



PROFILES
in
Resilience

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS
THAT CENTER THE LIVED EXPERIENCE
OF GENERATIONAL POVERTY

CHRISTINA H. DORR

Foreword by Rudine Sims Bishop

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Christina H. Dorr's love affair with books began early when her mother took her to the tiny red-brick public library in their village. This involvement has led her to become an award-winning librarian, author, presenter, and consultant. She has served on a number of state and national book award committees, including the Caldecott, Coretta Scott King, Geisel Award, and Stonewall committees. This is her fourth book, and the second one published by the American Library Association. You can visit her website at www.openдорrs2books.com.

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FOREWORD



School librarians and classroom teachers are natural allies in literacy programs. As a former elementary school teacher, I always appreciated the perspective that Christina Dorr brought to the discussions in my graduate courses on children’s literature. As a school librarian, she had insights that I was lacking, and her enthusiasm for and knowledge of books for children and teens were inspiring.

This book helps to expand the definition of diversity in children’s books by shedding light on an element of diversity that is sometimes overlooked—economic situation or income. By pointing out some of the cultural values that exist across both rural and urban poverty, Dorr invites teachers, librarians, and others who work with children from low-income families to see them in their cultural context and appreciate the values they bring to the classroom and library.

By presenting profiles of authors who are familiar with what she calls “generational poverty,” Dorr lets us see how their books offer literary mirrors to low-income children, as well as windows to more economically privileged readers, inviting all to celebrate our common humanity. She is careful to point out that the books by these authors are for *all* children, not just those who experience poverty.

The roster of authors and works included in this book is a useful resource for teachers and librarians. The sketches offer insight into the sources of the stories and the ways that authors’ biographies can influence their creative works and make their characters seem more authentic. Dorr’s own biography has influenced this book and made her more sympathetic to the lives—and more aware of the fullness of the lives—of children who grow up in generational poverty. And her commitment to helping librarians and teachers “see” these children and respond appropriately to them is clear.

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Equally important is that the book is appealing in its presentations of the lives and works of the authors. It keeps a reader turning pages. Teachers and librarians will find this book informative and engaging as it deepens their experience with both authors and books, as well as their understanding of children who are experiencing generational poverty.

—**Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop**
Professor Emeritus, Ohio State University

PREFACE



Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop is an Ohio State University professor emeritus, an icon in the world of children’s and teen literature, and a literacy scholar whose work has expanded conversations about the importance of representation in children’s literature. In her article “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Bishop explains this critical need for authentic voices:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Bishop 1990, ix)

Thankfully, Bishop’s ideas changed the conversation about what juvenile and young adult literature should be, who should be represented, and how all stories need be told.

More recently, the children’s book author and writing professor Uma Krishnaswami expanded on this idea:

What if, in addition to mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, some books worked like prisms? A prism can slow and bend the light that passes through it, splitting that light into its component colors. It can refract light in as many directions as the

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prism's shape and surface planes allow. Similarly, books can disrupt and challenge ideas about diversity through multifaceted and intersecting identities, settings, cultural contexts, and histories. They can place diverse characters at these crucial intersections and give them the power to reframe their stories. (Krishnaswami 2019, 55)

My hope is that all readers walk away with a new perspective. I hope that children living in generational poverty see themselves in the stories they read from the first section of this book, and that these stories provide them with affirmation, while the biographies they encounter from the second section provide inspiration. I also hope that those with adequate economic resources see others in the stories they read and empathize with the full complexity of every character, both fictional and nonfictional.

Living in generational poverty is degrading, challenging, painful, and sometimes hopeless. But it also has its joyful times; it builds strength and can make you a compassionate person. Writers of children's and teen books who include honest depictions of characters living in poverty show the whole of the child's life, not sugar-coating it, but not omitting the beauty in their lives either.

Part I of this book features inspiring storytellers, ten authors and illustrators who are familiar with poverty and how its challenges and joys are foundations for their work. I chose them because of their passionate voices, their truthfulness in storytelling, and the beauty of their work. And I've balanced writers familiar with urban poverty with those familiar with rural poverty, as well as a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The focus is on the creators' lives, though bibliographies for each of them will be included. The offerings are intended for children and teens in generational poverty to see themselves. And the titles are also for children and teens in better economic circumstances to help them understand others' lives and, hopefully, develop empathy.

Part II of the book consists of twelve inspiring stories of people who were raised in generational poverty and who are written about in children's and teen books. These individuals have successfully escaped the paralyzing hold of poverty. The books span age ranges, genres, and formats to meet the widest possible audience. The best books paint pictures of them as full human beings. That is, they include both the beautiful and the less

beautiful, the challenges and successes, the good choices and the poor ones, all at the appropriate age levels for the audience, of course. Canonizing their subjects, as biographers of past generations were accustomed to do, is no longer part of the landscape of biographies written today. Contemporary books about prominent individuals, created for children and teens alike, respect their readers and offer the truth about their subjects.

Why are these books needed? Because, as Jason Reynolds asserts, “you can’t be what you can’t see.” If I hadn’t seen the examples of my teachers and the lives of people in biographies, I never could have become the person I am. All children need to see possibilities and know they have choices and have a say in their futures. All children need to be given a wide variety of books with which to engage, to see themselves and others, and see what the possibilities are. Biography, autobiography, and memoir are genres that give a vision of possibilities which can inspire children.

