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“Moral of the Story”: How Children’s Books Regulated Race Relations Starting Before the Civil

War to Today

Faleya Scales

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December 7, 2020

“Books are wonderful tools, and art, for children which can affect, and have the ability to intensify children’s perceptions of reality and stimulate their imagination in a creative way. They can also teach racism and reinforce self-hatred and stereotypes.”¹

-Tom Feelings

INTRODUCTION

It often goes unsaid how much the values that are presented in children’s books have an impact on our lives. The “moral of the stories” that we have heard throughout our childhood progress into our adult life, thus shaping every aspect of who we are and how we identify ourselves. Considering this, it therefore seems logical that children’s books are a key component of how race relations have developed in American society. The race relations that developed in America, particularly white-black relationships, were merely dominant ones that were set in stone by the content, stereotypes, and narratives depicted in children’s books. The characters in these books, or caricatures, which are defined as the imitation of a person in which their bodily features are exaggerated, are used to represent black Americans or at least how white Americans viewed blacks. You’re probably wondering, why did white and black Americans, children and adults, feel such a connection to these books and the characters? I argue that they depend on these books to mold different aspects of their existence, including their identity, behavior, and livelihood. Throughout different periods of time starting just before the Civil War to today, children’s books have established some form of social hierarchy where whites were superior and blacks were inferior. This dominant-submissive narrative in children’s books taught white Americans from a young age what position they would hold later on in life and solidified what

¹ Tom Feelings. “Illustration is My Form, The Black Experience, My Story and My Content,” in *The All-White World of Children’s Books and African American Children’s Literature*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1995), 47.

adult white americans already knew: they had the upper hand. Before the Civil War, black caricatures began to pop up on the scene in children's books creating whites' ideal interpretation of a black person. Following in the Reconstruction era, which was a time when relationships between black and white Americans were supposed to take a more equal and respectable route, white Americans' faith in the society that they were used to was tested and blacks continued to fight for equality. Children's books such as *Uncle Remus* and *Ten Little Nigger Boys* became the minor constitution for white Americans and helped them keep in touch with the part of the past that left them in control. As time went on, particularly around the 1950's and onward, children's books began to change in tone and message, depicting a world that was inclusive and safe for all children. However, these same books became targets of backlash. While children's literature did begin to form into beautiful pieces of work that were, for the most part, fair, they still jeopardized the image of black Americans. These books affected social relationships between blacks and whites because they created an unrealistic reality that allowed one race to ridicule the other, projecting white Americans' fear of a changing society onto black Americans. Today we see children's books that focuses more on inclusion, however there is still a constant argument that a lot of the favored children's books today still miss the mark on being completely free of racial discrimination. Thus, I will argue that children's books were, and still are, a detrimental part of demeaning black and white race relations in American society.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Previous studies and research on social relations in America have covered a variety of topics; however children's books have been one of the many mediums that are just recently being discussed amongst historians when researching the development of race relationships.²

² Donnarae MacCann, Gloria Woodard, "Introduction," in *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, (Metuchen, NJ & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1985), 1.

Some historians do see that children's books are actually important in enforcing and regulating social relations. Historian Donnarae MacCann, specifically, discussed in her book, *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, the issues about racial awareness in children who are exposed to children's books and she insteads advocates for the production of children's books that omit racial bias completely. She explains that it is every author's duty to create children's books that do not create a fixated stereotype of a group of individuals.³ Author and historian Jennifer Ritterhouse agrees with MacCann that children gain social awareness from what is reiterated in children's books even at their young age. She says, "Read in white southerners' own parlors, these stories not only validated adults' racial views but reinforced lessons in white supremacy that white southern children also learned from the entire separate and unequal world around them."⁴ I agree with both women in regards to how children's books impact children's minds even at their young age.

I also examined the work written by historians Julius Lester and George Woods who explained in the chapter titled "Black and White: An Exchange" the animosity between blacks and whites in the book *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*. They suggested that whites' ideas of blacks that they create in children's books are not depicted in reality, which agitates whites because they are not able to deal with the idea of blacks being anything other than inferior beings that whites are used to them being.⁵ Of course, as time went on, blacks gradually made a name for themselves in American society which went against every idea that blacks had for whites which caused whites to lash out in a reign of terror against blacks. This is evident in examples that are later to come in this paper. I agree with the viewpoint of

³ MacCann, Woodard, 2.

