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“Slavery with a smile” - the media controversy about children’s literature on the topic of slavery and the rhetoric of the publishing industry

„Niewolnictwo z uśmiechem” – kontrowersje medialne wokół literatury dziecięcej o tematyce niewolnictwa a retoryka przemysłu wydawniczego

Abstract

Discussions about the appropriateness of American children’s books on ethnic and racial issues have recently become headlines in American daily newspapers. Journalists and opinion writers are questioning the themes and the perspectives of the authors. While some believe there must be limitations on what is published for young readers, others claim any kind of censorship is a violation of the freedom of speech. The paper will provide examples of media debates concerning recently published books for children. Among others it will discuss the controversy about Ramin Ganeshram’s picture book *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* published in 2016 and no longer distributed because of its “sanitized” vision of slavery.

Dyskusje dotyczące poprawności amerykańskich książek dla dzieci o tematyce etnicznej i rasowej w ostatnim czasie znalazły się w centrum zainteresowań mediów publicznych. Dziennikarze i opiniotwórcy kwestionują tematykę książek oraz perspektywy autorów. Podczas gdy niektórzy uważają, że publikacje dla dzieci powinny być ograniczone pewnymi ramami, inni każdy rodzaj cenzury traktują jako naruszenie wolności słowa. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje debaty medialne dotyczące ostatnio opublikowanych książek dla dzieci na temat niewolnictwa. Między innymi omawia kontrowersyjne wycofanie ze sprzedaży książki ilustrowanej autorstwa Ramin Ganeshram pt. *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* z powodu promowania pozytywnego obrazu niewolnictwa.

Key words

#SlaveryWithASmile, W.D. Myers, Ch. Myers, *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*, slavery, children’s literature, media rhetoric

#SlaveryWithASmile, W.D. Myers, Ch. Myers, *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*, niewolnictwo, literatura dziecięca, retoryka mediów

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“The act of enforcing racelessness in literary
discourse is itself a racial act.”
(Morrison 1992: 46)

American children’s literature has always been politicized and offered space to discuss a variety of racial issues. Although scholars have debated the “whiteness” of American children’s books for decades, the topic made the headlines in March 2014 after two authors, Walter Dean Myers and his son Christopher Myers, published their seminal articles on African American children’s literature in the *New York Times Sunday Review*.

In his article entitled “Where are the people of color in children’s books?” Walter Dean Myer tries to alert the readers about the critical state of today’s children’s literature featuring black characters by providing dismal numbers about America’s publishing industry: “Of 3,200 children’s books published in 2013, just 93 were about black people, according to a study by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin” (W.D. Myers 2014). He also draws on his own early reading experience. As a black teenager he never found characters like him in young adults’ literature. The books did not reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of the community in which he was growing up. But then W.D. Myers mentions the moment he read James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues,” which was an inspiration for him to start writing children’s books and fill a gap in American children’s publishing:

I didn’t love the story, but I was lifted by it, for it took place in Harlem, and it was a story concerned with black people like those I knew. By humanizing the people who were like me, Baldwin’s story also humanized me. The story gave me a permission that I didn’t know I needed, the permission to write about my own landscape, my own map (2014).

Now he believes his own books tell young readers as much as Baldwin's book did to him:

Thousands of young people have come to me saying that they love my books for some reason or the other, but I strongly suspect that what they have found in my pages is the same thing I found in "Sonny's Blues." They have been struck by the recognition of themselves in the story, a validation of their existence as human beings, an acknowledgment of their value by someone who understands who they are. It is the shock of recognition at its highest level (2014).

W.D. Myers admits he writes stories about inner-city children in order to "make them human in the eyes of readers and, especially, in their own eyes." He wants to make his readers believe they are "part of the America's dream, that all the rhetoric is meant for them, and that they are wanted in this country" (W.D. Myers 2014). The author's conclusion to the article is really alarming and a call for action. He stresses the fact that today's children's books offer a monolithic picture of blacks as victims, which is discouraging for many young readers. W.D. Myers writes:

And what are the books that are being published about blacks? Joe Morton, the actor who starred in "The Brother From Another Planet," has said that all but a few motion pictures being made about blacks are about blacks as victims. In them, we are always struggling to overcome either slavery or racism. Book publishing is little better. Black history is usually depicted as folklore about slavery, and then a fastforward to the civil rights movement. Then I'm told that black children, and boys in particular, don't read. Small wonder. There is work to be done (2014).