After part II there are four appendixes that offer additional resources:

- *Appendix A: Works by the Storytellers Featured in Part I*
- *Appendix B: Works about the Inspiring People Featured in Part II*
- *Appendix C: More Stories of Resilient Characters That Are Too Good to Miss*
- *Appendix D: More Inspiring Biographies That Are Too Good to Miss*

I feel this is a good moment to invite you to view the TedTalk on YouTube titled “The Danger of a Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She speaks eloquently about the need for a plethora of books and stories about any group of people, as a single story can severely limit our understanding. A single story pigeonholes people, gives one story for a dynamic, diverse group, and impedes our collective viewpoints of who others are. According to author C. H. Armstrong, “the purpose of art is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” (Armstrong 2019). And that is just what I hope the books I’ve included in the appendixes accomplish, and indeed what this book itself can accomplish.

It is my sincere hope that the stories and resources this book contains will expand your understanding of children and teens living in generational poverty, introduce you to authors and illustrators of substance who write of the joys and challenges of these children, and offer some book titles that can feed the souls of those children.

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I'd like to close this preface with a few statistics and quotations from Marian Wright Edelman when she spoke to a full crowd of children's educators and interested others at Ohio State University in 2017:

- The top 1 percent of the population in the United States is as rich as the bottom 90 percent combined.
- The gap between the rich and the poor at this time is the greatest it's been since the 1920s.
- A child is born into poverty in the United States every 48 seconds.
- There are 13.2 million poor children in the United States.
- One in two Black babies is born into poverty.
- A child is killed by a gun in the United States every 30 hours and 8 minutes.
- We should want for all children what we want for our own.
- Grab every child you can and give them hope and safety.
- Children need us to give them positive alternatives.
- I cannot overstate the power of diverse books, in which children can see themselves as well as the lives of others, to build empathy.

And most importantly, "We must make sure we find our moral compass again . . . Don't permit ugliness in your presence." It's my hope that this book helps us take a step closer to changing Edelman's quoted statistics and realizing her vision for children.

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INTRODUCTION

Growing Up in Generational Poverty



One professional development day at school, several years ago, we were receiving training about the tight grip that poverty holds on families. I was introduced to writer-researcher Ruby Payne's work; she is one legendary voice in the body of research on the world that children of poverty inhabit, how poverty affects their world and life view, and how it changes their sense of efficacy throughout their lives. As a staff, we were asked to participate in scenarios that families in poverty had to endure or overcome on a daily basis. For example, how to navigate transportation when you don't have a reliable car, how to apply for government assistance, where to find affordable childcare, and more. During these scenarios, I had to leave the room and compose myself privately because for the first time I truly understood why it's so very difficult for children to escape poverty—and then I had to formulate how to manage this understanding.

You see, I grew up simultaneously rich and poor. Rich because my father's passion was farming, dairy farming, to be specific. Our old family farm, barn, house, and grounds were overrun with cows, pigs, chickens, dogs, cats, and other assorted creatures. And while I, in no uncertain terms, didn't appreciate the four-legged animals that shared our living space, they did provide us with an abundance of eggs, milk, and meat. My mother felt that her job in life was to make sure her nine children were fed hot, healthy food three times a day, so she grew a large vegetable garden to supplement the resources the animals provided. While I decidedly disliked the job of weeding, I thoroughly enjoyed the abundance of vegetables. And Mom was an excellent, down-home country cook. Her roast beef, cheddar potatoes, and cherry pie had no rivals. Needless to say, I was well fed.

I was also rich in another way. Though neither of my parents valued education, my mother loved to read. Her favorite books were on the topics of history, nutrition, folklore, and religion. She was highly suspicious of fiction, as untruths were works of the devil, and it was wrong to use valuable

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time and engage the imagination in anything that didn't further one's understanding of country, duty, and Catholicism. And obviously her time was at a premium, with a large farm family and few modern amenities to make domestic life easier. But she read whenever she could spare a bit of time.

THE VALUE OF READING

Mom always said she didn't have nine children, but three families of three children each, because of the manner the nine of us were grouped throughout the twenty-one years she and Dad had children. I was both blessed, and cursed, to be born as part of the final family, number eight out of nine, and the youngest daughter. More about this later, but for now, I need to state that Mom shared her love of reading with the three youngest of us by either reading to us or telling us stories every night. I'm sure she must have done the same for the older six, but I, of course, have no recollection of that. She also took us to the tiny red-brick public library in the center of the quaint village near our farm. We owned very few books, and the ones we had were communal. So a trip to the library allowed each of us three to find books that we alone enjoyed. I used to check out as many books as allowed, and how I wished I could keep them!

Additionally, each of the three of us was given a fifty-cent allowance when the "milk check" arrived twice a month. There happened to be a little newsstand next to the grocery store where Mom would shop to supplement what couldn't be grown, raised, or found wild on our farm. I would spend my time while she shopped perusing the comic books, the only books for children the newsstand sold, and the only books my fifty cents could buy. So, I'd search through the comics to find one Mom would approve of, usually settling on the latest *Archie* issue. I would devour it on the way home, and I treasured my growing pile of them. These books were mine.

