

African American Short Stories: Author Studies for Elementary Level Students

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Abstract

Overview

Rationale

Author Profiles

Author Questions

Book Synopses and Questions

Lessons

Appendix

Bibliography

Abstract

Most of the literature read by students in today's school systems are severely lacking in cultural perspectives. This curriculum unit will answer the need to diversify the ethnicity of literature that students read. It will offer lessons in author studies for students in grades two to four. Students will be engaged in author studies of three prominent African American authors: Faith Ringgold, Jacqueline Woodson and Julius Lester. They will read three books from each author, research relevant information about the authors and background issues, write and present reports, and create their own stories in the style of their favorite author. Throughout teaching this unit, students will be able interpret the main idea and purpose of each story, the sequence of events, the characters, and the historical influences of each story.

Overview

This curriculum will offer lessons in author studies for students in grades two to four. Students will be engaged in author studies of three prominent African American authors: Faith Ringgold, Jacqueline Woodson and Julius Lester. They will read three books from each author, research relevant information about the authors and background issues, write and present reports and create their own stories in the style of their favorite author.

This curriculum will answer the need to diversify the ethnicity of literature that students read. Current reading programs and basal readers for early readers do not include diversity of authors and illustrators. Author information and pictures are always included with the reading selections. The reading program that was used at my school last

year for second grade only included one Native American author at the end of the program. Students are continuously given the message that authors and illustrators are white only. African American, as well as other racial and ethnic authors and illustrators are included only at the discretion of the teacher and usually as a read aloud, not as reading material.

In this curriculum, students will use the books of these authors as reading material. They will use these books as sources of information, since the authors are teaching history as they attempt to entertain. Students will also use these books as a way to learn to read. They will be reading to learn as they learn to read. These books will be an inducement to investigate different periods of history, specific events and culture. As they research, they will apply factual information to understand the stories and their importance as tools for teaching history. They will share their written reports on background information as well the books themselves to stimulate interest in fellow students to not just read these authors, but to explore more authors. They will be encouraged to understand the author's style and his or her purpose in writing their specific book. This will create a longing for students to pursue writing as a recreation and potential career.

The three authors selected have been writing children's literature for decades. Julius Lester and Faith Ringgold have been writing stories for children for about thirty years and Jacqueline Woodson, for about twenty years. Most African American authors seem to feel an obligation to write historically, and these three have gained their expertise in history. None of the stories are set in modern times. Even though most are fiction and two have autobiographical elements, these stories point to different eras in African American history, and not necessarily the most obvious ones. These authors are true historians and students will enjoy the sometimes humorous, dreamlike, surreal and realistic ways that they are drawn into these stories.

Rationale

Classical stories have many subliminal messages of racism and colonialism that, with no counter perspectives, give early and lasting messages. An example would be the story "Goldilocks". In this story, a golden haired girl (prior to hair dyes and weaves) crosses to the other side of the woods and finds a house belonging to personified bears, dark human-like creatures. Goldilocks feels entitled to enter their home, break their furniture, eat their food and fall asleep. When they return, she runs from the bear "villains", to live happily ever after. In her parody of this story, "The Golden Bandit", writer Tony Cade Bambara concludes that the bears' case will be up for appeal soon. Every time this classical story is told, children are repeatedly given the message that lighter golden haired people are more entitled and are justified in taking from darker people. The fact that these people are personified animals, questions whether the darker ones are actually human and entitled to the same rights as Caucasian humans.

Last year, my second grade students were required to read from a series called Junior Great Books, which features little known stories from great authors such as

Beatrix Potter. Stories coming from Caribbean or African cultures in this book were folktales, having no identified author. This is a subliminal message, which gives a racial identity to writers. White writers are identified. Non-white stories are not written, only rewritten by white writers. People of color do not seem to write.

For me, some of the most striking detrimental examples of subliminal negative racial messages came from a story called “The Happy Lion” by Louise Fatio. In this story, a personified lion, a former resident of Africa, is very happy to live as a caged animal in the “lovely French town, rather than “hot and dangerous Africa”. Everyone loved the lion as long as he was caged. One day the cage door is left open. The happy lion decides to tour the lovely town. All of the French people who loved him in a cage become frightened. When the lion realizes the fright he is causing, he is no longer happy until he is back in a locked cage. The lion is happy again.

“The Happy Lion” and “Goldilocks” were both written and created at a time when western countries were colonizing and enslaving people of color. There was a need to justify the subjugation that was being committed. The messages live on, however. When I protested my students reading “The Happy Lion”, I was told the students would be too young to understand or analyze as I did. That is my problem. The cultural perspectives and justifications are being given subliminally to children who are too young to analyze or critique. They can only accept these messages and hopefully, one day, question and protest them.

Most of the literature read by students in today’s school systems are severely lacking in other cultural perspectives. Perhaps subliminal messages are impossible to eliminate in anyone’s writing, but there must be other perspectives from other cultures and races. As William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist who wrote the introduction of Frederick Douglas: Narrative of a Slave, has said, the story of the hunt is very different when the lion is telling the story.

