

"LIFE FOR ME AIN'T No CRYSTAL STAIR";
READIN', WRITIN', AND PARENTAL (IL)LITERACY
IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN' S BOOKS

NEAL A. LESTER

Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now. . . if you teach that nigger. . . how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave.

-*Frederick Douglass* (1845)

Mass literacy is a relatively new social goal. A hundred years ago people didn't need to be good readers in order to earn a living. But in the Information Age, no one can get by without knowing how to read well and understand increasingly complex material.

-*Newsweek* (22 November 1999)

LITERACY AS DEMOCRATIC IDEAL

While Frederick Douglass's important *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) demonstrates an individual's alleged personal liberation spiritually and psychologically through reading and writing, the narrative equally forwards a culturally chauvinistic agenda that privileges the printed word. Proposing to show his learned northern abolitionist, primarily white male audience that access to reading and writing transforms him from his perceived animal barbarism to civilized humanhood, Douglass impressively and eloquently details human bondage and his release from it through elaborate rhetorical strategies: symbolisms, ironies, allusions, parallelisms, ambiguities, repetitions.² Indeed, Douglass's liberation from his enslavement comes less from his physical freedom than from his ability to read and write:

Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher [his master's wife, Mrs. Auld], I set OUT with high hope, and of a fixed purpose at whatever cost of trouble to learn how to read. (667)

He learns indirectly from Mr. Auld how threatened masters were of

slaves' becoming literate—among other things, they might write their own passes to freedom literally and figuratively—and this knowledge fuels his intense determination to become literate by any means necessary:

What he [Mr. Auld] most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to be diligently sought; and served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. (668)

Douglass's learning to read from Mrs. Auld's instruction and from manipulating little white boys so that he could write what they wrote is fundamental to Douglass's newly realized selfhood. Douglass's copying—physically mimicking "white literacy"—speaks to a cultural binary that exists between literacy and illiteracy in the western world. Although Douglass clarifies that slaves' physical and psychological survival was also connected to slaves' "reading" masters' behaviors and motives, he feels completely human and humanized largely because he can read and write.

In a broader sense, "formal" education generally and alphabetical literacy were believed to be keys to African American liberation from economic, social and political oppression. As Violet J. Harris explains in "African-American Conceptions of Literacy: A Historical Perspective,"

African Americans hold many of the same views [on the sacredness of education as white American citizens]; they, too, maintain an unstinting belief in the power of literacy to effect essential political, cultural, social, and economic change. In the past, and to some extent now, education was a privilege, albeit a privilege literally acquired through blood, sweat, tears, and enormous economic sacrifice. Unquestionably, acquiring access to literacy for African Americans has involved continuous struggle, in the face of unrelenting opposition from segments of the planter aristocracy, politicians, clergy, and ordinary citizens.³

Hence, to connect individual worth and selfhood, as does Douglass, with the ability or inability to read and write—one dimension of lit-

eracy—is not uncommon, however problematic, in a western culture that is, as Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer describes, "hypnotized by literacy." According to the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, literacy is the ability "to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."⁴ Buried in this definition is the ideal of literacy as realized personal goals, social worth, and fullest self-potential, implying that illiteracy constitutes failure on any number of personal and social levels. Despite its obvious language bias by specifying "standard" English as the definitive marker, The National Literacy Act of 1991 broadens this definition of literacy by adding orality to the equation: literacy is "an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."⁵ Personal goals and social values are again emphasized, literacy underscored as a prescribed personal and social ideal and standard. Neither definition, however, acknowledges literacy as a multitude of practices that legitimize realities and communicate diverse and varied experiences. If in fact literacy grants opportunities to achieve various ideals, those unable to read and write are perceived and treated as being socially handicapped and personally burdened. While Nancy N. Rue, in *Coping with an Illiterate Parent*, maintains that "literacy is not a single skill" (38) and has little to do with the moral and ethical decency of a non-reading individual (19), she nevertheless writes of this issue with extreme pessimism and oversimplification, maintaining that illiterate parents are most often "trapped in a nowhere job, imprisoned by a sense of inferiority, shamed by the inability to give [a child] everything [that child] needs intellectually and socially and emotionally *because* he/she can't read and write competently"(emphasis added 11). Rue implies that illiterate parents are in some ways less than complete and upstanding social individuals fully capable of maintaining satisfying familial and social relationships and leading productive lives. Even the book title itself—"Coping with an Illiterate Parent"—suggests that illiteracy is a kind of social disease or illness with which a child has to deal until a "cure" or "treatment" is found.

LITERACY IDEALIZED AND MORALIZED

Surprisingly or unsurprisingly, few children's texts address the issue of parental illiteracy. The treatment of illiteracy in a picture or

storybook for those learning to read seems on the surface oxymoronic, perhaps even absurd from the perspective of a publisher wanting to sell books. The idea of illiteracy I examine here is not about glorification of non-reading and non-writing. Rather, my concern is that books that dare to deal with parental illiteracy at all present parental illiteracy as a shameful secret, always to be hidden from the world of the parents' children. Eve Bunting's *The Wednesday Surprise* (1989) presents an elderly, presumably white grandmother learning to read as a "gift" to her adult son on the occasion of his birthday. Dick King-Smith's *The School Mouse* (1995) deals with the issue of non-reading parents in the racially and cultural neutral world of mice: young literate Flora "saves" her illiterate parents from eating poison. Both Dolores Johnson's *Papa's Stories* (1994), now out-of-print, and Vashanti Rahaman's *Read for Me, Mama* (1997) deal specifically with African Americans and parental illiteracy. In all of these books, the parent/adult-as-teacher role is reversed, and parents are led to literacy by the efforts of and responsibilities to a child. In these texts, literacy is idealized and those who can read idolized; literacy also—according to these accounts—allegedly signifies personal and social value and measures adult self-esteem and self-worth. With minimal complexity and compassion for individual circumstances even for or especially for children's texts, all of these treatments of illiteracy create artificial, culturally biased binaries that further marginalize those unable to read and write.