⁴ Jennifer Ritterhouse. "Reading, Intimacy, and the Role of Uncle Remus in White Southern Social Memory," *The Journal of Southern History*, 69, no. 3 (August 2003): 591.

⁵ Julius Lester, George Woods. "Black and White: An Exchange," in *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, (Metuchen, NJ & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1985), 67.

these historians and their ideology behind white Americans' connection to children's books does reflect my viewpoint on the matter of white and black Americans dependence on children's books.

Another main scholarly source that I used in my research was the book titled *The All-White World of Children's Books and African American Children's Literature*. Nancy Larrick, in the opening chapter of the book, *The All-White World of Children's Books and African American Children's Literature*, explains that white children are able to read children's books and don't have to worry about their existence being completely or partially disregarded.⁶ They grow up understanding their place in the world and the privilege that they have. This may not seem like much, but when it is coupled with the history of past social relationships, this approach raises a flag of how social relationships will form in the future. Because white children and adults are constantly affirmed of their existence and their power, they are capable of initiating social relations that are unequivocal. I agree with Larrick's point that white children are taught from a young age their privilege. All of the points made by the historians mentioned above do reflect my viewpoint on the matter of children's books and race relation. However, I plan to expand on this discussion by offering a psychological perspective into what connects white children and black children to these characters and how this in turn affects the relationships between the two.

The primary sources in my research, which mainly consist of children's books, were retrieved from the children's literature digital collections database from the University of Florida. Because of the impending pandemic that was occurring during the time of research, the resources needed in order to retrieve the children's books were limited. Also, the children's

⁶ Nancy Larrick, "The All-White World of Children's Books," in *The All-White World of Children's Books and African American Children's Literature*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1995), 1.

literature database that I used was very limited in the kinds of children's books. This made the amount and kind of children's books that I used for this project very limited, but I was still able to use the children's books that I obtained in order to create a chronological timeline of what was going on in American society and connect it to psychological aspects. Another obstacle in my research was that some children's books that did have racially biased content was excluded from digital databases, libraries, and other resources, so finding children's books to help support my thesis was difficult. Some of the books I planned to use for this paper were inaccessible, but I worked with the books that I did have.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The morals that are learned from children's books are things that we apply to our lives and use to help decide the person that we want to be. Some scholars touch on this topic including historians Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard. They discuss children's books' role in creating child development issues in the book, *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*. In the book it says, "They need to observe the changes that occur as children deal with such concepts as identity, vicarious experience, authority, and historical time."⁷ Identity is a huge part of who we each are and many factors play into how these identities form. Laurence Steinberg, a prominent psychologist and author, suggests that identity development is strongly influenced by social context, so it is best to look at a person's social circumstances in order to understand how they formed their identity.⁸ In most of American history, social relationships between blacks and whites have always been rocky due to the onset of relationships in which whites reigned superior over blacks. With the use of slavery, institutional racism, police brutality, and children's books, whites were easily allowed to not only gain power in American

⁷ Donnarae MacCann, Gloria Woodard. "Introduction," in *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, (Metuchen, NJ & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1985), 3.

⁸ Laurence Steinberg, "Identity," in *Adolescence*. (New York: McGraw Education, 2016), 228.

society, but they were also able to create a powerful identity that rised above any idenity that came from a minority group. Rebecca Rogers and June Christian explain in the article, “What Could I Say?: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Construction of Race in Children’s Literature,” how identity is different amongst those that are white and those that are black. In the article, it states, “White people form identities as a function of their privilege, Black people are thrown into an identity...”⁹ Blacks are “thrown into an identity” because of the fixed stereotypes and grotesque images of blacks that are displayed in children’s books.

What was most important in these children’s books was not so much the words, but more so the images that were displayed in these books. The images of characters in these books whether they were caricatures or animals came to represent whites in blacks. Wande Knox Goncalves explains this in his article, “Little Black Sambo and the Legacy of Image in African American Literature for Children.” He argues that the illustrations in children’s books are an important part of how children build a connection to the books they read.¹⁰ The more that they connect to the book, the more the book and its content comes to represent who they are. This is why whites really benefited from the books because these children’s books helped to declare their reality during times in which they were in power and times in which their privilege was tested. Even white adults sought support from children’s books that demeaned black Americans because it helped them remind them of the times in which they were on top which was a huge part of their identity. Jennifer Ritterhouse explains it better in her article “Reading, Intimacy, and the Role of Uncle Remus in White Southern Social Memory” when she says, “Meanwhile, the historical narratives, images, and rituals of commemoration that groups produce become

⁹ Rebecca Rogers, June Christain. “What Could I Say?: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Construction of Race in Children’s Literature,” *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 10, no. 1, (March 2007), 21.