Christopher Myers, a representative of a younger generation of children's authors, makes a similar point about underrepresentation of people of color in children's literature. He refers to the problem as "the apartheid of children's literature" (Ch. Myers 2014). Ch. Myers is critical of the rhetoric of major publishers, whose mission statements in his opinion "are littered with intentions, with their commitments to diversity, to imagination, to multiculturalism, ostensibly to create opportunities for children to learn about and understand their importance in their respective worlds" (Ch. Myers 2014). He reveals the truth about the mechanism of American children's book publishing houses which falsely promote their commitment to diversity ignoring the existing statistics. In his opinion, many book producers are not aware of the readers' expectations and they simply do not understand that children "see books less as mirrors and more as maps" (Ch. Myers 2014). He believes African American children would be more eager to read if they saw black characters on the covers. Publishers, on the other hand, tend to avoid such images as they claim such books would not easily sell. However, featuring only white characters on book jackets is a way of promoting whiteness as a norm, and marginalizing people of color. In his recent publication on racism in children's books, Philip Nel is particularly critical of the color-blind logic embraced by

many contemporary publishers. He believes “whitewashed covers hide characters of color from readers of color,” which has a lasting damage on young readers (Nel 2017: 27). The books tell them that their lives are not worth talking about and the stories of white characters are more exciting. Whitewashing children’s books is one of the major problems of today’s publishing business. Nel points out its main disadvantages: “Whitewashed covers illuminate how economic decisions passively perpetuate inequalities, naturalize Whiteness, and alter a text’s racial politics” (Nel 2017: 166).

A month after the publication of the two seminal articles, the BookCon organization had its annual convention in New York City. The fact that it had a panel of children’s book authors consisting of only white men led to a protest on social media, now known under the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks. The campaign inspired Ellen Oh and a number of other young-adult and children’s authors to establish a volunteer non-profit organization of the same name. WINDB (We Need Diverse Books) aims to address children’s authors and advocate more diversity in children’s book publishing. The executive board consists of educators as well as prominent children’s authors such as Jacqueline Woodson or Cynthia Leitich Smith, who incorporate multicultural themes in their works. As Clair Kirch observes, the organization moves “beyond ‘hashtag activism’ into creating tangible and substantial change” (Kirch 2014). It collaborates with such groups as First Book and the National Education Association’s Read Across America program. It runs a Scholastic Reading Club and grants the Walter Dean Myers Award to diverse authors.

Despite the popularity of such campaigns the problem of marginalization in children’s literature has not been solved yet. There is a general consensus among the people from the publishing industry that books with multicultural content and characters are needed but there is always the question: who is going to buy them? Some publishers believe that stressing the race of the characters, for instance, by putting them on the book cover, does not do any good because white readers will assume the book is not for them. However, according to white school librarian Amy Koester, this is the wrong way of thinking. Last year, when two African American picture books were given the Newberry Award, she responded to the controversial debate that aroused around that time. Dashka Slater quotes the librarian’s words: “If we argue that only black youth will want to read about black youth, we are really saying that the experiences of black youth have no relevance or meaning to youth of any other race” (Slater 2017).

The most recent debate concerning diverse children’s books is about presenting slavery from a positive perspective rather than as an act of brutality. The discussion emerged in response to the publication of Ramin Ganeshram’s and

Brantley-Newton's picture book *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* released by Scholastic on January 5, 2016. It tells the story of Hercules, the President's enslaved household cook at Mount Vernon, and his daughter Delia preparing a cake for Washington's sixty-fifth birthday. Delia explains how her father deals with the lack of sugar in the larder once he is asked to prepare the cake. The girl seems to be proud of her father, who gained fame due to his outstanding cooking abilities. The final illustration of the book showing the President, Hercules and Delia is a celebration of the cook's achievement, and it is accompanied with Washington's words: "Hercules [. . .] You are a magician, a master chef. You have outdone yourself again. Good man!" (Ganeshram 2016, unpagged).

