

The

PRZ

Project

In April, the Penn Libraries' Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts opened its third exhibition devoted to Ashley Bryan (1923–2022), an African American artist best known as an illustrator and writer of children's books. After two smaller ones that catered largely to an online audience during the pandemic—one featuring mid-1960s protest drawings and another sampling his portrayals of women—the Kislak Center marked the centennial of Bryan's birth with displays ranging from puppets to cut-paper collages to paintings he made while serving in the segregated US Army during World War II.

A bench in one corner of the Goldstein Family Gallery was piled with well-used copies of a dozen or so picture books: brightly illustrated collections of poetry, African folk tales, Black American spiritu-

From picture books to *The Poet X*, Penn Libraries are expanding and diversifying their holdings of books for young readers.

By Trey Popp

als with sheet music geared to a child with a C-recorder, and slim volumes like *My America*, a kaleidoscopic paean to the diversity of US landscapes and citizens.

The exceptionally quiet Goldstein Family Gallery, which lone visitors fre-

quently have all to themselves, is not a space given to people-watching. But it's easy to imagine that many of those who came to "Beautiful Blackbird: The Creative Spirit of Ashley Bryan"—which ran through July 21—lingered with the picture books longer than they gazed into the richly varied glass display cases. Eight of Bryan's books won Coretta Scott King Awards. He was honored in 2009 with the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal for "lasting contributions to children's literature." Encountering these color-daubed volumes in a university library registered as a rare treat.

Less rare, however, than it used to be. The Ashley Bryan exhibit, which drew from an archive donated to Penn Libraries in 2019, is emblematic of recent efforts by Penn librarians and the Graduate School of Education (GSE) to expand and diversify the University's holdings



PZ
7.1
D3355
Se
2018

PZ
7.1
D3982
Un
2022

PZ
7.1
D5638
Hu
2021

PZ
7.1
D616
Bar
2021

PZ
7.1
D76
Ho
2022

PZ
7.1
E969
May
2021

PZ
7.1
F373
Yus
2021

PZ
7.1
F485
Su
2022

PZ
7.1
G5529
Tak
2021

PZ
7.1
G65217
H54
2022



Lee

My GrandMom



LEE

TIGER HONOR

PZ
7.1
L4414
TI
2022

LOCKINGTON

In the Key of Us

PZ
7.1
L6235
In
2022

Montañas • Sanchez Gomez

Different

Berdman

LOWE

Chivia vs. the Dybbuk

PZ
7.1
L7245
Av
2022

LUKOFF



different kinds of friends

PZ
7.1
L8456
DI
2022



PZ
7.1
L865
Fr
2022

MACGREGOR The Many Half-Lived Lives of Sam Sylvester

PZ
7.1
M24525
Man
2022

MARTINS

THIS IS OUR PLACE

PZ
7.1
M3742
Th
2022

CORRY MCCARTHY Men o' War

PZ
7.1
M417
Man
2022

MCDUNN

HONESTLY ELLIOTT

PZ
7.1
M43453
Ho
2022

CASEY McQUISTON

I Missed Shara When

PZ
7.1
M46476
lak
2022

of children's and young adult literature. Van Pelt's PZ section—the call numbers dedicated to “fiction and juvenile belles lettres”—is on the march.

Books for young people have long been a part of the Penn Libraries' holdings. The Horace Howard Furness Memorial Library, for instance, holds about 400 editions of Shakespeare's works adapted for juvenile audiences—ranging from a 1907 Dandelion Classics for Children copy of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream, for Young People* to *srsly Hamlet*, a 2015 OMG Shakespeare! title that swaps out iambic pentameter for emoji-strewn text-message exchanges. The Geoffrey Denison Gulliver's Travels Collection includes many editions for children; they run the gamut from 19th-century illustrated English and French works to a 1995 Italian-language parody featuring Donald Duck in the title role. The Japanese Juvenile Fiction Collection, which began with the discovery of 188 brittle, pocket-sized adventure stories from the late Meiji and Taisho periods (1900–1920) in Penn's East Asian collection, has grown steadily to become the “most extensive single collection of such fiction in the world,” according to Penn Libraries. Thomas Woody, a historian of education who taught at Penn from 1919 to 1960, gifted a fascinating trove of 1920s–30s Soviet picture books. Their creators, many trained at a tuition-free proletarian art academy founded by Marc Chagall in 1918, would exert long-lasting influence on the design of children's books far beyond the Soviet Union—where some eventually fell out of favor (and into gulag labor camps) for failing to adhere to the strict “socialist realism” favored by Joseph Stalin. One struggles to imagine a more tragic fate for men and women who played an integral part in the expansion of Russia's literate population from roughly 1 million to 40 million in the space of a single decade.