¹⁰ Wande Knox Goncalves, “Little Black Sambo and the Legacy of Image in African American Literature for Children, (July 21, 1994): 3.

touchstones of unity and identification.”¹¹ The concept is that whites authors' use of black caricatures in children's books paired with their history of being in power allows them to be aware of their identity. I plan to use these ideas expressed by the authors and historians mentioned before in order to show how psychologically important children's books are to forming an identity.

Once Upon A Time: ANTEBELLUM

Pre-Civil War activity consisted of a myriad of things which left black Americans in despair in American society. Of course, black Americans were forced to work in labor for their white counterparts and this helped create a status quo for which whites felt comfortable in the presence of blacks. As if this was not enough, white authors created children's books in order to help teach white children that they could look forward to privilege in the future. Around the mid-nineteenth century, children's books were gaining popularity in America and they not only became a staple of the lives of children, but it also became an important part of white Americans' lives. One book that was created before the Civil War was the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which was written by author Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852. The book is one of the earliest examples of books with stereotypical black caricatures. These stereotypes include black caricatures with grotesque body features, content slave narratives, broken dialect, and more. One of the main stereotypes that was present in the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the foolish or content slave narrative. In the book, it says, “Hallo, Jim Crow! pick up that”, said Mr. Shelby, throwing him a bunch of raisins from the table. The child scampered as well as he could after the prize, and his master laughed, and said, “Now, Jim, show this gentleman how you can dance and sing.”¹²

¹¹ Jennifer Ritterhouse. “Reading, Intimacy, and the Role of Uncle Remus in White Southern Social Memory,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 69, no. 3, (August 2003): 587.

¹² Harriet Beecher Stowe, “George and Eliza Story,” in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (place: publisher, date), 2.

“Oh-these critters are not like white folk.”¹³ Although black Americans daily life consisted of being and a superior-inferior relationships with whites due to slavery, the use of stereotypes in books helped to keep these relationships in place and to also help psychologically tear down the mentality of blacks. Paul C. Deane speaks of this in his article “The Persistence of Uncle Tom: An Examination of the Image of the Negro in Children’s Fiction Series.” He suggests that, “Other means of debasing the Negro's status are accomplished by the use of certain stereotypes, a device which further equates all Negroes.”¹⁴ All blacks had one identity at the time which was the stereotypical slave that was either foolish, content, paranoid or many other things that went against the true identity. Because of this, white Americans viewed them as less than compared to themselves which helped to boost their own sense of identity, but this is just one of the early examples of how children’s books relate to race relations and to identity.

The Civil War began nearly a decade after the publication of the book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, more specifically on April 12, 1861, and this monumental event helped decide a new fate for black Americans. With this war starting after President Abraham Lincoln enlisted seventy-five thousand men to help fight against angered confederate soldiers, black Americans quickly jumped on the opportunity to fight for their freedom.¹⁵ They put the idea of abolishing slavery on the table and lined up to participate in this war.¹⁶ While they fought fervorously in the war, blacks and the Republican Party demanded for freedom of blacks. Eventually their prayers were answered when President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 in the middle of the battle between the free states and the slave states. The fight between the Union and the Confederacy was a long one, however, the Union were victorious in this

¹³ Stowe, 3.

¹⁴ Paul C. Deane, “The Persistence of Uncle Tom: An Examination of the Image of the Negro in Children’s Fiction Series,” *The Journal of Negro Education*, 37, no. 2 (1968): 144.

¹⁵ “The Civil War”, *The American Yawp: A Massively Collaborative Open U.S. History Book*, (Stanford University Press), <https://www.americanyawp.com/>.

¹⁶ “The Civil War”

bloody battle and these slavery-free states winning gave black Americans hope for a future in which they were not binded with whites. The Civil War ended in April of 1865 and although black Americans thought they could look forward to living their lives as free men, they soon realized following the end of this war that their lives would not change much. Following the end of the war, we enter the postbellum period in which Reconstruction begins for former black slaves to transition into regular life. From here you would see a rise in children's books and the continuation of stereotypes in these books that help maintain the power structure in black and white relationships.

