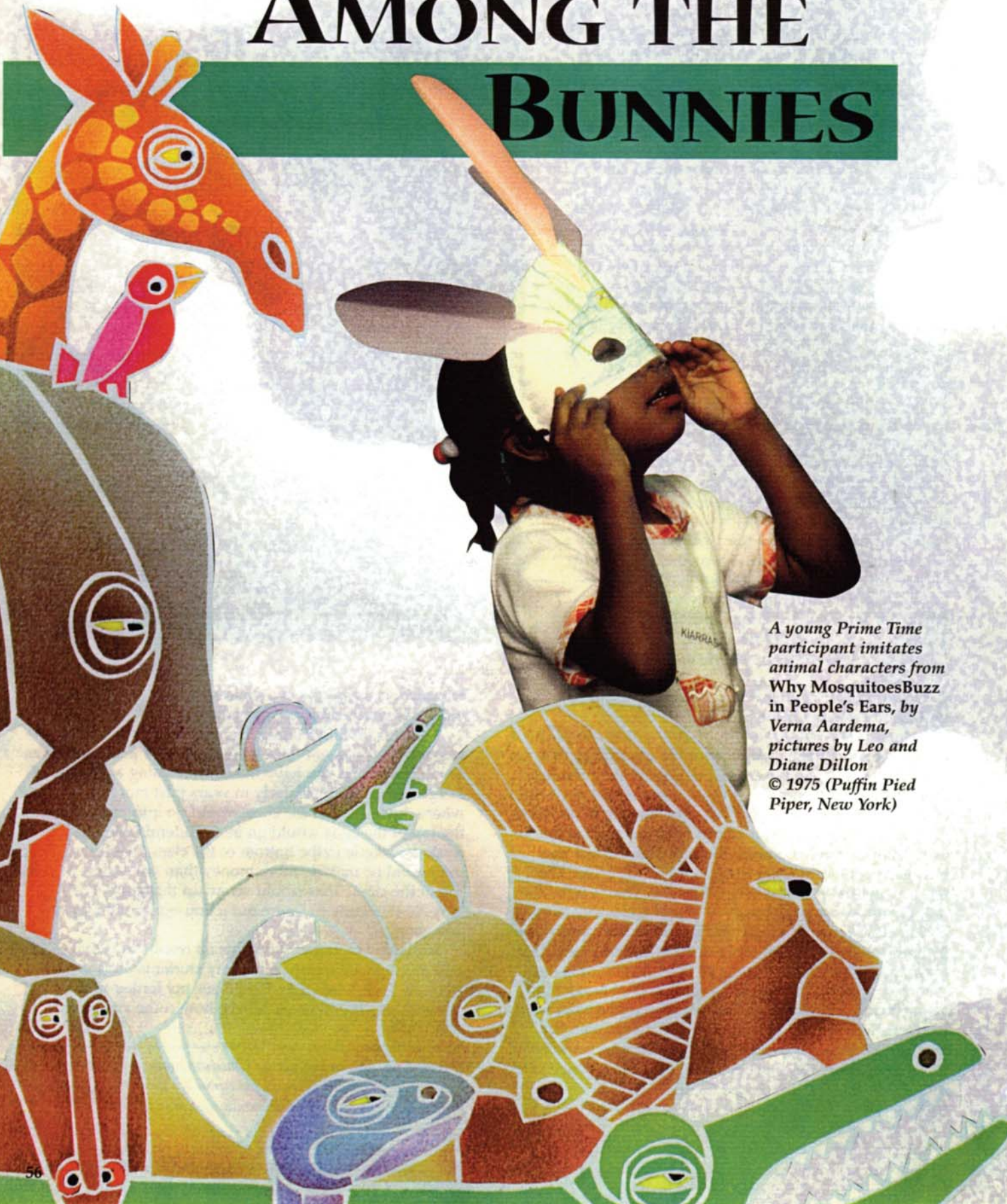


AGAMEMNON AMONG THE BUNNIES



A young Prime Time participant imitates animal characters from Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears, by Verna Aardema, pictures by Leo and Diane Dillon © 1975 (Puffin Pied Piper, New York)

FINDING THE HUMANITIES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

by Robert A. Becker

I first became involved with Prime Time Family Reading Time six years ago when I was asked to help develop "open-ended humanities-based" questions for the readings in one of the pilot programs. The motive was, frankly, funding. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities were being asked to help fund Prime Time, and since their mission is to encourage public access to the humanities, they were naturally concerned that this family-literacy series, like any other program they fund, have significant humanities content.

