

Wading in the Waters of African American Children's Literature

Langston Hughes' famous poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" appeared in *The Crisis* in 1921 when Hughes was twenty-one years old. Before and after the publication of this poem, water has been a powerful symbol in Black literature, stemming at least in part from the people's forced enslavement and travel across the Atlantic Ocean. Coming to mind immediately is Tom Feelings' Coretta Scott King awardee *The Middle Passage*, the story of this journey told in black and white paintings. I will do a reading of some of these powerful images and draw connections between this book and Irene Smalls' *Ebony Sea*, in which words are the conduit for exploring meanings of water for Africans who sometimes chose water as a deathbed rather than live in slavery.

The topic of water in African American children's literature cannot be addressed fully without considering Lucille Clifton's *All Us Come Cross the Water*. This book is important because of the way in which it introduces children to the idea of the African Diaspora, the communities of people of African descent who did, indeed, make it across the Middle Passage and went on to establish new communities and cultures in this hemisphere. *All Us Come Cross the Water* is central to any conversation about the ideas of Black brotherhood and sisterhood and opens up conversations about various related issues such as identity, language, and music.

People often allude to the imagery of flying in Black culture. But water is just as important and like flying Africans, there are also those Africans who have a special relationship with the sea which I will address through a discussion of *Sukey and the Mermaid*, by Robert San Souci and illustrated by Brian Pinkney. Is something different accomplished in folklore than in realistic and historical fiction and nonfiction?

Finally, my examination will circle back to Hughes, analyzing *Sail Away*, a pairing of Hughes' "water poetry" with the art of the illustrious Ashley Bryan, a perfect example of the coexistence of turbulent and refreshing waters in African American children's literature.