POSTBELLUM

You've already heard the classic story behind the Civil War and now we approach a new one that takes place after the Civil War in what is known as the postbellum era. During this time, many events take place that set the tone of what's to come in the twentieth century. After the Civil War, black Americans began the process of getting fixated into normal American society, but they faced obstacles along the way. After the Civil War, on January 31, 1865, slavery was officially abolished when the thirteenth amendment was created.¹⁷ Although freed from slavery, Black Americans continued to struggle to gain their rights due to many obstacles that stood in their way such as Black Codes, or small laws, that blocked blacks from obtatining certain civil rights such as the right to serve in the military.¹⁸ These books acted as the infrastructure of the new kind of relationships that were to form between whites and blacks after the Civil War. Race relationships still required blacks to be inferior to their white counterparts and any step out of those bounds was not allowed or tolerated. Children's books such as *The Story of Little Black*

¹⁷ "Reconstruction," in *The American Yawp: A Massively Collaborative Open U.S. History Book*, (Stanford University Press), <https://www.americanyawp.com/>.

¹⁸ "Reconstruction"

Sambo and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* created the blueprint for how these relationships should progress. These books contained derogatory pictures of blacks that made them into stereotypical caricatures in which they behaved in a way that was childish, lazy, partially illiterate and incomprehensible, and etc. Not much has changed about the kinds of stereotypes used in these children's books. On the other hand, the imagery displayed in these books became more insulting towards blacks. This all helped to demean the existence of the black in reality which re-established the dominant-submissive relationship in real life.

Reconstruction Era

During this time, black Americans who were former slaves waited close behind to see how the process of reconstruction will work out. With slavery abolished, they looked to the Republicans to continue to advocate and pass laws that would grant them their civil rights. This process did not go too much to plan because not too long after Congress declared that slavery was illegal by the constitution, President Lincoln was assassinated which put a halt in many of the plans that were set in place to help freedmen transition into American society.¹⁹ With the Vice President at the time, Andrew Johnson, taking Lincoln's place as President, southern states began to take advantage of his slavery loving views. They created black codes that could stop blacks from obtaining rights that whites had. However, this was frowned upon by Republicans, so as a result, they passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and shortly after the fourteenth amendment was passed which granted all freedmen civil rights.²⁰ Although blacks seemed to be pulling a lead in front of whites, that was not the case. White southerners began the process of instilling terror in blacks as a way to keep them from exercising their rights.²¹ This reign of terror that white southerners declared against black along with children's book like *Simple Addition by a Little*

¹⁹ "Reconstruction"

²⁰ imdb.

²¹ imdb.

Nigger, which was published in 1876, helped keep blacks “in their place.” Children’s book like *Simple Addition by a Little Nigger*, was the complete opposite of what the African Americans were looking forward to during their time of freedom. The story possesses African American caricatures that are being added to the story one or a few at a time. Although you could say that the book aims to try to educate children in simple math, it is a slap in the face of African American adults who prayed for better times and African American children who have to deal with things that should be of the past. Instead of being able to create an identity outside of being a former slave, they instead are fixated into an identity in which was molded for them by whites. This book features a stereotypical dialect of black people. In the final line of the book, you see an example of it. It says, “Five and five’s ten,”---and now’s gwine hum.²² The book aims to undermine blacks who just recently became free. Thus, the relationship between blacks and whites doesn't get better during the Reconstruction period, and it is expected to not get better in the years to come.

The reconstruction era did leave blacks with some small victories, but with the many big failures from the Reconstruction process and the use of children’s books that degraded blacks, blacks were mainly left in the same position that they started in. The blacks' new rise social status did not help create a social relationship with whites that was equal. It instead infuriated whites and led them to rely on books like *Simple Addition by a Little Nigger* in order to regulate the relationships that both blacks and whites were all too familiar with.