Children's texts that celebrate being able to read and write are not problematic in and of themselves. Problems arise however when such texts presume and forward the position that parental illiteracy is simple personal choice and not a series of complicated circumstances almost always beyond individuals' control. For example, my 79-year-old grandfather, with whom I spoke recently about his own illiteracy when I was mulling over ideas for this project, does not read and write, and to my knowledge this reality has never been an issue of family concern or discussion. It was an understood and rarely spoken fact, and clearly evident when, for instance, other family members read Father's Day and birthday cards to him. The whole tenor of my conversation with him was one of apology from him for this inability to read. He had a third grade education when his parents died and was forced to leave school to help work for the livelihood of his other five siblings. My grandfather and his older preacher brother were the only two who had minimal reading and writing skills. Others managed to continue studies along the way. With my Ph.D. in English, I felt awkward, embarrassed, and invasive talking about something the family had never

broached in such a manner. My conversation with my grandfather about his illiteracy was a lesson for me in his personal history and circumstances, a lesson of which I had no previous knowledge.⁶ In children's texts that deal with the subject of non-reading and writing parents but the non-reading and writing parents are not in fact the subjects, the circumstances of illiteracy—be they environmental or social, emotional, psychological, visual or even neurological as in dyslexia ("a disorder that makes learning to read extremely difficult")⁷ are unaddressed. Instead, literacy is celebrated at the expense of parental embarrassment, shame, and even morality.

Literacy is championed with near religious fervor in Vashanti Rahaman's *Read for Me, Mama*, wherein a young seven or eight-year-old African American boy is the instrument of his mother's "salvation" from illiteracy. Rahaman's story perpetuates class and race stereotypes, equating illiteracy with dirtiness, personal shame, even sin, and literacy with moral cleanliness and spiritual enlightenment. The story polarizes Joseph's ideal school/library experiences and the drudgery and mundane nature of his seemingly less than desirable home environment. The school librarian—older, wiser and proportional in weight—is almost God-like because of her professional authority and Joseph's adulation of her; she inspires Joseph with her engaging story reading. In fact, Joseph wants to emulate Mrs. Ricardo as a story reader. While Joseph's mother's storytelling is as exciting as the librarian's story reading, Rahaman's text affords the librarian and literacy an idealized position of power and authority not realized in Joseph's home life.

Race and class stereotyping occurs in other textual details. In fact, Rahaman makes illiteracy the source of these stereotypes. The overweight, late twenty-something African American woman, also a single parent—the text affords no clues to how this circumstance came to be—is trapped financially in two janitorial jobs. She has no independent means of transportation—she rides a bus or walks wherever she goes—and lives in an apartment next to empty lots of garbage and in a neighborhood with broken sidewalks. While these images alone are not distinct class markers, contextually, they render this less than ideal family unit as limited and existing in less than ideal American middle-class circumstances. Again, images of dirtiness and cleanliness are synonymous with illiteracy and literacy respectively. The illiterate Mama cleans hotel rooms, dirty dishes, the dirty apartment, and presumably white Mrs. Holder's apartment. These clean/dirty images appear in the illustrations as well. The literate librarian is either a light-skinned ethnic minority or a white person. The illiterate mother

is dark-complected.⁸ The university student who reads to Joseph at the laundromat is also non-African-American. Because of the mother's illiteracy, the text suggests, her participation in society is limited to working two jobs, doing laundry, shopping for groceries, and attending church activities. The implication is that the mother wants more or should want more or deserves more from life than these social rituals afford when in reality, some individuals, whether literate or not, may be quite satisfied in these circumstances.⁹

While leaving Joseph's mother unnamed in the text affords some degree of character universality in treating this issue of illiteracy, it also suggests that an illiterate parent may not warrant the authority of an identity, a name, not even the ability or opportunity to name herself. Recall that Frederick Douglass's consummate mark of selfhood and manhood comes in his ability to name himself, to "subscribe [him] self Frederick Douglass," suggesting the power and authority of one who can name or possess a non-generic name. Surely, there is more to this individual's identity than her named motherhood identity, an identity that is neither personalized nor individualized. All of the other literate characters, even the son Joseph, are privileged with a named identity: Ms. Ricardo (librarian), Mr. Beharry (university student), and old Mrs. Holder.

That Joseph's mother finds literacy through her church might easily be connected with the role black churches played historically in educating African Americans during and after slavery. As Leo McGee and Harvey G. Neufeldt note in *Education of the Black Adult in the United States: An Annotated Bibliography*, "[T]he black churches, most notably [sic] the African Methodist Church, took the lead in providing educational opportunities for blacks of all ages" (92). Yet this historical note is not revealed in the story but rather the notion that literacy is a "gift" from God. Just as a mysterious and seemingly divine presence puts a "pot of geraniums. . . in the deep hole in the sidewalk" in Joseph's neighborhood, the preacher and the congregation at Mama's church pray fervently to God for her to become literate, and God answers their collective prayers with evening adult reading courses and tutorials for Mama. One of the last images in the book shows Joseph and his Mama reading together as though their mouths are reading in unison. This image of open mouths even suggests singing as at Mama's choir practice or church revival service. Indeed, the illustration and the final words—"Slowly and carefully, Mama's voice stepped from word to word, page after page. Mama was reading!"—resound with the religiosity of singing, shouting, and celebration. With Mama's newfound literacy, she is presumably no longer desperate and

blinded by personal shame, deception, and inadequacy. She rather cryptically explains her illiteracy before her "conversion": "I have to learn to read. . . . My boy *needs* a mama who can read. But I never practiced up my reading, never learnt it good in school, and it all got lost from my mind, all got lost" (emphasis added). Notice that the mother equates literacy with good parenting. Importantly, the book's title, "Read *for Me*, Mama" (emphasis added), rather than "Read *to Me*, Mama" (emphasis added), further suggests that this parent's becoming literate is a response to her son's desperate plea, a plea that goes beyond the son's leisure entertainment: if Mama does not respect herself enough to be literate, then certainly she will become literate for her child. Notice also that Mama's spoken language is mangled and awkward, and presumably once she learns to read, she will be a better parent and will speak correct "standard" English. Indeed, literacy brings light and enlightenment to Mama. In this sense, the final open mouth might well be the words read or sung of the popular folk hymn "Amazing Grace":

Amazing grace how sweet the sound/
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see.

