

Discussing Race and Betsy-Tacy with Children

Recently, the BTS received this query from a parent:

I have been reading the series with my six-year-old daughter this year. She loves it! I'm just starting to read her *Betsy and Tacy Go Downtown* and am wondering if your Society offers any advice for talking to kids about the racism in the book, or if there is an outline for parents of what to expect in subsequent books that may require further conversation. It's so great how the girls stuck up for the Syrian girl in the previous book, but now we are into child and adult blackface with performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

We are grateful to this parent for encouraging us to consider this issue and to offer some guidance.

Looking at historical books with today's eyes

A recent trend in children's literature is to examine classic stories for stereotypes and cultural messages that, given today's standards and social mores, are now considered offensive. Lara Walsh notes that books "that were once an indispensable part of a school's reading curriculum are now receiving backlash or even being altered for containing themes or characters displaying overt racism or sexism."¹ Mitali Perkins adds, "Racial slurs in classic books can lead to talk about expulsion from the canon." The *Little House* series, several Dr. Seuss titles, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* are often cited as examples of much-loved classics with troubling aspects when viewed by contemporary eyes.

Maud's treatment of "Other" characters

By all accounts, Maud Hart Lovelace does an exemplary job of creating Syrian characters and integrating them into her stories. In *Steeped in Stories: Timeless Children's Novels to Refresh Our Tired Souls*, Mitali Perkins notes that in *Emily of Deep Valley*, for example, "we see fully fleshed Syrian characters through the eyes of hospitable Emily and her grandfather."²

Mitali offers an example of how to unpack and discuss a specific scene in *Emily* in which a racial slur appears:

When reading this book aloud to children, I find Bobby Sibley's use of "dago" as a negative slang word a good place to stop and discuss the danger of such ignorant

St. Clare came in, and good old Uncle Tom, and funny Aunt Ophelia with her corkscrew curls, and the comical Topsy.

The audience laughed uproariously at Topsy.

"I 'spect I growed," she said. "Don't think nobody never made me."

She sang a song about it.

"Oh, white folks I was neber born,

Aunt Sue, she raised me in de corn . . ."

• • • •

The waits between the acts of the play did not break the spell. A black-faced quartette sang plantation melodies, told jokes, and cakewalked.

—*Betsy and Tacy Go Downtown*
(1943), pp. 63-64

¹ Lara Walsh, "10 classic children's books that haven't aged well," *Insider* (May 14, 2019), <https://www.insider.com/classic-childrens-books-that-havent-aged-well-2019-5>

² Mitali Perkins, *Steeped in Stories: Timeless Children's Novels to Refresh Our Tired Souls* (2021, Broadleaf Books).

labels. At one point in the book, Emily turns to Bobby, one of the Deep Valley boys she is trying to recruit to join a club, to ask if he knows any Syrian boys: “Naw! They’re . . .” He stopped and looked cautiously at his father.”

I’d pause there for a moment. “Why does Bobby stop and look at his father?” I might ask a circle of upturned faces gathered around me. “What is he about to say, do you think?” I’d listen to their answers and talk about their prediction, and then we’d keep reading.

“What were you going to say, son?”

“You told me not to say it.”

“Then I’m glad you didn’t.”

I’d pause again. “Have your parents ever warned you not to use certain words when it comes to talking about other people?” I’d ask, and we’d talk about that for a bit. I might even introduce the term *slur*. “Have you ever been called something like that? How did it make you feel? . . . Let’s keep reading and see if [Bobby’s] view of Kalil changes.” . . .

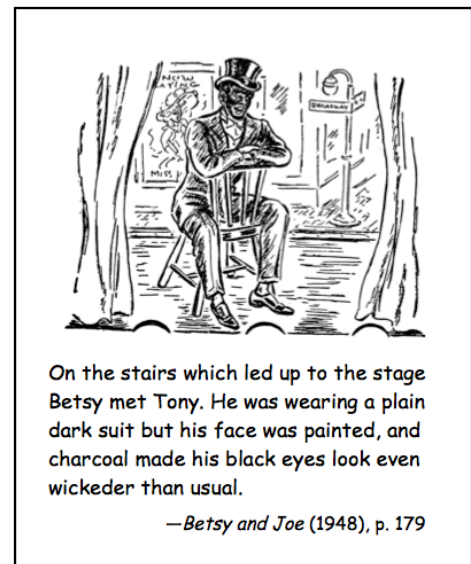
You might disagree with this, but in my eyes, even without adult mediation, an astute child reader can see from the book that slurs separate us and are used only by ignorant people.³

In other words, there is **so much that is good** here. Rather than consider “expulsion from the canon,” we believe that the Deep Valley books offer useful models of inclusion and provide many teachable moments. Mitali concludes, “I think Syrian children today would feel empowered and celebrated by Auntie Maud’s novel” (p. 103).

But then we come to blackface

Scenes of white characters in blackface are jarring and disturbing to us today. Says professor and author Jacqueline Stewart, “It’s probably shocking to people now to see this and think, ‘Well, how was that *possibly* acceptable?’ But this kind of representation seemed perfectly fine to the powers that be because they maintained the status quo in terms of America’s race relations.”⁴

The practice of donning blackface to portray Black characters of African descent was a staple of vaudeville, theater, and film for more than a hundred years.⁵ Historically, blackface was one way that the dominant white culture marginalized Black people and justified the power imbalance.



³ Mitali Perkins, 2021 (pp. 100–102). Excerpt used with permission.

