



QUEENS PUBLIC LIBRARY



THE AUGUSTA BAKER COLLECTION

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(Photo credit: From the Augusta Baker Papers, 1911-1998, the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.)



AUGUSTA BAKER: CHILDREN'S LIBRARIAN, EDUCATOR & MASTER STORYTELLER

Augusta Braxton Baker (1911-1998), a Baltimore, Maryland native, was a pioneering New York Public Library children's librarian, author, educator, and master storyteller. But her most notable role was as an advocate for positive Black representation in children's literature.

Mrs. Baker's advocacy stemmed from the negative portrayal of Black life in children's storytelling. The published works of this period described Black people across the diaspora as stereotypical caricatures. Through personal experience and observation by serving the children of Harlem at the 135th Street branch, now the

(Photo credit: From the Augusta Baker Papers, 1911-1998, the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.)

Countee Cullen library, Baker saw first-hand the detriment this depiction posed to Harlem's Black children.

Consequently, concerned about Black children across the country as well as the diaspora, Mrs. Baker challenged the publishing industry to reform this practice. In 1939, she began examining her own library collection. She then started implementing titles which she felt illustrated Black life accurately. This curation led to the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection*.

Later, Baker went on to publish the first edition of *Books about Negro Life for Children*, a book catalog which she considered to be an effective tool to help librarians and library patrons find reading material which depicted Black life without bias. Hence, her passion for the cultivation of Black adolescent minds is credited with influencing noted Black literary luminaries who passed through her library doors, such as poet Audre Lorde and writer James Baldwin. Ms. Lorde is quoted as saying that Baker's fierce advocacy for children's literacy within that Harlem community saved her life.

*James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) - African American-Bahamian poet, lyricist, and civil rights leader; best known for writing the lyrics to the Black national anthem *Lift Every Voice*.

THE CURATION OF THE AUGUSTA BAKER COLLECTION

Brief Historical Background

From 1740 to 1834, literacy in the United States of America for African Americans was both complicated and disparate based on region.

In Southern states, people of African descent were forbidden from reading, writing, or simply being in possession of a book due to draconian anti-literacy laws. However, in Northern states, where slavery was not outlawed until 1827, literacy in the African-American community was slightly better, since some were more likely to have access to a formal private education predominantly sponsored by Quakers. Still, many Northern cities, counties, and states did not allow African Americans, free or fugitive, to attend their public school systems.

In 1865, Congress passed the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery. This ushered in the Reconstruction Era (1866-1877), when African Americans desperately sought freedom and agency through literacy by establishing schools, particularly in the South. Northern states, like Pennsylvania, had already established schools such as the African Institute, now known as Cheney University, approximately 30 years earlier in 1837.

African-American leaders and educators understood literacy and education were pathways to true emancipation, yet the first African-American publishing house was not formed until 1942. It is within that historical framework that, in 1939, Augusta Baker began the curation of the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, now known as the Augusta Baker Collection, here at the Queens Public Library.

The James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection

Augusta Baker's curation of the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, commenced at a time when African-American children were exposed to negative portrayals of African-Americans and African American culture in children's books¹. In fact, prior to 1948, the number of adolescent books about minority groups, particularly African American children, was minuscule and most books did nothing to dismantle existing prejudices and stereotypes². Unfortunately, during that period, White authors of children's literature were not interested in motivating African-American children; their primary goal was to entertain fellow Whites³.

However, White authors were not the only ones that perpetuated systemic racism through literature: publishers were also complicit given their little contact with and knowledge of African-American communities⁴. In fact, most publishing houses did not believe that many African Americans could read,



(Photo credit: Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library)

and they assumed that those who could were financially incapable of purchasing books⁵. As a result, writers were able to base their knowledge of racial groups, particularly Blacks, on their association with a few individuals who needed employment or assistance rather than by personal relationships⁶.

Black librarians and educators realized this practice was harmful to both African American and White children

and therefore understood that they would have to take responsibility for changing the image of African Americans in children's books. Arturo Schomburg**James Weldon Johnson, and a group of Harlem women who called themselves The James Weldon Johnson Literary Guild worked closely with Augusta Baker to actualize this change⁷.

First, Augusta Baker removed children's books from her library shelves that depicted African Americans as caricatures. These books included characters that were poverty-stricken; characters that were lazy but carefree living on a plantation; and characters that had distorted body features and/or spoke with stereotypical dialect⁸. Next, Baker collaborated with Johnson, Schomburg, and the James Weldon Johnson Literary Guild on purchasing forty books, which through their language, theme, and illustrations gave African American children an unbiased, accurate and informed picture of Black life all over the world⁹.

Baker chose illustrations as the first selection criteria. She noticed the children in her Harlem community were unhappy with the images they saw. Baker said "we watched our boys and girls in the library, we realized that they went to the shelves, took down a book and looked at it carefully"¹⁰. "They looked at the illustrations before they did any reading"¹¹.

Baker understood that the children did not see themselves in those illustrations and sought to have illustrations with features that were natural, unique, and distinct to Black children¹².