Rahaman's text associates illiteracy with "wretchedness," being "lost," and being "blind"; literacy, in contrast, with sight and moral purity. While illiteracy may be perceived as a blindness, it is nevertheless one dimension of a person's life experience, not a whole human condition. Hence, although Mama may already know the words to the hymn as she does the hymns she knows well in her church choir, she can now read other unfamiliar verses and other less familiar hymns.¹⁰ With literacy, the book contends, Mama is a soldier armed to conquer the world. Armed with literacy, the author contends, this mother and by extension this family will break from its personal and social shackles. Even the book jacket reiterates this religious romanticizing of literacy as "salvation": "Vashanti Rahaman's story of how a mother and son face the challenge of literacy is told with warmth and sensitivity, while [the illustrator's] bold and beautiful oil paintings light the pages with images of hope and love."

The message of *Read for Me, Mama* oversimplifies even for a child audience the issue of illiteracy. We see Mama's life of drudgery before she becomes literate and are to believe that her daily busyness as a single parent will either change or cease and that she will have more time for her son. Indeed, while the mother may not spend time avoiding reading to her son, perhaps too much of the relationship between

a mother and her son is connected with her (il)literacy. The message presumes that Mama will not arrive home from work late if her work times are changed because she will be able to read announcements about revised schedules. The story avoids the reality that even literate persons misread or do not always read carefully. And how likely is it that Mama's work place would present revised schedules and have no verbal announcement or discussion so that Mama and others might at least hear about the schedule change? The final lesson of the book also suggests that Mama's literacy will change the quality of the relationship between this mother and her child. While reading to a child is an unquestionably important act that can be a bonding experience between a parent and a child, there is no reason to believe that the quality of this family's life overall or needs to change significantly.

Although Joseph admits that his mother is a great story teller—"Mama was the best storyteller in the world. Her voice danced and played with the words. She could make the most ordinary things seem not so ordinary after all"—her storytelling is not really celebrated.¹¹ Indeed, the book makes clear that Mama's stories are interesting to Joseph because Mama is an engaging storytelling performer: she uses interesting voices to make stories come alive. But while Mama is a great storyteller, even better than Mrs. Ricardo and the university student Mr. Beharry, Mama's storytelling—to which Joseph has undoubtedly been exposed long before he goes to school and hears a librarian read to him—ranks second in importance and value to Mrs. Ricardo's, the librarian's, story reading: "Mrs. Ricardo, the librarian, was the best story reader in the world. She could make her voice loud and soft and squeaky and growly. She could sound angry and happy and oh, so very sad. She knew all of the great big words in the books. Joseph wished he could read like that." The librarian, because of her literacy performance, is idolized. Joseph's mother's storytelling performance is as exciting and actually comparable to Mrs. Ricardo's animated performances, yet what distinguishes the librarian from the mother in this context is the librarian's ability to "know great big words." Surely, literacy is more than decoding big words.

Mama's conversion to literacy furthers the primary bias that literacy exempts individuals from limitations and creates false hopes: "Literacy," one source claims, "arouses hopes, not only in society as a whole but also in the individual who is striving for fulfillment, happiness and personal benefit by learning how to read and write. Literacy. . . means far more than learning how to read and write. . . The aim is to transmit. . . knowledge and promote social participation."¹² While literacy allegedly "saves" Mama from public and personal shame. *Read*

for Me, Mama does little to move what can be the painful realities of illiteracy to a deeper understanding. Rather, it maintains and even perpetuates faulty assumptions that illiteracy determines one's self worth and the quality of one's personal relationships. The text confirms Nancy N. Rue's assertions that "Illiteracy is considered by our society to be a shameful thing—certainly not something that is volunteered in the course of casual conversation. . . . If [adults] tell people they can't read, they're likely to lose jobs, friendships, and even the respect of their kids" (9). That Mama wears a pair of heart-shaped earrings prominently positioned in the illustrations just before her "true confession" before the church congregation and during and after the "conversion" further presents literacy as a divine "gift" from God, suggesting once again that literacy directly impacts on the loving relationship between a parent and child.

With the mother's literacy also comes a seemingly newfound church community rallying around the new "convert." Was there no community around Mama before this moment? Perhaps Rahaman works too hard to idealize literacy with assumptions that can surely undermine parental authority and individual self-respect. Perhaps she tries too hard to present a "happily ever after ending" to a story and circumstance that are more complicated than she realizes or dares to explore. Perhaps the story would achieve a greater impact if it explored some possible or probable causes of Mama's illiteracy beyond her cryptic explanation in the church. Perhaps Rahaman's reading audience might be better served by using Mama's illiteracy to discuss the cultural bias and social marginalization of those who do not share the same abilities, talents, opportunities, or even reading levels. The book might have been an occasion to educate both reading parents and children that there are degrees of functioning literate practice, that Joseph's mother's inability to read his library books, her church hymn books, or her work schedule announcements does not mean that she can not differentiate between cleaning supplies, shop for groceries, read numbers on her paycheck, or pay bills. Perhaps the book might have included some awareness on the author's part of the social, historical, and political history of illiteracy specifically among African Americans since according to Jonathan Kozol, in *Illiterate America* (1985), "[Illiteracy] figures for the younger generation of black adults are increasing. Forty-seven percent of all black seventeen-year-olds are functionally illiterate. That figure is expected to climb to 50 percent by 1990" (2). Although the National Education Association reports that among the total population of adult non-literate in English—41 % are English speaking whites, 22% are English speaking African Ameri-

cans, 22% are Spanish speaking, and 15% are non-English speaking people-"the actual numbers of white non-readers is twice that of the number of African American and Hispanic non-readers, dispelling the myth that illiteracy is not a problem among whites." ¹³ Still, Kozol further urges the rightful need to address illiteracy specifically within a particular cultural context of race politics:

When nearly half of all adult black citizens in the United States are coming out of public schools without the competence to understand the antidote instructions on a chemical container, instructions on a medicine bottle, or the books and journalistic pieces which might render them both potent and judicious in a voting booth, who can pretend that literacy is not political? (92)

While Kozol's comments are fundamentally sound, his call for urgency certainly warranted, perhaps he, too, overestimates the alleged "saving" powers of literacy. Joseph's mother seems not to have endangered her life or Joseph's or suffered any devastating trauma as a result of her inability to read. Nevertheless, the need to historicize illiteracy in any such discussion is clear:

The politics of literacy are nothing new. Long before the politics of racial segregation in the schools came to the national attention, long before Woodrow Wilson argued for the merits of class stratification in the public schools, long before laws throughout the nation made it a crime to teach black people how to read and write, long before the U.S. Constitution measured the black citizen as three-fifths of a man, one hundred years before the present government existed, a powerful leader, Sir William Berkeley, governor of Virginia, stated his views in clear, unflinching terms. "I thank God," he said, that "there are no free schools nor printing [in this land]. For learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing hath divulged them..God save us from both!"(93)¹⁴

