African-American Women and Their Contributions to Librarianship in the U.S.

CASE STUDY OF AUGUSTA BAKER’S BIBLIOGRAPHIC WORK

www.trmillerproject-bakerproject.weebly.com

S580 Final Project
T. Miller
April 2018
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biography</td>
<td>p. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker’s Bibliographic List</td>
<td>p. 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td>p. 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works by Baker</td>
<td>p. 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos</td>
<td>p. 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**BIOGRAPHY**

Augusta Braxton Baker

**Earlier Years**
- Was born April 1, 1911, in Baltimore, MD.
- She was an only child.
- Both her parents were school-teachers, and introduce her to reading at an early age.
- At the age of 16, she graduated from an all-black high-school where her father taught.
- She went to the University of Pittsburgh, and married James Baker III at the end of her sophomore year.
- Newly married, they moved to Albany, New York, where she attended Albany’s Teacher College and received a B.A in Education (1933), and taught in the public school system. However, she soon discovered an interest in librarianship, and got a B.S. in Library Science (1934).
- Sometime later, the Bakers moved to New York City. Although it was the Depression, Baker filled out job applications anyways, but her husband was against her taking one since he already had one; he wanted her to free the job market up for someone who really needed one. She obliged, and sometime later had their first child.

**NYPL**
- However, in 1937, she was grudgingly hired by New York Public Library (NYPL) as a children’s librarian at the 135th Street Branch in Harlem (now Countee Cullen Branch).
- She took an in-service training course by Mary Gould Davis (Dean of NYPL Storytellers).
- Although Baker was employed, African-Americans struggled nationally because of racism and segregation. Prior to Baker’s hiring, African-American women found it hard to get hired or promoted within the library. A few were hired as substitutes, and given a probationary period, even though they had some schooling compared to the White women being hired who didn’t.
- Baker also faced this rejection. She had applied some time earlier, but was told there were no “Negro openings,” but the protest of W.E.B. Du Bois and the Harlem community pressured the library to promote some of the African-American females already employed there. This protest also led to Baker finally being accepted, and getting a permanent position as a children’s librarian; and being promoted later on.
- While doing her job, Baker quickly became dishearten to see the negative depictions of black characters in children’s books. As a result, she started removing the negative books, and replacing them with more positive ones. This compelled her to create a bibliography list titled, *Books about Negro Life for Children*, depicting African-Americans positively. She started
this list in 1939, and completed it around 1946. This project became a way for her to fight racism and segregation, and advocate interculturalism. This list was published in 1954. This list resulted in the development of the James Weldon Johnson Collection, which Baker helped develop.

- Baker also was an accomplished story-teller. In 1953 she was promoted to Story-teller Specialist.
- From 1954-1961, Baker held the positions of Assistant Coordinator and Story-teller Specialist.
- During this time, she divorced her first husband, who later died in 1956.
- In 1961, Baker was promoted to Coordinator of Children’s Services for all 82 NYPL locations, which she held for 13 years. During this time, Baker developed the library’s collection by adding audiovisual materials. She held this position until 1974.
- After 37 years of work at the NYPL, she retired 1974.

**USC**

In 1980, she moved to South Carolina, where she became Storyteller-in-Residence at the University of South Carolina. In 1987, she started an annual storytelling festival on the campus called Augusta Baker’s Dozen. She retired indefinitely in 1994.

