

The brownies' book for civil rights



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The Future Generation Must Love Before They Can Fight for Change

The 1920's, for people of color, was a time of growth and change. “ Between 1914 and 1920, roughly 500, 000 black southerners packed their bags and headed to the North, fundamentally transforming the social, cultural, and political landscape of cities such as Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Detroit” (Williams). People of color began to construct a new environment for themselves in public life, actively encountering racial prejudice as well as economic, political and social challenges to create a Black urban culture that would apply enormous influence in the decades to come. This move, also known as The Great Migration, reshaped Black America and the nation as a whole. From this great move came the birth of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance was the development of the Harlem neighborhood in New York City as a black cultural mecca in the early 20th Century paving way to the social and artistic explosion that resulted. During this fundamental period, Black people began to boom in businesses, entertainment, and art. However, at this point in time, the majority of Children's Literature consisted of White characters and stories that were geared toward White families—not the children of color who were also exposed to them. However, with oppression came power, expression, strength, and a powerful children's magazine which would break the stereotypes of the role children of color played in popular children's stories. Through careful analysis of several sections from *The Brownies' Book* (Volume 2. No. 12), I will discuss how this magazine was used as a stepping

stone to guide/prepare Black children into becoming strong, positive, independent-professionals, leaders, and students.

W. E. B Du Bois

Before we commence our conversation on *The Brownies' Book*, it is worth recognizing and acknowledging one of the civil right front-runners who was a driving force behind the magazine's creation—William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. W. E. B Du Bois was born in Massachusetts during the mid to late 1860's. He graduated from Fisk University and received his PhD from Harvard University. A visionary, Du Bois sought to develop ideas in which to bring to light the racist issues of his time and to eliminate it—which would create a brighter future for people of color. In his fight for civil rights, Du Bois helped create The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP was an organization that worked to extirpate the harsh treatment and unfairness of Black people. This included rights such as (but not limited to): “ housing, education, employment, voting, and transportation; to oppose racism; and to ensure African Americans their constitutional rights” (Britannica. com). In addition to taking part of the establishment of this organization, Du Bois became the editor of their magazine— *The Crisis* .

Crisis Magazine

As previously mentioned, The NAACP subsequently launched *The Crisis* magazine, which aided in the fight for full civil rights and against stereotyped representations of Black people within society at the time. Upon the issues initial release, in 1911, Du Bois announced some of the aims for the

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magazine. Firstly, the magazine would act more as a newspaper since it would tackle all of the salient happenings and global issues that involved people of color. In addition to reporting the news, *The Crisis* would support men's rights, regardless of their skin color. *The Crisis* would be a magazine that upheld the "ideals of American democracy" (Dzanouni et al. 1).

Then, beginning in 1912, each October issue centralized its focus around children and child topics—while conserving the original ideals of the magazine. Known as "The Children's Number", this provided inclusion of the entire family and allowed children to become involved. Racism did not just affect the adults, but the entire family as well. Du Bois wanted children to read stories that shed a more positive light on children of color, which differed from the common barbarous depictions of Black people at the time. "Negative or nonexistent portrayals of Blacks in children's literature were the norm during the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries." (Vaughn-Roberson & Hill 494). Du Bois stated:

"Heretofore the education of the Negro child has been too much in terms of White people. All through school life his text-books contain much about White people and little or nothing about his own race. All the pictures he sees are of White people. Most of the books he reads are by White authors, and his heroes and heroines are White...The result is that all of the Negro child's idealism, all his sense of the good, the great and the beautiful is associated with White people...He unconsciously gets the impression that the Negro has little chance to be great, heroic or beautiful" (qtd. in McNair & Bishop 28).

The children's issue of *The Crisis* lasted for 7 years until one faithful day when Du Bois received a letter that would inspire a new magazine to be born.