While Rahaman's children's story need not be a history textbook, readers might well benefit from a cursory explanation of the richness of the African American oral tradition represented to some extent in the mother's storytelling, a tradition often less valued by a learned people. Carl F. Kastle farther adds in *Literacy in the United States: Readers*

and Reading since 1880:

For some centuries after the introduction of alphabetic writing, literacy was restricted to a small elite and limited to a few functions. . . . These early developments took place in the contexts of pervasive oral culture. Oral culture did not atrophy in contact with written culture; rather, the written word modified and extended communication networks. Not only has the great majority of the earth's population been illiterate throughout history, but the great bulk of communication in literate societies is still oral. (6-7)

The artificial white literate vs. oral and African American illiterate dynamic speaks largely to the race dynamics more fully understood within the context of social and political history. Kastle adds:

On all measures of literacy, at all points during the last century, white Americans have been more literate than black Americans. In 1880, the differences were vast, of course, with American black population emerging from slavery and subject to massive poverty and discrimination. . . . A large, durable portion of literacy differences between black and white Americans clearly cannot be explained by measurable economic and family characteristics. In the unexplained portion of the variation lie such elusive but real factors as the effects of prejudice, cultural alienation, discouragement, and differential aspirations, all related to race. (125-26)¹⁵

Additionally, the various ways in which different races, ethnicities, and even genders experience the world impact on their learning to read and write. For instance, African Americans, historically and politically denied access to writing and reading, emerge from and celebrate an aural, oral, and visual culture often at odds with the culture of the written word, authors such as Zora Neale Hurston raising oral rituals of folk culture to high art. "The white man," according to Hurston, "thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" (50). To offer some commentary that presents parental illiteracy often as the result of varied and complex circumstances is to enlighten readers, young and old alike, rather than perpetuate further ignorance and misunderstanding among the alleged literate.

Dolores Johnson's book on parental illiteracy, *Papa's Stories*, comes with mixed and confused messages, again associating illiteracy

with parental love for a child and with individual self-love. Emphasizing folktales, fairy tales, and the rich textures of oral traditions, Johnson's detail of a father's illiteracy seems incidental, not fundamentally connected with the story's inadvertent final message: that good storytelling is good storytelling whether the story is read, recited, or improvised.

Perhaps without really intending to, Johnson has written a book that celebrates folklore and performance. Not only does the narrative engage fairy tale rhetoric and a young kindergartner, Kari—her father's growing "Princess"—stumbling upon her thirty-something-year-old father and mother's secret of his illiteracy, but the story also romanticizes literacy as a middle-class ideal. While Kari's Dad does not "read" words in his daily "reading" rituals with Kari, he reads the pictures and creates wonderfully exciting stories from those pictures. In the illiterate father's hands, the culturally familiar stories of Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Jack and the Beanstalk take on new life for Kari.¹⁶ And since Kari herself is not quite a reader, there is no immediate confusion for her about what she sees on the printed page and what she hears her father "reading" to her. The father-daughter reading ritual seems complete until the fairy tale's wicked stepmother or witch figure—Kari's older neighborhood friend, Jennifer—disillusions Kari about her whole relationship with her Dad. Ironically, it seems that Jennifer's literacy threatens the ideal world Kari and her Papa have created:

Papa settled into his favorite chair, his skin smelling as fresh as fir trees. Kari climbed into his lap and snuggled into the crook of his arm. Then Papa read her a story. . . . There were times Kari and Papa got so wrapped up in their reading that Mama let supper sit while she joined Kari and Papa on the porch in the moonlight. Or, during winter's chilliest evenings, the whole family would snuggle close together on the sofa and read by the light of the fire.

Although Jennifer's alleged literal reading of the Little Red Riding Hood story affords Kari an opportunity to discuss her dad's illiteracy with him—the story does not clarify why Kari should believe her friend's version over her Dad's—the story does nothing to advance an understanding of the issue of illiteracy. That illiteracy seems secondary stems also from the fact that the illiterate father is not presented with any problems particular to his disability: he and his literate wife own a nice house in a pleasant middle-class rural environ-

ment, and he presumably has an adequate blue-collar job.

Johnson is not quite sure what her book is about; its focus seems too fuzzy to know what Kari or Johnson's reading audience is to glean from the details other father's cryptic explanation of why he is unable to read: "When I was young, I didn't care enough about learnin'. And there was no one who seemed to care about me. When I got older, I didn't love myself enough to even try." Might Johnson have allowed the family to have an honest discussion of less vague reasons for the father's illiteracy? How young is "young" when this father did not care about learning? Did extenuating family circumstances impact on this father's early education? How is learning to read and write fundamentally connected to this father's lack of self-love, and how has this lack of self-love manifested itself in his life as an adult? Did this father drop out of school when he was young? Is it possible for an illiterate individual, a parent even, to have healthy self-esteem? Were the circumstances of this father's illiteracy forced upon or "chosen" by him? What specific lessons might Kari learn from her father's reading inability?

Indeed, as Papa "reads" to Kari, Johnson does not initially make clear that the father is not choosing to improvise. That Kari prefers her dad's improvised, more creative versions of stories accentuates the performative nature of good storytelling that in this case is not handicapped by the father's illiteracy. When this father learns to read a little from his wife and is able to read the words on the pages of Kari's books, not just the pictures, Kari prefers what might easily be considered sillier revisionist versions where "little boys swallowed magic till they were full of beans, and giants. . . were angry because their mustaches didn't fit." At the book's end, Kari makes this request of her father: "Excuse me, Papa. When you finish this book, read it to me again like you always did. I love the extra-special way you read the stories. "

It seems odd that Johnson foregrounds her text allegedly about illiteracy in fairy tale folklore since fairy tales are part of cultural literacy and even those who may not be able to read them have surely heard of them and know their narrative germs. As folklore, these fairy tales have surely circulated in the father's own childhood whether or not he is the product of a literate family. Just as Kari and anyone else starts the journey toward literacy by inventing stories from pictures, Kari's father has every right to be respected for and confident in his storytelling abilities despite his illiteracy. Are story readers necessarily the best storytellers?