Like I said earlier, neither one of my parents found education valuable. Life was about hard physical labor and the value of being independent, and "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps." You never asked others for help, you never took charity, and you never allowed any physical or mental weakness to interfere with your work responsibilities. This was true on both a physical and religious level. In my family, you simultaneously worked

to survive on earth and earn your way into heaven. And education, and professionals, the “suits” of the world, had no sway over these attitudes. Fortunately for me, because Mom loved to read, I was allowed to explore books, however limited the worldview I was allowed by the choices Mom would approve.

THE EFFECTS OF GENERATIONAL POVERTY

As I mentioned above, I grew up simultaneously rich and poor. I was a child of generational poverty on both sides of my extended family, though not to the same degree. The Great Depression permanently scarred both my parents, but particularly my mother. Up until my mother’s recent death at 100 years old, she would weave tales to anyone who would listen of the dandelion soup her own mother used to make to have something hot to serve her family.

On my father’s side, the story was less severe. My grandfather, Dad’s father, was a railroad engineer who managed to stay employed throughout the Great Depression and was able to secure a job for my father as well, if only my father would accept it. More on those choices later. On my mother’s side, my grandfather was a painter of homes, businesses, cars, whatever was needed. Unfortunately, during the Great Depression, few had the cash for such an extravagance. Instead, my aunt who had dropped out of high school took a childcare job, while my mother, who was still in high school, worked part-time at the local “five and dime” store. When I once asked why her father hadn’t taken the job instead of her, she scoffed at the thought. That just wasn’t done. In other words, such a job was women’s work and beneath a man, even an unemployed man who had a family to support.

My mother’s mother, I found out only a few years ago, had taught school for two years as a young adult before she married. I asked Mom why she’d never told me that before, to which she responded that it wasn’t important. This was a comment on the value of the work of women, on the greater importance of a woman’s role as wife and mother, and on my mother’s devaluing of education. I’ve taken pride ever since in knowing that I’ve followed in my grandmother’s footsteps, without even being aware of it.

Both of my parents came from tough Irish stock, with a huge dose of physical stamina and a sense of self-righteousness, but very little business sense. You see, my father wanted to be a farmer, and so he turned

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down my grandfather's offer of a railroad job. I completely understand my dad for following his own dream, but I often wondered why he didn't educate himself better about animals, crops, and business management. But neither parent valued education—in fact, it was openly devalued—and they only put stock in hard physical work and intuition. Furthermore, my father didn't allow his six sons the option of following their passions, as my grandfather had done for him. Instead, each was expected to quit school and be a farmer, and they were openly ridiculed if they didn't want to.

Our clothes were handmade and hand-me-downs, the beds were mattresses on the floor covered with old coats, and cars had to be started with a butter knife in the ignition and stopped by cutting the engine. We lived in old farmhouses that sagged, with toilets that had to be flushed with a pail of water, and we were given home haircuts. With this came an ultraconservative political viewpoint, where government should stay out of our lives and Communism lurked around every corner. We were raised as staunch Roman Catholics, which manifested itself in guilt, fear, and shame wrapped in a patriarchal package. My seven siblings older than me expectantly developed a pattern of dropping out of school and devoting themselves to a life of hard, unprofitable labor. I clearly remember the day when I was twelve years old and I promised myself that I wouldn't be trapped in this pattern, though I didn't know how, nor did I know who would help.

I was both blessed and cursed to be part of the “third” family of children; blessed because I had seven older siblings to do most of the hard physical labor, cursed because I was tormented by those same older siblings. Blessed because I was a girl, and my father didn't expect me to devote myself to farming. Cursed because I was a girl, and my mother expected me to quit school, marry young, have a large family, and be a second-class citizen my whole life. Females were to take care of their husbands and children, the only definition by which women were measured for success. I remember my mother's mantra well: “Family takes care of family.” And she used it on many occasions, applying it to a myriad of situations.

SAVING GRACES

So how did I turn out to be an optimist, who eagerly looks for life's opportunities, a contented wife, the mother of two girls, a PhD, an award-winning teacher/librarian, and a published author, writer, speaker, and consultant,

living a few states away from my original family? I had a few life-saving supports:

- An aunt who cared about me as an individual. Though I only saw her occasionally, I would look forward to her asking about my interests, dreams, grades, friends, and so on. She always affirmed and encouraged me to be my best and achieve.
- I was a natural-born student academically, who not only achieved high grades but also thrived in the school environment and regarded my teachers as heroes.
- I had a strong desire to achieve, which, unlike my parents and siblings, was combined with a sense of planning and preparation. This combination took me in the directions I chose, rather than those chosen for me.
- I was a reader, thanks to my mother. I especially loved, and still do, to pore over biographies, discovering what made famous people tick, learning what their childhoods were like, and how they managed to nurture their passions and follow their dreams.
- And finally, I met my future husband when I was only sixteen years old. He told me he admired my achievements both in and out of school, encouraged me in all my pursuits, and quickly became my rock.