The narrative of *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* focuses more on the making of a dessert than on the institution of slavery. It is full of descriptions of ingredients and how they are combined. It comes with a recipe and thoughtful notes from both the author and the illustrator. In her note, the book's illustrator writes, "While slavery in America was a vast injustice, my research indicates that Hercules and the other servants in George Washington's kitchens took great pride in their ability to cook for a man of such stature. That is why I have depicted them as happy people" (2016). However, the author contradicts this statement, revealing to readers in the final notes that Hercules escaped Washington's home on the President's birthday. One can wonder why the author of the book decided not to include those facts in the main narrative. First, it has nothing to do with the celebratory story of the cook's achievement. Hercules is called by the author "the first celebrity chef in America." Secondly, it would be depressing for readers to learn about unfavorable parts of Hercules's life. From the author's note at the end of the book we learn that the Washingtons did not always treat their slaves well. With such details included in the main text, the book would present the true story of the slave. However, the book's cover depicts a smiling figure of President Washington with Hercules and Delia, which indicates it is not a story about typical slaves who were suffering while living in bondage.

Once it was published, the book was immediately criticized by scholars and journalists for presenting a false image of slavery. Not only the missing facts about Hercules's escape from the plantation but also the cartoon-like illustrations were pointed out as the weak points of the story. On Amazon.com, the book was given more than 100 one-star reviews. It set off discussions on Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media under the hashtag #SlaveryWithASmile. The debate also reached a number of scholarly journals, such as *School Library Journal* or *Kirkus Reviews*, which rejected the book for presenting a distorted picture of slavery.

In the face of the internet outrage, twelve days after the book's publication, on January 17, 2016, Scholastic made the choice to withdraw the picture book from sale, explaining that "without more historical background on the evils of slavery than this book for younger children can provide, the book may give a false impression of the reality of the lives of slaves" (Slater 2017). In response to the publisher's decision, Ramin Ganeshram defended her book in a letter posted on the Children's Book Council Diversity page:

In our modern society, we abhor holding two competing truths in our minds. It is simply too hard. How could one person enslave another and at the same time respect him? It's difficult to fathom, but the fact remains it was true. We owe it to ourselves — and those who went before — to try and understand this confusing and uncomfortable truth. To refuse to do so diminishes their history to one-dimensional histories that may give comfort to some but ultimately rob us all of the potential for real understanding. (Ganeshram 2017).

The author indicated she based the story on historical research in American culinary heritage and her intention was to honor the slaves' resourcefulness. She also speculated that some slaves could be quite content with their lives while living in bondage, especially if they were smart enough to use the situation to minimize their disadvantage.

The publisher's decision to withdraw the book from the market gave rise to a wide debate about the freedom of speech. The National Coalition Against Censorship first spoke out against Scholastic's decision. The organization said that "There are books that can — and should — generate controversy (...) But those who value free speech as an essential human right and a necessary precondition for social change should be alarmed whenever books are removed from circulation because they are controversial" (Charles 2016). What was discussed by the NCAC's members was not the content of the book but the meaning of freedom in today's publishing market. Scholastic was simply accused of self-censorship. Supporters of Ganeshram's book claimed that the publisher deprived the author of the chance to present an alternative story of slavery. However, depicting "happy" slaves does not mean that Ganeshram supports the institution of slavery. Unlike most children's authors writing about that period in American history, she does not offer a one-sided view of slavery. The story suggests that there could be some blacks who were more lucky than others given the horrible conditions other slaves had to live in. But even if they happened to be house slaves who were well-treated by their masters, they did not stop dreaming about personal freedom. From the author's note we learn that "Hercules was quite proud of his status in the Washington's home, and he lived a life of near-freedom. But as the Founding Fathers knew, being almost free is not the same as being free, and he dreamed of his own liberty" (Ganeshram 2016, unpagged). Thus it should not be surprising

