

Negro characters; the use of unrealistic stereotypes of the Negro as simpleton or buffoon or servile "darky"; the failure to portray Negroes holding responsible positions or playing dignified roles. It was easy also to recognize certain desirable positive elements: for example, the portrayal of Negroes and whites in normal and unforced relations in which each accepted the other simply as a human being.

Such criteria were of course relevant to all children's books, no matter what the race of their readers. But in recent years there has been an increasing concern about books specifically for the child of minority groups, and especially for the very poor, academically unsuccessful Negro child living in urban slums. Most children's books, it was felt, dealt with matters outside his experience, from a point of view alien to his, using a vocabulary with which he was unfamiliar, and written at a level of reading difficulty beyond his competence. Books, on the other hand, within his reading skill were likely to have been written for much younger children and hence to seem childish and irrelevant to him. Do such children need to have books written specially for them, confined to a predetermined vocabulary and subject matter? There is, on the one hand an obvious need for books of greater relevance and books that are easy to read without being childish. But equally there is a danger of providing such a child with a barren, written-to-order book produced artificially and without the breath of life, without giving him access to truly great children's books of universal appeal which he needs as much, if not more, than luckier children and which with some preparation he would be equally ready to enjoy and be moved by. Children of meager background and cultural experience have a greater, not a smaller, need for the very finest books that the creative mind can produce.

Fortunately, the very range and variety of children's books and the resources of good school libraries mean that such questions do not have to be answered on an "either/or" basis. A school library can and should have both books whose vocabulary and sentence structure are tailored to the temporary limitations of a deprived child and books that stretch his mind and reading skills; both books that hold up a mirror to a life he knows and can recognize and can be helped to understand and books that open a window to a world within the reach of imagination; both books deliberately written to appeal to his special needs and interests, even to his special limitations, and books that unite him with all children in a common wonder and excitement.

But there were many technical questions that remained unanswered for authors and publishers attempting to produce books especially for the culturally disadvantaged child. It is easy to say "simple vocabulary," but how simple? It is easy to say "Appeal to their special interests and experience," but what are they and how to appeal to them? There was very little real knowledge of how to interest the culturally deprived child in reading and make it a rewarding and exciting experience for him, because almost no one had really tried to do so.

Children's books as recently as even five years ago had eliminated harmful stereotypes and included hundreds of titles that would help privileged white children better to understand and respect Negroes and would strengthen the self-respect of relatively privileged Negro children who read them, but they had made little effort to reach the truly underprivileged, marginally literate, culturally destitute child of the rural or urban slums, whatever his race.

This failure was related to the economic problem. Children don't buy books; other people buy books for them: parents and grandparents and uncles and aunts; school boards and libraries and Sunday schools. But until almost yesterday nobody bought books for the child of the slums, black or white, rural or urban. Their parents often were uninterested, and had neither money nor knowledge when they were. Slum churches have no libraries, and until the last very few years neither did the schools of impoverished districts. As recently as two years ago, the elementary schools of New York, the nation's greatest city, and Washington, its capital, had no school libraries, and this was only too true of urban schools generally and of those of poor rural areas. The children of homes barren of books went to schools barren of books. Only the public libraries, with pitifully limited funds and too often with limited contact with the culturally neediest children made a serious effort to serve them. And the children of the rural slums often had no public library services at all. The segregation of many public libraries in some southern states further limited the service to Negro children. One consequence of society's ignoring the book needs of these disadvantaged children was that there were no funds for research or opportunities for experience in determining the kinds of books required to meet their special needs. Another consequence was that when a publisher did try to produce a