Furthermore, years later I realized that my “otherness,” my distancing myself from familial patterns, and my lack of close ties with the family helped, rather than hindered, my independence.

UNDERSTANDING GENERATIONAL POVERTY

In her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005), Ruby Payne cites twenty characteristics of generational poverty, fifteen of which were present in my family structure. These are:

1. “Importance of personality . . . the ability to entertain, tell stories, and have a sense of humor is highly valued.” My mother was the storyteller in the family; my father was the jokester, but always at someone else’s expense.

2. "Importance of relationships: One only has people on whom to rely, and those relationships are important to survival." My father, though he loved us, valued hard work the most. It proved his manhood. By contrast, my mother was the one who was thoroughly vested in her family and our dependence on her.
3. "Matriarchal structure: The mother has the most powerful position in the society if she functions as the caretaker." This was 95 percent true for my family. While my mother recognized that my father was the head of the household and earned the money, my father truly only cared about hard work and his family being hard workers as well. My mother was the sole caregiver and controlled every other aspect of our lives.
4. "Oral language register: Casual register is used for everything." My father, in particular, always spoke in his country slang and ridiculed anyone who used "highfalutin' language."
5. "Survival orientation . . . discussions center around people and relationships . . . a job is not about a career." A job was about hard physical labor, providing for your family, and proving your manhood or womanhood.
6. "Identity tied to lover/fighter role for men: The key issue for males is to be a 'man.' The rules are rigid and a man is expected to work hard physically—and be a lover and a fighter." Again, this was 95 percent true, and my family valued only hard physical work, but there wasn't the emotion attached. There was no loving, except the unspoken, undemonstrated kind, and no physical fighting, on my father's part, only verbal tussling.
7. "Identity is tied to rescuer/martyr role for women: a 'good' woman is expected to take care of and rescue her man and children as needed." My father didn't need rescuing; he was the physically strong head of the household. However, my mother saw us children as her babies that always needed her there.
8. "Ownership of people: People are possessions. There is a great deal of comment about leaving the culture and 'getting above your raisings.'" Any of us who aspired to be an individual and use our talents in a way not valued by the family structure were discouraged and often ridiculed.

9. “Negative orientations: Failure at anything is the source of stories and numerous belittling comments.” Rarely were we allowed to move on from our mistakes; to this day, family members taunt each other, in the form of twisted humor, about mistakes and embarrassments from years ago.
10. “Belief in fate: Destiny and fate are the major tenets of the belief system. Choice is seldom considered.” Though on the one hand my Catholic mother preached free will and choice, everything ultimately came back to “God’s plan.” Ironically, recently upon my mother’s death, while digging through some paperwork, it was discovered that my parents were married by a justice of the peace, and not a Catholic priest, because my father wasn’t Catholic. The hypocrisy of this fact, that she literally “took to the grave,” is significant.
11. “Polarized thinking: Options are hardly ever examined . . . it is one way or the other. These kinds of statements are common, ‘I quit’ and ‘I can’t do it.’” One was expected to follow the family’s traditions and practices and not try something new.
12. “Time: Time occurs only in the present. The future does not exist except as a word.” Today was all that was important, maybe the following week, but rarely beyond. We were always running late because planning and time management weren’t a part of our world.
13. “Sense of humor: Humor is almost always about people—either situations people encounter or things people do to each other.” Our humor, joking, and teasing were always at someone else’s expense.
14. “Lack of order/organization . . . often unkempt and cluttered. Devices for organization (files, planners, etc.) don’t exist.” I was the one who kept my half of the room tidy, books and schoolwork organized, and wrote a to-do list, even as a child. I felt the need to keep some sense of control and direction in my disorganized, unplanned environment.
15. “Lives in the moment, does not consider future ramifications: Being proactive, goal-setting, and planning ahead are not a part of generational poverty. Most of what occurs is reactive and in

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the moment. Future implications of present actions are seldom considered” (Payne 2005, 51–53). When life is focused on survival, the focus is on today, and not much farther ahead, as there may not be a future.

The other five characteristics of generational poverty, the ones that my family didn’t exhibit, are:

1. “Background ‘noise’: Almost always the TV is on, no matter what the circumstance. Conversation is participatory, often with more than one person talking at a time.” In my family of orientation, conversations were few and far between. Talk consisted of directions, expectations, and arguments, and TV was a rarity.
2. “Significance of entertainment: When one can merely survive, then the respite from the survival is important. In fact, entertainment brings respite.” Hard work and prayer were, for the most part, the accepted activities in my family; there was little time for entertainment.
3. “Importance of non-verbal/kinesthetic communication. Touch is used to communicate, as are space and non-verbal emotional information.” My mother was affectionate to us as young children, but beyond that my family never showed affection toward each other. We only touched when we were antagonizing each other.
4. “Discipline: Punishment is about penance and forgiveness, not change.” Neither one of our parents truly meted out a punishment; rather, behavior was expected and usually met through fear of their words, anger, and disappointment. However, Mom’s strict adherence to Catholicism was about penance and forgiveness.
5. “Mating dance . . . is about using the body in a sexual way and verbally and subverbally complimenting body parts.” Sexuality was not only not spoken of, but treated as something dirty, shameful, and only part of reproduction.

