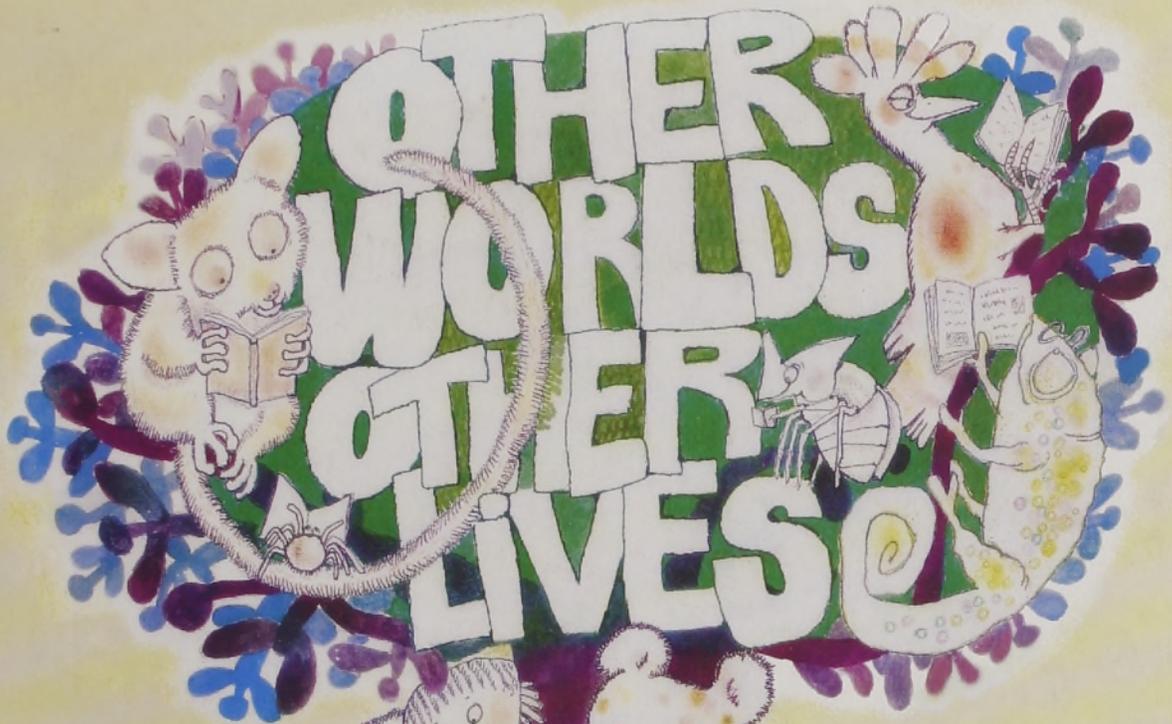


volume 1



children's literature experiences

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Unisa

monograph series 1

Other Worlds Other Lives

children's literature experiences

Proceedings of the
International Conference on Children's Literature

4-6 April 1995

volume 1

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Pretoria Unisa Press 1996

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First edition, first impression

ISBN 0 86981 956 9

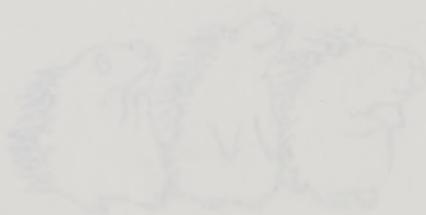
ISBN (set) 0 86981 959 3

Printed and published by the

University of South Africa

PO Box 392, 0001 Pretoria

Cover and illustrations: Joan Rankin



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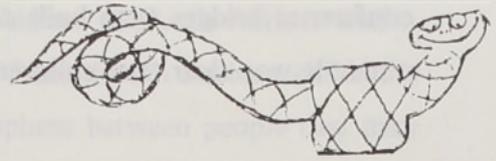
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Foreword



The Department of Information Science of the University of South Africa was forty years old in 1995. As part of the celebration of this milestone an international conference on children's literature, *Other worlds, other lives: children's literature experiences*, was held at the university from 4 to 6 April 1995.

The conference was more than just an opportunity to commemorate this event. The organisers were of the opinion that a conference of this nature at this particular time was especially relevant because children's literature can play an important role in the understanding of peoples from other countries, and can also contribute to the development of understanding between children of different cultural backgrounds in South Africa. It can help with the important process of nation building – and where better to begin with nation building than with children?

