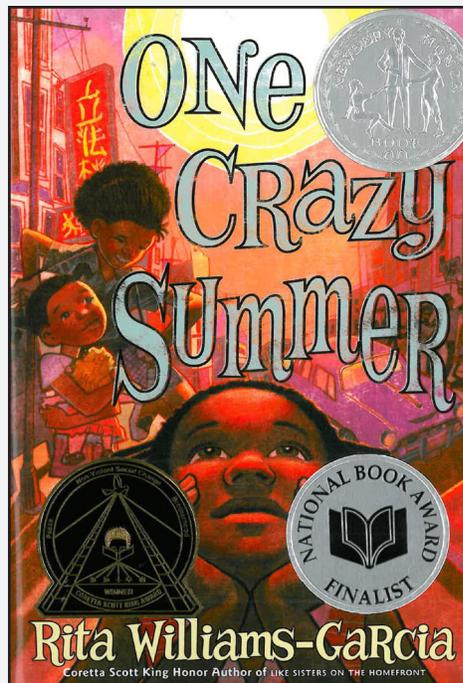


First Opinion: “Y’all Keep Up”

Williams-Garcia, Rita. *One Crazy Summer*. New York: Amistad, 2010.

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In her unpublished essay “The Three Generations of Ethnic Children’s Literature: A New Paradigm for Analysis,” Michelle Pagni Stewart offers an alternative way of conceptualizing the authorship of ethnic texts. Instead of associating the designation of “generations” with the immigrant status of the author, she links it with the approach that the author takes to portraying the focal culture. In her conceptualization, first generation ethnic children’s texts, generally written by outsiders to the culture, attempt to expose mainstream culture to minority cultures. Often didactic and sometimes patronizing, these texts tend to be “replete with stereotypes” and its authors “uninformed about the culture, history, values and traditions” of those being represented (Stewart 4). Second generation texts, according to Stewart (5), are those written by authors “knowledgeable of and sensitive to the culture” and may or may not be written by individuals from that ethnic group but must be composed by writers with intimate and accurate knowledge of that group, some of which may come from research. These texts “emphasize righting the inaccuracies and stereotypes so often propagated in first generation literature . . . [and] have, as their objective,

‘dismantle[ing] stereotypes, create[ing] cultural criticism of the dominant society, [and] make[ing] manifest crimes of the past’” (Ruppert qtd. in Stewart 5).

Third generation texts, in Stewart’s theorization (7), written by cultural insiders, are “marked by difference, lack of universality, positive as well as negative depictions” and are influenced by “ethnic literary traditions”. She continues:

Characterized by its lack of fixed binaries, third generation ethnic children’s literature exemplifies [Homi] Bhaba’s third space: it does not focus on the American vs. ethnic conflict so readily found in second generation literature, nor does it emphasize the idea that all ethnic Americans are also American (meaning patriotic, pursuing the American dream—all the “usual” stereotypes). Instead, third generation ethnic children’s literature emphasizes that there is not ONE ethnic experience, that one story/character cannot substitute for all. (Stewart 8)

Hence, third generation texts, according to Stewart, often portray intracultural conflicts and fissures rather than attempting to depict the culture in a positive light for the sake of outsiders. I take the time to explain Stewart’s reconceptualization of ethnic texts and authorship because I feel that Rita Williams-Garcia’s 2011 Newbery Award-winning *One Crazy Summer* succeeds as a children’s novel in large part because it is so absolutely and unapologetically a third generation text.

One Crazy Summer throws readers into the lives of three African-American sisters from Brooklyn—Delphine (age 11), Vonetta (age 9), and Fern (age 7)—and their estranged mother, Cecile, who writes militant poetry and lives at the margins of the Black Panther movement in Oakland, California. Williams-Garcia’s approach to composing this novel bears a strong resemblance to Cecile’s brusque retrieval of her (uninvited) daughters from the airport after their flight to California for their first summer visit with her: she verbally acknowledges their arrival, offering no hugs, kisses, or help with their baggage and walks off at great speed, advising, “Y’all have to move if you’re going to be with me” (Williams-Garcia 19). She warns them to keep up; if they don’t, it’s no affair of hers. In short, Williams-Garcia hurls readers into this same prickly, unwelcoming, alienating, historically-situated Black universe, into which the girls have been tossed, and expects young readers to “keep up” (Williams-Garcia 19). The novel’s view of life from the inside, its culturally rich language, the specificity of its sociohistorical details, and the author’s commitment to depicting the negative along with the positive makes *One Crazy Summer* one fine read.