Though my family didn’t exhibit these five characteristics, professionals who work with children in generational poverty need to understand the importance of the socialization these children have been raised in and live

with every day. Building empathy, not pity, for them and their situations is a must for being able to provide library and educational services that are meaningful and meet their needs.

ESCAPING POVERTY

And just what is it that children of generational poverty need to survive? Payne asserts that there are four reasons why an individual seeks their way out:

- A goal or vision of something they want to be or have;
- A situation that is so painful that anything would be better;
- Someone who “sponsors” them (i.e., an educator or spouse or mentor or role model who shows them a different way or convinces them that they could live differently);
- Or a specific talent or ability that provides an opportunity for them. (Payne 2005, 61)

Payne (2005) asserts that education is the key and that several supports and skills are necessary: role models and emotional resources, support systems, discipline, instruction to improve academic achievement, and developing positive relationships with adults. This is where librarians, teachers, counselors, and other personnel who work with children and teens are crucial. We provide examples, supports, and resources—not sympathy, pity, or handouts.

Though I’ve never been homeless, the wisdom that Ryan Dowd shares about the mindset of the poverty-stricken homeless person is insightful. In his book *The Librarian’s Guide to Homelessness*, he explains the way the homeless individual looks at time as follows:

Individuals raised in poverty focus on the present because survival requires prioritizing immediate needs . . . They also have a “shortened time horizon” . . . For most middle-class individuals, their time horizon is somewhere between one year and as long as they expect to live. For most homeless, though, their time horizon is about twenty-four hours . . . The reason

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for this is that most homeless individuals are in crisis mode, where the pressing survival needs of the next two days take priority. (Dowd 2018, 27–28)

When an individual's (or family's) needs for safety, nourishment, or shelter are uppermost in mind, future thoughts about education, self-actualization, and making an impact on others are not only ignored, but are scoffed at. My parents could see no value in my staying up until after midnight to study after I had spent a day at school and then worked for four hours. Their mindset was that I should quit school and work to help the family until I found a husband, and then devote my time to him and our many children exclusively.

The value in families in poverty lies in each other. People almost become possessions, as the hope of anything else in life is fleeting. Indeed, Dowd concurs: "According to the 'culture of poverty' theory, relationships are more important to poor people than to their middle-class and wealthy counterparts . . . they are more necessary for individuals in poverty. People with money can solve most of their problems by throwing cash at it. People without money don't have this option, so they have to use relational currency to solve their problems" (Dowd 2018, 29).

Another piece of research with significant insights is the ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) test proposed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Though poverty per se isn't one of the categories measured, it can be an inherent part of the categories that are measured: abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. And the higher the ACE score, the higher the risk of adverse health conditions both in childhood and in adulthood. However, there are other factors that can mitigate a high test score, including strong, nurturing relationships outside the home (Starecheski 2015).

The "requirement" of giving up at least some of those relationships is essential (in order to break the generational cycle), but nearly impossible to do. You have to have the ability and willingness to "turn your back" on who and where you came from. Without this willingness, the chances of your being sucked back into the conditions and attitudes that permeate your young years are high and powerful. I once heard my nephew say that a family can't be happy for your successes. And he's right because your successes remind them of their lack of success.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

I'll be the first to acknowledge that my childhood reflected rural, white poverty, which has its own set of real challenges, and in my case was paired with gender discrimination. But I am European American, straight, cisgender, and physically, mentally, and intellectually privileged. English is my first language, and I was raised Christian, though I left that behind years ago. And all of this gives me a degree of advantage and privilege that African Americans, Latinx, LGBTQ, and others don't have. I don't pretend to understand the differences between rural and urban poverty, but I do understand the similarities. And I listen, read, seek out the company of others different from myself, dialogue with them, and ask questions. I try to keep an open mind while readily acknowledging, and working against, my socialized biases.

One author-researcher who has helped inform me is Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu in his book *An African Centered Response to Ruby Payne's Poverty Theory* (2006). Kunjufu asserts through his research that achievement in school among African American children is dependent, even more than overcoming the effects of generational poverty, on the following:

- Strong school leadership;
- High teacher expectations;
- Increased student time on task;
- A more relevant Afrocentric, multicultural curriculum;
- More right-brain lesson plans;
- Utilization of cooperative learning;
- Single-gender classrooms (Kunjufu 2006, ix)

His work has built my understanding of the societal and economic structures that have been in place for centuries, and which map out the possible and the impossible for certain groups of people. His work, coupled with the history of racism adapted for young readers by Jason Reynolds and Ibram Kendi, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* (2020), have helped build my awareness and caused me to ask more questions. Their works also make me realize that the issues of poverty, achievement, health, and so on are very complex, intertwined ones that professionals working with children need to come to understand.

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Another book I encountered recently that gave me pause was the provocative children's book *Where Children Sleep* (2010) by James Mollison. Though I'm focusing on generational poverty in the United States, this book has a much broader focus; the photos and short bios of the children speak loudly to the many disparities in life that children endure. I "saw" myself in that book as a child, and it can give both children and adults a much-needed reality check about the differences that exist in the life opportunities for children of different socioeconomic classes. Truly, the measure of the values of a society can be seen in the way it treats the children.