**Other Accomplishments**

- Writing stories, stories collections, guides, and expositions.
- Writing and editing for numerous works.
- Being a consultant for *Sesame Street* (TV show).
- Teaching and lecturing on storytelling and children’s literature at various universities and organizations.
- Conducting a weekly broadcast called *The World of Children’s Literature* on WNYC Radio, during the 1970’s.
- She was involved in the development of the Coretta Scott King Book Award.
- Connecting and networked with authors, illustrators, publishers, agents, and community leaders to advocate her agenda.
- Serving on the ALA Executive Board, and was active in the following library organizations: ALSC, PLA, and the SCLA. For example, she was the:
  - Caldecott Committee Chair in 1966.
  - Division Chair for the ALSC in 1967-68.
- Awards received:
  - 1953 – First recipient of the Dutton McCrae Award for Intercultural Children’s Work in 1953.
  - 1968 – ALA Grolier Award.
  - 1971 – WNBA award (formerly the Constance Lindsay Skinner Award).
  - 1975 – Clarence Day Award.
  - 1975 – Honorary ALA Membership.
  - 1986 – Parents Magazine Medal Award.
  - 1986 – Honorary Doctorate from USC.
  - 1993 – Second recipient of ALSC Distinguished Service Award.
Later Years
She died February 23, 1998, in Columbia, SC. She was survived by her second husband (Gordon Alexander), one son, and two grand-daughters. After her death, her family donated her works to NYPL, USC Library, and Queens Library.
BAKER’S BIBLIOGRAPHICAL LIST
Books About Negro Life For Children
• This 16-page booklet is an extensive collection of 20th century children’s books based on African-American life.
• It contains 132 titles; with short annotations.
• Baker created this list between the years 1939-1963.
• The first edition of the list was published in 1946, titled, Books about Negro Life for Children. It had other editions in 1949, 1957, 1961, and 1963. In 1971, the list received a new title, The Black Experience in Children’s Books. However, this study is on the 1946 edition.
• This bibliography list is geared for pre-school, primary, and young adult age-groups.
• It’s categorized by: Stories; Folklore; Literature and the Arts; Songs; Biography, Travel, History; and Poetry.
• The Stories section is categorized by following age-groups: Pre-school and Primary, Upper Elementary, and Older Boys and Girls.
• This list was available for free at the 135th Street Branch where Baker worked; but sold for a small fee at other NYPL locations.
• Some issues concerning this list were the inclusion and exclusion of some titles. For example, the controversial book Little Black Sambo was included for reasons beyond Baker’s control. However, Baker was able to omit in the 1949 edition.
• Other issues were epithets. It should also be noted that during this time period, the controversial word “Negro” was commonly used. Baker used that term because of the time period she lived in. However, in this study it will not be used except in quotes.
• This collection is currently shelved at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division of the NYPL.
• This collection can also be found online at The New York Public Library Digital Collections: https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/c4c9dea0-4569-0135-96d9-05197e2ce88e#/?uuid=c51e2c40-4569-0135-3e21-009db8146662
CASE STUDY

Introduction
Throughout history, women have made meaningful contributions in the field of librarianship. However, little research has been done on the contributions of African-American women; one being Augusta Baker, former New York Public Library (NYPL) children’s librarian and noted storyteller.

The height of Baker’s career was during the early to mid-20th century. It was a time in U.S. history when modernization and progression were advancing for women and minorities. Both groups were fighting for justice and their rightful place in society. During her time at NYPL (1937-1974), she made a significant contribution in the area of bibliographic work for children’s black literature. She noticed weaknesses, and worked hard to make changes. Despite social limitations, Baker excelled and became an expert in children’s literature and storytelling; laying the groundwork for others in this field. As a result, she became a sought-after teacher, lecturer, and consultant.

This is a study on Baker’s bibliographic work titled, *Books about Negro Life for Children*, which she developed over a period of time (1939-1963). Early on in her career, she noticed negative depictions and stereotypes of African-American characters in children’s books. To resolve this problem, Baker created this collection of stories that depicted African-American characters positively. By creating this bibliography, librarians and parents could then search from an extensive list of books to use rather than referring to denigrating ones.

Purpose of Study
The purpose of this study is to examine Baker’s bibliographic work to determine what factors define quality, African-American children’s literature.

Methodology
A case study research methodology with a qualitative approach was used since I examined Baker’s work by reviewing and analyzing resources I found. No quantitative data was collected.

Sources Used:
Both primary and secondary sources were used to examine Baker’s work. Primary sources used were: Archival books and photos, interviews, and journals articles. However, the main source used was archival books being they were Baker’s published and archived bibliographies. These resources were gathered from digital libraries, academic databases, and historical-themed websites. Secondary sources used were articles gathered from academic databases, and websites dedicated to Baker’s work.

These resources were effective because they provided direct insight and first-hand knowledge into Baker’s work; detailing her feelings, values, ideas, and accomplishments, as well as her relations with colleagues, and community leaders. These resources also describe the time period and social culture in which Baker lived.

Unfortunately, some resources weren’t accessible without me doing some distant travelling. I don’t think these other sources would have been more useful, but I believe they would’ve added more knowledge and insight into the matter. For example, it would’ve been helpful to read Baker’s books that she wrote, review more of her writings (articles, letters, etc.), listen to
some of her recorded lectures, and view the Sesame Street shows she consulted on to get a better idea of what she thought merited quality child literature.

**Study Limitations**

Even though the qualitative case study research strategy was a good strategy for this study, there were still limitations.