The next general criterion was the theme, which Baker admitted was a challenge for the committee¹³. Baker felt that thematically, an African-American character could not be presented as a clown or a jester, but instead a central figure who was making some important contribution to the progress of society¹⁴.

The last criterion was language. Baker believed that the library needed to eliminate books which described African Americans in terms of derision¹⁵.

Augusta Baker stated that her purpose for curating the James Weldon Johnson collection was "to bring together books for children that gave an unbiased, accurate, well-rounded picture of Negro life in all parts of the world"¹⁶. Despite initial reservations from the publishing industry, Baker was able to implement this dream when she found an ally in Fredrick Melcher of the R.R. Bowker Company, the donor of the Newberry and Caldecott medals. Mr. Melcher literally took Baker "before a gathering of children's editors and told her to say her piece"¹⁷. Eventually, some listened.

In sum, the original James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of approximately forty titles became remarkably close to meeting all the criteria established earlier for children's books, even though very few books could fully meet those three requirements in the late 1930s or early 1940s¹⁷. As a result, Baker was a valuable resource to authors, artists, and publishers working with children's books by and about African Americans to provide the best literature for all children¹⁸.

¹Nancy Tolson, "Making Books Available: The Role of Early Librarians, Librarians and Booksellers in the Promotion of African American Children's Literature," *African American Review* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1998), <https://doi.org/Gale|A20610467>.

²Tolson

³Tolson

⁴Tolson

⁵Tolson

⁶Tolson

^{**} Arturo Schomburg (1874-1938) - Afro-Puerto Rican archivist, *American Negro Academy* President and curator who collected works on black diasporic culture, currently housed at New York Public Library's Schomburg Center.

⁷Tolson

⁸Tolson

⁹Tolson

¹⁰Augusta Baker, "Guidelines for Black Books: An Open Letter to Juvenile Editors," *The Publisher's Weekly* 196 (July 14, 1969): 131-3.

¹¹Baker, *Guidelines for Black Books*, 131.

¹²Baker, 131.

¹³Baker *Guidelines for Black Books* 132

¹⁴Nancy Tolson, "Making Books Available: The Role of Early Librarians, Librarians and Booksellers in the Promotion of African American Children's Literature," *African American Review* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1998), <https://doi.org/Gale|A20610467>.

¹⁵Augusta Baker, "Guidelines for Black Books: An Open Letter to Juvenile Editors," *The Publisher's Weekly* 196 (July 14, 1969): 131-33.

¹⁶Maxine Modell Merriman, "Augusta Baker: Exponent of the Oral Art of Storytelling; Utilizing Video as a Medium" (dissertation, 1983).

¹⁷Nancy Tolson, "Making Books Available: The Role of Early Librarians, Librarians and Booksellers in the Promotion of African American Children's Literature," *African American Review* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1998), <https://doi.org/Gale|A20610467>

¹⁸Maxine Modell Merriman, "Augusta Baker: Exponent of the Oral Art of Storytelling; Utilizing Video as a Medium" (dissertation, 1983).



(Photo credit: Luis Aucapina @Queens Public Library)

THE AUGUSTA BAKER COLLECTION AT THE QUEENS PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Augusta Baker Collection at the Queens Public Library (QPL) originates from Baker's groundbreaking curation of the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection for the New York Public Library system. Mrs. Baker also held a strong connection to Queens, as a resident of the prominent African American and Caribbean middle-class community, St. Albans, from 1948 until she moved to South Carolina in 1980. It was Mrs. Baker's departure from New York that led to her personally gifting to QPL the books from her private collection on the Black experience, with the center of QPL's collection

being titles that had been part of the original James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection.

The gift was pivotal to the enhancement of QPL's reference center since the library lacked a children's collection devoted to Black history and culture, and it would serve as a complement to QPL's adult Carter G Woodson Reference Collection dedicated to African American studies.

In short, The Augusta Baker Collection at QPL is a historical children's book collection of more than five hundred titles centered on the experience of the Black diaspora, as expressed through picture books, novels, and short stories, as well as folklore, poetry, biographies, and additional works of non-fiction from the 1940s to the late 20th century.

The books are available to QPL library users who are interested in examining the history of the Black experience as reflected in children's literature. The collection resides in Jamaica, New York at the Central Library's Children's Library Discovery Center, located on the second floor behind the reference desk. Please see the children's librarian for assistance.



(Photo credit: Courtesy of Richland Library, Columbia, S.C.)

LEGACY OF THE AUGUSTA BAKER COLLECTION

Augusta Braxton Baker was a pioneering figure in children's literature. She fiercely believed that representation played a significant role in shaping children's - specifically, Black children's- self-esteem and values. Consequently, Augusta Baker's legacy will be as a visionary who understood the power of intent, imagery, and ideas, which are elements that influence not just Black children - but all children. Thus, the Augusta Baker Collection at Queens Public Library will serve as a template for marginalized communities who are looking for their stories to be told. In a time when books are being challenged, and sometimes banned, the Augusta Baker Collection at Queens Public Library is an example on how books may be used to challenge a system.

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Children's Library Discovery Center

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