This curriculum unit will satisfy all the Common Core Standards of Pennsylvania for English/Language Arts in the following ways:

1. Foundation skills- Students will use reading strategies for phonics and fluency to read the stories themselves, rather than being read to by the teacher.
2. Reading informational text- Students will research and gather informational text to build background understanding for the selected stories. They will assemble key ideas and details, integrate knowledge and ideas, acquire and use vocabulary from a wide range of sources.
3. Reading literature- By reading the selected stories from seasoned, award winning authors, students will develop comprehension skills to understand key ideas and details, integrate knowledge and ideas (most of the stories are historical fiction), acquire and use vocabulary and be exposed to a wide range of reading material. The authors are members of plethora of writers who create great literature but are not invited to become incorporated into reading programs. They therefore write for reading aloud by adults or proficient early readers. There are varying degrees of vocabulary difficulty and complexity of ideas.

4. Writing- Students will utilize several types of writing. Because they will be conducting research of factual information, they will do explanatory writing. They will be responding to literature, and expressing opinions and arguments. They will also be writing their narratives in the style of one of the authors.
5. Speaking and listening- Students will be working mostly in small groups to discuss and collaborate and make presentations of knowledge and ideas.

Author Profile

FAITH RINGGOLD

Faith Ringgold was born in area known as Harlem in the city of New York in 1930 (Wikipedia.com). She was 81 years young at the time of this writing. She currently resides in Englewood, New Jersey and is professor emeritus at the University of California, San Diego. Professor Ringgold is known as an artist of many different mediums. Her paintings, mosaics and story quilts are displayed in museums and galleries throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, South America, the Middle East and Africa. Two 25-foot mosaic murals are installed in the 125th street subway stop in Harlem of New York City. She has received 75 awards and 22 honorary Doctor of Fine Arts Degrees both nationally and internationally for her paintings, quilt work, mosaics and literature (faithringgold.com).

In this curriculum the focus of Professor Ringgold's accomplishments will be her literature and the artwork that she uses to engage the reader and listener into her stories. The artwork in this curriculum will be the story illustrations. The main concentration of Professor Ringgold's literature is storytelling to children. That is, Faith Ringgold writes and publishes almost exclusively for children (faithringgold.com). As we will see, Professor Ringgold chooses to not only entertain but like the other authors in this curriculum unit, she teaches African American history. In the three stories chosen, Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky, Tar Beach and If A Bus Could Talk, the lessons will explore, the history of slavery, African American migration from the rural South to urbanization in the North and the Civil Rights Movement. Ringgold steadfastly teaches factual history but, with surreal and fantasy elements, no doubt, to make the painful experiences of African American history achievable and even mystical in overcoming.

Professor Ringgold continues to create. As you explore her website, you will notice that she has three works of literature still to come. She remains a historian, artist and writer that will continue to delight and entertain our children as she shares her memoirs with us. Her interactive website includes a thought provoking questionnaire about race, in which she collects our thoughts on racial identity. She also encourages children's ability to create through illustration as she includes a story for children to illustrate.

Faith Ringgold is a profound artist, historian and social commentator and should be shared with our students. This curriculum will awaken these students to her many talents in order to entice young minds to follow in her path.

JULIUS LESTER

If you visit the website of Julius Lester, you will learn that Professor Lester was born in 1939 in St. Louis, Missouri and lived most of his childhood in Kansas City and Nashville. He attended Fisk University. As a young adult he moved to New York City and lived there from 1961 to 1971 (members.authorsguild.net/juliuslester). According to Wikipedia.com, his life in New York drew him into political and social causes of the time. He was a radio and television talk show host. He taught African American history at the New School for Social Research. He became fully involved in the Civil Rights Movement, as an active member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and travelled to North Vietnam to film and protest American bombing of the country. He also travelled to Cuba with SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael to meet and travel with Fidel Castro.

Professor Lester eventually went on to Teach at University of Massachusetts at Amherst and became the writer of over 43 books for children, adolescents and adults. One of his early books, To Be a Slave, written in 1968, received the Newberry Honor Award. Professor Lester went on to receive over a dozen prestigious American awards for his writing and faculty scholarship. Julius Lester's career as a professor of college spanned many disciplines, from literature to history to cultural studies. In the reading for this curriculum, we will experience Professor Lester as a historian and a cultural preservationist as he modernizes and retells narratives and folktales of slaves and elders of the African American experience.

We will examine a story from his retellings in The Tales of Uncle Remus: the Adventures of Brer Rabbit and an epic African American history legend, The Old African and an original work, What a Truly Cool World, a creation story. As mentioned earlier, Lester has been a writer for all ages and his literature as been strongly impacted by social and historical causes. His early adult social and political views could have been considered radical, as in his book, Look Out Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama (out of print). However, these selections are meant to educate and entertain the young reader on history and cultural awareness. As we will see in the retelling of the Brer Rabbit story, Lester does not mask the pain or cruelty of the time, because that would mask or weaken the historical perspective. (Lester, 1999) In fact, in The Old African, the reader is exposed to very cruel details of the slavery experience, but a legend is retold from the perspective of the victims who are triumphant in the end.

Julius Lester's last book, Hungry Ghosts, was written in 2009. He considers himself retired from teaching at the University and lives a quiet life on twelve acres in

western Massachusetts. On his website, he states quite clearly that he no longer makes personal appearances. He does not let us know if he continues to write, but his creativity does appear to have weaned. He is inspired by history and his history will inspire our students.

JACQUELINE WOODSON

Jacqueline Woodson was born in 1963 in Columbus, Ohio but grew up moving back and forth between South Carolina and Brooklyn, NY. She received her B.A. in English from Adelphi University and studied creative writing at New School for Social Research. Woodson would later become a writing professor at Goddard College, Eugene Lang College and Vermont College (Wikipedia.com).