**Some limitations of this type of study (case studies) are:**

- **Bias of researcher:** Although my research was straight-forward, I presented all the information in its originality the best I could without including or excluding certain pieces of information.
- **Qualifications of the researcher:** Being a MLS student, I felt qualified to do this type of research for the level of this project.
- **Limited or incomplete information:** Case studies often present one aspect of a case, as opposed to presenting a case in its entirety. However, with the nature of my topic and research question, this wasn’t a problem.

**Some limitations of qualitative research are:**

- **Bias of researcher:** Again, my research was straight-forward, I presented all the information in its originality the best I could without including and excluding certain pieces of information.
- **No quantitative data:** Since there’s no quantitative data to support a hypothesis; information is only descriptive, so it’s hard to make concrete conclusions. Again, with the nature of my topic and research question, quantitative data wasn’t necessary.
- **Time-consuming:** In researching this project, it took quite a bit of time for me to look through Baker’s bibliography and some of the books listed in her collection.

**Some limitations of studying this particular topic or time period are:**

- **Limited information:** The only limitation I faced was not having access to a few primary sources available in another state. These resources would’ve helped to broaden my understanding of my topic, but they weren’t available online.
- **Finding reliable and complete sources:** Unfortunately, in the past, women and African-American’s accomplishments were not recognized as much as they are today. Therefore, much of what they did may not be recorded or be recorded incompletely or inaccurately. Plus, some historical resources have been destroyed or no longer exist.

**Problems in Research**

There were several problems I encountered in my research:

- Inconsistent information on dates, and names of institutions, and locations where Baker’s work is stored.
- Lack of primary sources such as Baker’s writings, recorded programs, lectures, and TV show Baker consulted on.
- Lack of credible sources. In my research, I came across numerous articles on Baker, but few that were scholarly.

**Results**

From my research, I discovered that there are five factors that can determine whether African-American children’s literature is quality or not. In the Introduction of Baker’s bibliography, she immediately lists three factors: Language, book theme, and illustrations. “It is the purpose of
this list to bring together books for children that give an unbiased, accurate, well-rounded picture of the Negro life in all parts of the world. Language, theme, and illustration have been scrutinized with this aim in mind, and choices were made accordingly" (Baker, p.3). These three factors are the main ones that should be considered. However, I included others that I felt were also necessary. I provide examples for each factor from a variety to titles within Baker's collection. These examples consist of both children and Young Adult titles.

**Language:**
This factor included the description of African-Americans and dialect. With this list, Baker tried to exclude any book that described African-Americans negatively or in a stereotypical view.

Baker also thought heavy dialect should be avoided because of the difficulty children would have in reading and understanding it; as well as its loss of authenticity. Baker stated, “Another language consideration is the use of heavy dialect. It is too difficult for the child to read and understand, and since often it is not authentic, but has been created by the authors themselves, it is misleading. The use of regional vernacular is acceptable, but dialect should be used with great care” (Baker, p. 3).

For example, on p.16 of *The Cherry Street House* by Eleanor Nolen (1939), the author uses dialect that’s simple enough for children to understand and read.

Although, the book was included in Baker’s 1971 revised version of her bibliography (The Black Experience in Children’s Books), the Saturday Review published Baker’s op-ed where she approves the author’s use of dialect, and the elimination of epithets in the book.

**Book theme:**
This factor was based on characterization, and how African-Americans were depicted. Were they being depicted as Americans contributing to society or as minstrel-like characters? Baker stated, “There are Negro doctors, lawyers, judges, soldiers, sailors, teachers; Negroes, in fact, are found in every walk of life. The complete picture of the Negro’s part in American life should be represented and not just the nostalgic old South with its plantations and loyal servants” (Baker, p. 3). Baker excluded any book that characterized African-Americans as buffoons.

For example, *We Sing America* by Marion Cuthbert (1936) was a book depicting African-Americans as contributing Americans.
Another example was, *My Dog Rinty*, written in 1946, about a boy who lives with his family and dog in Harlem. The real photographs make it easy for children to connect and relate to the character. This book portrayed a positive image of African-Americans as responsible citizens living a normal life.

![My Dog Rinty](image.png)

In her 1975 *Horn Book* article, Baker stated that “*My Dog Rinty*, though not the first photographic picture book of black life, was the first one of high quality showing urban life and blacks in professional positions. In the thirties and forties, blacks were still largely shown as farmers and laborers. Yet segregation had actually spawned black professional and business people” (Baker, 1975, para. 7).