BEYOND THE LITERACY BINARY

Many readers and writers take for granted the privilege and authority given those who can do the same. For them, daily tasks such as reading traffic signs, a newspaper or magazine in a doctor's office waiting room, a restaurant menu, telephone books, a child's school progress report, checks, recipes, maps, and medicine bottles are believed fundamental to our social and personal survival. I was starkly reminded of my own middle-class assumptions when I recently assigned to my African American children's literature class an intergenerational oral history midterm project specifically about African American identity and childhood reading experiences. Students were asked to interview two individuals—one at least ten years older than they and another between the ages of five and ten—about their reading experiences as African American children. I had expected to get stories from individuals that allowed students to see how images of African Americans had or had not changed over generations and how early reading experiences impact on adult identity formations. When one student submitted his project, his younger interviewee was the only instance of twenty who could not read. While I had assumed that all parents are reading to their children before they are put to bed, the reality of non-reading children and non-reading parents became an issue I had inadvertently overlooked in all of my fairly extensive preparations for teaching the class. The young boy, now age ten and in a juvenile jail until age eighteen for various crimes, was never read to and never learned to read; he still acknowledges no value in learning to read as he is the product of a non-reading adult environment. Another student submitted a project that revealed an eleven-year-old boy's extreme written and verbal giftedness despite having grown up with totally illiterate grandparents. And just as it is necessary to understand the circumstances of young Johnny's inability to read, it was equally important to understand the circumstances of Johnny's parents' illiteracy since illiterate children become illiterate adults and illiterate parents.

While this project has made no efforts to be exhaustive in its exploration of parental illiteracy in African American children's books, it recognizes the grave misinformation and incomplete information available to children with non-reading parents.¹⁷ Failure to address parental illiteracy in children's texts in many ways furthers the marginalization of those unable to read and write. Treatments here evidenced are rudimentary and grossly inadequate. To equate illiteracy with hopelessness, immorality, lack of self-love, limited quality

family relations, latchkey childhood, parental dishonesty, and limited social participation is to accept the cultural bias associated with literacy and to remain ignorant to complicated realities. As a Professor of Education clarifies, "The great divide in literacy is not between those who can read and write and those who have not yet learned to. It is between those who have discovered what kinds of literacy society values and how to demonstrate their competencies in ways that earn recognition."¹⁸ Sojourner Truth, an illiterate former slave and one of the first black feminist abolitionists, "protested against discriminatory laws that denied the ballot to women. . . blacks and illiterate citizens. After she was once turned away from a voting booth, she said, 'I can't read a book, but I can read the people.'¹⁹ Indeed, her comment speaks to a dimension of (il)literacy that must be considered in order to eradicate myths and stereotypes used to determine individual self and social worth. My exploration reveals that literate authors can be totally unaware of the complexities of (il)literacy and the multitude of literate practices at the core of social, cultural, and individual identity formations. Among African Americans, the issue of (il)literacy must be further contextualized not as a way of condoning not learning to read and write but as a way of understanding more fully that non-reading and writing is seldom if ever a simple matter of personal choice.

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NOTES

1. Langston Hughes. "Mother to Son," *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 187. This poem is selected and recited by Precious Jones, Sapphire's illiterate teenage African American female in *Push* (1996), as one of her pre-GED adult illiteracy course assignments. The poem is dedicated to her infant son, Abdul (112-113).

2. Alphabetical literacy and orality need not exist in cultural opposition. Even though the "readerly" narrative is a model of rhetorical flourish at its best and meant to be read as a demonstration of "mastering the muster" through mastering the master's language, other rhetorical strategies by Douglass-emotional flourishes, metafictional moments, and rhythmic patterns-render the *Narrative* its distinctly sermonic/ "speakerly" textures, its clear connections with orality and African American folk storytelling. Robert G. O'Meally, in his essay "Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*: The Text Was Meant to Be Preached," comments on the oral "preacherly" dimensions

of Douglass's text:

The *Narrative* does more than touch upon questions often pondered by black preachers. Its very form and substance are directly influenced by the Afro-American preacher and his vehicle for ritual expression, the sermon. In this sense, Douglass' *Narrative* of 1845 is a sermon, and, specifically, it is a black sermon. This is a text meant to be read and pondered; it is also a Clarion call to spiritual affirmation and action: This is a text meant to be preached. . . . But Douglass, who grew up hearing sermons on the plantation and who heard and delivered them throughout his life, produced, in this greatest account of his life, a text shaped by the form and the processes of speaking characteristic of the black sermon. This is a mighty text meant of course, to be read. But it is also a text meant to be mightily preached. (Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto, eds., *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*. New York: MLA, 1978, 192-193; 210).

3. Violet J. Harris, "African-American Conceptions of Literacy: A Historical Perspective" *Theory Into Practice* 31 (Autumn 1992): 276. Not only does Harris provide a rudimentary summary of historical realities facing African Americans in their quest for literacy, she also comments on the fact that literacy, depending on the nature of what one becomes literate in or about, can be both "emancipatory and oppressive":

Literacy serves emancipatory functions when appropriated to reconstruct society and/ or provide individuals with the options needed to participate in all sociocultural institutions. Literacy functions in an oppressive manner. . . when curricular materials, educational philosophies, and pedagogical techniques combine to inculcate an ideology that denigrates a group, omits or misrepresents the history and status of a group, or limits access to knowledge that would enable the individual or group to participate in sociocultural institutions. (277).

4. "Literacy and Life." <<http://www.edentek.net/litlife.htm>> (26 February 2000): 1.

5. Ibid.

6. In circulating drafts of this essay, a couple of African American friends, responding with familiarity to these details of my illiterate father, were compelled to share illiteracy details in their own families. Both email accounts show how adult family members' illiteracy impacted on their own educational values. One, an adult literacy volunteer teacher, writes:

The men on my mom's side of the family are illiterate. They were not encouraged to do well in school like the women were. So they

didn't. None of my uncles could read or write past elementary school level. Survival came from what they learned on the streets and others doing their reading and writing for them. My dad, who was a math whiz, dropped out of school in the third grade to roam around and do nothing. In his fifties, he joined a literacy organization to learn how to read and write. We are proud of his accomplishments. It was never a secret in my family. When my brothers slack, they try to use the excuse that [since] dad made it without an education, why can't they? He sets them straight.

