeared on the literary scene in recent years that give example to the ways in which Black History can be told to more contemporary young readers and writers. Stories like *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*,⁷ which gives attention to a teen who also refused to give up her seat in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 before Rosa Parks' historic act nine months later. *Copper Sun*⁸ is Amari's story. Amari, an African girl once secure and betrothed by her tribe has her life turned awry when her village is attacked and ravaged by white men from America and foiled neighbors of a different tribe. When Amari is sold into slavery, readers are dragged through the dirt, tossed and soiled on a huge ship headed across the ocean, and violated on the docks in front of slave traders right along with Amari. Every person she encounters along her hopeless journey as an enslaved girl has a powerful and intoxicating story that helps weave her experiences deeper together. *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*⁹ recalls the gifted and strong baseball players and their social and political fight to be recognized as a legitimate sports league. The story spotlights real-life size paintings of the players by the illustrator Kadir Nelson who provides breathtaking and powerful images to capture these men as they were during a time when they had to sacrifice just to play the game they so loved. *Fortune's Bones: the manumission requiem*¹⁰ is the story of a skeleton display in a Connecticut museum, the body of a slave, whose wife had to dust and clean his bones after he was placed in the slave masters home for study. The doctor who owned Fortune used his body parts to later teach his son about the human body. These stories provide a model platform for writing similar to *The Brownies' Book*. This growing modern-day platform allows young readers to engage and embrace Black History in new ways.

In *Shadow and Substance*,¹¹ Rudine Sims Bishop conducted a survey and analysis of African American children's literature published between 1965 and 1980 to look at images and representations of blacks. Bishop concluded the literature was used to: a) foster social conscious in other children; b) assimilate black children to the melting pot; and c) share stories of growing up black, which she calls culturally conscious fiction. This literature was historically created to right incorrect images in texts, has continued as a vehicle to pass along black culture, serves as a means for telling new stories and for writing counter narratives. The Cooperative Children's Book Center keeps annual statistics reporting the number of books published by and about people of color. Each year since 1998, 5,000 new multicultural titles are published. Last year, of the 5,000 titles published, 258 books were by and about African Americans. Although the number of works has steadily increased year to year, there is room for more voices. The need for similar literary

platforms is apparent; more books with similar aims are needed for all students of Black History and students need an outlet for the myriad of frustrations and questions they face daily in their lives.

I have been personally impacted by the works of Hughes and others who emerged out of or were influenced by the *Brownies' Book* tradition – authors who gave me permission to challenge stereotypes by writing to provide a counter-narrative to the many devalued portrayals of Black children and teens. I remember my encounters with texts with negative impressions and my overwhelming desire to find an outlet for my own frustrations. After years of grappling with negative images of Black children and stories that didn't include Black girls like me, I began seeking out writers attempting to correct these inaccurate portrayals. Writers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neale Hurston left an impression that changed the way I viewed my place in this world. Inspired by this storied tradition and with full recognition that many Black children and teens continue to wrestle with the frustrations I experienced, my first young adult novel, *Sellout*¹², tells the story of a teen girl confronting negative stereotypes, racial tension, and betrayal in her own neighborhood. She works to find her truest self, while redefining what it means to be Black in the world around her. However, one story will not be enough. More African American young readers and writers must come forth with works for Black children and teens with positive character portrayals and empowering stories. Few outlets like *The Brownies' Book* have emerged on a large scale since its last printed edition in 1921, leaving a gap for today's students to fill with stories retelling Black history in new voices. Sadly, educators have not been able to carve out a space for African American children's literature in many classroom spaces where not only the African American experience is marginalized, but so too are the voices of African American children.



Notes

1. Dianne Johnson-Feelings and Marian Wright Edelman, *The Best of the Brownies'* *Book*. (Oxford University Press, 1996)
2. Ibid.
3. Heinrich Hoffmann, *The Story of Inky Boys*. (Blackie and Sons Ltd., 1845)
4. Helen Bannerman, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (Grant Richards, 1899)
5. Agatha Christie, *And then there were none: Ten Little Niggers*. (Collins Crime Club, 1939)
6. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903)
7. Phillip Hoose, *Claudette Colvin: twice toward justice*. (Macmillan Square Fish, 2009)
8. Sharon Draper, *Copper Sun*. (Atheneum Books, 2008)
9. Kadir Nelson, *We are the Ship: the story of Negro league baseball*. (Hyperion, 2008)
10. Marilyn Nelson, *Fortune's Bones: the manumission requiem*. (Front Street, 2004)
11. Rudine Sims Bishop, *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction*. (National Council of Teachers of English, 1982)
12. Ebony Wilkins, *Sellout*. (Scholastic Press, Inc., 2010)



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Lesson plan

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Connections to Middle School and/or High School:

Writing can be used as a tool to create change in the world. Facilitate a class discussion critically examining stories submitted to *The Brownies' Book* by young writers and encourage student responses. Provide time for small group discussion and writing feedback time. Encourage students to write a story/response/journal of their own, using *The Brownies' Book* story as a model. When stories are complete, students should choose a platform (newspaper, letter to the editor, magazine, journal, blog, email blast, etc.) to submit their own writing.

Goals and objectives of Lesson Plan:

- Create awareness of writing for social change
- Encourage student voices within the classroom and in the world
- Critically examine and respond in writing to a piece of literature
- Use *The Brownies' Book* as a model for readers and writers
- Large and small group discussions based on chosen story
- Submission of writing responses to an outlet outside of classroom (newspaper, letter to the editor, magazine, journal, blog, email blast, etc.)

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards: US History Teacher Expectations: Adapted from *National Standards for Social Studies Teachers*. Developed by the NCSS National Task Force for Social Studies Standards, NCSS, 56 pp., 2002.

- Guide learners in practicing skills of historical analysis and interpretation, such as compare and contrast, differentiate between historical facts and interpretations, consider multiple perspectives, analyze cause and effect relationships, compare competing historical narratives, recognize the tentative nature of historical interpretations, and hypothesize the influence of the past;
- Assist learners in acquiring knowledge of historical content in United States history in order to ask large and searching questions that compare patterns of continuity and change in the history and values of the many peoples who have contributed to the development of the continent of North America;
- Insure that learners are made aware of the full range of opportunities to participate as citizens in the American democracy and of their responsibilities for doing so.

Activity:

- Choose a story from *The Brownies' Book*
- Facilitate class discussion critically examining chosen story
- Small group work to select one story
- Brainstorm and build upon student responses
- Free write time to respond to chosen story
- One-to-one editing time with teacher to determine an appropriate outlet for writing response and to begin editing process
- Submit writing to chosen outlet

Assessment:

Allow students to share their writing responses with a peer and together determine an outlet to share their writing with the world. Students should edit, revise, and send their writing to the outlet of their choice. Teacher and students can negotiate edits and changes to be made to their responses prior to submission to the outlet of choice (newspaper, letter to the editor, magazine, journal, blog, email blast, etc.).

Teacher Resources:

Dianne Johnson-Feelings and Marian Wright Edelman, *The Best of the Brownies' Book*. (Oxford University Press, 1996)