South Africans have for a very long time been isolated from the rest of the world. This cultural isolation has also affected children's literature. After all these years there is a great deal that we can learn from overseas colleagues and those in other African countries with regard to their children's literature. South African children's literature has progressed during this period and shows a distinctive development from which other countries can also learn.

Multiculturalism in children's literature is a question that is enjoying worldwide attention. From an international standpoint children's literature can build bridges between children from South Africa and those from other countries. During this

conference bridges were built and knowledge exchanged and we learnt from each other. It was clear that children's literature is an international language.

More than 450 people from throughout South Africa attended the conference daily. It was indeed an international gathering in every sense of the word. Delegates from 22 countries from six continents were present. Geographically speaking a thorough acquaintance was made with "other worlds".

The range of themes and topics that were raised and the variety of viewpoints through which they were approached by the speakers of different backgrounds is proof of the multidimensional nature of children's literature as an area of study. Academics, teachers, librarians, psychologists, parents and others each had their own approach – some academic and theoretical, some practical and popular – and there is as far as possible an attempt to represent all these approaches.

Owing to the extent of the conference various lectures and workshops were offered concurrently. By publishing the contributions, delegates will have the opportunity to read those lectures that they could not attend and those that they did attend but can no longer remember. The organisers of the conference felt that it was such an important conference that the proceedings deserved wider exposure. We believe that these proceedings are a valuable contribution to the limited number of South African publications on children's literature.

It is, however, not possible to include everything that took place during the conference in these proceedings: the discussions that took place between sessions and at social gatherings; the variety of workshops that were offered by experts;

the exhibition of children's book illustrations; exhibitions of South African and various overseas children's books; book launches of new South African children's and youth books; the stimulating and jovial atmosphere between people that may have spoken different languages but who all had the universal language of children's books in common.

The text of the different contributions is faithfully reproduced. Owing to time limitations it was not possible to do comprehensive editing. Where it was necessary to edit contributions, every attempt was made to retain the original style. The reference style is standardised where possible but in spite of various attempts to correct and complete references and bibliographies, the editors were not always able to obtain the correct information from the authors. The editors would have liked to have had greater conformity in the proceedings but to achieve this would have meant delaying publication for several months.

Not all the papers delivered have been included in this publication. It was decided to publish the Afrikaans papers in a separate volume. In certain cases it was not possible to publish a paper due to the nature of the presentation – for example, where the contribution was in the form of a slide presentation, or, where a large part of the presentation was in audiovisual form. Unfortunately, certain contributions could not be included because the speakers did not make them available.

The scope of the conference is reflected in the fact that the contributions have to be published in three volumes. We trust that everyone with an interest in children's literature will find something to engage them. The Department of Information Science hopes that this conference and these publications will play a

role in making people aware of the importance of children's literature in the development of the people of this country. The study of children's literature is multidisciplinary and justifies exhaustive study on an academic level.

We wish to thank the Rector and Administration of the University of South Africa for making the conference and the publication of the proceedings possible.

The papers published in these proceedings do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Information Science nor the University of South Africa nor those of the editors, and therefore the Department, the University and the editors accept no responsibility for opinions expressed in these proceedings.



Curricula Vitae

of contributors to this volume

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Edward Ako is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Yaounde in the Republic of Cameroon. He has published several scholarly articles as well as *On the road to Guinea: essays in black comparative literature; vol 1*, and is editor of *SOSONGO*. He holds a PhD from the University of Illinois-Urbana, Champaign.

paul biegel (netherlands)

Paul Biegel is one of the foremost Dutch writers for children. Since the publication of his first book in the early 1960s he has published some 45 books, many of which have been widely translated. His awards include the Best Children's Book of the Year, two Golden Pencils, four Silver Pencils, the State Prize of the Dutch Government for his complete *oeuvre*, and the Woutertje Pieterse Prize.

cristina colombo (argentina)

Cristina Colombo is a translator, author, poet and researcher. She has received several literary awards for her works which include poetry for adults and short stories, novels, poetry and riddles for children. She is a member of Alija's committee (Argentine section of IBBY), a member of the jury for Alija's Honour List and the National Selection Committee for IBBY Honour List, and is an associate editor of *Bookbird*.

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Stephen Finn is Professor of English at the University of Pretoria. He obtained a DPhil from Potchefstroom University and has published four books and several dozen articles on communication, propaganda, and English and Hebrew literature. At present his main concern is with Holocaust writing, particularly by women and children, and with the diary as a literary form. He is on the editorial board of three journals.