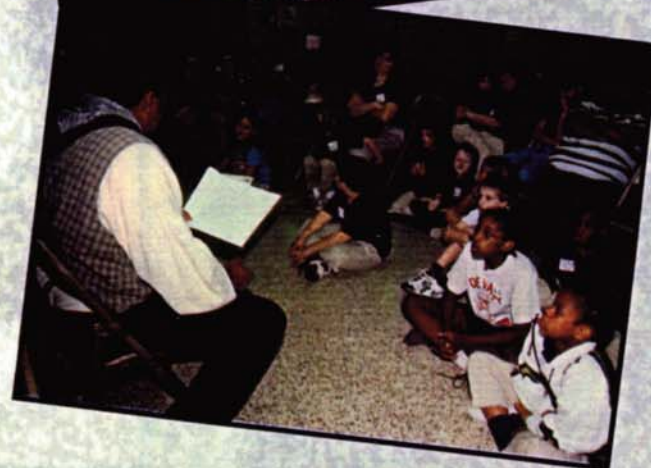
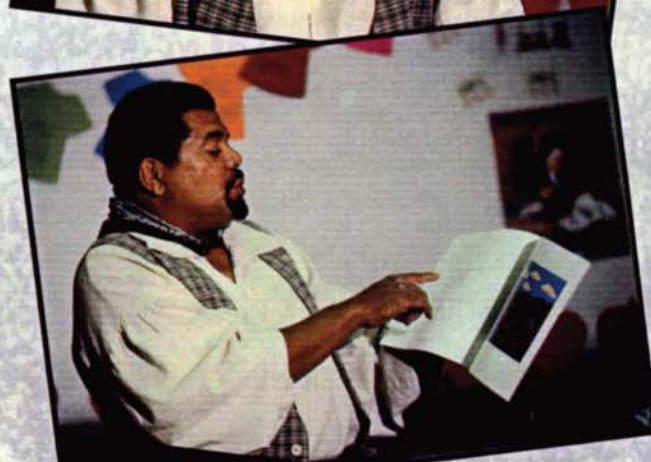
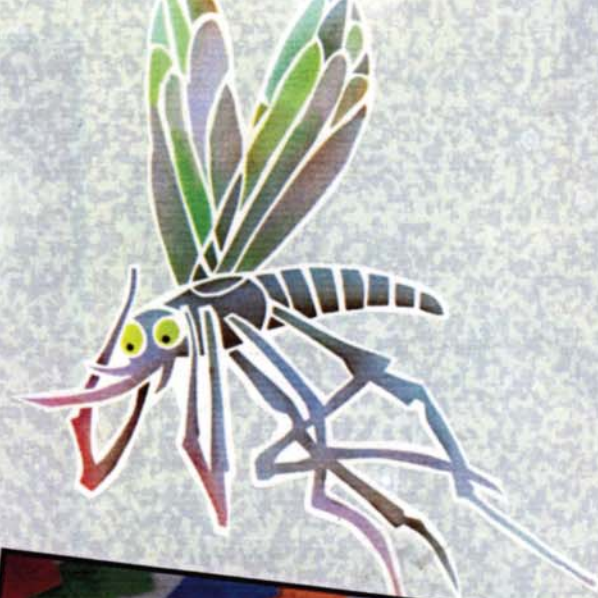
There was some concern, I think, that Prime Time would be "just another literacy program" or "just another story-time program" without any particular connection to the humanities broadly considered. So, they brought me on board to help develop humanities-based questions for discussion groups. I was there, in short, to beef up the humanities content.

Now that was pretty flattering, I thought. I envisioned frantic LEH program directors, brows furrowed with concern, shouting in panic at their aides: "We're low on humanities content in Baton Rouge! Get me Becker! Stat!"

I wasn't particularly concerned about the job as I began it. I mean, children's books? How hard could it be? Besides, that particular set of Prime Time readings included a collection of Greek myths and a story from the Old Testament. Those being the easiest to deal with from a humanities point of view, I started on them first.

But then, one evening a week or so later, I sat down with another of the books, opened it up at my keyboard and started to read. Two hours later, I was still sitting at the keyboard, going through the book for the sixth or seventh time, and my screen was still blank. The book was Bernard Waber's *Ira Sleeps Over* (1979), and if there was significant humanities content lurking in there somewhere, it was, that night, doing a damned fine job of keeping itself hidden from me.

I've come a long way, since then. I've worked on a variety of Prime Time programs—I even helped conduct one in Baton Rouge—and as a traveling evaluator of programs in various libraries. I've worked with several new sets of books and taken part in some book selection



meetings at which those present engaged in what diplomats like to call "a full, frank, and free exchange of ideas"—a phrase they normally apply to meetings between Israelis and Palestinians.

Along the way, I've changed a lot of my ideas about the humanities content in Prime Time programs. I no longer think of it, as I did going in, as merely something that had to be there to justify funding. After watching Prime Time operate for half a decade, I know now that the humanities emphasis is essential to making the program *work*. If Prime Time is something other than "just another literacy program," something unique and especially effective, it is so *because* of the humanities content. If part of what makes Prime Time unique is the emphasis on discussion—on presenting books not merely as stories to be read for fun (though it does and should do that), but as things which contain ideas—ideas that are interesting, especially fun to talk about, and to discuss, then it is the humanities content that makes it so. What Prime Time teaches, I think, by indirection, is that anyone who reads a book, even a simple children's book, is actually holding a conversation with its author. And, what makes Prime Time particularly effective is that it enables adults as well as their children to take part in those conversations and later conduct them on their own, long after the library sessions have ended. It is the humanities content that makes this possible.

PRIME TIME

FAMILY READING TIME

AN APPROACH TO THE ISSUE OF INTERGENERATIONAL LITERACY

Prime Time Family Reading Time is a unique intergenerational six- or eight-week program of reading, discussion and storytelling held in public libraries, community centers and other public venues. The program features award-winning children's books from around the world which stimulate discussion about themes and problems encountered in everyday life. Prime Time aims to assist parents with low literacy skills in order to build their confidence in helping their children learn to read.

"Our goals are to use the humanities-based content of the books to reinforce the role of the family; to encourage parents and children to bond around the act of reading and learning together; and to help parents and children learn how to select books and become active library users," explains Michael Sartisky, president and executive director of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.

Prime Time has been commended by local citizens for its quality and publicly lauded as a national standard for excellence in humanities programming for children and youth at risk. In September 2000, Prime Time was one of only ten arts and humanities programs nationwide to receive the prestigious "Coming Up Taller Award" from the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Prime Time was the only

humanities project honored, and it was the only project which was state and nationwide in impact, not confined to a single community.

Prime Time's Humanities Based Content

In each 90-minute session, a storyteller demonstrates effective reading techniques which are specifically designed to teach not only reading, but the skill of reading out loud. Each story focuses on a specific humanities-based theme that both children and parents encounter daily (i.e. fairness, responsibility, beauty, courage).

After the storyteller presents the story, a humanities scholar serves as a discussion leader, introducing families to methods of talking about texts. The texts used in discussion are selected in consultation with scholars and experts in children's literature to ensure that the humanities-based content is substantive and accessible to both children and new adult readers. The discussion techniques taught in this segment seek to stimulate interest and knowledge of the books' content—skills which will foster a lifelong love of learning through reading.

Each session also includes a five-minute library commercial. This is an opportunity for librarians to introduce families to library resources such as other books by Prime Time authors, homework aids, GED materials for parents, books on parenting and

healthcare, computer-access stations (where available), newspapers, magazines and other items families unfamiliar with libraries might not know about.

Prime Time Expands Nationwide

Begun in 1991 with a pilot at the East Baton Rouge Parish Library, Prime Time programs have dramatically helped over 4,000 people in 42 of Louisiana's 64 parishes. And Prime Time continues to expand nationwide, with pilot programs completed in 14 states in 2000 and sites in another 14 states slated for 2001. Expansion is made possible through a partnership with the American Library Association and with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Prime Time has been adopted as the official family literacy program of the Mississippi and Texas State Humanities Councils. Sartisky notes, "It feels good to know that we represent Louisiana with an educational program that is effective, that other states want."