MIDDLE-CLASS MISUNDERSTANDINGS

What solidly middle-class people don't usually understand is that the essentials of life vary depending on the socioeconomic class in which you are born. One story can act as an illustration of what I mean. One rather large family with children in the elementary school at which I worked had just had a new baby. One of the boys' classroom teachers dropped in on the family to bring a gift and realized during their visit that the kitchen had no refrigerator. Without asking the family's needs, the staff took up a collection and purchased a refrigerator. The family accepted it, but promptly sold it and used the money to travel to Florida to visit grandparents. The staff felt the family to be ungrateful, when in reality they put their new-found resources to use to connect with extended family, the most valuable resource in their lives. If the staff had understood the family's true needs, or asked, they would have realized that the need to connect with family was greater than their need to own a refrigerator. Furthermore, a refrigerator can't be transported when a quick move is necessary.

Author Tara Westover depicts the skewed perspective of families living in generational poverty in her book *Educated: A Memoir* (2018). She does a masterful job of demonstrating the lack of trust in the educational system, the defensiveness of those without educational opportunities, and how often this manifests itself in dysfunctional families who stubbornly try to prove to the world that not only is an education not needed, but it's a weakness. Families and individuals in generational poverty often rely solely on themselves, often dangerously refusing professional help. And then when a child does seek an education, or a different way of life, or

wants to be truthful and honest about who they are and what they need, not only are they not supported, but often they are ridiculed and have to navigate obstacles thrown up in their path.

Author J. D. Vance, in his blockbuster book *Hillbilly Elegy*, masterfully captures the feelings of desperation that are often associated with generational poverty:

I want people to know what it feels like to nearly give up on yourself . . . I want people to understand what happens in the lives of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children. I want people to understand the American Dream as my family and I encountered it. I want people to understand what upward mobility really feels like. And I want people to understand something I learned only recently: that for those of us lucky enough to live the American Dream, the demons of the life we left behind continue to chase us. (Vance 2016, 2)

Digging yourself out of generational poverty is nearly impossible for many children for at least two reasons:

1. System wide power structures that hold you in place are nearly impossible to overcome: race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, age, geography, ability, primary language, and so forth.
2. The ability and willingness to turn your back and walk away from everyone and everything that you were raised with is often required.

Because of the often insurmountable obstacles they face, and the family ties that suck them back in, the cycle of poverty is usually repeated. You see, what often keeps children in generational poverty is not the lack of supports that researchers such as Ruby Payne say are needed (though they are needed), but the societal power structure that limit opportunities and self-efficacy over them, and a child's own inability to turn their back on everyone and everything that they grew up with. It's emotionally too difficult. What the professionals—who predominantly come from middle-class backgrounds—who work with these children need to understand

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is that some conditions are well beyond the child or teen's control, and they are beyond your control as well. But you can become supportive and furnish examples that say to children, "Let's see what we can discover and accomplish together."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The author and poet Jason Reynolds says that "children don't need your salvation, they need you to see them, and thank them for coming to the library." And to welcome them into our spaces and let them know that the space and the resources we have to offer are expressly for them. What do school and youth services librarians, classroom teachers, and other professionals working with children and teens need to acknowledge? They need to understand:

- Family dynamics are the most important aspect of life.
- Children and teens draw strength from others because people are all they have.
- Family takes care of family.
- The power of expectations, both spoken and unspoken, is a formidable one, and it keeps families in poverty.

And what can school and youth services librarians, classroom teachers, and other professionals working with children and teens offer?

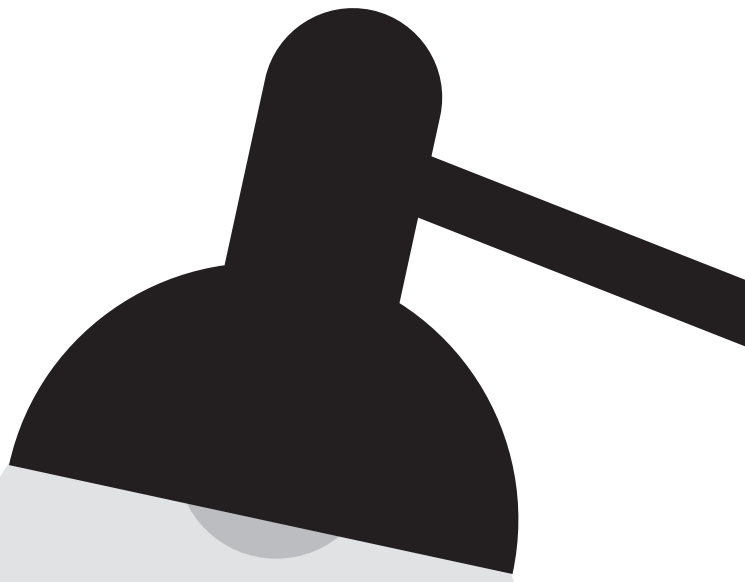
- Listen, without talking.
- Be present and respectful.
- Honor their stories, skills, and knowledge.
- Keep their trials and challenges in mind.
- Reach out to families and ask what they need.
- Ask what children and teens really want in life, not what they think they deserve.
- Encourage them in their desires and aspirations.
- Provide opportunities for their choices.
- Help them realize that these opportunities may never come their way again.