Post-Reconstruction Era

The use of children’s books to reinforce stereotypes continued after the Reconstruction era ended in 1877. This included a book which was very similar to the book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with its collection of short stories all told by a character named *Uncle Remus*. This book was

²² John. “Simple Addition by a Little Nigger,” (New York: McLoughlin Bros, Inc., 1876), <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00028337/00001?search=little+=niggers>.

created by a white Southern man by the name of John A. Harris in 1880, and he was fascinated with the story of blacks that he created an imaginary character by the name of Uncle Remus and created his own narrative of how blacks on the plantation were. However, his stories instilled certain stereotypes about blacks that white southerners grew too fond of. In one of the stories in the book titled “The wonderful tar-baby story,” Uncle Remus says, “Tu’n me loose, fo’ I kick the natal stuffin’ outen you,’ sez Brer Rabbit, but de Tar-Baby, she ain’t sayin’ nothin’.”²³ The term “tar-baby” refers to a black or dark skinned person and compares the color of the skin to the color of tar which is dark. Terms like these were added to the list of names that were thrown at black individuals. Yet, this is not the only problem in the book. The book does display many stereotypes towards blacks, but it gives false narratives about how blacks viewed slavery and how their daily life was. It was written through the eyes of a white southern author who created his own idea or identity for blacks that white people found amusing and could use for their own benefit.

Books like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) followed suit in the process of using stereotypical looking caricatures. In this book, the author Mark Twain used all forms of black stereotypes in the popular children's book. Minstrel characters, that will become popular later on, were used to depict the black characters and the common stereotypes of black, such as poor speech and childishness, were used to create a storyline of the interactions between black and whites characters in the book.²⁴

²³ Joel C. Harris. “The wonderful tar-baby story,” in *Uncle Remus.*, (London: Osgood, Mcilvaine & Co., 1880). <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00084087/00001?search=uncle+=remus>.

²⁴ Frederick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann. “*Huckleberry Finn* and the Traditions of Blackface Minstrelsy,” in *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, (Metuchen, NJ & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1985), 78-79.

Before entering into the twentieth century, black Americans received a huge blow to their progression in American society. On May 18, 1896 the supreme court case of Plessy v.

Ferguson declared that it was legal to make public facilities and schools “separate but equal.”

Jim Crow & Segregation Era

The era of Jim Crow and segregation was amongst American citizens. Setting the scene mainly in the South, segregated movie theaters, public bathrooms, libraries and etc. were marked with signs indicating which race was allowed in each facility. Minstrel shows became a popular form of entertainment for white audiences and frequently involved the use of “black face,” or painting their face with a black medium with either red or white overexaggerated facial features, by white actors in order to create their idea of a black character. During this time, the term Jim Crow was coined from the use of a black caricature by that name in minstrel shows. However, these black caricatures that were seen in minstrel shows were also displayed in children’s books which grew in number in the turn of the twentieth century. Books such as *Coon Alphabet* use black caricatures that were presented in minstrel shows and seemed to ridicule black Americans’ intelligence. This 1898 children’s book, that was supposed to facilitate learning, used pictures and broken language in order to portray the image of blacks in a mocking manner. The author, E. W. Kemble, created the book *A Coon Alphabet* in order to depict black Americans the way that he and other whites saw them. One of the lines in the book states, “A is fo Amos, what rides an ole mule, so he can be early, each monin ter school.”²⁵ This quote is the shining example of stereotypical dialect being used to represent blacks. Yet this is something that was popular in many children’s books such as *The Story of Little Black Sambo* which is a children’s book that was published by Helen Mannerman, a white woman, in 1900.

²⁵ Edward W. Kemble. “A Coon Alphabet,” (New York/London: R.H. Russel, 1898), <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00085041/00001/1j?search=coon+%3dalphabet>.

The main character, Sambo, was portrayed to be a dark-skinned Indian; however when the book gained popularity in America, the character and the story was altered to fit whites depictions of blacks. "Sambo" became the ideal image and name for many young African Americans, serving as one of the many terms used to ridicule and insult them and their character, just like the term "tar-baby" from the book *Uncle Remus*. The main character, Sambo, along with his family had animalistics or protruding characteristics that later served as an ideal image of blacks for whites to use against blacks when the book became accessible in America. The mother of Little Black Sambo depicted the image of a black woman that was present in many children's books during the time: a cooking mammy who was overweight and possessed exaggerated features. The popularity of the book led to white children calling any one with African features a "sambo" throughout the 1920's-1950's.²⁶ Later on, these same black people who read *The Story of Little Black Sambo* recounts being laughed at and pointed at by white children when in social settings.²⁷ The idea of sambo became all blacks identity which explains the point Rogers and Christian made in their article about blacks being forced into an identity.