The Ashley Bryan collection fits into a series of Penn Libraries initiatives that aim to document a more contemporary devel-

Children's books diversified at a snail's pace for half a century. The plot twisted around 2016.

opment in Anglophone children's and young adult publishing: the fits-and-starts drive to diversify the range of authorial voices and thematic material available to young readers. As a historical phenomenon, this is a 20th-century story whose latest phase is reverberating in the form of school- and library-based book bans and other forms of reactionary backlash.

Bryan traced his own vocation in children's literature to a 1965 *Saturday Review* article that bore the blunt title “The All-White World of Children's Books.” In it, former president of the International Reading Association Nancy Larrick documented a survey of 5,206 trade books published for children between 1962 and 1964. Nearly a decade after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision promised the integration of America's schoolchildren, Larrick found that only 6.7 percent of the books published for them contained a Black character in text or illustration. And those that did tended either to “show him as a servant or slave, a sharecropper, a migrant worker, or a menial” or as a “counterstereotype ... who is always good, generous, and smiling in the face of difficulties.”

“Across the country, 6,340,000 non-white children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them,” Larrick observed. “There is no need to elaborate upon the damage—much of it irreparable—to the Negro child's personality. But the impact of all-white books upon 39,600,000 white children is probably even worse. Although his light skin makes him one of the world's minorities,

the white child learns from his books that he is the kingfish. There seems little chance of developing the humility so urgently needed for world cooperation, instead of world conflict, as long as our children are brought up on gentle doses of racism through their books.”

The story since then can be told in two ways. On the one hand there are writers and illustrators like Bryan, whose varied catalog runs to almost 50 books, most printed by major publishing houses. In 2018, book collector Joanna Banks gave Penn Libraries some 10,000 books, periodicals, recordings, and photographs related to African American authors [“Gazetteer,” May/June 2020]. Her only condition, she said at a 2020 Kislak Center symposium, was that the 1,000 or so children's books in the collection “were not locked away behind closed doors, so that no child would have access to them.”

Banks' children's books joined another collection that, in a roundabout way, illustrates the flip side of the story. Atha Tehon G'49, who earned a master's in fine arts from Penn, spent a decade as art director of children's books at Alfred A. Knopf, served as a designer and art director at Dial Books for Young Readers from 1969 to 2001, and continued designing children's books after her retirement. She worked with authors ranging from Maurice Sendak to William Steig. Several years before her death in 2012, she wrote that “probably the most important book [she] worked on is *White Ships/Black Cargo* by Tom Feelings, and the most enjoyable *The Old African* by Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney.”

Tehon's papers reside in the Kislak Center along with her personal collection of 1,217 children's books. Of these, 67 are classified by Penn Libraries as treating African American subject matter. (A few dozen more bear the illustrations of the prolific Jerry Pinkney.) Considering that the vast majority of these books were published well after Nancy Larrick's 1965 *cri du coeur*—more than half of the Tehon collection derives from



the 1990s and 2000s—it is plain to see that the world of American children’s books diversified at a snail’s pace in the half-century that followed it.

That dynamic is all the more remarkable given the dramatic diversification of the country’s youth population over the same time period. In 2014, Sibylla Shekerdjiska-Benatova, a senior conservation technician for paper at Penn Libraries who is currently completing a master’s degree at GSE, founded A Book a Day, a nonprofit that works to expand literacy among children in underserved and di-

verse communities. Her goal was simple: provide a multicultural population with books as varied in theme and authorship as the kids and families who’d be reading them. The organization focused on West Philadelphia students at the Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander and Henry C. Lea schools, which serve large numbers of bilingual families. (Both schools also have partnerships with GSE.)