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Lawrence Gordon lectures in library and information practice at the ML Sultan Technikon in Durban. He initially taught history and English at high school before departing for the groves of academe, and has lectured at various tertiary institutions (mainly in the fields of teacher education and librarianship). He holds a BEd and postgraduate degrees in both psychology and library science.

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Maureen Nimon comes from the University of South Australia. She has taught in teacher-librarianship for 20 years, with children's literature part of her teaching responsibilities. She holds a doctorate, has done research on the relationship between children's reading habits and their reading abilities, and has a particular interest in the social context within which children's literature operates.

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Thuli Radebe is a lecturer and coordinator for the school librarianship programme in the Department of Information Studies at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg. She holds a master's degree from this university on the topic of reading interests of black children. In 1989 she was awarded the Princeton Fellowship which she utilised for research on reading and cross-cultural aspects.

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The Spirit of my story

gcina mhlophe

*In the beginning was the word. The word gave birth to language.
Language gave birth to a story, with stories real fun began!*



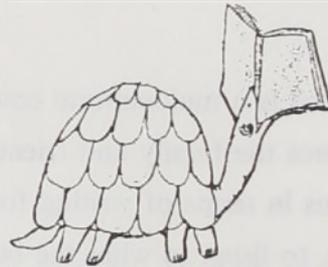
That certainly is how I feel. You see, I was lucky to be born in a family with a lot of singing and story sharing. Yes, sharing is the key word for me at all times, for what good is a story without an ear to receive it? So I say, stories are there to be shared, to mould us, to teach us values, sometimes to tickle us and make us laugh uncontrollably, to take our minds to the worlds of Make Believe, of Never Never Land, of Bhakubha ... the list is endless, and so is the capacity of our imaginations.

South Africa is a multicultural country and we are so lucky to have been born here, to have the family and friends we have, and most importantly all that lies ahead of us in terms of writing for our children, or writing with our children, or better still, to listen to what the beautiful children of South Africa have to say. Writers, teachers, storytellers and educators of every kind, let's get our bricks ready, the building has only just begun.

There is an African tradition or way of doing things together called 'ILIMA'. It is a spirit we can all enjoy and grow from. Communities from all over the world, big and small, can try to invite this spirit into their lives and it will come rushing like a bright light to lead them forward.

Every writer who calls themselves a children's writer must, in some way or other, look for and find the child inside them. This child still has all the innocence of youth. This child inside has a very clear and distinct voice, all we have to do is listen. As people who are used to talking and being listened to, or should I say we are used to writing and being read to, so we have to really take time and learn to listen to the inner child. Sometimes there are many other sounds trying to drown the child's voice, but we must try and let the child have an ear. There is no doubt in my mind that the time for new stories and new ways of telling them is long overdue. I am constantly struggling to find ways to see, to hear, to feel, to imagine and to go inside a story so much so that I can be a vehicle or a medium through which the story can reach out and touch other people's lives. I sing, I chant, I clap and I smile as I feel the words of a story touch and caress every part of me – my very soul. I am carried on the wings of imagination and I do not demand to know the address of where we are headed because I know I am in good hands. I am in the company of words, let me share a favourite poem with you.

IN THE COMPANY OF WORDS



It is truly marvellous, wonderful and comforting
to know that I have eyes to read
hands that can write
and an enormous love for words
I am lucky to be speaking a few extremely beautiful languages
for I love words – language's ancestors
when I am happy words define my happiness

when I am sad and confused
words turn into clay and allow me
to mould and remould my muddled up thoughts
till I find inner peace in my soul

Had I to choose between weeping and reading
I'd most definitely choose reading a good book
for I have proof, for aches and tensions – it works!
Countless times I've turned my back on pain
and found friends in characters from far off lands
countless times I've defied anger
and caressed my nerves with an old comic book
countless nights I've triumphed over insomnia
and had a heart to heart talk with my pen and paper.

I come to my desk in the dead of the night
I sit without a clue as to how I wish to start
but then, before I know it, words of all types and sizes
come rushing unto my finger tips
as I feel my whole body smile
I welcome them, every single one of them
like the good old friends that they are
then, when they start dancing in large circles around me
throwing teasing wordy circles on my walls
I am convinced that I was not born to be bored
for how indeed can boredom even begin to penetrate
my timeless word circle?
Now you see why I'm so content in the company of words.