that the talented black cook did finally escape. However, omitting this fact from the main story and the illustrations does not mean that the author perpetuates the myth of a happy slave such as the images of slaves on the pages of Thomas Nelson Page's fiction. As Nel rightly observes, *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* is "a symptom of racism's resilience, and not of any conscious malice from its creators." (Nel 2017: 218). The book is also a celebration of the cook's unusual skills. Depicting black enslaved heroes as outstanding individuals is definitely empowering to African American readers, who are not offered such examples on a regular basis. Scholastic's editor Andrea Pinkney uses this argument to defend the book: "the role of African Americans played in celebrating the president's birthday is often not acknowledged, due to the fact that Hercules and his cake are not well known by many" (Pinkney 2016). Censoring such stories is, according to the NCAC, a great mistake. It does not allow the authors to present so rarely disputed aspects of slavery, and wonderful stories are wiped out from public memory.

Other organizations such as PEN American Center and the First Amendment Committee of the American Society of Journalists and Authors claim that it is a normal situation that books cause controversies and inspire discussions, especially if they concern ideas that can be offensive to certain groups. Another issue they raise is that withdrawing the books may have a long-lasting effect on the publishing industry. There is a danger that publishers will simply reject books that are likely to be controversial, thus depriving authors of the possibility to speak out on difficult topics. Thus the First Amendment supporters believe that withdrawing Ganeshram's picture book is a wrong precedent.

A Birthday Cake for George Washington is not the first book which led to such a heated discussion of the slavery issue and the lack of diversity in the publishing industry. In 2015, *A Fine Desert: Four Centuries, Four Families, and One Delicious Desert*, written by Emily Jenkins and illustrated by Sophie Blackall, was criticized for its cheerful depiction of a slave mother and daughter as they prepared a blueberry dessert on a South Carolina plantation. The book was not pulled out of circulation but in response to the outrage on social media the author apologized on the blog of Reading While White organization of white librarians dealing with the problem of racism in children's books. Jenkins admitted that while writing the book she did not consider the effects it might have on young black readers, who, according to many critics, are bound to feel ashamed of their own race. She said: "I've changed my mind. I cannot ignore the voices of those who have helped me understand something I didn't consider before: No matter how thoughtful the intent was in depicting this mother and child, the end result is that it can be seen as perpetuating painful imagery of 'happy' slaves" (Jenkins 2015). Although the book turned out to be a publishing failure, it brought an interesting intellectual

debate on “good” and “bad” multicultural children’s literature. Allyson Criner Brown, the director of nonprofit organization Teaching for Change, writes there is a lot to learn from all kinds of children’s books on heavy subjects (Brown 2016). Both of the titles discussed here are a good lesson on how not to approach the topic of slavery in contemporary America.

It must be stated, however, that within the last few years there were several children’s books about slavery that received excellent reviews and simply worked for young readers. As Nara Schoenberg writes for *Chicago Tribune*, “The best children’s books about slavery can do this: Telegraph injustice in a phrase or a glance, without unduly scaring kids or unwisely letting them off the hook.” She also adds that “it’s important not to sugar-coat slavery” in order to make it easier for children to understand it (Schoenberg 2016). Thus it is important to note that there are many children’s authors in the United States, for instance, Faith Ringgold or Jacqueline Woodson, who are not afraid to mention the horrors of slavery such as lynching, hunger or separation from one’s own family at an early age, and their books have never been criticized.

The recent debates concerning children’s books on the topic slavery are part of a larger debate about institutionalized racism. #BlackLivesMatter manifestations or #OscarsSoWhite debate about racial inequalities in show business are all connected with the color-blindness rhetoric, which is a subtle way of talking about race or not mentioning it at all. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva observes, “color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era” (Bonilla-Silva 2010: 3). Most scholars of color reject this rhetoric saying that it marginalizes minority groups. At the same time authors and publishers prefer not to risk strong criticism and decide not to include any characters of color in their book, or simply to censor the book. However, such decisions lead to further prejudices. As Nel notices, “It is more risky to ban racist books outright, or to use only the bowdlerized versions. It is a less risky choice to teach these books critically, helping students see the ways in which they reinforce racism, engaging them in difficult and painful, but sadly necessary conversation” (Nel 2017: 73-74).

