

Profile

Eloise Greenfield

RUDINE SIMS BISHOP

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This month, Profiles editor, Rosalinda Barrera, invites Rudine Sims Bishop to help us learn about Eloise Greenfield, recipient of the Eleventh NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry. Sims reveals that Greenfield's early love of music echoes in both the form and content of her poetry and prose.

Eloise Greenfield is the 11th winner of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children, presented at the annual convention in Detroit, in November, 1997. In being honored for the aggregate body of her work, she joins a distinguished list of former winners: David McCord (1977), Aileen Fisher (1978), Karla Kuskin (1979), Myra Cohn Livingston (1980), Eve Merriam (1981), John Ciardi (1982), Lilian Moore (1985), Arnold Adoff (1988), Valerie Worth (1991), and Barbara Juster Espensen (1994).



Mrs. Greenfield was born Eloise Glynn Little, on May 17, 1929, in Parmele, North Carolina, five months before the stock market crash marked the official beginning of the Great Depression. It had, in some sense, already begun for her family and many others and, three months after her birth, her father went north to Washington, D.C., to find work and “make a way” for his wife and children. When he had saved enough money, he sent for his family, and Washington, D.C. became home. On her ninth birthday, the family moved into Langston Terrace, a new low-income housing development.

For us [the children], Langston Terrace wasn't an in-between place. It was a growing-up place, a good growing-up place. Neighbors who cared, family and friends, and a lot of fun. Life was good. Not perfect, but good. We knew about problems, heard about them, saw them, lived through some hard ones ourselves, but our community wrapped itself around us, put itself between us and the hard knocks, to cushion the blows. (*Childtimes*, pp. 138–139)

After graduation from high school, she attended Miner Teachers' College (now the University of the District of Columbia) for two years, and then took a job as a clerk-typist at the U.S. Patent Office. In 1950, she married Robert Greenfield. They became the parents of two children, Steven and Monica, and grandparents of four. She has been writing since

she was in her early twenties and, to date, has published over 30 children's books, including biographies, picture books, board books, novels, and poetry.

Mrs. Greenfield's interest in literature and the arts was nurtured from childhood. She loved to read, and had ready access to the Langston branch of the public library, which was housed in the basement of one of the buildings in Langston Terrace. She also loved music and the theater:

It was all magical to me. My parents have to have credit for that because they loved the arts, and there was a lot of music in our lives, even before we could afford a record player. We had radio. We also would go to the Howard Theater to see shows. It was mostly jazz—musicians like Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan. All the big stars came there. And the Lincoln Theater, at that time, had films, and occasionally stage shows. We used to go to the Watergate Outdoor Theater to see opera. That was long before the hotel was built.¹

As soon as I started writing, I knew that was what I wanted to do. Just putting the words down and re-arranging them and trying to say precisely what I wanted to say was fascinating.

Writing, however, came later, when the boredom of her job—"typing basically the same letter every day," drove her to search for an alternative. She began with rhymes, which she now characterizes as "really ridiculous." Nevertheless, she had been bitten by the writing bug:

As soon as I started writing, I knew that was what I wanted to do. Just putting the words down and re-arranging them and trying to say precisely what I wanted to say was fascinating. . . . And then I thought I would test my talent; write three stories, and send them out. If they were rejected, that would be like three strikes. Of course, they were all rejected. I didn't even know how to market them, and I didn't know that I needed to learn the craft of writing. That's when I stopped for a few years. Subsequently, I discovered that you have to develop your craft; you really have to study and practice. So I started doing that.

Her first published work was a poem, "To a Violin," which was published on the editorial page of the *Hartford (Conn) Times*, in 1962. It was not a poem for children but, like many of her children's poems, it was influenced by her love of music; in this case, the sound of the violin. Her writing for children began when she was searching for books in which her own young children might see themselves reflected. She had joined the D.C. Black Writer's Workshop, where Sharon Bell Mathis, then head of the children's divi-

sion of that organization, was working on a biography of Ray Charles for the Crowell biography series. Ms. Mathis urged her to do a biography for the same series, and she chose to write about Rosa Parks. That biography was the recipient of the first Carter G. Woodson Award from the National Council for Social Studies, in 1974.