**Illustrations:**
Books with stereotypical or caricature-like illustrations of African-Americans were excluded from this list. Baker believed artists could illustrate African-Americans and their features in a real, yet positive light. According to Baker, “An artist can portray a Negro child—black skin, crinkly hair, and short nose—and make him attractive or make him stereotype and caricature” (Baker, p. 3). According to Baker, some illustrators “… had sometimes made their animals more attractive than their black characters” (Baker, 1975, para. 3).

Illustrations were extremely important to Baker because it gave both African-American children and children of other races something positive to look at. Baker even wrote a 1943 article in the *Wilson Library Bulletin* stating, “No adult working with books and children will deny the influence of the printed word upon young people. In order to give children more democratic attitudes towards all the racial groups that make America the great nation it is, we must use literature that will strengthen the growth of democracy” (Baker, p.141).

For example, on p. 7 of *Hazel* by Mary Ovington (1913), the author described the African-American features of a young woman beautifully.
The author also includes a picture of a beautiful of Hazel on the front end-paper.

Anne Pellowski, former and student trained by Baker was quoted in 1998 as saying, “She was way ahead of anyone else in doing that first list and calling attention to the fact that black children needed attractive books with wonderful heroes and heroines” (Glick, p. 13).

**Quality literature:**

I thought “quality literature” should also be included as another factor, even though Baker didn’t mention it. Baker focused on depicting African-American life positively, but what was missing was that she also required that books be well written with a good plot, interesting setting, and strong characterization. It’s not enough for a book to include multicultural characters; other elements must be included in order for the story to capture the minds and hearts of young readers.

For example, *Uncle Bouqui* of Haiti by Harold Courlander (1942) was a favorite story of Bakers. “Her signature story was Harold Courlander’s “Uncle Bouqui Rents a Horse,” a Haitian tale in which a slow-witted Bouqui gets tricked again by his sly nemesis, Ti Malice” (Glick, 1998, p. 13). Baker loved folklores as they provide stories with interesting plots and characters.
Interculturalism:
Another factor I felt was worthwhile including is interculturalism. Although Baker didn’t mention it out-right, the theme of interculturalism is in many of the books she included in her list, even some Afro-centric themed books. Interculturalism involves the interaction and integration of two different groups of people coming together; recognizing both differences and similarities.

For example, in Adventures in Black and White by Attilio Gatti (1943), two boys of different races come together to solve a mystery.

Baker also included books written by both Caucasian and African-American authors. This was another way for her to include interculturalism in her collection.

Discussion
Upon examining Baker’s bibliography, I must say I disagree with many of her choices. I found most of them offensive, and wouldn’t use them for library programming today. I even found offensive material in some of the titles I used as examples. However, I do believe her choices were acceptable during the time period in which she lived, and she tried to portray African-Americans as positively as she could with the material she had available. Baker did state that titles were dropped and added with each revision of this bibliography.
It should be noted, that not all Caucasian authors and illustrators of children's literature wrote or drew denigrating books or images of African-American characters. There were a few authors that did well such as Carter Woodson, Jane Shackelford, Florence Means, and Eva Knox Evans, who Baker mentioned as writing quality literature with African-American characters.

It should also be noted that there have been a lot of changes in black children's literature since Baker original list was published in 1946. In her 1975 *Horn Book* article, Baker stated that in the 1960's, "Illustrations began to show black people with beautiful Afros and distinguishing features. White writers were becoming more perceptive, and editors quicker to detect a lack of sensitivity. Blacks were acting as consultants and reviewers; black editors, such as Toni Morrison and Walter Dean Myers, were emerging; and, best of all, more black authors and illustrators were seeing their own excellent work published" (Baker, 1975, para. 10).

Baker also stated that the 70's brought changes in dialect. "Now in the seventies, dialect is definitely gone, replaced by a form of Black English. John Steptoe writes gonna instead of gwine; and an easy, rhythmic pattern of speech is found in Lucille Clifton's books" (Baker, 1975, para. 11). By 1971, when Baker's list was revised for the last time, and newly titled, *The Black Experience in Books for Children*, Baker describes what she believed had happened with the past 50 years. "We have now reached the point where most aspects of the human experience in the black community can be portrayed in children's books without being self-conscious. The whole range of black life is shown in the list representing every class and condition of society, a variety of experiences and all periods of history" (Baker, 1975, para. 15).

Even more changes have been made since Baker wrote this article in 1975; however, this study will not expound on these changes since the focus of this study is on Bakers original bibliography list.

