



Lifeline Two No.2: Picture Books

Article Author:

[Judith Elkin](#) [1]

[19](#) [2]

Article Category:

Lifeline Library

Byline:

Judith Elkin continues her series.

Judith Elkin continues her series on Multi-cultural Books

<!--break-->

In the last issue of **Books For Keeps**, I tried to show the importance of children's books which reflect, naturally and unselfconsciously the richness of cultures existing in Britain today. I believe that such books should be readily available in all schools regardless of the ethnic mix of the children within that school, for after all we are educating children for their future in a multi-cultural Britain.

Children's attitudes develop rapidly from a young age and their image of the world around them begins to form quite early. Thus, a multi-cultural breadth of vision is just as important when we are dealing with younger children, as with older children, and needs to be reflected in picture books.

What should we be looking for in picture books?

I want children to have access to stories about black children as well as white. Picture books can help to normalise the existence of black people in our society and help the black child to acquire a positive self-image.

I want children to be able to see in picture books, images of people from a variety of different cultural and religious backgrounds and the existence of different forms of dress, language, food and customs as a normal part of everyday life.

Books can support children of minority ethnic groups by presenting them to themselves as positive, dignified people whose domestic lives, families and festivals are worth recording in books, and make children more aware of the ethnic mix in our society.

I also want children to have picture book versions of folk tales and legends from many different sources, not merely stories of European origin. By drawing attention to traditional folk tales from other cultures, we can give recognition to the cultural roots of many of our children and introduce all children to a much wider literary heritage.

Some of the books I looked at in the last issue, like **Mother Goose Comes to Cable Street** and **The Baby's Catalogue**, with their attractive illustrations, and the **Strands** series, the **Terraced House** books and Joan Solomon's stories, with their skilful use of photographs, show clearly that children of different colours and cultural groups are a normal part of everyday life in Britain today. These can be used very successfully alongside the picture books mentioned below.

Ezra Jack Keats' picture books, which originated in America, were amongst the first books published here which featured a black child in an urban environment. In **Peter's Chair**, Peter decides to run away with his dog, Willie, when his father paints everything pink for the new baby. He saves his favourite little chair from this indignity only to find it no longer fits him! This title is also available in a Gujarati/English and Turkish/English edition. The same endearing

child, Peter, also appears in **The Snowy Day, Whistle for Willie, A Letter to Amy, Hi, Cat!**, all dealing humourously with everyday situations. The books with their simple texts and attractive collage illustrations, continue to have great appeal to nursery and infant school children.

The first picture book which tried to do a similar thing here, was **Petronella Breinburg's My Brother Sean**. Sean goes to nursery school for the first time, and cries! A familiar situation for many parents and children but it is very refreshing to find such a homely, appealing story with a black child as the main character. Sean also appears in **Doctor Sean** and **Sean's Red Bike**. The warm, relaxed illustrations are by **Errol Lloyd** who more recently has begun writing his own stories.

Nini at Carnival is one of them. It is a simple story about a small girl who finds herself without a costume at carnival time, but is rescued by her "fairy godmother". This charmingly illustrated and colourful story makes a valuable contribution to multicultural picture books, as it shows an event of Caribbean origin taking place in London, and captures the hustle and bustle of carnival time. **Nini on Time** is a slightly longer story about Nini and her friends getting to the zoo along crowded inner-city streets, peopled by groups of many ethnic origins.

Maybe it's a Tiger has a similar, but American urban setting. The local children collect animals which resemble the pictures in their wild animal book, to start their own private zoo. So the tabby cat becomes a tiger, the puppy a bear, the gerbil a kangaroo. It is a humourously imaginative and repetitive story with real animals lurking in the background. Children of 5 + will appreciate the humour and detail of the busy illustrations. A useful story for reading aloud.

Dig Away Two-hole Tim, told in a gentle colloquial style, is a charming story by **John Agard** set in Guyana about a mischievous small boy who is fascinated by holes of any description, in clothes, in roads, anywhere! This good-humoured naughtiness appeals to young children and is well captured in **Jennifer Northway's** colourful, vibrant illustrations.

Jafta, written in clear, simple prose by white South African. **Hugh Lewin**, is a delightful portrait of a small black child living in Africa. Jafta talks about himself in a jokey way: "When I'm happy. I purr like a lioncub... But when I get cross, I stamp like an elephant and grumble like a warthog." **Lisa Kopper's** two-tone illustrations are full of vigour and humour and carefully capture Jafta's emotions to create a picture of a very real little boy and his family. There are now eight titles in the series, but **Jafta** remains the most accessible. In **Jafta - My Mother**, Jafta talks about the strength and security he gains from his mother and in **Jafta - My Father**, the sadness he feels when his father goes away to work (gently understated).

In the two newest titles, **Jafta - the Journey** and **Jafta - the Town**, Jafta and his mother go (on foot, by cart and by bus) to spend an all-too-brief few days with his father.