In 1978, her first book of poems, *Honey I Love and Other Love Poems* (Crowell) was published. A collection of poems focused on many variations of love and the things people can love, it has become a modern-day classic. Some of the poems—for example, "Things," "Harriet Tubman," and the title poem—have become classroom staples and have been anthologized many times. Mrs. Greenfield comments on the origin of the book:

I wrote the title poem, "Honey I Love," as a picture book. I liked that phrase, "Honey, let me tell you." It was a phrase that was used a lot by African American people, but it had not reached the point where it had become stereotyped. So I wanted to use that, and that's where the title came from. And I wanted to write about things that children love, about childhoods where there may or may not be much money, but there's so much fun. That's where the idea came from. Then I just had to find the different verses and the specific subjects I would write about. When I sent that in as a picture book, the editor said that it just didn't work and she suggested that I write other poems to accompany that. I still felt that it worked as a picture book, but the idea of doing other poems was very intriguing. So I decided to do that, and that's how that book came about. Then, in 1993, Harper asked me if I would mind using the title poem as a picture book. They didn't know about the origin.²

In the past twenty years, Mrs. Greenfield has published three other collections of her poetry for children: *Under the Sunday Tree* (1988), *Nathaniel Talking* (1989), and *Night on Neighborhood Street* (1991). In addition, she has published three single poems in picture book format: *Africa Dream* (1977), *Daydreamers* (1981), and *For the Love of the Game*:

Mrs. Greenfield's poems are marked by strong rhythms, expressions of emotion, and a strong sense of children, their voices, and the way-stations on their journey through life.

Michael Jordan and Me (1997), six board books consisting of single poems for very young children: *Daddy and I* (1991), *My Doll Keshia* (1991), *I Make Music* (1991), *Sweet Baby Coming* (1994), *Kia Tanisha* (1997) and *Kia Tanisha Drives Her Car* (1997), and another Let's Read Aloud book, *On My Horse* (1995).

Mrs. Greenfield's poems are marked by strong rhythms, expressions of emotion, and a strong sense of children, their voices, and the way stations on their journey through life. She frequently uses rhyme, particularly in work for younger children, but her poems vary in form and style. Her poetry reflects or comments on the specific cultural experience of growing up African American in this society, but the topics and themes—love, family, neighbors, dreams, the joy of living, the resilience of the human spirit—reach out to all children. Both her poetry and her prose reflect some African American linguistic and musical traditions. Music is an especially important influence:

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With the poetry and prose, I think the music that you grow up with, and that you love, is a part of you. It's a part of your speech and a part of your personality. And so there are times when I consciously decide that I want to write about music; for example, the blues poem "My Daddy" in *Nathaniel Talking*. But there are other times when I just hear the music of speech, and when I'm writing, it flows into the work. Then, if I can't find the word that will make that rhythm fit, even if everything else fits, even if it rhymes perfectly and has the exact meaning I want, if it feels wrong musically, I can't use it.

Jazz music is a special interest of Mrs. Greenfield's. In 1982, along with musician Byron Morris, she produced a recording of the poems from *Honey, I Love*. The poems are interpreted by Mrs. Greenfield and a group of young children, and are accompanied by a jazz ensemble. It also includes a monologue by Mrs. Greenfield on jazz music. A very appealing album that brought pleasure to children of a generation now grown, it is currently unavailable, but she is working on making it available again to a new generation.

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"Nathaniel's Rap," from *Nathaniel Talking*, indicates Mrs. Greenfield's awareness of current popular music as well as her ability to express the feelings and concerns of a nine-year-old. *Nathaniel Talking* also reflects Mrs. Greenfield's sensitivity to children and their concerns. "I love writing for children, and I've always enjoyed spending time with children, observing them and trying to figure out what they're thinking and what their lives are like."