On her website, Professor Woodson describes herself as someone who wrote constantly and on everything. She even resorted to graffiti on a public building. She credits her writing talent to not just writing “Once upon a time...” stories, which can be assumed to be fantasies, but to being able to “lie” well. She says, “I loved lying and getting away with it.” “I was well on my way to understanding that a lie on a page was a whole different animal—one that won you prizes and got surly teachers to smile. A lie on a page meant lots of independent time to create your stories and the freedom to sit hunched over pages of your notebook without people thinking you are strange” (jacquelinewoodson.com/bio). This is truly an inspiring thought for our students.

Although Woodson, like Toni Cade Bambara (“But mostly I lie a lot”) is proud of her ability to lie and stimulate fascination in people, she writes as a historian. She writes for children and young adults and does not fantasize. Her stories are brutally honest of life circumstances, such as racism, incarceration, murder, isolation; but all with hopeful outcomes. She rejects the notion that the African American living situation is without hope (Wikipedia.com). Professor Woodson is an open lesbian and has written a book, The House You Pass on the Way, to help young people who are struggling with sexual identity issues. While she may not have experienced all of the traumas she writes about, there is a lot of autobiographical truth as well as a heart felt understanding of many of the struggles of African American youth.

The three books recommended for this curriculum are Coming on Home Soon, The Other Side and Show Way. All are designed to teach a common history in the African American experience. One deals with African American immigration out of the rural South, and the isolation that accompanies it; another deals with the segregation and racism and the third follows a family lineage through its female ancestors. Each story gives such a personal account of the experience; one cannot help but believe that Professor Woodson was not personally involved. She is such a good liar.

Jacqueline Woodson has been the recipient of the Newberry Honor and Coretta Scott King Honor awards among many other nationally recognized awards. Show Way received the 2009 Newbery Honor Award (Wikipedia.com). She continues to be one of

our most prolific writers of books to young people. There is so much more that our children can expect from her.

Books Synopses

Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky, by Faith Ringgold

In this short story, two African American children, Cassie and her brother BeBe are flying around when they come upon Harriet Tubman in a train in the sky. The train is traveling North to freedom or the travelers will die. BeBe immediately hops aboard the train. The train leaves Cassie behind with "Aunt Harriet". Aunt Harriet assures Cassie that she can take the next train and she will meet with BeBe soon. Harriet Tubman then proceeds to take Cassie through the actual experience of slavery, from being sold at the auction block, through the underground escape from one safe house to the other. At Niagara Falls, the US-Canada border, Cassie meets up with BeBe, who has now rescued a baby slave whose mother has gone to Heaven. Cassie, BeBe and Baby Freedom fly over Niagara Falls into Canada, where they are now safe from slavery.

The author has generously supplied background information on Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, as well as other resources of information. Background knowledge prior to reading this story is strongly suggested. Early readers are traditionally taught to identify separate genres, e.g. fiction vs. nonfiction, reality vs. fantasy and have probably not been introduced to mixtures such as this. Without the background knowledge, an early reader would probably have a difficult time understanding the truth about the Underground Railroad experience or the author's message that a guardian angel, embodied as "Aunt Harriet" would deliver slaves from danger.

This is a surreal story that utilizes Faith Ringgold's talents as a writer, painter, quilt maker and historian. The reader should also be given prior knowledge of the author's talents and exposure to her artwork. This will assist the early reader in understanding why the author approaches her story in this way and how to interpret the author's main idea.

Possible Questions:

1. What is the main idea of this story?
2. What are the sequence of events (perhaps completing a story map)
3. How many genres do you count in this story? Why do you think the author mixed genres? How does this make you feel?
4. Which events in the story do you find to be truth? Which do you find to be fantasy?
5. What is the purpose of this author? To entertain, inform or persuade? Why?
6. What is your opinion of Faith Ringgold as an author of this story? Why?

Tar Beach by Faith Ringgold

In *Tar Beach*, children who obviously have a concept of a beach and wide-open spaces have adjusted their perspectives to living in an urban setting such as Harlem, New York. They anticipate a beach picnic in the evening on top of a roof of their apartment building. Neighbors come together, adults, bringing food and beverages and have a picnic/party on the “tar beach”. Cassie and her brother BeBe settle down on a blanket on the beach. As they do, Cassie starts to float to the stars and eventually to fly. She takes BeBe with her. They fly over places that are now familiar to them. Cassie can wear the George Washington Bridge as a necklace, she gives her father the union building that refused his race, and she conquers the ice cream factory.

The post slavery African American migration from the rural South to the urbanized North is background to this story and information that must be first investigated. Students should weigh upon the notion that children were displaced to very different environments. In most cases the displacement does not make adults any wealthier than they thought they would be. They trade a tar roof for a beach and unions are blocking their labor efforts. Ringgold’s illustrations are crowded, giving the feeling of confinement. The main character, Cassie’s imagination leads her to flying.

Once again there is a mixture of genres. Faith Ringgold, on one hand is giving the reader a history lesson on the migration North and blocks that resettle most African Americans into a different type of poverty. Our main character is not traumatized or saddened by her displacement or confinement. She has learned to fly and take what she cannot normally have. Ringgold has created a quilt of the front cover, which students should research. But her use of the quilt symbolizes escape, as the quilt was one of maps of escape during slavery.