The “Slavery With A Smile” debate is changing the current debate on slavery and diversity in children’s literature. It is visible that there is a need to talk about different aspects of slavery, not only about its brutal effects but also about individual people living within this system. What should be stressed, according to many critics, is the fact that those people had their own skills and talents, which were hardly recognized. They had their relatives and they were proud if any of them achieved success while being enslaved. Moreover, some of them benefited from slavery if they were in friendly interactions with their masters. However, like in

the case of *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* or *A Fine Desert*, in which the advantages of slavery seem to overshadow its drawbacks, there will always be the question whether slaves could ever be happy or proud. In order to prove it, there is a need for a larger body of literature presenting the institution of slavery from different perspectives.

Although there is a growing number of children's books on the topic of slavery or the civil rights movement, there is still a need for more diversity. The number of non-white characters in contemporary American children's books is disproportional to the percentage of young people of color living in the U.S. According to the statistics collected by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), 73,3% of all characters depicted in children's books are white (2015). Nel believes it is a systemic problem concerning the whole publishing industry, which is now dominated by white authors, illustrators, reviewers, editors and agents. Under the guise of color-blindness or marketability, these people regularly separate children's literature from hard topics such as slavery. Apart from hiring people of color in the publishing industry, it is equally important to raise people's consciousness of racist tropes which are frequently promoted in children's literature. Given the present and future demographic changes in the U.S., it is necessary to create more diverse children's books that do not ignore or stereotype the groups that will soon become America's racial majorities. Otherwise, the future generations of colored children will not be interested in reading, or, to use Christopher Myers' words, children's literature will remain an "apartheid" issue (Ch. Myers 2014).

American exceptionalism is another factor which makes the publishing industry avoid such topics as slavery. It is an ideology which promotes America as an exceptional place due to its democratic ideals. However, many scholars reject this concept because it totally ignores the institution of slavery as an important part of the U.S. history. Thus the belief in America's idealized position does not allow many authors and publishers to talk about slavery. Children's literature does not offer much space to slavery either. In fact, as Nel notes, on Amazon's website it is easier to find children's books on the Holocaust than on American slavery (Nel 2017, 19). Amazon.com as well as other similar websites do not give slavery its own category. These might be the outcomes of decisions made by those who believe in American exceptionalism. These people have introduced a new rhetoric of race dominated with such words as color-blindness or post-racism. However, as the controversies around children's books about slavery have shown, the phrases have caused even more disputes about the appropriateness of the topic for young readers.

It is hoped that the "Slavery with a Smile" debate will lead to changes in the rhetoric of the publishing industry and children's literature will not be whitewashed

any longer. So far the media controversy has raised the awareness of many authors, editors and teachers who have already taken steps to control the publishing market. Most of these activists are people of color connected with such campaigns as Black Lives Matter or We Need Diverse Books, though there are also whites who feel obliged to diversify American children's literature. In his most recent work on racism in children's books, Philip Nel provides "A Manifesto for Anti-Racist Children's Literature" which consists of nineteen directives, most of which are aimed at whites (Nel 2017, 202-224). By using Karen Fields and Barbara Fields' term "racecraft," he makes an important point about the meaning of certain phrases which hide racial assumptions. These are: "racial profiling," "people of color," or "diverse books." Nel believes these phrases need to be questioned as they are inherently racist. They simply suggest that whiteness is beyond any category of race. However, Nel decides not to resign from using the word "diverse." In the next points of his manifesto he encourages both white and non-white readers to read critically, buy, teach and publish diverse books. His initiative is supposed to continue Nancy Larrick's proposal made fifty years ago, in which she said: "White supremacy in children's literature will be abolished when authors, editors, publishers, and booksellers decide that they need not submit to bigots" (Larrick 1965, 85). The problem of racial biases in children's books has not been totally resolved. It still exists and is oftentimes justified with color-blindness or marketability.

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