

READING THE RAINBOW

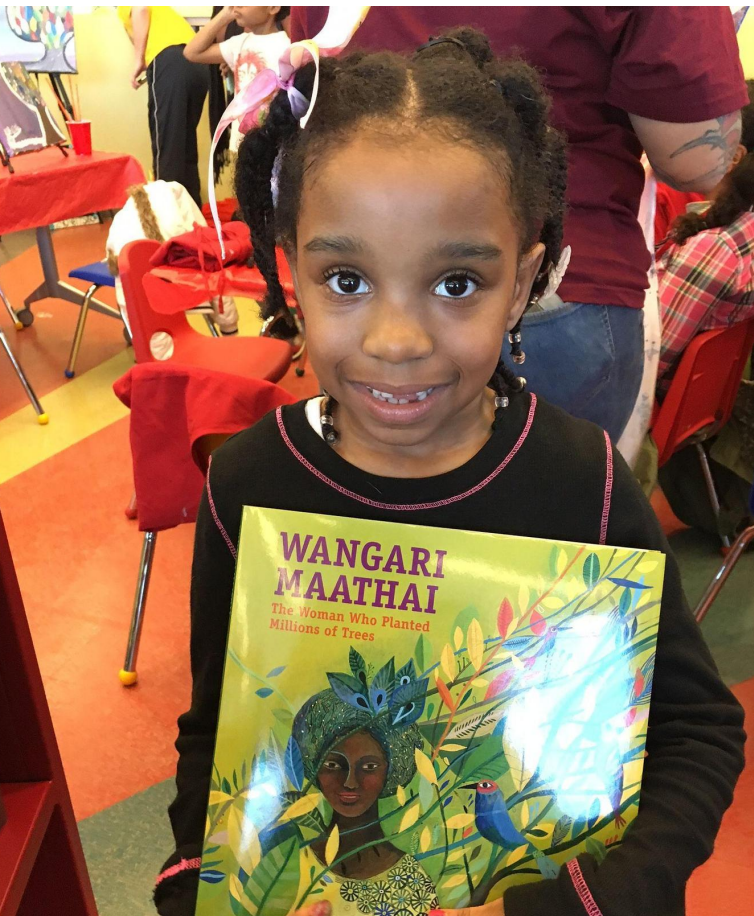
Founder of the Children's Africana Book Award, Brenda Randolph and her colleague Vanessa Oyugi share their passion for children's literature and the importance of reading diversely.

Brenda Randolph, Howard University and
Vanessa Oyugi, Howard University

Brenda, you founded the Children's Africana Book Award (CABA) in 1991. What inspired you to create this award? What did it take to get the prize off the ground?

I was inspired by a 2nd grader. After I read the book *Galimoto* to her class, she whispered to me, "Please read more books like this to my class. It shows what Africa is really like." A recent immigrant from Liberia, she was distressed by the ridiculous things classmates said to her about Africa. Her comments sparked an epiphany. As a school librarian, I knew well the power of the Newbery and Caldecott book awards. Could a prize that recognized books about Africa encourage educators and parents to choose better books? When I approached the Outreach Council and ASA executive board with the idea of an award, they enthusiastically agreed.

Getting the prize off the ground was a group effort. ASA members Ed Keller, Edna Bay, Gretchen Walsh, Barbara Brown, Jo Sullivan and Patricia Kuntz were early and enthusiastic supporters. Africanist scholars wrote book reviews and served on award committees as did children's literature scholars Meena Khorana and Vivian Yenika Agbaw. Funding and national recognition were our biggest challenges. A few early winners paid their way to the awards ceremony but most had not heard of CABA.



Partnerships with the Library of Congress, Teaching for Change, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art provided direct funds, in-kind funds and a national publicity platform. Volunteers were crucial. Charlene Brooks, a brilliant programmer, helped design a review database, and Harriet McGuire performed a myriad of tasks in addition to providing much-needed financial support. Most important has been the support and encouragement of my former professors Mbye Cham, Bob Edgar and other members of the faculty at the Department of African Studies at Howard University.

Vanessa, you having been working at Howard alongside Brenda including on the CABA for the past few years. What has been the most challenging part of working on the award? What is most inspiring?



Every year the CABA process begins with receiving book submissions, sending them out to reviewers, organizing CABA committee consultations that lead to the selection of winners. The work then moves to notifying and inviting the winners to the CABA Ceremony and Festival. And then the planning begins.