Outcome Assessment

Prime Time staff are currently developing a sustainable evaluation system to track long-term program effectiveness in changing reading and library usage habits among Prime Time participants. Evaluation components include narrative reports from the librarians, scholars, and storytellers, as well as entry and completion surveys submitted by participating family members and collected at each site. Prime Time's 99.7% retention rate reflects the program's extraordinary impact on participants. For more information on Prime Time, contact the LEH office at (504) 523-4352, ext. 27, or toll-free within Louisiana at 1 (800) 909-7990.

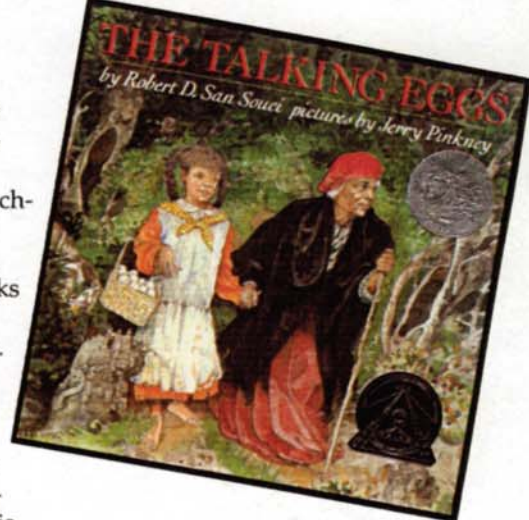
Humanities Content

Let me explain what I mean by "humanities content." Most of the books used in Prime Time are simple children's tales. We are reaching—we want to reach—marginal readers among both children and their parents. That means the books and stories must be accessible to them. And that means fairly basic.

But this creates a problem. Reading and talking about such books can seem to be a little demeaning to adults. Discussions can become childlike and not considered serious fare for adults. This is especially awkward in dealing with animal stories. Asking a grown man to talk about what a bunny did, or a grown woman to explain what the field mouse saw . . . well, you see the dilemma. What this can lead to, and I've occasionally witnessed it at some programs I've visited, are Prime Time sessions in which children are happily engaged in the discussions while the adults sit in the back, smile at the children and say nothing, or nearly nothing. Sooner or later, when that happens, the presenters may all but abandon the adults except for a ritual "Isn't that true, parents?" The adults smile and nod, and that's it.

What can solve the problem, what makes serious discussion of these children's books by the adults in the group possible, and in ways that do not leave the children out, is the humanities content we present to them. Or rather, find in them.

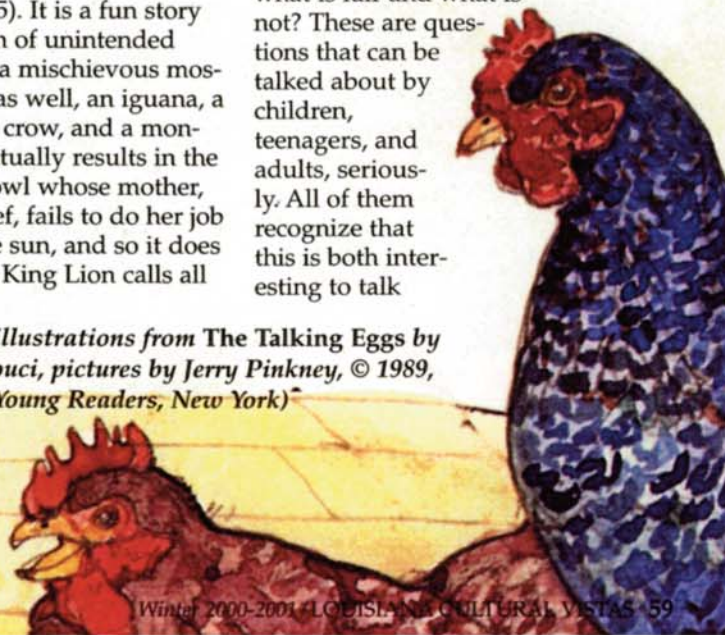
Take, for instance, Verna Aardema's retelling of the African folk tale *Why Mosquitoes Buzz In People's Ears* (1975). It is a fun story about a long train of unintended events begun by a mischievous mosquito involving, as well, an iguana, a snake, a rabbit, a crow, and a monkey. All this eventually results in the death of a baby owl whose mother, distracted by grief, fails to do her job of awakening the sun, and so it does not rise that day. King Lion calls all



the animals together to find out why the sun didn't come up. In order, he blames the owl, then the monkey, the crow, the rabbit, the snake, the iguana, and, finally, the mosquito. All the other animals agree the mosquito was at fault and should be punished. But the mosquito fled before the verdict. He now spends his time buzzing in peoples' ears to explain what really happened and to ask if everyone is still mad at him.

This is a quintessential Prime Time story, for it raises a fundamental question in the humanities—philosophy, in particular. It asks, "What is justice?" (Or as kids put it: "what is fair?") Who should be held responsible for events that occur at the end of a long chain of causation? This is no trivial question. It is a fundamental question, no less here than in Africa, where the story originated. What is justice in this situation? Why is this just and that not? How do we decide what is fair and what is not? These are questions that can be talked about by children, teenagers, and adults, seriously. All of them recognize that this is both interesting to talk

Book cover and illustrations from The Talking Eggs by Robert D. San Souci, pictures by Jerry Pinkney, © 1989, (Dial Books for Young Readers, New York)



about, and important to talk about. The story raises an issue, in short, that matters very much in their own lives.

"Was it fair to blame the mosquito?" the session leader might ask, and the kids will be off and running. I've seen it work. Prime Time ran a program in Baton Rouge several years ago, and a few teens were there—visibly unhappy teens. Arms crossed. Eyes rolled toward the ceiling. You know the look. You could read their resentment clearly. That they thought the program "kid stuff" was made plain by every sigh, every gesture. They sat there as the program began, silent, determined to be bored, clearly hauled there by an adult. That night, the storyteller read *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*

were involved for the rest of the evening.