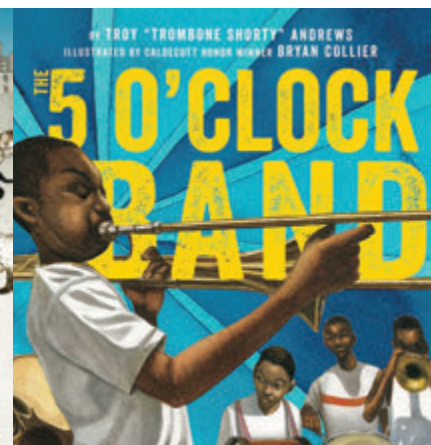
Shekerdjiska-Benatova wanted to enrich the schools’ libraries with titles that would allow students “to recognize themselves and their classmates in the pages”

and also “open up the kids’ cultural horizons beyond their own individual experience.” But she was taken aback by how hard it was to find high-quality books that met those marks. Her experience reflected a stubborn status quo that University of Madison-Wisconsin’s Cooperative Children’s Book Center had been documenting for years. Of 3,400 children’s books CCBC reviewed from the 2015 publishing year, 7.6 percent featured Black characters, 3.3 percent included Asian/Pacific characters, while Latinos appeared in only 2.4 percent. Animal, vehicle, and other nonhuman characters nearly outnumbered all minority groups combined. White characters were present in 73 percent of the books.

“It was really chilling,” says Shekerdjiska-Benatova. But by 2016 she began to notice an uptick in the kinds of titles she was seeking. A Book a Day has now

donated hundreds of them—and over 7,400 copies in all—to school libraries, community centers, and young readers. (Penn Libraries provided funding between 2014 and 2019.) The books are fabulously varied in nearly every way imaginable: artistic style, subject matter, cultural traditions, reading level, authorship. In poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction, titles like *Wangari Maathai: The Woman Who Planted Millions of Trees*, *Cora Cooks Pancit*, *Ramadan Moon*, and *Can I Touch Your Hair? Poems of Race, Mistakes, and Friendship* reflect a newfound vigor in the marketplace for juvenile books. (The CBCC’s 2022 survey of children’s literature registered an approximate doubling, tripling, and quadrupling of books about Black, Asian, and Latino characters, respectively, compared to 2015; and authorship in each of those categories increased even more dramatically. Books featuring LGBTQ themes, characters with disabilities, Judaism, and Christianity have also ticked upward since 2018, when the center began analyzing those attributes.)

Penn’s Graduate School of Education has played a modest role in amplifying this trend. In 2015, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, an associate professor at GSE who joined the University of Michigan’s School of Education in 2021, launched an annual Best Books for Young Readers list that explicitly aimed to “showcase authors and illustrators dealing with issues like gender, race, ability, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and socioeconomic class in authentic ways.” Each year the GSE list features approximately 50 titles spread between picture books, middle grade, young adult, and graphic novels. They range from illustrated books like Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow’s *Mommy’s Khimar*, about a Muslim girl who plays dress-up with her mother’s headscarves; to the late civil-rights leader and Congressman John Lewis’s *March* trilogy; to Elizabeth Acevedo’s pathbreaking novel-in-verse *The Poet X*. (Shekerdijiska-Benatova, who helped curate the latest edi-



tion in connection with her master’s work, has a tender spot for Eugene Yelchin’s middle-grade *The Genius Under the Table: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*, which resonated with her own experience as a child in Bulgaria.)

The Poet X exemplifies the way the young adult category has transformed the publishing marketplace in the 21st century. Acevedo’s Afro-Dominican protagonist is “just a normal 15-year-old in a dogmatically religious household” in Harlem who spends the book “working out her relationship with Christ, with God, and with her mother—as a Holy Trinity,” riffs Melissa Jensen C’89 G’93, a lecturer in the English department who has taught popular seminars on children’s and young adult literature for the last 15 years. “Thirty years ago, had you been able to get it published, it would have been given to an adult audience,” she remarks. “It might have trickled down to a younger audience. But now the young adult subgenre of children’s literature is such an entity in itself that these extraordinary works [have had space to flourish]. I honestly think *Long Way Down* is one of the most beautiful and important texts of the last decade,” she adds, referring to another novel-in-verse by the Black American writer Jason Reynolds—“and it was written deliberately for a young audience.”