Possible Questions:

1. What is the main idea of the story?
2. What are the sequence of events (perhaps completing a story map)
3. How many genres are in this story? Why do you think the author mixed genres? How does it make you feel?
4. What about this story do you think could be true? What is fantasy?
5. If you could fly, where would you go? What would you like to change?
6. What is your opinion of Faith Ringgold as the author of this story? Why?

If a Bus Could Talk by Faith Ringgold

In the book, If a Bus Could Talk, a little girl named Marcie boards a mysterious bus that does in fact talk. The bus tells Marcie that she is riding on the bus that, in 1955, carried Rosa Parks into history. This was the very same bus that civil rights worker, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, which was across the aisle from where a white man was sitting and was subsequently arrested. The bus tells how Mrs. Parks faced racial discrimination all of her life, which as a child, prohibited her from being able to ride a bus to school at all. The bus suggests that Mrs. Parks fully intended to start a movement by her refusal. As Marcie rides, the bus congers up significant people who played major role in the Civil Rights Movement that began in 1955. They all board the bus and Marcie gives up her seat to Rosa Parks. Marcie leaves the bus declaring that her friends at school will never believe who or what she saw.

As with her other stories, this book is again a blend of fantasy and fact. The bus is personified to give information to Marcie. The information that is given is well researched. Rosa Parks was not asked to give up her seat to a white man. She was asked not to sit across the aisle from him. The bus gives us the name of the bus driver. Rosa Parks is presented as someone who has struggled with and against racial discrimination all of her life. She was not merely tired. She does not move from the seat because she wanted to resist injustice. Notable people, including Reverend King, who would align themselves with Rosa Park's civil disobedience, board the bus as well. For Marcie, the entire ride becomes a dreamlike experience. She knows her friends will not believe her and she is not certain she believes the experience herself.

Even though the history lesson is obvious in this story, background information is still necessary. Students should have a clear understanding of who the significant people are who enter the bus and the role that they played in that Civil Rights Movement. Students should understand that the African American Civil Rights Movement started when African slaves were brought to the Americas and continues through present times. The phase of the Civil Rights Movement that started in 1955 with the arrest of Rosa Parks was a collaboration of many people, far more extensive than those who entered the bus.

Possible Questions:

1. What is the main idea of this story?
2. What is the sequence of events? (Perhaps completing a story map)
3. Why would the author choose a bus to tell this story?
4. What parts of the story are true? What parts are fantasy?
5. If you met Rosa Parks or someone important in history what would you ask them?
6. What is your opinion of Faith Ringgold as an author of this story? Why?

Coming Home Soon by Jacqueline Woodson

Narrated in the first person, a little girl, probably about eight years old, must cope with the absence of her mother. The story takes place during World War II. The narrator's mother has been given the opportunity of a non-traditional job (i.e. a job normally done by men) on the railroad. The job will take the mother to Chicago, as the narrator stays behind in a rural area with her grandmother. The child finds a kitten that her grandmother, reluctantly, allows her to keep. Food is scarce and the environment is snowy. The narrator and her grandmother anxiously await a letter and money from the mother, which finally comes. The mother returns at the end of the story.

Jacqueline Woodson is teamed with E.B. Lewis, an illustrator and professor of the arts at the Philadelphia University of the Arts. This book received the Caldecort Honor Award for its illustrations, which are warm, loving and nostalgic. Very often, authors' words are voided of descriptive language because the publisher chooses to leave most descriptions to the illustrator. In the illustrations, we see the loneliness of the child and the worry of the grandmother. The snowy scenes give us the feelings of isolation of the characters left behind.

The circumstances of the story, a mother leaving to work on the railroad in the North during World War II, represent monumental transitions in the African American family. The extended family of the rural South will become fragmented as the great migration to the North accelerates. Students should research the patterns of post slavery African American migration.

This story covers an awkward time period, unrecognized for its relevance in African American history. The New Negro Renaissance (Harlem Renaissance) had waned. The Great Depression was over, job opportunities for women exploded and the extended family started to break down. African American men increased their role in the military as the country went to war. Single mother households increased. African Americans accelerated their migration to the urban North. Prior to reading, students should investigate this migration of African American from the rural South to the urban North. They should compare and contrast the change in lifestyles.

Possible Questions:

1. What is the main idea of this story?
2. What are the sequence of events? (Perhaps completing a story map)
3. Describe how the main character feels about her mother's new job. How can you tell her feelings from the author's words or illustrations?
4. Do you think the mother has come home to stay? Why or why not?
5. How do you think the main character's life will eventually change?
6. What is your opinion of the author of this story? Why?

The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson

This is a story about “that summer”. “That summer” was a summer of intense feelings as race relations were about to change forever. This is the summer leading to the civil rights movement, in perhaps the late 1950’s to early 1960’s. Written in the first person of a young African American girl named Clover, our main character notices a lonely Caucasian girl, named Annie, about her age, in the home next to hers. Typical of the rural South, African Americans and Caucasians often lived next to each other and the children often played together. However, this summer was filled with tension. Clover had been warned by her mother not to venture to the “other side” of the fence. When Annie asks to play with Clover and her friends, Clover’s friend Sandra immediately says “No”. One day after the rain, Clover and Annie meet and establish a friendship. Clover invites Annie into her circle of friends. The children recognize that the fence that divides them to two sides will one day come down.

