

Some Thoughts and a Bit of History on the publication of  
the Handprint Books edition of

## THE STORY OF LITTLE BLACK SAMBO

the original text by Helen Bannerman  
illustrations by Christopher Bing

The story of Sambo, the little boy who outwits a band of voracious tigers with independent resourcefulness, had simple beginnings: In 1898 it was conceived and written down by a mother for her two daughters to while away the long hours on a two-day train ride from Madras to Kodaikanal, India. They were escaping the plague- and disease-ridden hot city for the cooler mountain air to be found in a hill town. Helen Bannerman was the wife of a Scots officer in the British Army stationed in India for thirty years as a member of the Indian Medical Service. She accompanied her story with illustrations of a thick-lipped, fuzzy-haired boy with bulging eyeballs, a portrait which only too tragically incorporated every visual stereotype and exaggerated caricature of a "native" child seen through the eyes of a member of the white, colonial ruling class.

Alice Bond, a friend of Mrs. Bannerman, brought both text and illustrations to London, seeking to find a publisher for the story. She soon found him in Grant Richards, who acquired the copyright for five British pounds. The slim volume found a large and appreciative audience both in England and on the continent; a popularity which some have ascribed as much to the compact trim size of the original book—which was uncharacteristically small and thus deemed particularly suitable for children's hands—as to the inherent appeal of the story. Within a year of its first publication, Sambo was available in the United States, published here by Frederick A. Stokes. Over the next four decades, the story would be published to great success in numerous editions, not only the original with Helen Bannerman's images, but also many new and pirated versions with illustrations that clearly reflected a particular American racism. The portrayal of the young boy very much reflected the tradition of blatantly racist *picaninny* and *golliwog* images that were so common in American representations of Africans and African-Americans from the early 19th Century onwards.

By far the greatest impact of the story was felt by the African-American community. Although it appears likely to be coincidental, Helen Bannerman's choice of the name *Sambo* could not but evoke the most negative of images to African Americans. While Sam- is an extremely common prefix for an Indian boy's name [Samir, Samrat, Sambit, Sambhdda, etc.], the term had quite a different connotation in the Western Hemisphere. *Sambo* was used as early as the 18th Century in

the Caribbean to refer to those of mixed race who were three-quarters black, and by the middle of the 19th Century had acquired the pejorative meaning of a lazy African male. Just where the origins of the usage in the Americas reside remains unclear, perhaps from the West African Foulah *sambo*, uncle. And whether conscious or not, Helen Bannerman's choice to qualify Sambo's name with "Little Black," echoing perhaps Francis Hobson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886) or even the Brothers Grimm "Little Red Riding Hood," imposed inevitable connotations that were at once literally belittling and denigrating.

For both Euro and African-Americans growing up in the first half of the Twentieth Century, Sambo was only too often the first black child they encountered in picture books. Many shared a love for the text of the story; it is difficult not to respond positively to the sheer joy and cleverness Sambo shows in outwitting the tigers and the satisfaction of the feast which ends the tale. But it was ultimately impossible to reconcile the story with the outrageously racist images—either Bannerman's (no matter how naively drawn), or the far more racist others which followed.

There are two recent, significant, newly illustrated editions that ask readers to reassess the story; they appeared almost simultaneously in 1996—*The Story of Little Babaji*, illustrated by Fred Marcellino, and *Sam and the Tigers*, with a text by Julius Lester and illustrations by Jerry Pinkney. The former returns the story to its Indian roots, renaming the hero to Babaji, with a setting and costuming that is unmistakably that of the land and era of the Raj. Lester and Pinkney relocate Sambo to a fantastical landscape in a mythical American South with a new text which is a wonderfully humorous riff on the original.

Thoughts on this edition I have been involved with the making of this particular edition of Sambo for almost fifteen years. Christopher Bing had found his way to me through the good offices of Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Chair of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University, who was so impressed and moved by Christopher's initial illustrations that he strongly encouraged him to complete the book and introduced him to his agent, Carl Brandt, who in turn presented Christopher's work to me.

Christopher came to the story as a four-year-old child living in Florida; it was by far his favorite story, the one he begged his grandfather to read again and again. Returning to the book as a student

at the Rhode Island School of Design, he had a reaction shared by many who knew and loved the book as children and who came back to it years later to see it through the eyes of an adult: a dismay at the narrowness of vision which informed the illustrations, entirely at odds with the richness of the story. With no view towards publication, but simply to satisfy himself, Christopher set out to reillustrate the text with images that he felt would truly complement Bannerman's text. Thus the portrayal of Sambo as an African child was a conscious and deliberate decision, as was the choice of setting: India. There was no denying that this story could only take place on the Asian sub-continent—after all, there are no tigers in Africa. Helen Bannerman's text makes explicit references to *ghee*, the Indian word for butter. But Christopher felt equally strongly that to simply recast the figure of Sambo as an Indian child wrenched the story out of the cultural context in which it been understood by an American readership for over a century. Therefore, his Sambo is a glorious and unabashedly African child, who runs through a richly detailed Indian setting, a fluidity of culture and geography possible only in the genre to which this tale ultimately belongs: true and marvelous fantasy.

In an ideal world every book for children stands to be judged only on its own merits, on the skill and persuasiveness of its language, the power and emotive strength of its images, and its ability to stir the imagination of its readership. But in reality, any story must assume life in the context of its history and culture, it will and must resonate in a universe filled with the expectations, interests, and prejudices that readers will bring to it. Perhaps for no book does this hold more true than *The Story of Little Black Sambo*.

It is my hope that a child who encounters the present volume will come to learn the complex history and dark shadows with which this story has been fraught from the first, because in the truth that history so often reveals lies a fuller understanding of our culture and our blind spots. But first and foremost, I hope that every reader will respond with the joy and excitement of discovering a satisfying and rewarding story with illustrations seamlessly woven into a wonderful whole.

Christopher Franceschelli  
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