One of my students (female) also quit in the third grade to help feed the family. She never really had the opportunity or drive to go back until recently. She is now eighty years old. (Personal email, 19 January 2000)

Another writes of the circumstances other parents' illiteracy:

My mother died at the age of forty; she did not get her GED until she was thirty-seven. She was a very smart woman and it was fun when she went to school because we sometimes go to help her with her homework to an extent. My stepfather never graduated from grade school as I can recall; however, he traveled the world in the army. It was not until I was a grown woman that I found out how extremely well his math was, something I suffer with. The point is that neither Mom nor Dad ever helped us with our homework. There was no doubt that we would go to school and were expected to graduate, but there was never any reading to help us or helping with math so that we could move to the next level. Other than school books and the Bible, we had no books around our house. There was no money for them and of course we never went to a library. I do however remember them telling stories when the weather caused the lights to go out. That was fun! As you can tell, I sometimes have very mixed feelings about education and its benefits. So many non-formally educated folk have become millionaires. (Personal email, 2 February 2000)

7. Barbara Kantrowitz and Anne Underwood, "Dyslexia and the New Science of Reading" *Newsweek* (22 November 1999): 72. In their investigation of this disorder that affects about 20% of children, Kantrowitz and Underwood point out that this inability to decode sounds, essential to reading, results from mixed brain signals; in this case, "reading disorders are most likely the result of what is, in effect, faulty wiring in the brain-not laziness, stupidity, or a poor home environment" (74). They also cite instances of individuals who are successful despite these childhood reading and learning challenges: "Indeed, famous and successful dyslexics include Tom Cruise, artist Robert Rauschenberg and Olympian Dan O'Brien" (74). Although the article obviously does not champion non-reading, it emphasizes that non

readers can succeed, further evidenced in the example of John Corcoran: "By sixth grade John Corcoran, a severe dyslexic, still couldn't spell 'cat' and could tell MEN from WOMEN on restroom doors only because one was longer. Still illiterate as an adult, he taught social studies in high school—by using movies for lessons, inviting guest speakers and having students grade papers. At 48, he registered for a public library literacy program. . . . Now 60, he published *The Teacher Who Couldn't Read* in 1994" (78). Corcoran's book details his life of deception and riskiness as he successfully moved up the career ladder through elementary and high school, college, and ultimately to his own classroom as a teacher unable to read words on a page. Learning how to read was to him like "being set free from almost five decades of bondage." Notice the analogy made here between illiteracy as a form of enslavement and Frederick Douglass's alleged liberation from slavery through his ability to read and write.

Although not a children's text, Sapphire's controversial novel *Push* (1996) is the disturbingly graphic account of an adolescent African American girl's tortured journey to realized selfhood through literacy. The novel demonstrates the complex circumstances—emotional, psychological, social, and physical—that interfere with Claireece Precious Jones's efforts to become literate. Because of many complicated circumstances and situations revealed in the novel, Precious is sixteen and unable to read and write. In fact, she confesses in her narrative that except for pages with pictures, "the pages look all the same" (48). Importantly, literacy is less Precious's "savior" from her traumatic life of paternal and maternal incest and two subsequent pregnancies, AIDS, and social neglect, than her teacher, Blue Rain, whose approach to helping Precious realize her own self-worth despite her past and present circumstances is through reading and writing. The narrative shows Precious's spiritual blooming after enrolling in a pre-GED adult literacy class for beginning writers. In addition to mastering alphabetic literacy, Precious gains a community of fellow students who respect and care for her as never before. The novel ends with Precious reading to her infant son and committing herself to making her son's life better than hers. Interestingly, some details of Precious's circumstances echo a situation shared in one of the emails from an adult literacy tutor friend that, after reading a draft of this essay, shared an experience with one other student:

I had a student once who quit school in the ninth grade. She thought she was stupid because she never did well. It was not until just before we began our lessons that she found out that she was dyslexic. When I started working with her, her kids would make fun of her. When she started improving, they started helping her with her homework. When she was on her way, she got a job in her child's school as an office aide. Before, she was on welfare, just passing the time doing much of nothing. I would say she had very low self-esteem. In the two years we worked together, I saw her grow as a person. (Personal email, 19 January 2000)

8. Historically, the intraracism that exists within African American communities and households associates light skin with power, authority, and success. Dark-skinned African Americans were presumed to be, were treated as, and perceived themselves as less socially advantaged. Such dynamics emerge from the history of American slavery that rewarded on many levels African Americans closest to masters' white ideal in skin color or hair texture. Masters' children with slaves often were treated as privileged and socially gifted. See Kathy Russell, et.al., *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

9. Nikki Giovanni's autobiographical poem, "Nikki Roasa," is an adult's perspective on childhood memories often misrepresented or misinterpreted when others impose their values onto another's realities or experiences. Despite her family's material lacking and problems with a father who drank too much and too often, Giovanni is not necessarily in psychological and emotional denial when she insists that her childhood "was quite a happy one":

childhood remembrances are always a drag
if you're Black

... and if you become famous or something
they never talk about how happy you were to have your mother all to
yourself and
how good the water felt when you got your bath from one of those big tubs
that folk in Chicago barbecue in

... and though you're poor it isn't poverty that concerns
you. . .

... I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me because they never understand that Black love is Black
wealth and they'll probably talk about my hard childhood and never
understand that all the while I was
quite happy.

("Nikki-Roasa." in Demetrice A. Worley
and Jesse Perry, Jr., eds.,
African-American Literature: An Anthology, 295)

10. This instance of illiteracy is explored briefly in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* when the narrator Scout attends her black maid Calpurnia's church and wonders why the congregation is not reading from the hymnals as they sing. Coupled with the economic issue of the black church not having sufficient funds to buy enough hymnals for its members is the fact that most of the congregation is illiterate. Calpurnia's literacy came from the whites whose house she keeps and she has passed that "gift" of literacy on to her son Zeebo who lines hymns—announces the words of hymns for the congregation in a call-and-imitation response format. Notice the conversation between Scout and Calpurnia about this performance:

"How're we gonna sing it [hymn] if there ain't any hymn-books?"
Calpurnia smiled. "Hush baby," she whispered, "you'll see in a
minute. "
Zeebo cleared his throat and read in a voice like the rumble of distant
artillery. . . .
Miraculously on pitch, a hundred voices sang out Zeebo's words. . . . (121)

It never occurs to Scout that folks who can not read as she and others around her can function quite efficiently. Scout's naivete highlights again the assumptions of privilege attached to literacy. The reality of illiteracy in her church congregation offers Calpurnia the opportunity to explain literacy as something that potentially separates rather than unites her with other blacks socially:

Jem [Scout's older brother] said it looked like they [illiterate congregation] could save the collection money for a year and get some hymn books.
Calpurnia laughed. "Wouldn't do any good," she said. "They can't read."
"Can't read?" I asked. "All those folks?"
"That's right," Calpurnia nodded. "Can't but about four folks in First Purchase [church] read. . . I'm one of 'em." . . . (124)

Class and race are here connected with literacy. In this moment, Lee shows that illiteracy does not mean individuals are unable to function or suffer from low self-esteem because they are unable to read and write. At the same time, the literacy and Calpurnia's attachment to her white family further separate her from the "regular" lot of blacks in Maycomb County.