I do not for a minute want to pretend that there are no difficult, impossible times in a writer or teller's life when stories just are not ready to be born. Sometimes I feel too that I have a story alright, but do not feel strong enough to tell it. Then I hum little song prayers to help me along:

Sibhaka bhaka, Langa Nyanga
Mhlaba noLwandle, nginike ukuhlakanipha
Ngixoxe le ndaba, ngixoxe le ndaba
Kubuye inhlonipho yamasiko ethu

I call on you Sky, Sun and the Moon
You Earth and the Sea, Give me the wisdom I need
To tell the story, to tell the story
And bring back respect to our culture.

This sure is a song-prayer for me. I sing it several times and feel strength coming into my body even when I am very tired after a long fast day in the city.

Stories of a certain kind can sort of grow on you, for instance, with me the African tortoise has been so much a part of my life that I cannot imagine my life without one. It all started with a story called the *Queen of the Tortoises* almost ten years ago. Now I look at the Tortoise character as a creature I can aspire to emulate, I hope that is good English! I am a very impulsive person naturally, the tortoise is slow, patient, lives long and is very wise. It has a way of protecting itself in hard times and it is a very grounded animal, need you ask why I love the tortoise? Now it is my symbol and many creative people seem to have symbols like these, or are they guardian angels? All I know is that we can learn from each other, we can share our skills to build a very colourful tree that can soon be our children's literature. The spirit of ILIMA can be called to help again and again. My way is not the best, but is only one way of saying

ngiphonsa itshe esivivaneni!
inyoni yakhela ngoboya benye!

We all have our Aunt Flossies:

literacy, cultural heritage and inter-group appreciation through family stories

elizabeth fitzgerald howard

Sani Bonani

Goeiemôre

Thank you ... And aren't we all fortunate to be coming together in this glorious place at this auspicious time! I am truly grateful to be part of this important conference on *Other Worlds, Other Lives* discussing family stories because I believe family stories are a powerful force to connect us to ourselves and to others. Making such connections is surely one of the deepest hungers of the world today.

I had written my paper before my husband and I came to South Africa, but I have had to write another because after almost five weeks of memorable encounters and events I am bursting with feelings and impressions and information and inspiration. I have learned so much. Now I will be writing not only from my African American experience, but also from my experiences here in South Africa, where the message *family stories are for us all* seems even more vital: We all have our Aunt Flossies.

In this paper I plan to touch in turn on family stories and literacy, family stories and cultural heritage, and then family stories and appreciation of others. Then I



will introduce some of the people from my books, people in the particular African American family that I am part of. I hope that by sampling some African American culture, you will see some of your own culture and appreciate some of the universal qualities of our common humanity.

My perspective then is of an African American author broadly though briefly exposed to the changing education for children in the New South Africa. Literally the linking of heretofore quite separated worlds. I have had the opportunity to meet children, education students, teachers, librarians, authors and publishers in several regions of the country. READ¹ has allowed me to help in their efforts to promote literacy through using family stories. In these almost five weeks I have rediscovered that it is all because of Aunt Flossie.

What are family stories? I am not including traditional folklore but rather stories and sayings from ordinary family experiences and family memories. In my own writing it is about Uncle Clem throwing a surprise off the train that night for my Dad and cousin Marie. It is about my 98-year-old Aunt Flossie living in a house so crowded full of stuff and things because she never threw anything away ... The lives of all of us are *crowded* full of stories.

Family stories might actually be seen as a *new genre* of children's literature because of their potential for making possible connections to other worlds, other lives. Family stories suggest that by knowing ourselves better we are more able to connect to humanity. Because we all have our Aunt Flossies.

First, a look at the importance of Family Stories for literacy. Literacy is a major focus, perhaps the major focus in South African education for adults as well as

children. Research on reading (and writing) has long demonstrated the value of stories in emerging literacy. Stories are important for reading because they help children to associate reading with enjoyment while developing feelings and imagination. Reading is about meaning, and children can find meaning more directly in stories about familiar events and people. (Sylvia Ashton Warner years ago focused on children's own stories as "helps" to reading.) But for South Africa's black children especially there are few family stories in print reflecting *their* family lives. One way that this need might begin to be fulfilled would be for teachers, and through them, children, to be enabled to write stories about their family experiences.