The author is teamed with an award winning illustrator, E.B. Lewis. He is a professor of art at the Philadelphia University of the Arts. Professor Lewis’ watercolor paintings are emotional and assist the author in describing the loneliness of a child isolated by tension. The paintings aid in depicting Clover’s curiosity and the common ground the children achieve when they become friends.

Jacqueline Woodson has chosen a difficult time in African American history: the eve of tremendous change, the Civil Rights Movement. African American children are warned not to cross to the “other side” because it is “not safe.” We see Clover and eventually her friends take a risk. Clover is able to convince her friends against discriminating against Annie. The story concludes with the feeling of hope. In the “old” rural South, children befriend each other, but will eventually separate because of, not just social stigma, but segregation laws. The hope of these children is for the fence and the separation to the “other side” to end for good.

Woodson’s history lesson is to have children to imagine being forbidden to form relationships because of race. Research by students into the Civil Rights Movement is essential to understanding this story. Students should also research and understand the social and legal segregation (Jim Crow Laws) that took place prior to the Movement. They should understand why breaking these laws were not “safe”. They should have an appreciation of Clover’s bravery in defying the warnings and apprehensions of her mother and friends, by befriendng Annie.

Possible Questions:

1. What is the main idea of this story?
2. What is the sequence of events? (Perhaps completing a story map)
3. Why do you think Clover’s mother warned her about going to the “other side” of the fence?
4. Why do you think that Sandra did not want Annie to join them?

5. What would you have done if you were Clover? Why?
6. What is your opinion of the author of this story?

Show Way by Jacqueline Woodson

The title, Show Way, is a term for one of the functions of quilts during slavery. Escaped slaves used quilts to show them the way to escape to the North or slavery free areas. In this story, Show Way represents the history of quilts in Woodson's family and the female ancestry they represent. Woodson traces her female family tree back to an ancestor who was enslaved. The history proceeds to track the lineage to Woodson's own daughter and the quilt that she has created to symbolize this lineage.

Show Way is a very simple story. The author very generously uses her family as she nostalgically remembers her female ancestor who "Love that baby up." She uses short stories for each ancestor to explain her importance to the family. It teaches students about tracing family trees and histories, but, not through the last name, which is usually male oriented. This is through collecting family stories through older family members, in this case the females. The author shows how each descendent is strengthened through love. The mother would always "love that baby up".

The research project that would best benefit students as background for this story would most certainly be to research their own family histories and trace the lineage of their own ancestors. It has been my experience that most families become very excited about this and are very forthcoming. Many have gone on to further explore their family histories. The problem has always been with that one child (and there is at least one per classroom) who is disconnected from his/her birth family. In most cases, foster or adoptive families have been very generous in using their family lineage. However, there are some who don't. Children who are disconnected from their birth families are often even more saddened at the reminder that they must use a family to which they are not biologically related.

Researching personal family histories can result in many frustrating blocks, which open wounds and skeletons. With most African American families, tracing families beyond the last person enslaved is almost impossible. We will notice with Show Way, Jacqueline Woodson, herself, starts with the last person enslaved. There are very few Roots stories in which Alex Haley is able to trace his family lineage to a young man and village in Africa. Stories of slaves are rich in inheritance information, but much has been lost, in that slavery legally ended in 1865, and there are no longer any survivors. Legal documents and records of slave births, deaths and lives usually did not exist, which made it almost impossible for even slaves themselves to know what happened to their relatives.

Alternatives to personal family research could be in the many documentaries and histories of African American families from slavery to the present. In focusing significant time periods in African American history (e.g. slavery, the New Negro Renaissance, the post slavery migration from South to North, the Civil Rights

Movement), students can research narratives of individuals with these experiences. Paula Young Shelton, daughter of the high profile civil rights advocate, Andrew Young has written a book for children called Child of the Civil Rights Movement. This is an example of a narrative that involves a relationship that is impactful on family as well as African American history. The documentary Unchained Memories: Slave Narratives is a series of personal stories collected in the 1930's of survivors of slavery. These examples and others will provide students with family stories to understand how family histories are passed down. Students can also project themselves as descendants by imagining if a famous African American were an ancestor. For example, "George Washington Carver Could Have Been My Ancestor" with a persuasive explanation why could be a writing project. They can research and explain why this person would be an ancestor because of shared interests.

Possible Questions:

1. What is the main idea of this story?
2. What is the sequence of events? (perhaps creating a story map)
3. What is the genre of this story? Why?
4. What have you learned about the author by reading this story?
5. Why do you think the author wrote this story?
6. What is your opinion of the author of this book? Why?

"Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby" from Tales of Uncle Remus, The Adventures of Brer Rabbit as told by Julius Lester

Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby is probably the most well known of the Tales from Uncle Remus, which is why it was selected, but there are many from which to choose. Many years ago, this particular story was featured in the Walt Disney movie, "The Song of the South". Brer (brother) Rabbit is a trickster. However, in the beginning of this story, Brer Fox, who made a baby out of tar, tricked him. Brer Rabbit touches the tar baby and becomes stuck. The more he tries to pull away, the more stuck he becomes. Brer Fox captures Brer Rabbit and takes him home to kill and cook him. Brer Fox tells Brer Rabbit of the many ways he can kill him. Regardless of how many ways Brer Fox can describe a way to kill Brer Rabbit, Brer Rabbit tells him this is fortunate because it is better than being thrown in the "briar patch". Finally Brer Fox decides that the worse way he can kill Brer Rabbit is to throw him into the briar patch. Brer Fox does this. Brer Rabbit hops out the briar patch and announces to Brer Fox that he was "born and bred" in the briar patch.