⁴ Turner Classic Movies, *TCM Original Production: Blackface and Hollywood* (January 27, 2020). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tf4OKW_fqYU

⁵ Turner Classic Movies, 2020.

Blackface is part of the toxic culture of racism. It is an assertion of power and control. It allows a society to routinely and historically imagine African Americans as not fully human. It serves to rationalize violence and Jim Crow segregation.

—David Leonard, professor of comparative ethnic studies and American studies,
Washington State University⁶

But is that what Maud is doing in these chapters of *Downtown* and *Betsy and Joe*? No. Maud simply mentions blackface as an observer of current events.

That being said, we cannot gloss over the potential hurt and confusion these scenes may cause for today's readers. Wendy Burton—a public health nurse, lifelong Betsy-Tacy fan, and mom of biracial kids—pointed out that when we say, “Oh, you know, these things were more acceptable in the past,” we're leaving out a few key words: “These things were more acceptable **to white people** in the past.” Racism and racist behavior may have been more overtly tolerated by the dominant group, but it was never acceptable.

Some suggested talking points

Emily Wax-Thibodeaux writes about watching the movie *Holiday Inn* with her biracial children, who were understandably startled and confused by the characters in blackface. She consulted her kids' teacher, Phillip Andrew Williams, who recommended keeping the discussion as simple as possible for very young children.⁷

One way to begin is to present some basic factual information, appropriate to the age and maturity level of your children. For example:

- Blackface is a form of theatrical makeup used by non-Black performers to portray (a caricature of) a Black person.
- To apply blackface, white performers darkened their skin with shoe polish, greasepaint (an oily mixture of grease tinted with color, used for stage makeup), or burnt cork. They also painted on enlarged lips and other exaggerated features.
- Although the exact moment that blackface originated isn't known, its roots date back to centuries-old European theatrical productions, most famously Shakespeare's *Othello*.
- Performing in blackface peaked in popularity before the Civil War (early 1800s) and stayed popular into the early 1900s, a period when demands for civil rights by recently emancipated slaves triggered racial hostility.
- Its popularity began to decline after the 1930s. By the mid-20th century, changing attitudes about race and racism effectively brought an end to blackface in theatrical performances.

⁶ Alexis Clark, “How the History of Blackface Is Rooted in Racism,” *History.com* (updated April 20, 2021). <https://www.history.com/news/blackface-history-racism-origins>

⁷ Emily Wax-Thibodeaux, “My 5-year-olds saw blackface in a 1942 Christmas movie. They had a lot of questions,” *Chicago Tribune* (February 8, 2019). <https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/parenting/ct-life-blackface-parenting-20190208-story.html>

Note: PBS KIDS recommends practicing what you want to say before you actually say it.⁸

Next, ask your children what they think and how they feel about it. Follow up with what you think and how you feel about it.

Tell your children why we now understand this practice to be racist and wrong—again, using language appropriate to their age and maturity level. For example:

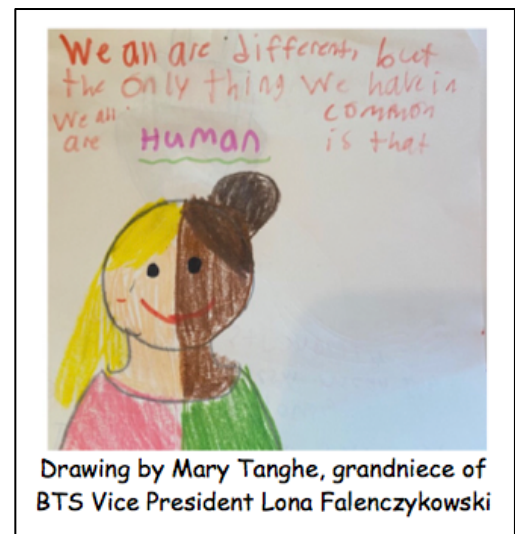
- Blackface was a way that white people pretended that Black people weren't human. It was a way to strip the humanity from people of color.
- It was also a way to present Black people as childlike figures to white audiences. ("See, they can't hurt you!")⁹
- The white performers played characters who perpetuated many negative stereotypes of Black people, thus further demeaning and dehumanizing African Americans.¹⁰

Phillip Andrew Williams suggested that Emily Wax-Thibodeaux say to her kids, "Painting your face to look like a real-life person who looks different from you is a really bad idea because you can really hurt someone's feelings and make them feel unsafe to be around you."¹¹

A nice conclusion to the discussion might be to talk about how to be an ally. From the PBS KIDS website:¹²

- Ask your child what they would do if they saw the characters in the book being made fun of, or called names, or bullied.
- Have your child write a sentence or draw a picture about how they can be an ally and who they can be an ally to.

"Children might not feel like they have a lot of power—but they do," says Dr. Aisha White, who directs the University of Pittsburgh's P.R.I.D.E Program.¹³ Teaching young children to be allies can empower them and get them thinking about what they can do to address racial injustice head on.



How have you handled these scenes when you read Betsy-Tacy with children? Do you have any additional tips or tales to share with us? We'd love to hear from you!

⁸ PBS KIDS website, *How to Talk Honestly With Children About Racism* (June 9, 2020). <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-to-talk-honestly-with-children-about-racism>

⁹ TCM: *Blackface and Hollywood*.

¹⁰ Alexis Clark, 2021.

¹¹ Emily Wax-Thibodeaux, 2019.

¹² PBS KIDS, 2020.

¹³ PBS KIDS, 2020.