READ has long been endeavouring to respond to this need. Since I am an African American author who writes about family I was asked to conduct a two-day workshop on writing from family experience with some teachers from townships. Over the two days participants tried going back into their childhoods, capturing memories, recalling incidents and writing them down. The child who always put off cleaning up the kitchen when it was her turn, risking the anger of her father; the little girls who journeyed to their aunt's house for the weekend but were too homesick to spend the night; the school monitor who risked his own safety to rescue a fellow student caught under a taxi ... Real stories out of the ordinary experiences of the people who lived them. Workshop participants were enthusiastic about the possibilities for building on these efforts and publishing ... perhaps in desktop format ... stories which might be used in furthering literacy for emerging readers.

This leads me to my second topic, family stories and cultural heritage. I believe that family stories might be playing the same role today as the folktales have done in the history of all peoples: defining our identity, establishing right behaviour, educating the children, providing a link to the past and a guide

toward the future. In African American author Camille Yarbrough's book *The Shimmershine Queens*, 90-year-old Cousin Seatta says "A people's story is the anchor dat keeps um from driftin', it's the compass to show the way to go, and it's a sail dat holds the power dat takes um forward."² Although the author was referring to the larger history of African American people, it is also true for the particular story in a particular family. Family stories, remembered, repeated, enjoyed, do help us to know who we are and where we have come from, and where we might go. Stories based in the ordinary experience of a child's own culture enhance that child's self esteem – as he or she sees self in the context of that culture.

In South Africa stories are everywhere. My husband and I have made a point of asking people, whenever we could, can you tell a story about your family? The stories have poured out from Sotho and Tsonga, Venda and Afrikaner, from Xhosa, English and Zulu, some full of humour, others poignant: The nightmare of seeing one's grandparents' home bulldozed, while grandfather refused to leave. ... How a twist of fate spared another grandfather's life: Late getting back to his ship in WWI, he was the only one who lived as all his comrades – 800 of them – drowned when the ship sank.

Family stories help to *preserve* the traditions, the values and our memory of our grandparents, parents. The compassion of my great Aunt Lulu who consoled me when I broke a plate: "If nobody every broke a dish, there wouldn't be any work for the people who make dishes." My mother's uncompromising pronouncement all through my high school years: "Books and boys don't mix." And her subtle request when the hour was late and a young man should be leaving the house: "Betty, will you please bring up my scissors?" Cautious Aunt Flossie's dire warning: "Betty, darling, don't get your feet wet. You'll injure

your internal organs.” In family stories are the hopes of mothers and aunts for their children’s future and the cultural wisdom of the past. And we all have our Aunt Flossies.

My third point is that stories from families of different cultures take readers out of their own lives, into other families’ lives, other families’ worlds and lead to intergroup appreciation. In the USA one reason for publishing authentic stories about African American children has been to provide children who are not African American a way of getting to know African Americans. Not only is black children’s self esteem enhanced as they see themselves reflected in books, but white children seeing brown and black faces, and finding that they can identify with black characters, realise that white is not inherently superior. The same is true in books for South African children. Children in different cultures share so many ordinary family experiences: rivalry with siblings, birthdays, school, moving to a new house – there is a universal culture of childhood which is conveyed by such stories.

Stories derived from authentic family experiences carry within them values that transfer across cultures. There is not a large body of literature in print for children portraying the cultures of black, coloured or Indian South Africans, and very few written by people of these cultures. But the stories are there waiting. This is not the time to discuss *who* can write about a culture. There will be more books as new developments in education cause new demands. And, as is happening with children’s books from the different cultures in the United States, stories of the experiences of the families of South Africa’s varied cultures will enrich the lives of children here and in other worlds. Family stories build bridges for us all.

All of my books have been based in family stories, stories reflecting aspects of African American culture, and I hope they are contributing to the forging of connections. We all have our Aunt Flossies.

What might a reader – adult or child – find out about African Americans in *The Train to Lulu's*? Beppy and Babs' story is the story of an extended family. Our parents had moved to Boston, in the north, from Baltimore, in the south: paralleling the migration of thousands of African Americans in the quest for opportunity; back in Baltimore were all the relatives, the story of so many African Americans whose roots are somewhere else, and that is where all the aunts and uncles were.

Children are taught to follow directions and to be obedient. "Don't open your lunch box until the train stops in New Haven." The older sibling is responsible for the younger one, "Babs, people are looking at us. We have to be good. You are acting like a silly baby."

The welcome at the station in Baltimore: all the aunts and uncles; so many hugs and kisses. ... Lulu is here. "Lulu, Lulu, we came on the train. We're going to your house for the whole summer." To Lulu's? Yes, but we would be shared by Aunt Flossie and Cousin Chita ... and all the other relatives ... fulfilling the African axiom: It takes a whole village to raise a child.