After years of neglect, multicultural child books are now receiving a lot of attention. Diversity has now become a focal point in children's literature as more and more books on this subject are being published. Despite this increase, librarians must still exercise good judgment when selecting and using this type of material. For overworked librarians, it's easy to quickly pick-up a book with multicultural characters and feel sufficed in using it for a program. However, in doing so, one lowers the standards of librarianship, and our service to our communities. Baker repeatedly mentioned this as being one of the reasons why she started her list in the first place. She wanted to provide librarians and parents with a useful tool to refer to when needing quality, African-American literature, as opposed to using whatever book is familiar or ready available.

As a result of my research, I've come to the same conclusion as Baker in that all African-American literature for children is not equal. Unfortunately, with today's multicultural children's books, I've come across a number of titles I felt were less than quality. Like Baker, I too feel compelled to create a similar, yet contemporary booklist; which I'm considering doing in the future.

My research has thoroughly answered my question in terms of what factors make for quality, African-American children’s literature: language, book theme, illustrations, quality literature, and interculturalism. I realize that these factors could be applied to any multicultural children's book
in a universal way. This study provides useful guidelines for other librarians and myself going forward.

**Historical Fit**

This study informs and helps readers to understand:

- The factors that define quality black children’s literature.
- How the development of children’s black literature got started in the U.S., and key figures that were instrumental in making this happen.
- Historical events and changes that took place in the U.S. during this time period.
- The contributions of African-American women in the field of librarianship and children’s services.

This is especially important to children’s librarians because many of the fundamentals (strategies, techniques, tools, etc.) for learning and understanding children’s librarianship and literature are rooted in history. These fundamentals were tried and tested by librarians in the past, and many remain to this day; just different ways of doing them.

**Recommendations**

I’m making four recommendations to resolve some of the issues associated with this subject. In this section I will be lumping all multicultural children’s material together:

1. National standards or guidelines should be put in place for writing multicultural children’s books. These standards or guidelines should not hinder the creativity of an author, but only be used as a checklist to guarantee a level of quality. A diverse committee of individuals from the library and book industry should be established to help define these standards and guidelines; making periodic updates when necessary. Although this is usually the job of a publisher, standards and guidelines should be referred to throughout the whole book-making process.

2. An association or organization dedicated to the issue of multicultural children’s literature should be established as a source for advocacy, support, and resources for authors, librarians, teachers, and other professionals who work with children.

3. Conferences, seminars or workshops should be offered regularly to make information and resources available to professionals in this line of work.

4. The creation of a modern, multicultural children’s booklist that is done with care and skill such as Baker’s. There are some booklists online, but it’s hard to determine if they are quality and useful.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, as more multicultural children’s books are written, a standard must be established for defining quality. Inclusion of multicultural characters in books isn’t enough; they must include a combination of factors in order to get children excited about reading, and advance the agenda of literacy, reading, and social diversity properly. As Baker stated so eloquently, “… when you get little children excited about books, you are building within them a lifelong habit of using the library.” (Augusta Baker Papers, n.d.). Baker’s philosophy was based off this belief, which resulted in her creating this bibliographic list that changed the field of children’s librarianship and literature.
References


WORKS BY BAKER

Story collections:
1. Books about Negro Life for Children
   https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/c4c9dea0-4569-0135-96d9-05197e2ce88e/book#page/5/mode/2up

2. The Black Experience in Children's Books (formerly called Books about Negro Life for Children)
   https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/75962720-ec99-0134-23ba-08966110efa1/book#page/7/mode/2up

Treatise/Exposition:
1. Storytelling: Art and Technique

Other books:
1. Young Years: Best Loved Stories and Poems for Little Children
2. Best Loved Nursery Rhymes and Songs
3. Best Loved Fairy Tales Including Mother Goose Selections With Helpful Guide for Parents
4. The Talking Tree and Other Stories: Fairy Tales from 15 Lands
5. Best Loved Collections from Children's Classics
6. The Golden Lynx and Other Tales
7. Young Children's Library Volume 1
8. Young Years Library, Volume 2: Best Loved Nursery Stories, Verse and Fables
9. Young Years Library, Volume 5: Mother's Guide to Children's Reading
PHOTOS

1930's

Early in her career (1930's). 135th Street Branch, Harlem (1939).

Baker at the 135th Street Branch.

1940's

Baker reading My Dog Rinty – NYPL.

1950’s

1960’s

TV program (1962).

Children’s program (1960’s).

Caldecott Committee Chair (1966).

ALA Children’s Services Division Chair (1967-68).

1970’s

1980’s


Later years

Baker in retirement.