From her reverence for Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali to her expectation that the only other Black person on the airplane will keep an eye on them as her grandmother has requested, Delphine narrates from on the inside of Black life and addresses readers as if they too inhabit that space. As the oldest, Delphine considers it her job to keep her

younger sisters in line, and she usually does a fine job of that. In addition, however, she feels the weight of the whole race on her young shoulders as they move through this first aviation experience where they are clearly the minority both as children and as Black passengers. Despite trying hard to avoid it, Delphine confirms that her sisters have made a "grand Negro spectacle" of themselves when they yell at her for trying to see the Golden Gate Bridge out of the plane's window (Williams-Garcia 10). She narrates, "I had managed to disgrace the entire Negro race, judging by the head shaking and the *tsk-tsking* going on around us" (Williams-Garcia 11). Throughout the novel, the fear of shaming the race and their guardians—their father and grandmother—back home in Brooklyn influences much of Delphine's thinking and decisions.

Delphine's narrative, riddled with humor, filters their unusual and sometimes very adult experiences through a child's lens—a decidedly Black child's lens. For instance, Big Ma, who despises Cecile for her nontraditional mothering and abandonment of her three daughters, has repeatedly told the children: "Your mother lives on the street, in a hole in the wall, sleeping on park benches next to winos" (Williams-Garcia 23). Though Delphine has grown out of taking these statements literally, she expects Cecile to be at least "bad off. To be one of those 'Negroes living in poverty' as the news often put it" (Williams-Garcia 24). When they arrive at Cecile's odd, green stucco house—that the girls at first assume is frosting—and discover that she does not, in fact, live on the street, Delphine kicks Vonetta to keep her from telling Cecile what Big Ma has said about her. Still, when Cecile says to herself in the girls' presence that she should have gone to Mexico to get rid of them (presumably by abortion) when she had the chance and that she never asked them to come, Delphine concludes, "Our mother was crazy" (Williams-Garcia 26-27). As the girls learn more about Cecile, this assumption seems affirmed: She sends them out into the city alone to buy their own dinner from a shop owner they nickname "Mean Lady Ming," refuses to let them into her kitchen and instead makes them eat on a tablecloth on the floor, demands that they go to the free breakfast and summer school program run by the Black Panthers and not come home until dusk, and never keeps track of where they are or what they're doing during the day. In an almost detective fashion, they figure out that she writes poetry and that the Black Panthers want her to print documents for them—a request that incites anger and resistance from Cecile/Nzila (her pen name). Only after Cecile is arrested and the girls have to fend for themselves for seven days does Delphine begin to make sense of the snatches of memories she has retained from the time before Cecile abandoned them as young children.

For this novel, Williams-Garcia has done her historical homework and does not shy away from taking readers into uncomfortable and sometimes taboo spaces. Readers learn about the Black Panther political movement and rhetoric through the "power to the people" lessons the children receive daily in the summer school program. While contemporary

students often hear more about the militancy of the Black Panther movement than anything else, this novel also focuses on the importance of the Panthers' outreach programs and attention to taking care of children and community members. In the novel, the sisters also encounter Hirohito Woods, a biracial child of a Japanese mother and a Black father, who has "long black eyelashes and coppery-colored skin" (Williams-Garcia 112-13). Their interactions with Hirohito, their disturbing argument with one of the young male Panthers about whether they are "colored" or "Black," and Vonetta's vindictive act of coloring Fern's favorite white-skinned baby doll's black all bring readers face-to-face with frictions rarely discussed outside of the African-American community either in 1968 or now.

In the same way that Cecile intentionally makes her daughters feel unwelcome in her kitchen/workspace and home, Williams-Garcia never lets readers get too comfortable as they move through this book. Even after one of the most important and emotional moments in the novel, when the three girls recite Nzila's poem "I Birthed a Black Nation" for a crowd of hundreds, Williams-Garcia does not linger on this high point. Instead, unbeknownst to her sisters, Fern remains on stage and delivers a poem she has composed that blows the whistle on a traitor working and living among the Panthers. And just when readers feel it's time for the denouement, Delphine explodes in response to a criticism from Cecile, prompting Cecile to finally open up to her oldest daughter and explain what prompted her to abandon them. This discussion makes all the difference.

One Crazy Summer never becomes a "feel-good" novel. It is prickly and uncomfortable throughout, but as readers close the book, exhausted, and pull the thorns out of their flesh, we intuit that Williams-Garcia has taken us into spaces where few authors dare to tread. And the journey is well worth the effort.

Works Cited

Stewart, Michelle Pagni. "The Three Generations of Ethnic Children's Literature: A New Paradigm for Analysis." N.p.: n.p., n.d. [Print?]

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