That question—"What is fair?"—works on all ages, and it works on all ages through this story. I was driving my youngest son and his best friend someplace a few years ago—both were high school freshmen. As usual, my car was littered with Prime Time books, and that day the book, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*, was on the back seat. My son's friend picked it up and asked what it was. My son told him it was a neat story that he ought to read. And he did, right then and there. After which, my son asked if he thought the mosquito should have taken the fall for all that happened. "Sure," said his friend. "What?" said my son. "No way." And they were off. The rest of the ride—with little prompting from me—they debated who was guilty, who should have taken the rap, and why. Being high-school boys, they

importance in our lives today. The adults in the program recognize this. And that recognition brings them into the discussion. At one program, there had been a news story earlier that week about an alcohol-related death at LSU. A student got drunk at a bar, went out into the parking lot, passed out under a car, and was killed when the car's driver drove off later that night. The bar was being sued. One of the adult participants made the connection. Really the same question as the one in *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*. Was the bar that sold him drinks responsible for what happened an hour later somewhere else?

These kinds of questions, once begun, can take the discussion in whole new directions, and raise new issues of importance in the blink of an eye. At one program I was conducting, I thought we had pretty much run the gamut on *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*. We were about to move on to another story when a man sitting off to the side, who had not said a word so far that evening, spoke up and said: "I knew the mosquito would get the blame."

The storyteller asked him how he knew that, and he said,

"Because it was the

smallest and

weakest animal in the

story." Instantly, several children were waving hands at us, agreeing. "They always pick on little kids at school." And we were off on a new track: power, powerlessness, and justice, and how they relate. We didn't put it that way, of course, and neither, directly, did the kids or adults, but that is what we were discussing. Humanities questions, all.

Yes, No, Maybe So . . .

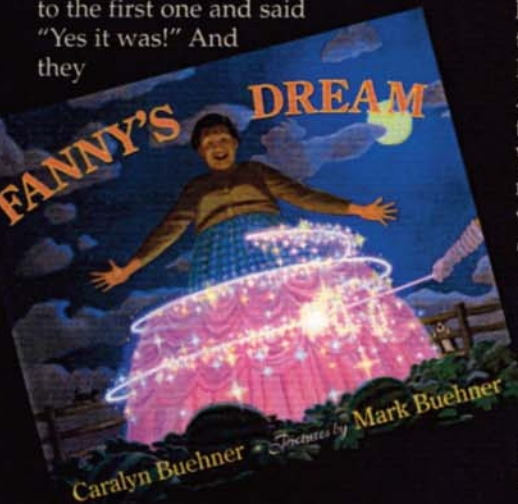
Focusing on the humanities content can solve another occasional problem with the Prime Time readings. Many of the books included (this is all but inevitable) are really morality tales, designed to teach children to be generous not selfish, kind not nasty, and honest not untruthful. They have lessons to teach. And there is nothing wrong with that, except that the lessons are usually so self-evident and

What Prime Time teaches, I think, by indirection, is that anyone who reads a book, even a simple children's book, is actually holding a conversation with its author.

and then asked whether it was fair to blame the mosquito for what happened. The younger children began to talk: "Yes!" "No!" "They should have blamed the monkey or the iguana," and so on. The teens were listening. Finally, one couldn't resist, and blurted out: "It's not fair! It wasn't his fault!" The one sitting next to her turned immediately to the first one and said "Yes it was!" And they

debated all this in terms a bit more pungent perhaps than you'd expect or encourage in a Prime Time group. But the issues were exactly the same: justice and responsibility, and how they are determined. That's a humanities question. A serious question. And an interesting one. (And a historic question that appears right at the dawn of western civilization: Homer's *Iliad*. What, after all, was Achilles pondering as he sulked in his tent, but a matter of justice to him? What, but justice, had Agamemnon in mind when he took back Achilles' servant girl and started the whole story of the *Iliad* off on its long and bloody course?)

And the question of what constitutes justice—how can you tell when you have it and when you don't—clearly has a great deal of



Book cover and illustration from *Fanny's Dream* by Carolyn Buehner, illustrations by Mark Buehner, © 1996 (Dial Books for Young Readers, New York)

so unambiguous that there is nothing much to discuss. Who, having read a tale like *Cinderella*, in any of its various versions (like John Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (1987), for example), would come down on the side of selfishness, greed, and dishonesty? There really isn't a whole lot to discuss there on the face of it.

The nice thing about so many humanities-related questions is that they are ambiguous. They do not have obvious answers. They are rich in ambiguity, and in particular, in moral or ethical ambiguity. (*Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* is, again, a good example.) And ambiguities are exactly what we want to identify in these stories, because they are often the best things to talk about unless you want to turn the discussions into Sunday School meetings.

Sunday School-like sessions, by the way, sometimes happen and need to be guarded against. We really want disagreement at these sessions. We want to foster it. Encourage it. Even, if necessary, to provoke it. Without it, the programs can degenerate into simple question-and-answer sessions that, once you get beyond the actual storytelling, are boring. "That wasn't nice, was it?" Yawn. I observed a session once at which the discussion leader asked a question like that of a different story. He got a chorus of "Nos" from the children. (The adults had pretty much zoned out by then.) And he followed up with "Does anyone think this character was fair?" That was a good question. One hand went up, a girl in the front row. What followed was uncomfortable to watch.

"You think he was fair?" "Yes" said the girl. Remember, she had been brave enough to go against the herd and raise her hand to disagree. The only one. "But," said the discussion leader, recounting something that had happened in the story, "That certainly wasn't fair, was it?" "No" said the child. "And what about this and so" said the leader. "That wasn't fair either, was it?" "No" said the girl. This happened three times. Then the leader said: "So he really wasn't fair, was he?" Having been driven back to the herd, the girl said, of course, "No." And the Sunday School lesson moved on.

That child who tried to disagree is gold for Prime Time sessions. The discussion leader should have praised her

for going a different way.

Disagreement is what we *want* in these sessions. He should have run with her. "Well," I'd have said when she went against the group, "that is *really* interesting. That didn't occur to me. Tell us why you think it was fair?"