- Don't impose your values and wishes.
- Show hope and help them understand that there is no one more important than them and their needs come first.
- Provide excellent literature that reflects their lives and inspires them and their dreams.

My mother always insisted that “all that matters in life is a healthy, happy family. The rest is gravy.” I disagree. While the most important part of life is a healthy, happy family, the rest isn't gravy. It's essential to who we are, who we can become, and what we can share with others. And it takes strength and conviction to put yourself first and say no to that which keeps you down.

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Part I

INSPIRING STORYTELLERS



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CYNTHIA RYLANT

Were you, like me, a comic book reader as a kid? If so, then you have a reading habit in common with the picture-book author and novelist Cynthia Rylant. Why did she read them? Because she had access to them at a local “five and dime” store and was able to afford them as a child. Her other love was *Nancy Drew* mysteries, and later, paperback teen romances, for the same reasons. She didn’t actually realize there was a world of children’s books until she was a teen and had the opportunity to visit a public library. There, Rylant discovered the children’s room and the world of picture books. She read the Caldecott winners *Make Way for Ducklings* by Robert McClosky and *The Ox-Cart Man* by Donald Hall and her world was changed forever. Though she had never met an author, she knew she had to be one.

EARLY INFLUENCES

As a child, Rylant was surrounded by storytellers, and she relished the richness of both the telling and the stories. She states:

I don’t mean people who were professional storytellers; there were just people with some kind of yarn to spin . . . it was so brilliant and unpretentious. So, I think that I am just echoing those voices that I heard in West Virginia, whether they be those in front of the bait shop or two sisters sitting at the kitchen table and talking about all the shenanigans in the coal camp . . . their words just flowed. (Brodie 1996)

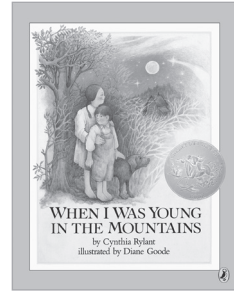
Later, as a graduate student in library science at Kent State University in Ohio, her knowledge of children’s and teen literature grew by leaps and

bounds. Upon graduation, and after a year working as a librarian, she published her first book, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, based on her early years with her grandparents, and she has made a living for herself as a writer ever since.

Growing up in small-town Beaver, West Virginia, raised by a single mom, who was often away to attend nursing school, offered Rylant little materially. During that time, she lived with her grandparents and extended family in a neighboring town. Rylant was abandoned by her father when she was only four, relating years later that “you struggle to believe you’re worth something” after such a trauma (NPR, 2013). She also feels that this abandonment contributed to her need to be a writer, stating, “If you were a child who is never told the truth, you begin to make up your own. After my father left, and no one mentioned his name again, I simply made up things about him . . . I think maybe some children who have suffered a loss too great for words grow up into writers who are always trying to find those words, always trying to find a meaning for the way they have lived” (Rylant 1989, 5).

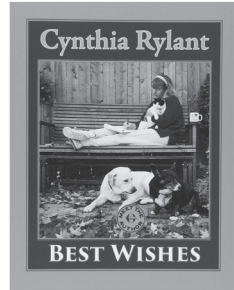
Rylant’s writing also made her powerful in another way, when she states that “writing stories has given me the power to change things I could not change as a child . . . I can make fathers stop drinking. I can make mothers stay in my books, though I couldn’t in real life” (Rylant 1989, 10). And in those stories, she can give children living in poverty hope for change. But life as a child for Rylant was rich in many other ways. “Although Cynthia later realized they had been poor, she had never lacked for love . . . She says that the gentle strength of her loving grandparents is what helped her survive being left by her parents” (Ruffin 2006, 9).

Rylant and her mother lived in a country house with no plumbing, and with very little to offer in the tiny community, particularly, no library. However, Rylant relates that she was “independent and creative . . . [and because] my mother worked so much, I didn’t have anyone to drive me anywhere . . . Beaver was just a little town in some very big mountains” (Brodie 1996). As she grew up and attended high school, Rylant wrote often and won a few awards for her work in “English classes, but I really couldn’t see myself as a . . . writer . . . because to me writers were people who were born into loftier circumstances” (Brodie 1996).



Rylant also shares the importance of opportunities for children in poverty—of being able to see the possibilities outside of their circumstances and see beauty in their experiences. She had the chance to attend a symphony orchestra that traveled to Beaver. She remembers that while “watching the conductor and his beautiful orchestra, I felt something in me that wanted more than I had. Wanted to walk among musicians, artists, and writers. Wanted a life beyond [what I knew]” (Rylant 1990, 33). Children can’t be what they can’t see, so opportunities, possibilities, both in person and through books, are essential for them.

In Rylant’s autobiography, *Best Wishes*, she writes, “A few times during the year I go back to West Virginia to see my family. My grandmother still lives in the same little house I wrote about in *When I Was Young in the Mountains*. Those relatives still drive up to visit . . . And when I sleep in my mother’s trailer among the trees, I hear the sounds of night in the country” (Rylant 1992a, 23–24). In this short, photographically illustrated book, Rylant speaks simply about her childhood experiences and alludes to how they have informed her books.