The original Tales of Uncle Remus is a large collection of slave narratives told to a journalist named Joel Chandler Harris. Harris wrote 263 tales, from 1896 to 1918 (Lester, 1986). As much as possible, Harris retells the slave narrative verbatim, and used the southern slave dialect. The tales, written in dialect, are almost unreadable to modern

English speakers and freely uses the word “nigger”. Julius Lester considers his retelling of these narratives, a way of preserving the stories and the rich cultural heritage. He writes in what he calls a “modern Southern dialect.”

Many folktales have been changed over the years to become less violent or cruel. In “The Three Little Pigs”, the Big Bad Wolf does not always eat the first two pigs; instead, they run to the home of the third. The Big Bad Wolf does not perish in the fireplace of the third pig’s house. He escapes. Lester does not change the plot of the stories, even though most modern readers would consider many of them cruel, as when Brer Fox congers up the many ways to kill the hero, Brer Rabbit. Lester believes that changing the plot to become less violent would weaken the stories culturally (Lester, 1986). These are slave narratives from a brutal time in American history. Lester points out that the folktales that were created at that time were not meant for children, but were told adult to adult. Children could only hear if they were silent (Lester, 1986). African tales and African American slave narratives are full of tricksters who overcome the cruelty and violence, sometimes turning the table with the violence. The tricksters were usually animals, probably so that the master would not recognize the storyteller as a trickster, or himself as a perpetrator or recipient of tricks.

The character of Uncle Remus is used as the narrator of these stories and is telling them to a Caucasian boy. Uncle Remus is not injected into any of the stories, he only speaks in dialect. The movie, Song of the South makes Uncle Remus a full-blown character who has two Caucasian children that he is entertaining with his stories. The main character of the Harris/Lester stories remains that tricky rabbit, Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit was probably influential in creating the later tricky rabbit, Bugs Bunny.

Student research should include an exploration of slave narratives, perhaps from the documentary Unchained Memories: Slave Narratives and a search of other slave folktales, such as The People Could Fly Anthology and the African “Anansi” tales. Students might be encouraged to read some of the stories written by Joel Chandler Harris and make a comparison with the retold stories of Lester. Students can speculate why the tales were told and search for hidden messages and symbolism.

Possible Questions:

1. What is the main idea of this story?
2. What is the sequence of events? (perhaps do a story map)
3. Why do you think the author chooses to retell stories that were written by someone else? What is his purpose in writing, i.e. to inform, persuade or entertain?
4. Do the characters remind you of anyone? How?
5. Why do you think the characters are all animals?
6. What is our opinion of this author as a writer of this story? Why?

The Old African by Julius Lester

The Sea Islands (aka Gullah Islands) off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia have a legend going back to the slave trade. The legend is that a slave ship unloaded its cargo, African humans onto the coast of an island. The cargo slaves were all bound and chained together. They chose not to stay in captivity in the Americas. They all turned and walked back into the water until they could no longer be seen. The slaves on the island believe that the bound escaped slaves walked back, underwater, to Africa. Julius Lester retells this legend, but he extends it both at the beginning and end. The story begins with the capture in Africa and the horrible ride across the Middle Passage. The story ends as the bound Africans free themselves of their chains in the water and walk back on to the shores of Africa.

There are several hundred Sea Islands, stretching from the Carolinas to Florida and many of them have not only told, but, claimed this legend. Legends are usually based in truth at some point. While the inhabitants of the islands want to believe that the captives were successful in walking back to Africa, one cannot help but believe that, in truth, this was a massive suicide. The fact that so many islands claim the legend, one cannot help but believe that revolts in which slaves turned en masse into the water, probably occurred frequently.

According to the Penn School of St. Helena Island, SC, the historical and cultural center of the Gullah Islands, the slave trade from Africa did not end when it was made illegal in the late 1700's. The trade, in fact, went on into the early 1900's, as did slavery because of the isolation of the islands and its inhabitants. Inhabitants remained mostly Africans, who recreated their own unique African culture and language, until the 1950's. The similarity to the African climate and environment made for a blended African culture with inhabitants who were well adapted. The 1950's brought the inventions and increased use of air conditioners and pesticides. Until that time, and the inventions, most Caucasians could not live on the islands, which aided the autonomy of the enslaved Africans, who were not forced to abandon their cultural and religious beliefs. Because of the progress, many of these islands, e.g. Hilton Head or Kiawah, are now resorts.

The legend written and expanded by Lester becomes inclusive of many aspects of African American slavery. Prior to reading, students should research the slave trade from Africa and the Middle Passage. They should also explore the history of the Sea Islands or Gullah Islands. This is a story for mature students. It has many graphic details and harsh depictions. This story is masterfully illustrated by one of the best children's books illustrators, Jerry Pinkney. The story is keenly detailed by both the author's words and the illustrator's paintings.

Possible Questions:

1. What is the main idea of this story?
2. What is the sequence of events (Perhaps do a story map)

3. Which parts of the story do you think were true, which parts were legend?
4. Why would slaves create a legend about a tragic event?
5. How did reading this story make you feel? Did you have more than one emotion?
6. What is your opinion of the author as the writer of this story? Why?