All societies around the world and throughout history have used stories to teach their children, to pass on the moral standards of that particular society, and to give children examples of

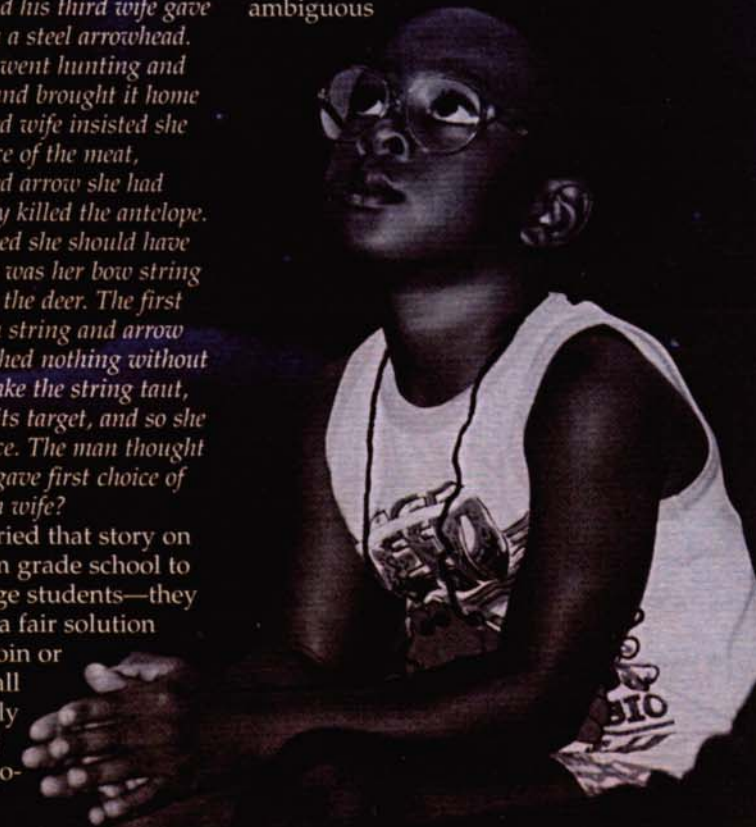
how they are expected to behave as adults. Our society does this by very clear moral tales with very clear lessons to be drawn—the boy who cried wolf, Pinocchio, and so on. But not all societies do it that way. One particular tribal group in Africa, for example, teaches by posing stories for children that have no obvious answers, no clear moral right or wrong. Here is an example, adapted from Jan Knappert's, *What Do You Think?—Judgment Tales of the Nkundo of Congo*:

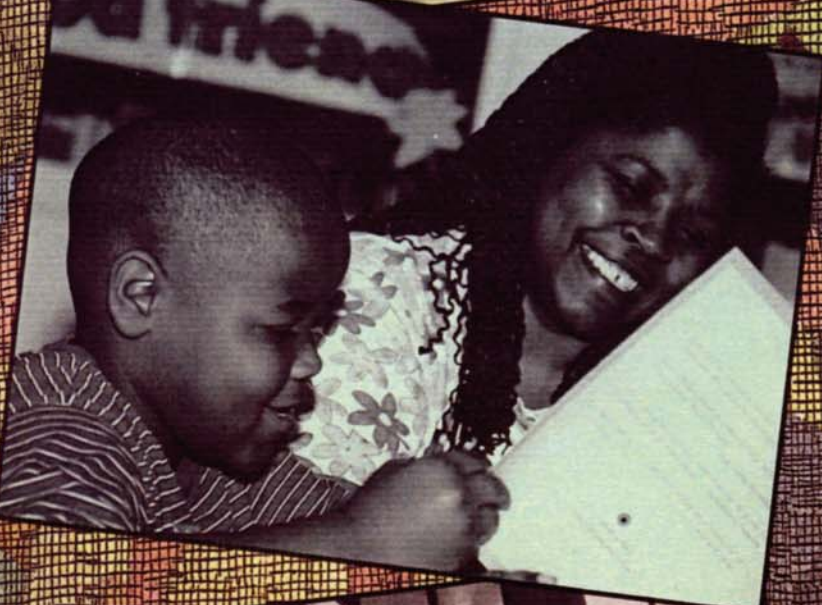
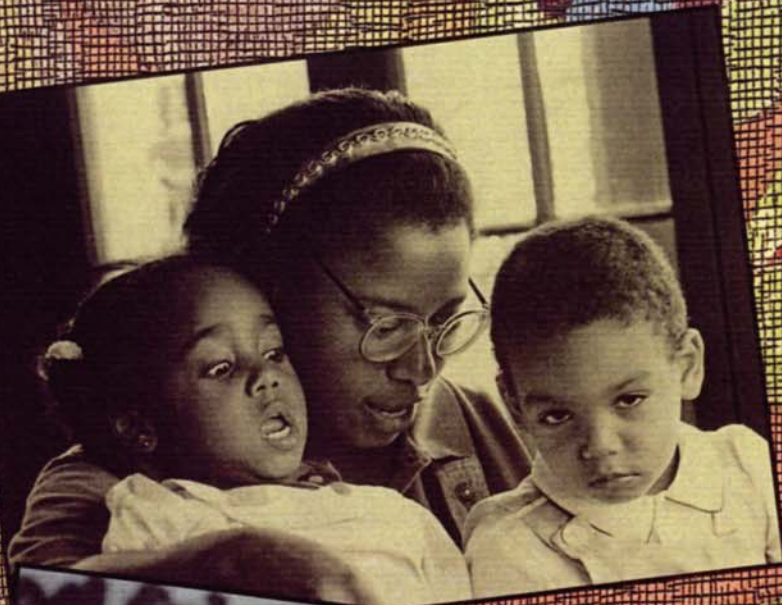
Once there was a man who had three wives. Each gave him a gift. His first wife gave him a fine new bow of oak wood. His second wife gave him a fine bowstring made from oxhide. And his third wife gave him a new arrow with a steel arrowhead. He took his gifts, and went hunting and killed a fine antelope and brought it home for his wives. The third wife insisted she should have first choice of the meat, because the steel-tipped arrow she had given him had actually killed the antelope. The second wife claimed she should have first choice, because it was her bow string that sent the arrow to the deer. The first wife insisted that both string and arrow would have accomplished nothing without the fine oak bow to make the string taut, sending the arrow to its target, and so she should have first choice. The man thought for a while, and then gave first choice of the meat to . . . which wife?

