

“You may think you know this story”: Cendrillon, A Caribbean Cinderella

This year’s Phoenix Picture Book Award winner is Robert San Souci and Brian Pinkney’s 1998 *Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella*; the committee noted in particular such elements as “vibrant illustrations,” “distinctly Caribbean atmosphere,” and the French Creole flavor of the narrative (award announcement at <http://www.childlitassn.org/phoenix-picture-book-award>). Reviewers in 1998 seem to agree with this assessment, calling it “a delight” (Kay Badalamenti, *Black Issues Book Review*, Mar/April 2002), and a “vital rendition of an old favorite,” with “its melodious language and its spirited art” (*Booklist*, 15 Oct 1998). Yet San Souci has not been universally praised as an adapter of folktales from other cultures; in fact, Eliot Singer puts his work squarely in the camp of “fakelore,” stories that purport to be multicultural versions of traditional tales but which are in effect Europeanized and Anglicized, sometimes to the point of being unrecognizable to the culture that they supposedly are taken from. This paper will not go that route as it examines San Souci’s claim that his text is “loosely based on the French Creole tale ‘Cendrillon’ [but] expanded . . . considerably” (Author’s Note). Rather it will follow the lead of Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, who finds the adaptation to be accurately reflective of Caribbean culture and a “subversive” text when looked at through the lens of critical race theory (Yenika-Agbaw 241, 242), and of Louis Seifert, who sees the Creoleness of one of San Souci’s influences, Patrick Chamoiseau’s collection *Creole Folktales* (1994), as a way of reclaiming racial and political identity. One of the key ways that San Souci [and Chamoiseau] does so is through the construct of the narrative storyteller; another is through the sophisticated interplay between recognizable European “Cinderella” motifs and the Black French details of life in Martinique, an aspect of the book highlighted by Pinkney’s illustrations. Ultimately, San Souci and Pinkney’s book is not simply another entry into the multicultural Cinderella canon currently so popular with elementary school teachers and librarians and castigated by folklorist purists as culturally appropriated narratives, but rather a statement of a deeply contested political and racial identity—Black, Creole, and French Caribbean.

Bibliography:

- Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Creole Folktales*. Transl. Linda Coverdale. NY: The New Press, 1994.
- Gipson, Jennifer. “‘A Strange, Ventriloquous Voice’: Louisiana Creole, Whiteness, and the Racial Politics of Writing Orality.” *Journal of American Folklore* 129.514(Fall 2016): 459-485.
- Hearn, Lafcadio. *Two Years in the French West Indies*. NY and London: Harper & Bros, 1890.
- San Souci, Robert. *Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella*. Illus. Brian Pinkney. Simon and Schuster, 1998.
- Seifert, Louis. “Orality, History, and ‘Creoleness’ in Patrick Chamoiseau’s ‘Creole Folktales.’” *Marvels and Tales* 16.2 (2002): 214-230.
- Singer, Eliot A. “Fakelore, Multiculturalism, and the Ethics of Children’s Literature.” <http://www.msu.edu/user/singere/fakelore.html>.
- Thompson, Deborah. “Not All Cinderellas Wear Glass Slippers: A Critical Analysis of Selected Cinderella Variants from the Black Perspective.” *Fairy Tales with a Black Consciousness: Essays on Adaptations of Familiar Stories*. Ed. Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, Ruth McKoy Lowery, and Laretta Hendersen. McFarland, 2013. 74-91.
- Yenika-Agbaw, Vivian. “Black Cinderella: Multicultural Literature and School Curriculum.” *Pedagogy: Culture and Society* 22.2 (2014): 233-250.