In some years we have quite a large number of winners which means we stay busy arranging their travel and accommodation, their schedule and itinerary which includes coordinating speaking events. These days are the busiest yet the most rewarding. Meeting the talented authors and illustrators is a treat we look forward to every year. CABA winners tend to come from all walks of life: different backgrounds, ethnicities, unique and diverse career backgrounds. Their stories are the driving force behind what we do! Therefore, celebrating their work and shining a light on their accomplishments is the highlight of our year.

The CABA is really a collaborative effort between multiple people and institutions. What are some of the initiatives that Howard, CABA, and Africa Access have been able to collaborate on that have excited you the most?

The newest and most exciting initiative is The Gold Road, a web-based, interactive map of people, places and trade items connected to medieval Ghana, Mali and Songhai. Other collaborators on The Gold Road include David Conrad (Empires of Medieval Africa CABA, 2005), Elsa Wiehe of the African Studies Center at Boston University and our Center media specialist Ania Ueno. We are currently adding enhancements to the map, based on teacher feedback. Another important initiative, the annual Global Read Webinar, features live book talks and interviews with CABA winners. Recorded sessions are available online and include Meja Mwangi (Mzungu Boy), Elizabeth Zunon (Grandpa Cacao), and Arushi Raina (When Morning Comes). We are looking forward to the February 2021 webinar with Zimbabwean writer Na'ima Roberts (Far from Home).

How have you seen children's literature change over time? How has CABA changed with it?

Books are better!! In the 1960s children's books set in African countries were often shockingly racist. I learned about the problems when a parent complained about

crude stereotypes in *The Voyages of Dr. Doolittle* by Hugh Lofting. Gradually we have seen improvements. There are still far too many books that treat Africa as a country, divide Africans into “tribes” or highlight outsiders rather than Africans as agents of change but we are seeing more books that we can recommend. A welcome trend is the increase in books by second generation African Americans, Nigerian Americans Nnedi Okorafor and Tochi Onyebuchi, Ivorian-American Elizabeth Zunon and Ugandan-American Nansubuga Nagadya Isdahl. Born in the US, but attuned to their parents’ cultures, their books bring fresh depictions of Africa that speak to American youth, many of whom are seeking characters who look like them. Another promising trend in children’s literature is the small but growing availability of books from African publishers. African Books Collective has been an important means of connecting publishers in Africa to the US market. CABA has recognized several titles published in Africa including four titles from Ghana’s Sub-Saharan Publishers. In an effort to increase the pool of African writers available to young people, in 2017 CABA created the New Adult category. The award recognizes adult books written by African authors that are suitable for mature teens. Recent New Adult titles include *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah and *Behold the Dreamers* by Imolo Mbue.

Each year you have a wonderful ceremony for the CABA winners but unfortunately this year the in-person celebration was canceled due to COVID-19. What are the digital ways that you connected with authors and readers this year?

This summer we launched CABA Book Talks on the CABA YouTube channel. Readers can access videos of CABA winners reading and discussing their award-winning books. In November we will celebrate the 2019 CABA winners during the ASA Outreach workshop. In December we will introduce social studies teachers to CABA books virtually during the National Conference on Social Studies.

The CABA website has made it very easy for teachers and parents to identify exceptional books for children (and themselves). Why do you believe it’s important to invest in Africana books for classrooms and at-home bookshelves for all children?

Africana books are useful tools in the dismantling of racism and notions of white supremacy. The picture book *Desmond and the Very Mean Word* (about Desmond Tutu) shows how racism hurts and provides strategies for handling bullies. *Hector* (about Hector Pieterse) profiles a South African child shot during a demonstration and how his community and country have honored his life. *Stones for my Father* (set in South Africa) gives voice to a white Afrikaner girl whose views and actions differ from those of the racists in her family and community.

Africana books are also a valuable means of imparting universal lessons. *Seeds of Change* (about Wangari Maathai) and *Gizo Gizo* (the trickster spider) can help students identify and rectify problems of soil erosion and water pollution in their own communities. *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* (about William Kamkwamba) highlights scientific curiosity and encourages youth to unleash their own ingenuity. *The Rise of the Golden Cobra* (set in ancient Nubia) champions good governance and promotes rules of engagement that protect prisoners of war and civilians.

We have seen many books about race and racism flying off bookstore shelves in recent months. Has this demand and the Black Lives Matter movement had an impact on children’s literature and/or literary education?

