

*Early Literacy Article Feb. 2009*

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The book is old; older than Confederation, yet as relevant as the 2008 American presidential election. There are only three copies of this book in the world – one in England, one in United States, and one in Canada. In 1783, when this book was written, thousands of Black men, women and children in the United States wanted to see their name written between its covers. This “Book of Negroes” was a handwritten list of Black Loyalists to whom, at the end of the American Revolution, Britain offered safe passage from New York to Nova Scotia.

Freed slaves escaped to Canada on ships with other fleeing white Loyalists, some who travelled with slaves of their own. The courage and resilience of Black people during this time is humbling and the inspiration behind Black History Month. Though recognized decades earlier in Ontario, Black History Month was declared nationally for the first time in February of 1996.

Especially during Black History Month, we are reminded that adults can nurture an awareness and appreciation of Black culture and people among our children long before they are old enough to understand the history of slavery, or learn the names of Black leaders.

Books for children that simply depict Black people in illustrations affirm to all of us that Canadian society is only complete when the books we share with infants and toddlers include children of colour. “Whose Knees are These?” by Jabari Asim is a multicultural board book featuring babies knees. The book combines rhyme with a peek-a-boo guessing game.

“We All Went on Safari” by Laurie Krebs teaches children to count in both English and Swahili. The reader travels through Tanzania finding big cats, ostriches, warthogs, monkeys, elephants, and other wildlife to count.

“Why Mosquitos Buzz in People’s Ears” by Verna Aardema is an African folktale that offers a lesson about lying. The story begins with a mosquito telling a lie to an iguana. This sets off a series of events that affects everyone in the African forest.

“Amazing Grace” by Mary Hoffman shows the spunk and spirit of a Black girl, and demonstrates the power of love within a single parent family. Grace wants to be Peter Pan in a school play. Her classmates tell her she can’t play that role. She’s a girl, after all, and Black. Grace, however, with the encouragement of her mother and grandmother, makes up her mind to try for the part anyway. Her acting is brilliant and Grace learns, as her grandmother reminds her, “Grace, you can be anthin’ you wan’.”

For older children, “The Kids Book of Canadian Black History” by Rosemary Sadlier, overviews the events and people who shaped Canada. It’s a nonfiction book with fact boxes, mini profiles, timelines, stories and more.

During Black History Month, we recognize the tremendous contributions of Black people to Canada. We also remember that appreciation of cultural diversity can grow with each generation when we choose with care the books we read and talk about with our children.