Not only are illiterate church members able to function in literate circumstances, but there are even illiterate preachers who manage effectively as well. My maternal grandfather's older brother is an illiterate preacher and has been all of my life. For those who do not know that he is illiterate, he "performs" literacy quite effectively. He has heard biblical scriptures so often that he has memorized them, giving audiences a sense of his spiritual commitment. He knows familiar songs and the Word of God so well that he does not have to read them word for word. Since there are so many translations and modifications of the Bible for various audiences, his recitations might easily be taken as a modernized revision of scriptural texts. He does open the Bible to some text as he recites. Those who know him well know how he skillfully manages to avoid situations calling for spontaneous reading on his part. Since a number of illiterate black preachers in my childhood were not formally trained in seminaries or other theology schools, they managed quite effectively to preach soul-stirring sermons and to negotiate their leadership, authority, and credibility masterfully.

Literacy as privilege and a means of separating blacks from the illiterate masses is evidenced in Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of*

a Slave Girl, Written, by Herself. Notice the emphasis as in Frederick Douglass' title when both authors clarify that their narratives were "written by [themselves]." Literacy marks their liberation from slavery. Jacobs, who allegedly taught herself to read, is more self-confident, arrogant even, because she is literate, unlike the other slaves around her: "I was invited to attend [slaves' churches] *because* I could read" (emphasis added 45). There is no sense that Jacobs/ Brent has any other connection, spiritual or communal, with those who share her lot beyond her ability to read to them. She even comments on her ability to pass on news information because others depended on her reading abilities: "They knew that I could read; and I was often asked if I has seen anything in the newspapers about white folks over in the big north, who were trying to get their freedom for them" (45). While literacy puts Jacobs/ Brent on equal grounds with the white populace, it separates her from her fellow lots of slaves. This middle-class preoccupation with literacy surfaces again when Jacobs/ Brent is reunited with her nine-year-old daughter Ellen after seven years of being separated and in bondage. Although Jacobs/ Brent is concerned about Ellen's unkempt appearance, she is most bothered by daughter's inability to read: "When she [Ellen, the daughter] was placed with Mrs. Hobbs, the agreement was that she should be sent to school. She had been there two years, and was now nine years old, and she scarcely knew her letters. There was no excuse for this, for there were good public schools in Brooklyn, to which she could have been sent without expense" (166). At the same time, Brent/ Jacobs's concern for her daughter's literacy might seem any literate parent's desire that her child receive an education that will aid in living a "better" life.

11. Story reading and story telling need not be as dichotomized culturally as this narrative presents. In other words, reading stories is certainly not any more important than good story telling. For instance, Angela Johnson's *Tell Me a Story, Mama* (New York: Orchard Books, 1989) is an African American children's book that celebrates a storytelling tradition. When a young daughter requests that her mother tell her a story as she is being tucked into bed, the young preschool girl clarifies which story she wants her mother to tell by ultimately telling the story to the mother as the mother has told her. The narrative re-creates the mother's childhood story through the daughter's retelling. Whether or not the mother is literate does not influence this equally important parent-child ritual. Two other children's texts importantly present talking and storytelling as a source of communal celebration: Deborah M. Newton Chocolate's retelling of the Ashanti legend, *Talk, Talk* (Mahwah, NJ: Troll Associates, 1993) and Angela Shelf Medearis's *Too Much Talk, a West African Folktale* (Cambridge: Candlewick Press, 1995).

12. "Quotations about Literacy." <<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Database/quote.html>> (03 September 1999): 2.

13. "The Typical Adult Non-Reader," <<http://indian-river.fl.us/living/services/als/typical.html>> (26 January 2000): 1. According to a 1987 report, *The Subtle Danger: Reflections on the Literacy Abilities of America's Young Adults*, published by the Educational Testing Service (Princeton, N.J.), "on

the average, African Americans perform 20% behind whites on literacy tests and Hispanic perform halfway between the two."

14. Not only were slaves punished if caught learning to read and write, but whites that assisted in slave learning were also subject to legal consequences. Describing feminist abolitionist Lydia Maria Child's crusade against slave illiteracy in Child's *An Appeal in Favor of Americans Called Africans* (1833), Cecelia McCall, in her essay, "A Historical Quest for Literacy," recounts the deliberate obstacles to slave learning:

[Lydia Maria Child] reports that various laws were enacted to maintain illiteracy. For instance, South Carolina was the first state to order that any person caught instructing a slave be fined one hundred pounds. Virginia declared that schools established to teach either slave or free Black people should be disbanded and each pupil lashed twenty times. Anyone caught teaching slaves in Georgia was imprisoned for ten days and given thirty-nine lashes. By 1837, all states in the slaveocracy had enacted similar laws. . . . In the free North, . . . Ohio, for instance, refused to educate "colored" children at the public expense or allow them to attend schools with white children." (4)

After slavery ended, literacy continued to be a weapon of white supremacy used against black social and political participation: "Literacy or other tests as a condition for voting were suspended by the Voting Rights Act in 1965 initially only in those states in which Congress found there had been pervasive discrimination against blacks in registration and in which literacy tests had been specifically designed to disfranchise racial minorities. Later, the ban on literacy and other tests was made nationwide and permanent by amendments to the Act in 1970 and 1975. The Supreme Court held the nationwide ban constitutional after concluding that literacy tests had reduced voter participation in a discriminatory manner throughout the country and not merely in those states originally covered by the Act" (McDonald, Laughlin. "Minority Vote Dilution: The Fourteenth Amendment and the Voting Rights Act" <http://www.aclu.org/aclu-e/course3_mcdonald3.html> 4 January 80, 3).