Every time I've tried that story on young people—from grade school to high school to college students—they quickly decide that a fair solution would be to flip a coin or draw straws, since all the gifts were equally important in killing the deer. Good demo-

cratic solution, that. A truly American solution. (It is not the right one for the tribe involved, by the way.) What I want to note here, though, is not that the right answer to this question is different for different cultures and different societies, or that an American child might answer it differently than an African one (though, that is certainly a matter of interest to the humanities). What interests me is that for the tribe involved, what the tale really teaches is not the answer to the question, but the method by which it is reached. The children discuss the story (with an elder present), talk about the possibilities, try various solutions, and slowly, by discussion, reach the "right" conclusion for their culture, their community. *That* is the lesson: difficult matters are properly resolved by discussion, by an exchange of ideas and opinions, by the gradual emergence among the discussants of the way to go, the answer to offer, the solution to reach that is best for the family, the community, and all those involved.

That is also one of the things, one of the most important things, that the Prime Time program has to offer to its participants along the way. And it can only be taught if the answer to the question under discussion—presuming even that there is only one answer—is not obvious. It must be ambiguous





and capable of different solutions or the tale will not teach what the tribe wants taught. Just that way, what makes Prime Time works are the ambiguities in the stories. The difficult moral choices. The questions that have no obvious answers. The humanities questions.

Let me give you another example from the 2000 Prime Time book list, Caralyn and Mark Buehner's *Fanny's Dream* (1996).

Fanny is a Wyoming farm girl who dreams her Fairy Godmother will arrange for her to marry the mayor's son and live a life of ease and luxury. But it doesn't happen, so Fanny marries instead the Jensen boy, a hardworking farmer (who, incidentally, will wash the windows—Fanny's least favorite chore). They work hard, have children, and come to love one another. Then, a decade later, Fanny's Fairy Godmother finally shows up and offers to make Fanny's old dream come true: marriage to the mayor's son and a life of ease. Fanny looks back at her house where her husband is reading to their children and says, no thanks. She'd already found her prince.

Now, what is the main point of this story? I guess you could disagree about that. My wife, for example, thinks the main point of the story is that Fanny doesn't do windows and her husband does. But this discussion won't take you very far, I think, and most discussions of the tale can lead to a pretty predictable end, to a kind of Sunday School lesson again: how foolish Fanny would have been to hang on to her silly dream of living in the mayor's house amid riches and wealth; how wise she was instead to marry her humble farmer friend; how smart she was to realize many years later that she'd really found in him her Prince Charming, and without the help of a Fairy Godmother at all. It is a feel-good story with a strong moral point to make. But how do we bring in the humanities more directly and where can we go with it from there?

One thing you can do—and it is a tactic that can work with very nearly any story—is to follow Pete Seeger's advice in his introduction to his book, *Abiyoyo* (1994): change the story. Change one element in it to highlight, just to create an ambiguity, a moral or ethical question, a humanities question not perhaps there in the original story. Or there but not evident.

Take Fanny: suppose her dream had been not what it was (to be rich and live in luxury and leisure in the mayor's big house). Suppose her dream had been to become a scientist and maybe someday discover the cure for AIDS, or cancer, or sickle cell anemia. Would she have been right to give up her dream then? Why or why not? (Think

this is not a humanities question? Well, once again, recall Homer's *Iliad*. Recall its hero, Achilles, whom the gods gave a choice as a young man: they would guarantee him a long life, comfort, happiness, and riches as ruler of his own land. Or, he could have a short life, but one filled with the opportunity for glory and great achievements that would live long after him in song and legend. He chose the chance for great deeds and glory, even at the price of a shorter life. Did he choose wisely and well? Would you have chosen that way? Would Fanny?)

Once you change that one element in Fanny's story, once you make her dream a noble one, not a trivial one—once you face her with the question the gods posed to Achilles—you have a chewy, meaty, humanities-based question on the table. Dig in. Suppose you had a choice. Suppose the gods told you that you could marry, live a long and comfortable life in a modest house, and be pretty happy. But you would never be especially wealthy or powerful or important, and as far as the world was concerned, you would

accomplish no great thing. Or you could choose instead to devote your life to finding a cure for cancer and have a chance—no guarantee, but a reasonable chance—to succeed at it. But you might have to devote so much to the search that you might not have a family or a happy home life. Which would you choose? Why? Would your answer necessarily be the "right" answer for everyone? And so on.

Oh, the Questions You Can Ask!

Of course, looking for the moral and ethical ambiguities is not the only way to infuse humanities content into Prime Time discussions. There are many others. You might, for example, simply ask how a book fits into the modern world. Take, for example, Barbara Brenner's *Wagon Wheels* (1984), which is the tale of African-American pioneers on the Great Plains just after the Civil War. You might ask this question: "Suppose you are a librarian, and in your library you have one shelf labeled 'American History' and another shelf labeled 'Black History.' And you have only one copy of *Wagon Wheels*. Which shelf would

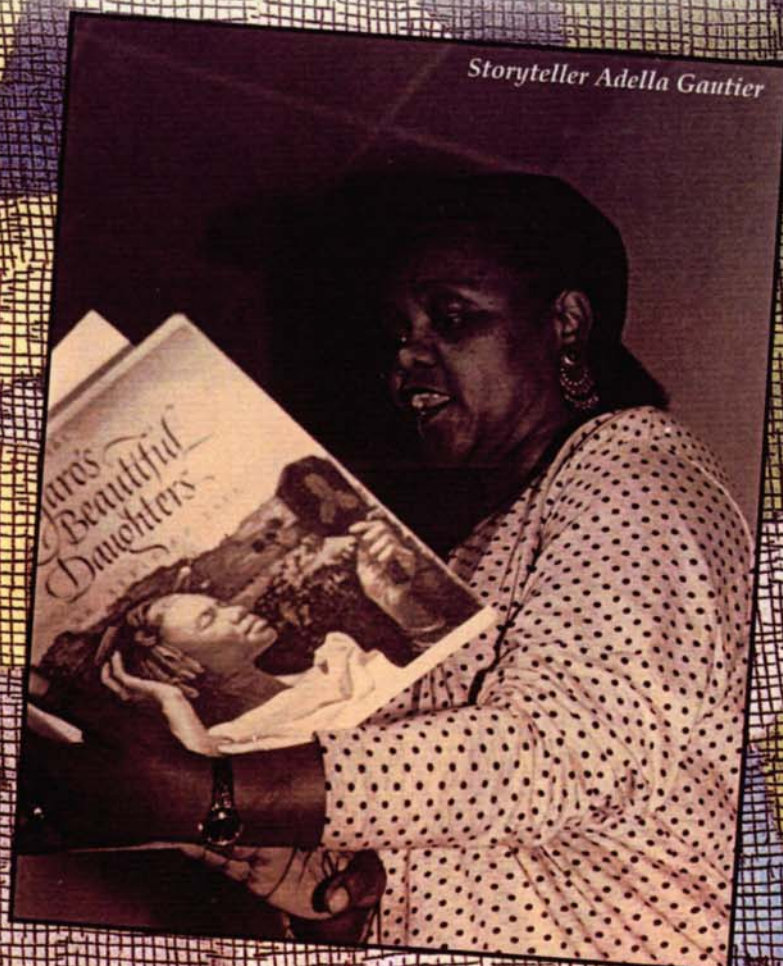
you put it on? And why there and not the other one?" Those questions can take the group and the discussion to some very interesting places.