Tusk Tusk is a more overt exploration of racial tolerance but approached in a very humourous way by talented illustrator, **David McKee**. Two herds of elephants, one black, one white, love all creatures except each other. The peace-loving elephants go into the jungle while the others kill each other off. The peace-loving elephants eventually emerge grey, but at the end of the story, the big-eared elephants are regarding the little-eared elephants with growing suspicion. The message is about differences of all kinds, suggesting that life will be 'very boring if everyone ends up the same. As with many of David McKee's books, there is a great deal of substance behind an apparently simple picture book.

Folk Tales in Picture Book Form

Hanuman is a simple retelling of the story of Hanuman. the Monkey God's early life, from the Indian epic tale, the Ramayana. The brightly coloured, stylised illustrations use Indian art conventions and add significantly to the story. This is a splendid attempt to make a well-known legend accessible to younger children.

Rum Pum Pum is also an Indian folk tale, riotously illustrated by Jose Aruego and Ariane Dewey. Blackbird prepares to make war on the king who has stolen his wife. Armed with a sharp thorn, a half walnut shell helmet and a frogskin

shield, he beats on his drum and marches to fight the king. He is joined by further aggrieved creatures. cat, ant, stick and river who all hide in the blackbird's ear ready to take revenge on the king. This is a fairly long story but the repetition and predictable element of the story mean that it can be enjoyed by children of about 5+.

The Monkey and the Crocodile is a traditional Jataka tale from India about the cunning monkey who outwits the crocodile. Colourfully and amusingly illustrated by **Paul Galdone**, this version of a familiar tale reads aloud well to children from 5 to 11.

The Elephants and the Mice is my favourite title amongst the many paperbacks published by the **Children's Book Trust of New Delhi** and available here through many specialist bookshops. It is a retelling from the Panchatantra about a colony of mice, living in great splendour in a deserted Indian city, who help a herd of elephants. The delicate pictures of mice dressed in saris and turbans are full of humorous details.

Stories about Anansi the tricky spider-man, are always popular with children. **A Story, A Story** is a single Anansi story, beautifully illustrated in paste! colours and delightfully retold by **Gail Haley**. The story of how Anansi fulfills the task set him by Nyame the Sky-God and brings stories down to earth, reads aloud extremely well and can be used with a wide variety of ages from infant to lower secondary.

Tortoise's Dream is a charmingly repetitive, cumulative tale from Africa, illustrated by **Joanna Troughton** in bright, iridescent colours. Tortoise dreams of a tree which contains all! the fruits of the earth. All the animals try to find the tree but only the plodding, determined tortoise succeeds. Again idea! for reading aloud for children of about 4+.

Details of books mentioned

Ezra Jack Keats (Bodley Head)

The Snowy Day, 0 370 00776 X, £3.95

Whistle for Willie, 0 370 00760 3, £3.50

Peter's Chair, 0 370 00790 5, £3.95

A Letter to Amy, 0 370 01510 X, £3.95

Hi, Cat!, 0 370 01546 0, £3.95

Petronella Breinburg (Bodley Head)

My Brother Sean, 0 370 02025 1, £2.95

Doctor Sean, 0 370 02029 4, £3.50

Sean's Red Bike, 0 370 10781 0, £1.85

Errol Lloyd (Bodley Head)

Nini at Carnival, 0 370 30023 8, £3.95

Nini on Time, 0 370 30301 6, £4.50

Nandy's Bedtime, 0 370 30395 4, £3.50

Kathleen Hersom

Maybe It's a Tiger, Macmillan, 0 333 32382 3. £3.95; **Picturemacs**, 0 333 35166 5, £1.95 (May 1983)

John Agard

Dig Away Two-Hole Tim, Bodley Head, 0 370 30421 7, £3.95

Hugh Lewin

Jafta, Evans, 0 237 45543 5, £2.95; Dinosaur, 0 85122 267 6, 85p

Jafta - My Father, Evans, 0 237 45545 5, £2.95

Jafta - My Mother, Evans, 0 237 45544 7, £2.95

Dinosaur, 0 85122 268 4, 85p

David McKee

Tusk Tusk, Andersen Press, 0 905478 27 4, £3.50; Sparrow, 0 09 930650 6, £1.50

A. Ramachandran

Hanuman, A. & C. Black, 0 7136 1923 6, £3.50

Maggie Duff

Rum Pum Pum, Kestrel, 0 7226 5543 6, £4.95

Paul Galdone

The Monkey and the Crocodile, World's Work, 0 437 42503 7, £3.50

Marilyn Hirsh

The Elephants and the Mice, Children's Book Trust - New Delhi, 95p (Available from Soma Books, 38 Kennington Lane. London SE11)

Gail Haley

A Story, A Story, Methuen,

0 416 75190 3, £4.50

0 416 86520 8, £ 1.95 pb

Joanna Troughton

Tortoise's Dream, Blackie, 0 216 90886 8, £4.50

Page Number:

12

Source URL (retrieved on Oct '20): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/19/childrens-books/articles/lifeline-library/lifeline-two-no2-picture-books>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/judith-elkin>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/19>