African American culture? Sure. But connections beyond because stories about African American children – authentic stories – show how our lives are linked to other lives and other worlds.

Chita's Christmas tree is based on my now 87-year-old cousin Chita's reminiscences plus one Christmas memory of my own of the celebration at Chita's parents house. What might a child listener or adult reader find out about African American culture? A loving family. A father and daughter who have a special relationship: A secret conspiracy which they act out every Saturday when they take the peanut butter sandwiches from mama and never eat them. They feed the sandwiches to Henry the horse while they eat the hot, sugary waffles they buy from the waffle man. The week before Christmas they go into the deep woods to find the tree that Chita hopes Santa will bring ... the Christmas eve supper and celebration with all the relatives ... Christmas morning ... how does that tree get there? This story also conveys some little known history of African Americans ... that in turn-of-the-century Baltimore there was a thriving black middle class, living *ordinary* lives in the midst of a segregated society; Chita's father was a doctor ... a small glimpse of African American culture evoked in a picture book. Children might find connections because they too plot secret excursions or special surprises with their fathers ... And the experiences of holiday festivities and traditions are transferable in many ways – across cultures, linking us to other lives, other worlds.

Mac and Marie and the train toss surprise comes from a story my father told of waiting with his cousin Marie for Uncle Clem to throw a surprise off the train as it passed The Big House, Mac's house. What is there of African American culture? Young black men did get jobs as porters and waiters, and were an essential part of the railroad industry ... I made Uncle Clem into a student to indicate that there were African Americans who went to college ... The Big House? A little irony here. That is the name my grandparents gave to their big house in the country, actually the traditional name for the plantation master's house in slavery times. Children from other worlds can respond to the promise of a surprise ... and to the dream of Mac, that one day he will be big and old enough to do something special. My sister's next door

neighbour, not an African American, reported that one night her four-year-old son concluded his prayers, “God bless Mommy and Daddy and Grandma and Uncle Clem.”

And then there is *Aunt Flossie’s hats and crab cakes later*. Once upon a time I had an Aunt Flossie. A teacher in the Baltimore schools, she lived in one tall narrow house for 65 of her 100 years and she never threw anything away. Her house was full of treasures: old utility bills, old magazines and Christmas cards, school tests from the 1930s, fabric for sewing dresses, half sewn dresses, all the shoes she ever had (these were under her bed), gift items for possible weddings ... and boxes and boxes of hats. At 98 she was still busy and spry, never missing a wedding or funeral, and always decked out in a special hat. One Sunday afternoon her hat blew into the water, and I had an idea for a story. The story tells of Sarah and Susan who visit Great Aunt Flossie on Sunday to drink tea and eat cookies and try on hats – Aunt Flossie tells stories about her hats. I hope the story conveys Aunt Flossie’s love of children, her graciousness, her sense of humour, along with her own memories of Baltimore history. Reviews of the book have highlighted the celebration of family, and the importance of extended family, and the loving intergenerational relationships. All African American cultural values ... but children in most cultures have warm associations with older family members ... perhaps spending Sunday afternoons playing with grandma’s button box or grandpa’s tool chest. Many listeners have said that Aunt Flossie reminds them of people in their family, who also may be keepers of family memories. We all have our Aunt Flossies. Again, family stories do transcend boundaries, show us other lives, other worlds, but help us to know that we are all part of the same world, and that other lives are ours, too.

Something memorable happened as I was speaking one morning with about a hundred first-year education students at Kagisaning Teachers’ College in

Bloemfontein ... After I had told them Aunt Flossie's story, and talked about how books help us to realise our connections with each other, one young man seated at the back raised his hand and said to me, "You could be my aunt!" I went right up to him and shook his hand, and said, "Why not, how are you, nephew?"

Family stories, told in ordinary language, by ordinary people, enhance children's reading, preserve and hand down culture, and promote awareness of our connections. Ordinary family stories are an extraordinarily rich resource to be mined for the treasure they contain. They lead us to other worlds, other lives. We all have stories. We all have our Aunt Flossies.

Notes

- 1 READ is a widely acclaimed NGO (non-governmental organisation) working all over South Africa to improve literacy and build a reading culture.
- 2 Yarbrough, Camille, *The Shimmershine Queens*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989, p. 21. I am indebted to Professor Rudine Sims Bishop, Ohio State University, for calling my attention to this quotation.