In 1910 the children's book *Pickaninnies: Little Redskins* possessed Black Americans that were drawn as stereotypical minstrel caricatures in this book as well. For example, the "mammy" character which is usually an overweight black woman was present in the book along with other popular stereotypes about blacks such as the one where black are watermelon-loving folks. Popular children's books of today once were racially biased including the book *Mary Poppins* which was published in 1934 and *The Story of Dr. Dolittle* which appeared in 1948. The original story of *Mary Poppins* features scarcely dressed black caricatures that spoke in

²⁶ Wande Knox Goncalves, "Little Black Sambo and the Legacy of Image in African American Literature for Children." (July 21, 1994): 3.

²⁷ Goncalves, 4.

broken dialect and ate watermelon.²⁸ The Story of Dr. Dolittle used characters that represented blacks in a negative and over exaggerated manner.

The postbellum era was filled with many disappointments for African Americans. They overcame many challenges, and yet they seemed to always be stuck in the same place they were before. The children's books during this time worked against them and because of this they had trouble with creating their own identity beyond slavery. However, a new area was approaching that would change the way blacks identified themselves and how they formed relationships with whites. Of course, children's books will be a key component during this time period.

FIGHTING FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

As we move along in the next chapter of this story, we examine one of the biggest movements in American history: The Civil Rights Movement. The era of the Civil Rights Movement is still to this day an important moment in American history, but what is surprising about this era is how children's books were at the center of this conflict. Children's books created the status quo for many whites and when blacks began to rise above white society's expectations, this new reality messed up the perfect fairytale that they lived in for so long. No longer did African Americans wish to live in the shadows of their white counterparts so they created a path of their own, and, in turn, they received backlash from whites. They were able to do this by winning legal battles in the Supreme Court including one of the most famous United States cases known as *Brown v. Board of Education* which occurred in 1954. This case declared that the segregation of schools and public areas was illegal. This case offered hope to African Americans who wished to get to better times and to get the civil rights that were not completely

²⁸ Hani Morgan. "Over One Hundred Year of Misrepresentation: American Minority Groups in Children's Books," *American Educational History Journal*, 38, no. 2, (2011): 361-362.

granted to them during times of Reconstruction. However, as African Americans began to move up the social ladder, whites became outraged and projected their anger at many sources including African Americans. However, blacks were not the only ones that were targeted, it was also children's books. As children's books began to show more inclusiveness, whites became agitated and this resulted in the condemnation of certain children's books and the publication of children's books that they deemed fit for children. Again, you would wonder why children's books were such a huge deal to adult white supremacists? This section should give some insight as to why this was indeed an important turning point in the relationships between blacks and whites.

Civil Rights Movement

The period of the Civil Rights Movement was a huge turning point in the progression of white and black relationships. Black Americans took a stand against white supremacists who did not value their rights. These white supremacists in turn chose to intimidate blacks. Books became an unexpected ally on both sides. This is definitely shown in the 1959 incident in Alabama in which the Alabama legislature allowed the burning and condemning of the children's book *The Rabbit's Wedding*. This book, published in 1958, was created by Garth Williams and it involves a white rabbit marrying a black rabbit which was considered the most horrendous image to white adults. When the book received backlash by white supremacists and legislatures in 1959, Garth Williams made a statement to the AP and the Times of India News Service saying, "I was completely unaware that animals with white fur, such as white polar bears and white dogs and white rabbits, were considered blood relations of white beings."²⁹ Another person who was completely shocked by the news of the banned children's book was an Alabama librarian by the name of Elizabeth W. Reed. Reed was the librarian that went toe-to-toe with 1959 Alabama

²⁹ Garth Williams, "Alabama Stirs Over Children's Book: White Rabbit Marrying Black Rabbit," (AP and the Times of India News Service, May 22, 1959).

Senator Eddie Eddins in order to keep the book, *The Rabbit's Wedding*, in her library. Even when she faced backlash and manipulation from those of the white legislation, she did not back down. She eventually was able to keep this book in the library.