What a Truly Cool World by Julius Lester

This is a truly cool book that is a creation story and the beginning of a great legend. In this story, we visit Heaven and watch God create the world. All of the human-like characters are black. God, his wife and the angels are all black. God creates a world with trees, water, land, humans and animals. The only colors are brown, green and blue. Shaniqua, the Angel in Charge of Everybody's Business, decides that the world is dull and encourages God to add more colors. God creates music and sings so beautifully, that flowers come to the Earth. Shaniqua is now satisfied, but the flowers become lonely. Shaniqua learns to sing like God and little bits of color flutter down to the flowers. The flutterbies become known as butterflies and all is well with the world.

The jacket cover of the book refers to this story as a "hilarious fractured creation story". It is funny and appears light hearted. I have no doubt this book is a welcome change from the serious history lessons of the other books in this author study. However, this book is loaded with controversy. First of all the use of a book that refers to God and Heaven in a non-religious school will probably create a stir and parents should be informed that their children will read a book in which such references are made. Most parents will agree if they have not read the book. The next issue is the references to God. God is spoken to in what could be considered disrespect terms (e.g. What's up Mighty Maker). In this story God is not perfect, and Shaniqua, the Angel in Charge of Everybody's Business, continually shakes his confidence. This may also be an affront to many religious beliefs.

Probably, the biggest controversy of this book will have to do with race. As I was reading this book to a second grade class, one boy couldn't take it any more. He very respectfully raised his hand in the middle of the story and said. "Ms Christmas, everybody knows that God is white." The other children nodded. The illustrator, Joe Cepeda has painted all of the heavenly bodies as black and the language is definitely African American slang dialect. One might say that the author and illustrator rely heavily on African American stereotypes, e.g. Shaniqua is the meddling big-mouthed black woman. I reminded students that they are not offended by paintings of God and religious people/symbols as always being white. The artists who are creating the pictures are using their own personal beliefs. They are not using personal knowledge. Here the author and illustrator are using their beliefs.

Lastly, a major controversy could be that God and the heavenly beings are presented not just as faulty mortals, e.g. God has a wife, but they are presented as

fantasies. Children love a good fantasy and this book will be welcome on that level. However, when heaven turns black, that surely *must* be a comedy and fantasy. The author and illustrator seem to be saying that no one should ever take this seriously.

In the past I have used this book to introduce life science. As research for prior knowledge, students can investigate the importance of butterflies for flower pollination and food production. Creation stories versus science once again bring on another controversy, but there are lessons in the recognition as to why life is created as it is and the importance of how animals and plants work together.

Possible Questions:

1. What is the main idea of this story?
2. What is the sequence of events (perhaps doing a story map)
3. What is the genre of this story? Why do think so?
4. Which character in this story do you think was the most helpful in creating the world? Why?
5. What do you think was the author's purpose in writing this story?
6. What is your opinion of the author as a writer of this story? Why?

Lesson One

Objective: Students will be able to complete a research project of each of the three authors. They will be able to write a report and present information to the entire class.

Materials: basal reader, chart paper, markers, preliminary author questions, biography page of the websites of Faith Ringgold, Jacqueline Woodson and Julius Lester

Step One: Teacher will explain that students will be doing a preliminary author report. Teacher will model doing an author report. Teacher will choose an author from the end of a fiction selection from the basal reader for the class. Teacher will write questions from the preliminary author page on chart paper. Students will read the author biography and assist teacher in answering the questions. After questions have been answered, teacher will write an author synopsis in paragraph form as an author report.

Step Two: Teacher will write the names of the three authors on the board, leaving ample space under each name. Teacher will randomly divide class into three groups with six to nine students per group. Each group will be a book club for each author. Write the name of each student under the name of the author to which they are assigned. Have groups assemble. Hand out preliminary author questions.

Step Three: Students will break into their assigned groups. They will choose a group recorder and reporter. Students will use the biography page from the author's website to answer the questions. Recorder will record answers on chart paper. They will then write report in paragraph form. (optional)

Step Four: Whole class will assemble. Group reporters will report back to class, what they have learned about the authors.

Closure: Each student will find and use one word to describe their author.

Homework: Students will write a paragraph explaining three things they admire about their author.

Lesson Two

Objective: Students will be able to research and report on preliminary information needed to understand the stories they are about to read.

Materials: KWL charts, computers and books, 3X5 cards, chart paper and markers

Step One: Teacher will announce to students that they will be researching various topics that will be relevant to the stories they are reading. Teacher will choose the topic of slave narratives as an example to model to students. Teacher will fill out a KWL chart for slave narratives, with student input. Teacher will show excerpts from Unchained Memories: Slave Narratives video. Teacher will answer the "L" questions on chart paper with information from the video.

Step Two: Teacher will assign each duo or trio the book they will be reading and allow to examine. Teacher will then assign a topic that is relevant to the book they will be reading. The last paragraph in each book synopsis will have suggestions for research topics;

Step Three: Students will work in duos or trios. They will fill out a KWL chart. Students will use computers and books to obtain information regarding the topic they have been assigned. They will place information and sources on 3X5 cards. Teacher may or may not assist with locating research material, depending on the maturity level of the student, but this is an independent process.

Step Four: Using chart paper, students will answer their "L" section. They will report back to their small groups, with the information they obtained.

Closure: Teacher will ask each student to report one new thing they learned during this lesson.

Homework: Students will use 3X5 card to write a paragraph, summarizing what they learned about the topic to which they were assigned.

Lesson Three

Objective: Students will be able to read assigned books, fluently. They will be able to answer questions for comprehension and explain these answers to each other, using examples from the stories.