When asked about how the process of writing operates for her, Mrs. Greenfield explained that writing poetry and fiction is a different process from writing biography.

With biography, it's totally a conscious decision to write about someone. I go and do the research, make all the notes, and when I start to write, that's when I sometimes get language that I'm not expecting. So it can happen during the writing process. With the other books, from the conception, there's usually something inside me that will start the process. I'll see a face, and the face will bring words, or I'll hear some music or a voice. So the similarity in the process, for all my writing, is that I have to go inside at some point and find the words.

She either composes on a word processor, or uses pen and paper. "I don't know how I make the distinction, but I know what I feel like doing." Revising and re-working poems is a significant part of the process. She remembers writing 20 drafts of some poems before reaching the final product. Finding the words is just the beginning.

Three of her books started, not with the words, but with the pictures. *Daydreamers* (1981) was written to accompany a series of child portraits drawn by the African American artist, Tom Feelings. *Under the Sunday Tree* (1988) is a collection of poems inspired by the paintings of Bahamian artist, Mr. Amos Ferguson. *Sweet Baby Coming* (1994) is a board book whose text accompanies Jan Spivey Gilchrist's drawings of a mother-to-be and her daughter getting ready for the new baby. When asked how starting with the pictures affected the process of writing the poems, Mrs. Greenfield had this to say:

It's very interesting. I like doing it. What I do is set the artwork out, and stare at it for weeks at a time. I look at the art one piece at a time. I've loved all the art that I've used, and so I try to capture my feeling about it and put that into words. I have an overall feeling for what I'm going to do, what I'm trying to accomplish. Then I finish one poem and move to the next one. It's necessary that I treat the artist's work with respect; that is, that I do what illustrators do, or should do, which is to stay within the context of the work so that it will never be in conflict with the original work. That's very different than the kind of freedom I have when I'm the initiator. Then I can do whatever I choose. So there's a restriction there, but it's balanced by the fact that you're inspired by the work the artist has done.

Although Mrs. Greenfield's books have been illustrated by a number of different artists over the years, 17 of her books have been illustrated by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. I asked her to talk about the collaboration between the two and what there is about Ms. Gilchrist's work that resonates with her:

Part of it was what I first saw in her work; and that is the eyes of the characters are so real. There is expression in the eyes. It looks like something that's impossible to do, but they look like real people who have feelings. And a lot of my work has to do with emotion. The other part is that we don't cross the line into each other's territory. I know that she re-

spects my work; she's going to read the manuscript a thousand times. When we worked in reverse, she knew that I would handle with care her work for *Sweet Baby Coming*. So that's another part of it; that kind of respect. And part of it is that, when my work goes to Jan, I know that she's going to come up with something wonderful. And she will go to that place where she goes, where things happen, and it will be perfect. There's always power in it. The other thing is it's always respectful of African American people.

Their most recent collaboration is *For the Love of the Game: Michael Jordan and Me* (1997). It is a poem in two parts. The first part shows images of Michael Jordan forgetting "to obey the law of gravity" as he seems to fly over the basketball court, providing inspiration for two children thinking about life and making links between their own spirits and that represented by Michael Jordan. I asked Mrs. Greenfield if this book had anything to do with her being a basketball fan:

I like basketball a lot. I don't know that I would go so far as to say that I am a fan. But I'm a fan of people who do things so well that it's almost miraculous. Jan Gilchrist and I had been watching Michael for many years, and when we wanted to do a book about the human spirit, we wanted to make it concrete for children. Because, of course, there is no picture of the human spirit, we wanted to compare it to something that they had seen—Michael Jordan flying—as a symbol of the human spirit that all of us have. And then Jan used the further symbol of the eagle because of the power of that spirit.