There has certainly been an uptick in the demand for socially relevant children’s books. The August 17 issue of Publishers Weekly highlights several librarians who are incorporating antiracist literature into their literary programs. Bianca Spurlock, a school librarian in Richmond, VA, notes that requests for relevant books have increased, not only from school administrators and parents, but from students themselves. According to Spurlock, “...the students bring it up, because our city has been a hotbed for protests and the students are aware.”

The larger question is: will the current demand for antiracist books spur lasting change in children’s literature? In large measure that depends on a publishing industry which Publishers Weekly editor Calvin Reid describes as “overwhelmingly white at every level.” Will publishers hire more people of color as editors and bring diversity to other key jobs in the industry? David Unger of CUNY’s City College is skeptical. “Often the book industry looks to show commitment to Black Lives Matter and diversity with the least amount of effort it can offer

A group of diverse young people, including a young man on the left and several young women, are holding copies of the book 'Abina and the Important Men'. The book cover features a line drawing of a group of people. The background is a warm, orange-toned overlay.

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before moving on.” In the July 13 issue of Publishers Weekly, author L.L. McKinney put it more bluntly, “we don’t get that support until we start dying in the streets.” CABA winner Tochi Onyebuchi concurs. To keep pressure on publishers he founded the Transparency Project which collects data on who is hired and payment differentials. “If publishers consistently make smaller bets on specific types of authors, it’s likely because they assume those authors are less desirable and marketable.” To assist people of color who want to work in the industry, David Unger invites them to enter CUNY’s Publishing Certificate Program. Founded in 1998 with the help of novelist Walter Mosley, the program aims to help students, especially students of color, get jobs in the publishing industry.

Do you have any advice for parents and teachers trying to inspire a love of reading more diversely?

BEGIN EARLY. American children as young as three view ‘all of Africa’ as a vast animal kingdom. By four or five, they can name several Asian and European countries but few can name even one country in Africa. Home and school libraries should reflect the world but because Africa has been so maligned and mis-represented, it should receive special attention.

READ ALOUD. Children of all ages enjoy a good story read aloud. Reading aloud expands their knowledge of the world, builds empathy while stimulating their imagination. Audiobooks are another read aloud

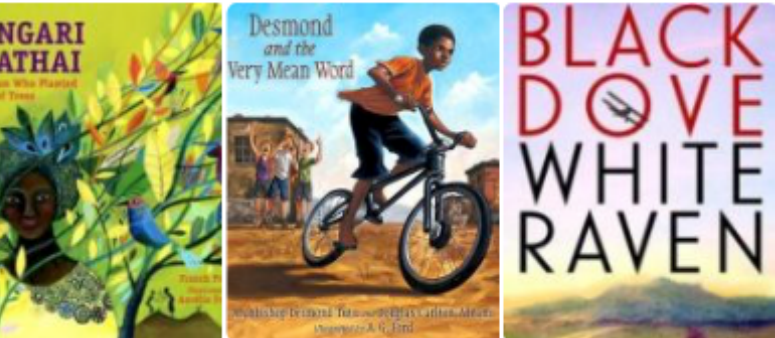


option, especially for auditory learners. Research has shown that audiobooks increase reading accuracy by 52% and reading comprehension by 76%. Recent CABA audiobooks include *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* (Mbalia), *Mirage* (Daud) and *War Girls* (Onyebuchi).

JOIN OUR READ AFRICA CHALLENGE. Parents and teachers can access the Read Africa Challenge at AfricaAccessReview.org. The 'Challenge Options' invite youth to participate in a variety of literary activities.

The CABA is already in its 28th successful year. What do you see for the future of the Children's Africana Book Award over the next three decades?

Recently, the Outreach Council included support for CABA in the Outreach by-laws. This strong institutional commitment will ensure the continuation of CABA for many years.



ASA was the first national area studies association to establish a book award for young people. Renewed commitment means CABA will continue to be a model for global understanding.

CABA participates in national social studies and literary conferences through partnerships with sister Title VI Centers. We need a presence at national diversity conferences including, People of Color, National Association of Black School Educators and Black Caucus. We also need to extend our reach to important international conferences including the Bologna Children's Book Fair and IBBY conferences (International Board of Books for Young People).

Getting more CABA books in the hands of youth is also critical. Through our partnership with An Open Book Foundation, hundreds of children in metropolitan Washington have received free CABA books. We hope to expand our gift book program regionally and nationally. Dolly Parton provides thousands of gift books each year through her Imagination Library program. Why can't we?