Sometimes, if you are lucky, your participants will do the heavy lifting for you. If you encourage your people, children and adults, to look for connections, to look for reflections of the ideas in the books you are discussing in their own lives, or in TV shows or movies even, they will sometimes find connections you never thought of. This leads me to my favorite Prime Time story.

It happened during a Prime Time program I was conducting in Baton Rouge. We were talking about Mufaro's *Beautiful Daughters*. Here is a very brief summary of the tale:

Mufaro, an honest man who lived in Africa, had two beautiful daughters, one kind and generous, the other greedy and prideful. Both are to go to the capital city, Zimbabwe, where the King is to choose a wife and make her Queen. The prideful daughter hurries on ahead, being rude and selfish to all she meets along the way, trying to make sure she is chosen first and that

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her sister will become a servant in her palace. The kind daughter on her trip to the capital is pleasant and helpful to all she meets. The nasty daughter is rejected when it turns out the people she met along the way were, in fact, the King and his subjects in disguise, testing the character of the two daughters. The kind daughter, of course, becomes Queen and her nasty sister becomes a servant in her palace.

The storyteller asked the group what kind of servant they thought the nasty daughter would make in her sister's palace. One woman offered: "She is going to be trouble. She'll resent her sister always. They better send her away. She'll grumble and grouse and scheme to get even. She'll be like Scar in *The Lion King*." Nice connection, I thought, and the kids and other adults were nodding, and thinking about it, too. Then the woman made a leap that neither I nor the storyteller had ever considered when we'd planned the session: "But even if she got to be queen, she wouldn't be queen long. Like Scar, she doesn't have what it takes to be a queen. She doesn't have the character for it."

It dawned on me that we were now discussing the nature of kingship, and what characteristics were necessary for the moral authority to rule. That is

a fundamental question for the humanities: who possesses the moral authority to govern, and what comprises it. It is a question the House and Senate and the nation confronted almost daily during President Bill Clinton's impeachment proceedings last year. It is a humanities based question of great importance today, of significance at any time, brought out in the discussion by one of the adults via a connection she saw between *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* and Walt Disney's *The Lion King*. That was Prime Time at work, hitting on all eight cylinders.

Another way to bring the humanities into the discussion of nearly any book is to get the participants to think a little about how the writer wrote the story, how or why she made the choices she did. A very good way to do this, sometimes, is to simply ask of a story "What's not there? What does the writer not tell us that we might want to know? And why doesn't she tell us?"

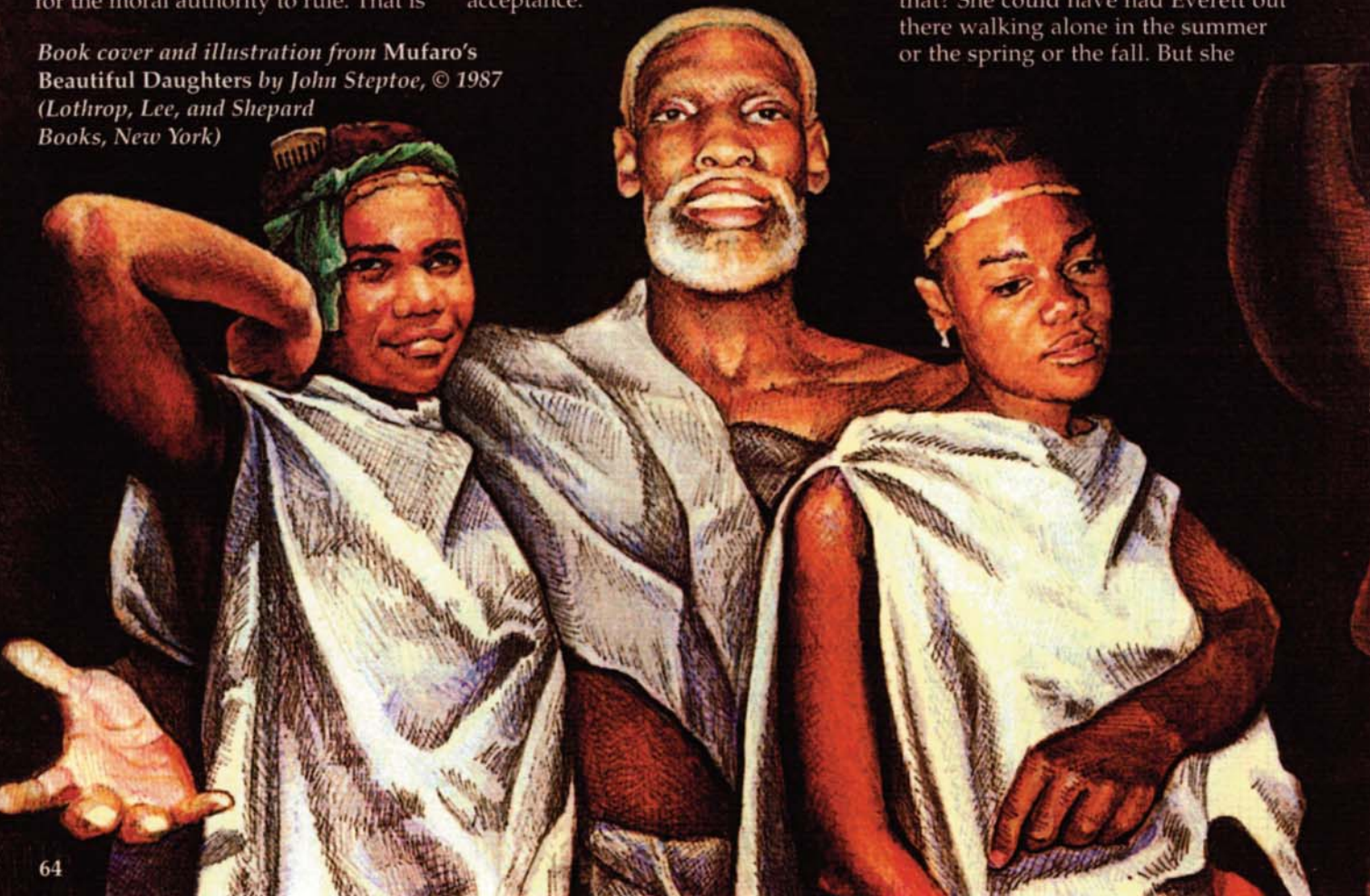
Take Lucille Clifton's *Everett Anderson's Goodbye* (1988), for example. It is the tale of a young boy who loses his father and goes through all of the five stages of grieving: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