Mrs. Greenfield has been inspiring readers with her word images and visions of the human spirit for a quarter of a century. And her work continues; in 1998 there will be a new chapter book called *Easter Parade* published by Hyperion. And when she is able to get her pile of business work "down to a reasonable level"—she's been away from home quite a bit in recent months—she wants to write the text for another picture book.

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Mrs. Greenfield was delighted to learn that she had been selected as the 1997 winner of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for children. She commented: "I'm thrilled. It's such an honor. It's an important award and I'm very happy to receive it." The Selection Committee is proud and privileged to honor her work.

Notes

1. Quotes are from a telephone interview conducted on June 17, 1997.
2. The picture book (Let's Read Aloud) version of *Honey I Love*, with illustrations by Jan Spivey Gilchrist, was published by Harper in 1995.

Children's Books by Eloise Greenfield

Poetry

Africa Dream. Illus. by Carole Byard. Harper, 1977.

Honey I Love: And Other Love Poems. Illus. by Leo and Diane Dillon. Crowell, 1978.

Daydreamers. Drawings by Tom Feelings. Dial, 1981.

Under the Sunday Tree. Paintings by Mr. Amos Ferguson. Harper, 1988.

Nathaniel Talking. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Black Butterfly Children's Books, 1989.

Night on Neighborhood Street. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Dial, 1991.

Lisa's Daddy and Daughter Day. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Sundance, 1991. (*A Beginning Reader*)

For the Love of the Game: Michael Jordan and Me. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. HarperCollins, 1997.

Poetry Board Books

Daddy and I. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Black Butterfly Children's Books, 1991.

My Doll Keshia. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Black Butterfly Children's Books, 1991.

I Make Music. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Black Butterfly Children's Books, 1991.

Sweet Baby Coming. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. HarperFestival, 1994.

Kia Tanisha. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. HarperFestival, 1997.

Kia Tanisha Drives Her Car. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. HarperFestival, 1997.

Let's Read Aloud Books

On My Horse. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. HarperFestival, 1995.

Honey I Love. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. HarperFestival, 1995.

Other Books

Picture Books

Bubbles. Illus. by Eric Marlow. Washington, DC: Drum and Spear Press, 1972. Published as *Good News*. Illus. by Pat Cummings. Coward, 1977.

She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl. Illus. by John Steptoe. Lippincott, 1974.

Me and Neesie. Illus. by Moneta Barnett. Crowell, 1975.

First Pink Light. Illus. by Moneta Barnett. Crowell, 1976. Re-published with Illustrations by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Black Butterfly Children's Books, 1991.

Lessie Jones Little and Eloise Greenfield. *I Can Do It by Myself*. Illus. by Carole Byard. HarperCollins, 1978.

Darlene. Illus. by George Ford. Methuen, 1980. Re-published by Scholastic, 1995.

Grandmama's Joy. Illus. by Carole Byard. Philomel, 1980.

Grandpa's Face. Illus. by Floyd Cooper. Philomel, 1988.

Big Friend, Little Friend. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Black Butterfly Children's Books, 1991. (Board Book)

William and the Good Old Days. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. HarperCollins, 1993.

Aaron and Gayla's Alphabet Book. Illus by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Black Butterfly Children's Books, 1993.

Aaron and Gayla's Counting Book. Illus. by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Black Butterfly Children's Books, 1993.

Novels

Sister. Illus. by Moneta Barnett. Crowell, 1974.

Talk About a Family. Illus. by James Calvin. Lippincott, 1978.

Koya Delaney and the Good Girl Blues. Scholastic, 1992.

Biographies

Rosa Parks. Illus. by E. Marlow. Crowell, 1973.

Paul Robeson. Illus. by George Ford. Crowell, 1975.

Mary McLeod Bethune. Illus. by Jerry Pinkney. Crowell, 1975.

(with Alesia Revis) *Alesia*. Illus. by George Ford, with photographs by Sandra Turner Bond. Philomel, 1981.

(with Lessie Jones Little). *Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir*. Illus. by Jerry Pinkney. Crowell, 1979.

(Autobiography)

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