In a quiet tone, she shares the joys of her life as an adult, and how she appreciates, and gives a helping hand to, those still living in her childhood village. But without it being said, the poverty she grew up in is very obvious in the photographs. She no longer belongs to that poverty, however. Her ability to leave the area, to still return for visits but also leave again, speaks volumes. Children in poverty can benefit from this picture of Rylant loving and valuing her past, and also showing how it has informed and helped shape her own adult life, which is very different from her childhood. Though the book (part of the *Meet the Author* series) is now over twenty years old, the basis of what she shares is still valid and valuable.

LIFEWORk

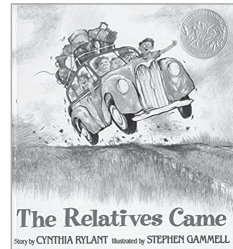
Rylant’s characters have the qualities of being nurturing, “steady, reliable, and loving,” and she attributes this to her austere but “wonderful experiences” in a close-knit family (NPR 2013). Interviewers have claimed

that her characters exude a “quiet dignity . . . They are strong characters—people whose lives are hard but who are proud of who and what they are . . . Vivid characters, characters who become flesh and blood on the page . . . simple, yet complex” (Brodie 1996).

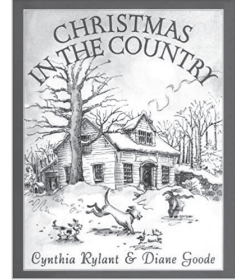
In Rylant’s first book, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, she talks of the joys of her childhood spent with her grandparents. “When I was young in the mountains, I never wanted to go to the ocean, and I never wanted to go to the desert. I never wanted to go anywhere else in the world, for I was in the mountains. And that was always enough” (Rylant 1982b). In muted folk art illustrations, complemented by a spare but sufficient text, Rylant relates the joys, the challenges, and most importantly, the complete peace and satisfaction of her life back then. She gives the reader a slice of her life, and fills the book with details about family members, eating too much okra, and Sunday celebrations. The added touches in the illustrations show a range of emotions, from love to fear to contentment. Children in poverty need to see the joy of their lives reflected in books. And children who don’t endure poverty need to see the happiness that lives unlike theirs can experience.

In a later book, *The Relatives Came*, Rylant shows the love that an extended family can bring and the close relationships in poor families. Because those in generational poverty have little else, people are of the utmost importance. “The relatives stayed for weeks and weeks . . . They ate our strawberries and melons, then promised we could eat up all their grapes and peaches when we came to Virginia” (Rylant 1992c). Lovingly told, filled with rich imagery, *The Relatives Came* relates the annual visit by Rylant’s Virginia relatives to West Virginia. The small day-to-day occurrences and tasks they all take on is the backdrop to the joy the families share in being together. The book shows how families in poverty depend on one another, help each other, enjoy each other’s company, and give little thought to the lack of material goods. It shows the strong foundation of relationships and how they can be a support. The book’s watercolor illustrations depict slightly exaggerated characters in the West Virginia countryside who are clearly enjoying their time together.

Christmas in the Country is set at Rylant’s grandparents’ home as well and shares the joys of simple holidays. “I loved those ornaments. Some



of them I had made myself. Hard foam bells glued with green glitter. Red construction-paper chains. There were silver icicles and white glass stars and soft angels. Each ornament reminded me of my whole life” (Rylant 2002). Recounting Christmas at her grandparents’ little house in the country, with an old coal stove and a tiny kitchen, Rylant describes the simple joys in preparing for and celebrating the holiday. Children who have an affluent life, and a Christmas holiday that’s all about the gifts, are given a view of how even modest preparations performed with a loving family can be joyful. The book affirms to children in poverty the goodness that is inherent in the unpretentious delights shared with people who love you. Diane Goode’s warm, sensitive watercolors add to the intimacy of the memories.



And in her book *This Year’s Garden*, Rylant shares the simple joys of being self-reliant. “Granny says she’s not canning an army’s worth of beans this year” (Rylant 1982a). In vivid color and impressionistic style, the reader is shown a picture of a multi-generational family’s hard work in preparing for and planting a garden. This is followed by the harvesting and canning of the vegetables to have delicious meals. The first-person narration is equally descriptive and intimate and shows all children the value of hard work and perseverance.



The language in Rylant’s books is truly poetic, filled with imagery, cadence, rhythm, and lyrical language. She says, “the gift of language, it’s truly a gift . . . it isn’t linear or rational . . . I try to be humble about the fact that I really didn’t do anything to have this ability to make beautiful language” (NPR 2013). She attributes this writing voice to her father who, she discovered years after his death, had written for an Army newspaper, using the same rich language (Ruffin 2006). Rylant writes without any “pre-thinking or pre-planning” and without a schedule (Teut 2017). Stories come to her as she writes a picture book, usually in one or two sittings: “everything just flow[s] together . . . I wait for this feeling that tells me there is a story inside me. Then I pick up a yellow pad and I’ll go sit on the porch, or sometimes I’ll just sit up in bed late at night . . . I like to write outside if I can manage it” (NPR 2013).

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