15. Recall that Frederick Douglass, even after being free from slavery and "armed" with literacy, is unable to secure a job as a calker because whites will not work with him: "I went in pursuit of a job of calking; but such was the strength of prejudice against color, among the white calkers, that they refused to work with me, and of course I could get no employment" (Mack 714). The myth of Frederick Douglass's liberation from slavery and racism is perpetuated even in historical texts for elementary students. As if literacy exempts Frederick Douglass from racial discrimination, Karen H. Dusek's essay, "Frederick Douglass, Abolitionist Writer" boldly asserts: "When Frederick Douglass was a boy, he wanted more than anything else to be free. Believing that he would never be truly free without an education, he learned to read and write. His ability to read and write soon proved to be his most powerful weapon in his lifelong fight against slavery and prejudice" (*Cobble*

stone: *The History Magazine for Young People*, 21). Neither Douglass's narrative nor this essay on him speaks of literacy—the ability to read and write—as a way of personal liberation imaginatively. Rather, liberation is ideally connected to overcoming social circumstance.

16. John Corcoran, chronicling his life as an illiterate parent and high school teacher, offers a similar experience with the fairy tales he pretends to read to his daughter, also called his "princess." Because of the pictures and his familiarity with the fairytales orally, Corcoran confidently embellishes the stories of *The Three Little Bears* and *Cinderella* but is at a total loss when his young daughter requests a story with which he is unfamiliar. He recounts the pain of that experience:

The big Golden Books and their wonderful pictures would stimulate my imagination to weave some crazy yarns. When I told the Three Bears, Cinderella, or another well-known fairy story, they were embellished with all the drama of Orson Wells or Alfred Hitchcock. Sometimes I could hear Kathy [Corcoran's wife] laughing in the kitchen at my tall tales. I had a lot of practice at storytelling.

Colleen had a surprise for me that night. "Read this Daddy," she said, snuggling closer to me. She held out a new book, one with smaller pictures and more words. Her blue eyes were bright with anticipation. . . . I looked at the first page, hoping there would be a clue. . .

I couldn't decipher one word in this preschool children's book.

How I wanted to be able to read, to help her [daughter] during those valuable growing-up years before school. Parents who can't read can't teach their children to read. My heart was wrenched, knowing that I could not give her what I didn't have. (4-5)

17. Eve Bunting's *The Wednesday Surprise* intends to be a warm, fuzzy middle-class, white family moment celebrated when an elderly grandmother and her seven-year-old granddaughter, Anna, give the adult son a "gift": the grandmother learns to read from the granddaughter's instruction. Although the message encouraging everyone to value reading is undeniably important—"It's much smarter if you learn to read when you're young. . . . The chance may pass along with the years"—the story is full of unanswered questions that might explain rather than boldly proclaim without explanation or clear illustration the advantages of literacy. As in other children's books examined in this exercise, illiteracy is synonymous with an individual's lack of self-esteem, poor self-image, and is tainted with presumed immorality. As the narrative moves rather fumblingly, it leaves more narratively unsatisfying questions than answers and explanations: How does the grandmother choose the books from which the granddaughter will teach her? How has the family responded to the grandmother's illiteracy up to the point of this story? What is the grandmother's life like as a nonreader? How and why is grandmother's learning to read such a "gift" to her son? Why has the grandmother resisted

her son's insistence that "she must learn to read"? Why does the son insist that his mother become literate?: "You were always telling me to go to classes, classes, classes," Grandma says to Dad." To what extent does the relationship between this mother and son suffer *because* she is a non-reader? To what extent has the grandmother's illiteracy affected the son's literacy? What are the specific circumstances of the grandmother's illiteracy? To what extent does a seven-year-old read well enough to teach anyone how to read? How long has the granddaughter been teaching the grandmother? Why has no adult in the family bothered to teach grandma to read? Why and how is grandma's reading "the best gift ever" for her son? While Bunting supports the notion that everyone should learn to read when young, her book never explains through the grandmother's experiences why and how reading is important on many levels. Once grandmother "performs" her literacy—"this wonderful thing" —before the family at her son's birthday party, how does literacy change her life or the family's? Mom will continue to have her office job, Dad will continue to work as a truck driver, and Sam will continue his sports practice. Once grandmother learns to read, will she and Anna continue to read during their weekly Wednesday night sittings?

Derek King-Smith's *The School Mouse*, a level four reader and chapter book, is the story of a mouse, Flora, desperately making herself literate: "By day, she educated herself, and in the evenings she taught her class" of other mice. While the story champions literacy in the very act of the mouse's saving her mouse parents from eating "poison" because she has learned to read—"Thank goodness I have learned to read. . . or else I might well have sampled these attractive-looking blue pellets" (28)—the journey toward literacy is both dangerous and lonely for Flora. She meets with hostility and resentment *from* her mouse family who initially have no interest in learning to read. Flora's literacy quest begins as and leads to arrogance and alienation *from* her other mouse family. She says: "I am not an ordinary school mouse. I'm sure I'm not. I'm sure I can learn all sorts of things that no mouse has ever learned before, if only I study hard enough, and then I shall be an extraordinary school mouse" (16). Flora has accepted the assumption and cultural bias that literacy elevates individuals from the masses and that that such elevation is socially valued by all. Despite her mouse family's initial resistance to Flora's "too high an opinion of herself" (15), Flora recognizes her literacy acquisition as part other self-esteem in much the same way as does Calpurnia in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "I am lucky. I don't suppose there's another mouse on the face of the earth that knows as much as I do already. But I can't talk much about my lessons to the others because they wouldn't understand. . . . They're all uneducated. And why? Because there's no one to teach them" (104). Literacy isolates the questing mouse and she is lonely until she meets another literate male mouse and they live happily ever after. As do the other children's texts, this one misleadingly idealizes literacy through Flora's action and proclamation that: ". . . the first and most important thing, for mice and humans, is to learn to read. Once you can do that, there is no limit to what you can get into your heads" (108).

18. "Quotations about Literacy." <<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Database/quote.html>> (03 September 1999): 1.
19. Peter Krass. *Black Americans of Achievement: Sojourner Truth* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988),97.

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