This example in this moment of history does show the relationship that whites had with children's books. Like Williams explained, whites seemed to have some kind of connection to the white animals displayed in children's books including the book, *The Rabbit's Wedding*. The white rabbit in this story clearly represented white Americans and it made them upset when the white rabbit was presented with a black rabbit, which represented black Americans. The illustrations that Garth Williams put in this book was the complete opposite of white's reality or usual reality. By placing the rabbits in a bondage together, it made the two seem as if they were equal which was a huge blow in white American's egos.

The Civil Rights Movement was a very powerful period in African Americans lives and it included many monumental moments some of them being the establishment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed segregation in public areas and forbade ethnic, religious, and racial discrimination, and the Voting Rights Act in 1965.³⁰ The movement involved African Americans from all different backgrounds, including students and activists. Along with their faith and belief in Christianity,³¹ they took the country by storm with their peaceful protests, sit-in, marches, and other forms of peaceful retaliation. This movement even involved white Americans who supported their black peers and hoped for a more inclusive world. Though children's books during this period still held racially biased beliefs and displayed stereotypes against blacks, this time period began to show more progression towards children's books that were free from hate. This allowed for harmonious black and white relationships to blossom as a result.

³⁰ "The Sixties," in *The American Yawp: A Massively Collaborative Open U.S. History Book*, (Stanford University Press), <https://www.americanyawp.com/>.

³¹ "The Sixties"

The End?: CONTEMPORARY

The story about children's books' role in our society, to this day, has not been laid to rest. The use of children's books in modern society takes on more nuanced forms. Some children's books omit the use of stereotypes that demean the black race; however, in the same token, they have also omitted the presence of black characters altogether. There are also books that do include black characters, but are not successful in removing stereotypes. There are authors and writers who are working to create children's books that are more inclusive for any child to read. The rise in African American authors gives hope for a better future of the idea of children's books, but we must not deny that some time after The Civil Rights Movement died down, creating new children's books did have some failures, and this, in turn, impacted race relations. Around the 1970's, the publication of children's books showed a huge shift in thinking about social relationships and race. For the most part, it offered an inclusive environment for children and young adults of all races.

For example, the book, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, published by Mildred D. Taylor in 1976 gives some insight into racism during the early twentieth century and tells the story of black experiences through the lense of blacks themselves. Mildred Taylor, a famed black author, wrote this book in order to give a better perspective on black Americans' experience in American society during the time of the Great Depression and onward. Although progress was being made in improving the message in these books, there still were minor hiccups in the process in which authors used African American stereotypes in children's books. One of these books is a 1975

published children's book, *Philip Hall Like Me, I Reckon Maybe*, which involved a black character who spoke with a broken dialect.³²

As time went on, children's books were published that had important messages that any child of any race could relate to. One of which is the book, *The Rainbow Fish*, which was written and illustrated by author Marcus Pfister in 1992. The book offered inclusive life lessons that all children could benefit from and use to mold the values and beliefs that would make up their identity.

Some of the more modern books today embrace the idea of inclusivity and positive representation. This includes books like *All are Welcome* which was published on July 10, 2018, and the more popular book that was recently made by Matthew A. Cherry, *Hair Love* in 2019. This children's book features a young black girl who gets help from her father with doing her hair and it promotes black positivity during a time in which African Americans still face social injustice. Also, the book represents the progression in the image of black characters in children's books since before the Civil War. We are now at the point that books are starting to put black people in a more positive light which in turn leaves room to form an identity that they could be proud of rather than an identity that degrades them.

To conclude, the effects of children's books on American society are greater than we think. Although they are mostly used during an early phase in our lives, they teach us morals, values, and beliefs that mold our identity. The books that are presented in this paper proves that children's books were heavily relied on to help maintain the status quo of race relations. Whites dependence on children's books is something that is most of the time not mentioned, but is always existent. We look to these books to help us understand the world around us. They provide

³² Morgan, Hani. "Over One Hundred Year of Misrepresentation: American Minority Groups in Children's Books," *American Educational History Journal*, 38, no. 2, (2011): 368.

a guide for how race relations developed throughout American history for decades. I encourage more historians to look at children's books when researching the development of race relations. Although new authors, writers, and illustrators are finding new innovative ways to move away from the kind of childrens' books that were present in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is still much work to do in getting rid of stereotypical ideas. All in all, the moral of the stories that we have learned from children's books during our childhood translates more than to just ourselves, but also to the world we live in.