You might ask: "How did Everett's dad die?" Well, the story doesn't say. "Why doesn't the author tell us that? What reason could she have had for leaving that out? It's a pretty important thing. Why do you think it isn't there?"

How an artist works, why he makes the choices he makes, is very much a humanities question. So many readers—so many of the college students I teach—never consider for a moment that what they read in a book represents conscious choices on the part of the writer, that there were other possibilities. Raising a question like the one above may get some of your participants, adults, too, since it is a serious question, thinking as they read about the choices writers make. Asking what is not there is a good way to start that with any book.

And since these are all illustrated children books, you can take it a little further and start talking about the choices the illustrators made. In *Everett Anderson's Goodbye*, not a word in the book tells you when the story takes place, what season it is. But if you look at the very first illustration, there is Everett, alone on a cold and snowy street in the dead of winter. Now why did the artist do that? She could have had Everett out there walking alone in the summer or the spring or the fall. But she

Book cover and illustration from Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters by John Steptoe, © 1987 (Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard Books, New York)

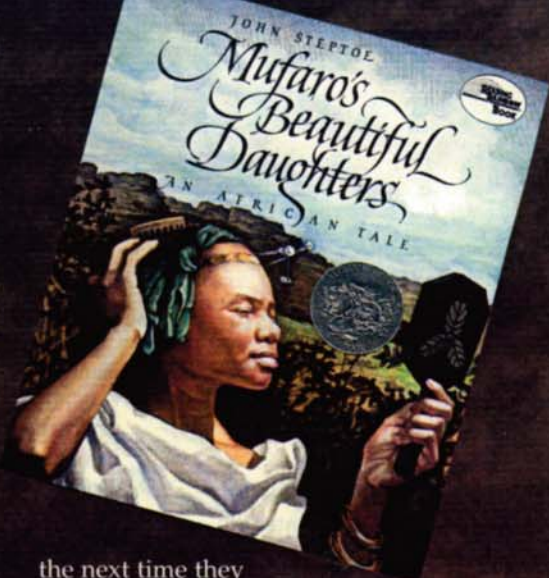


chose winter. Why? (That's a choice again. Does it enhance the story? Make it more powerful? Would it have been less wise to have put Everett in that picture in the summer, do you think? Would he have seemed less alone on a sunny street filled with children and their parents? Or more alone? Why?) Getting readers—any readers, at any age—into the habit of wondering, sometimes, why an author did this or that, or didn't do something else is absolutely getting them to wonder about the humanities and its presence in the work of writers, artists, and, yes, TV writers and moviemakers, too. These are not trivial questions for readers to think about as they read. Not always of course, not every time they pick up a book or read a story. But sometimes. Because it makes the reading more interesting, and more fun, because it means the reader is carrying on a conversation with the author, or the illustrator, or both.

Another approach that works to keep the discussions focused on the humanities, and on non-trivial questions of real interest to youngsters and adults alike, is treating the sessions, particularly the later ones, as mini-seminars in comparative

left living back in a rundown shack in the swamp in utter poverty. The writer tells us that the good sister went off to live the life of a rich woman in the big city "but she remained as generous as ever." Did she? Leaving her mom and sister to struggle on in squalor, nasty though they were? This is a good place to ask them to think again of Mufaro's good daughter. Would she have done that? What makes you think that? Does that mean the good daughter in *The Talking Eggs* did not remain generous when she went off to live the high life in the big city? If you think so, then why did the writer say she did? How can that be? Is there a hole in the story? A flaw? Something that doesn't seem quite right? Did the author make a mistake? (It happens!) That is something you and they can talk about.

In funding Prime Time, it is the goal, I think, of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Library Association, and the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities to convince participants in the program that reading, really, is a conversation between them and the authors of the books they are reading—a conversation that begins when they turn to the first page of a story, but does *not* end when they reach the final page. The book goes back to the library. The ideas in it stay with the reader, his or her conversation with the author continues the next day, the next month, the next year,



the next time they see something—a news story, a movie, another book, a TV show—that reminds them of what they read, or the next time something happens in their own lives, be it a birth, a death, a tragedy, a challenge, a success, a failure, something that calls the book or its ideas and what they had to say about such things back to mind.

And Prime Time itself is based on encouraging this conversation between people and the world of books, between people and the humanities in their lives, and it is based on the belief that it is never too early to begin that conversation. And that it is never too late. **LCV**

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Storyteller Earl Bryant

literature. Pop characters out of earlier stories, and plop them into the new stories and ask what they would do in them, how they would act.

For example, in Robert D. San Souci's *The Talking Eggs* (1989)—another of those nasty-sister/good-sister tales—the good sister becomes rich as a reward for her virtue, the bad sister and her greedy mother are