Materials: Three editions of recommended books from assigned authors, 3X5 cards, chart paper and markers, blank story map forms

Step One: Teacher will announce that students will read the stories they have been assigned. She will write procedure on the board or have it prewritten on chart paper:

1. Preview book
2. Vocabulary
3. Read book in duos or trios
4. Story map
5. Answer questions
6. Group presentation

Step Two: Students will assemble into small groups and then into duos or trios and books are handed out. Students will preview books and do a picture walk. In duos or trios, they will explain to each other what they think will happen in story.

Step Three: Students will skim text for word that are unfamiliar or that they are unable to decode or define. They will write these words on 3X5 cards. Students will place all of the cards in a pile for the whole group. The groups will review vocabulary words. Students who can decode and define words will do so for the rest of the group. Students will search definition and pronunciation of leftover words in the dictionary.

Step Three: Students will divide into duos or trios and read the stories together. They will read aloud to each other, assisting in decoding and fluency. Duos or trios will decide who will do group read aloud.

Step Four: Working in duos and trios, students will fill out story maps (one for each student) and answer questions on chart paper.

Step Four: Each duo or trio will read their book to the small group. They will then present chart paper questions and answers as a report to the rest of group.

Closure: Students will give a one sentence description of the book they read.

Homework: Students will take story maps home and write a summary of the books they read.

Lesson Four

Objective: Students will be able to compare and contrast the stories they read for each story and draw conclusions about the author of these stories. Whole class will compare authors.

Materials: Books, chart paper and markers, post reading author questions

Step One: Students will divide into small groups. Teacher will post instructions on board or chart paper:

1. Make a list of how books are the same
2. Make a list of how books are different
3. Make inferences about author from these lists
4. Answer post reading author questions

If possible, teacher should model compare and contrast lists and how to draw author conclusions from these lists, by using stories from another familiar author.

Step Two: While in small groups, students will make two lists. They will choose a recorder and reporter. One list will have characteristics of how books are the same. The other lists will have characteristics that are different for each book. Students will make a list of conclusions about the author from these lists. Students will answer post reading author questions on chart paper.

Step Three: Whole class will come together. Reporters from each small group will present an author report from author characteristic conclusions and post reading questions.

Closure: Each student will give one word describing his or her author

Homework: Students will write a thank you letter to their authors for the writing the books and include reasons they liked the books. If a student has negative criticism, encourage them to write it out, but let them know that negative criticism will not be sent to the authors.

Lesson Five

Objective: Students will be able to participate in a follow-up of the author studies. They will read and review other books that authors that were of interest to them when they heard the reports.

Materials: Books involved with the author study, letters to authors, chart paper lists from groups

Step One: Teacher will tell students that they will edit and send letters to authors. Teacher will model editing a letter.

Step two: Students will assemble into small groups and exchange letters. They will edit each other's letter. Students will rewrite edited letters. Teacher will arrange for letters to

be sent, after doing a final edit. All authors in this study have addresses included on their websites.

Step Three: Chart paper lists of author and book reports and information should be hung. Students will take a gallery walk of these lists.

Step Four: Students will have a reading “free for all” in which they will exchange and read books and authors that they did not read during the four other lessons.

Closure: Students will provide a one-sentence review of a new book they have read.

Homework: Students will write a persuasive paragraph recommending that other students read their favorite book from this selection.

Lesson Six

Objective: Students will be able to identify the style and write a story in the style of their favorite author in this curriculum.

Materials: Chart list from previous lessons, story map forms, paper and pencil or computers, book of slave narratives, like The People Can Fly

Step One: Students will do another gallery walk of author and book reports. Teacher will write the names or authors on the board. Teacher will ask students to identify the styles of each of the authors and write these style characteristics on the board. Examples would be that Faith Ringgold writes historical facts but blends them with fantasy. Jacqueline Woodson writes about families and personal situations in histories, not famous events. Julius Lester enjoys retelling legends and he uses humor.

Step Two: Asking students to choose their favorite author and imagine they are the author. Keeping their favorite author in mind, have students create a story map of a story they would like to write. The story can be fictional or biographical.

Step Three: Teacher will model writing a story, using a story map and an author’s style.

Step Four: Students will write and illustrate a story, using their story maps and an author’s style. For example, a slave narrative book can be used if a student is doing Julius Lester.

Step Five: Students will assemble in their three small groups. They will read their stories aloud to their group members. Group members will guess which author style was used.

Closure: Teacher will ask students to describe how they felt being Faith Ringgold, Jacqueline Woodson or Julius Lester for the day.

Homework: Students will write two questions each about an author and a story.

APPENDIX
Common Core Standards of Pennsylvania
Bibliography

Common Core Standards of Pennsylvania

Below are the Common Core Standards of Pennsylvania that are met in this curriculum:

English Language Arts for second through fourth grades

- 1.1.2, 1.1.3, 1.1.4 Learning to read independently
- 1.2.2, 1.2.3, 1.2.4 Reading critically in all content areas
- 1.3.2, 1.3.3, 1.3.4 Reading analyzing and interpreting literature
- 1.4.2, 1.4.3, 1.4.4 Types of writing
- 1.5.2, 1.5.3, 1.5.4 Quality of writing
- 1.6.2, 1.6.3, 1.6.4 Speaking and listening
- 1.8.2, 1.8.3, 1.8.4 Research

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