The Penn Libraries has acquired many of the GSE Best Books for its circulating

collection. “We’ve always tried to capture award-winning books,” explains Lynne Farrington, the director of programs and curator of special collections. “Even if we hadn’t collected widely, there was a tendency to collect Newberry Award winners, or Coretta Scott King Award winners—we’ve always had that interest in at least the ones that have been already vetted and deemed to be important works.”

During the pandemic, Farrington collaborated with GSE librarian Patty Lynn and Mayelin Perez Gr’24, a librarian for Literatures in English, Theatre Arts, & Comparative Literature, on yet another diversifying initiative. With a modest internal funding grant, they focused on building the circulating collection of children’s and young adult books about immigrant and refugee communities in the United States.

You can view this through the lens of an academic research library—what kinds of books are being produced for young readers during an era of elevated immigration and opposition to it? “There have been so many issues around immigration in this country,” Farrington says. “To help people understand who immigrants are, where they’re coming from, what their lives are like—all of these kinds of things are really important.”

But on another level, the project addressed the straightforward interests of a multicultural University community. “You have lots of parents at Penn who



take out the books that we have in the library, and bring them home and read them to their children,” Farrington notes. Her team ended up finding a lot of books about grandparents—visiting or receiving visits from faraway ones—and even more about food, an element of cultural heritage famous for sparking emotions ranging from nostalgia to shame in any number of immigrant children.

Simple stories can do profound work, as Perez observed in a 2021 Penn Libraries blog post. “They offer a window through which young people see other individuals and other realities; or a door through which they enter and experience other worlds; and sometimes these works are a mirror, through which young people can see themselves,” she wrote. “So much literature for young readers is inevitably a way to transmit values, norms, and culture and foster a sense of belonging.”

Jensen welcomes another development in juvenile publishing—and the University’s stacks. “Until very, very recently, whatever the diversity was—whether it was ability, or culture, or heritage, or sexuality—that was the conflict in these stories. But it doesn’t have to be. And we are beginning to see that.” In contemporary juvenile chapter books featuring gay protagonists, for instance, “the conflict doesn’t have to be the kid coming out—instead we just get to read varied stories about queer kids. And we’re starting to see this across the board.”

“What are the books that stay with people? The books they read as children—and want to then share with their children.”

There’s no doubt that public libraries continue to reign supreme as sources of discovery for young readers. When celebrating its 125th anniversary in 2020 the New York Public Library released a list of its nine most borrowed books of all time. Four were picture books (including the number one, Ezra Jack Keats’ *The Snowy Day*, with 485,583 checkouts), and almost all the rest were school-age classics like E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and (of course) J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. The only unambiguously adult-oriented title on the list was Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

Measuring the engagement with juvenile books at the Penn Libraries is difficult. Last year, books from the PZ section were checked out roughly 1,000 times—but PZ excludes nonfiction and a great deal of what is most popular with young adults. (The fictional works of Elizabeth

Acevedo and Jason Reynolds, for instance, reside in PS as “American literature.”) Yet for Penn’s champions of children’s literature, these books’ value to an academic library transcends their borrowing history, their utility to GSE faculty and students, or their potential usefulness to students of arts and design.

“They are the gateway to literary studies,” Jensen declares. “They are the first step in readership. I’m sure there are plenty of voracious adult and young adult readers who were not read to as small children. But I don’t know any! So we talk endlessly about the importance of reading to your children.”

“What are the books that stay with people?” Farrington asks. “They tend to be books they read as children—and they’re the books that they want to then share with their children, and their children’s children.”

It may seem strange that a library that exclusively serves adults would think seriously about picture books and novels that might appear on a middle- or high-schooler’s summer reading list. But maybe it shouldn’t.

“Perhaps people will think twice about relegating kid lit,” Jensen hopes. “Perhaps it will bring the acknowledgment that within this pantheon of children’s literature are texts that are valuable because they are enjoyable—and have real cultural importance and literary importance.”