The Letter

As part of the children's issue in *The Crisis*, Du Bois would receive letters from children which included stories that he would incorporate into the magazine or questions that he would answer. In 1919, Du Bois received a letter from a little girl who wanted to become more aware of Black history as a reaction to the mistreatment she received from White people. However, this little girl also conveyed her dire hatred of White people (Harris 7). This proclamation of hatred by a young child caused Du Bois a great deal of dismay. Du Bois believed that this young girl was not the only child who felt the same amount of deep hatred. Du Bois felt that *The Crisis* (which children had access to) held some responsibility for the negative feelings expressed by this little girl. *The Crisis* magazine did not shy away from discussing heavy topics. There were several times when lynching's were reported in the "Children's Number" of *The Crisis*. However, Du Bois was adamant that the magazine would report the news, despite its explicitness, even though he was apprehensive about the effects this kind of information might've had on children. He wrote, "To educate them in human hatred is more disastrous to them than to the hated: to seek to raise them in ignorance of their racial identity and peculiar situation is inadvisable— impossible (qtd. in Harris 5). Thus, Du Bois (along with Jessie Fauset & Augustus Dill) decided to create a magazine solely for children where they can read stories with correct and positive depictions of colored people. A book where they could grow to not

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have hate in their hearts for others, but where they can learn to love themselves. This magazine would be known as *The Brownies' Book*.

The Brownies' Book

The first issue of *The Brownies' Book* was released in January 1920. *The Brownies' Book* was the first collaborated attempt to produce a work of literature exclusively addressing the needs of Black children. The magazine ran from January 1920 to December 1921 under the leadership of Du Bois as the editor, Augustus Granville Dill as the business manager, and Jessie Fauset as the literary and managing editor (Gyant 22). Each issue cost 15 cents a copy or \$1.50 for a year's subscription. *The Brownies' Book* was the first magazine to take Black Children seriously— which challenged the falsified depictions of Black people, in children's stories, at the time.

The magazine encouraged imagination and play while also recognizing racial prejudice in the Children's Literature world. *The Brownies' Book* celebrated cultural variances among the Black childhood experience. Through stories (historical, fantasy, etc.), photos and illustrations, *The Brownies' Book* fostered a deep cultural pride in young Black readers. This magazine was instrumental in promoting future Black Children's Literature. Du Bois and Fauset created *The Brownies' Book* primarily for Black children “ to teach universal love and brotherhood for all little folk, black and brown and yellow and white” (Gyant 22) *The Brownies' Book* was also a substitute to the often detrimental and racially biased children's textbooks, literature, and literary magazines of the time. “ Furthermore, while some of the stories published in T. B. B spotlight upper-class Black children, most are set within an Afro-

American, not a White, cultural content” (Vaughn-Roberson & Hill 495). As part of *The Brownies' Book's* creation, Du Bois created 7 objectives that would act as the magazine's foundation.

The Objectives

When creating *The Brownies' Book*, DuBois developed 7 objectives that framed the ideals and beliefs children who read this magazine would gain. In stating these goals, Du Bois “ proposed a model of social action or behavior that would counter the effects of the negative images of Blacks and Black culture pervasive in American culture” (Harris 192). These 7 objectives were:

1. To make colored children realize that being “ colored” is a normal, beautiful thing.
2. To make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race.
3. To make them know that other colored children have grown into beautiful, useful and famous persons.
4. To teach them a delicate code of honor and action in their relations with White children.
5. To turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition and love of their homes and companions.
6. To point out the best amusements and joys and worthwhile things of life.

7. To inspire them to prepare for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice. (qtd. in McNair & Bishop 29).

Each objective was a response to the attitudes of Black children at the time. These objectives addressed a child's negative self-image created by the malicious depictions of Black people, which could be seen in most Children's Literature written by White people. These objectives also emphasized the importance of educating young Black children on Black culture as well as responding to the dire hatred a child felt toward others as a result of racism. The objectives that Du Bois created were also to teach children to celebrate the color of their skin and that being a person of color was beautiful thing; that being a person of color is not diminishing but empowering.

The 2nd and 5th objectives seem to be in direct relation (or inspired by) the letter Du Bois received back in 1919 for *The Crisis* magazine. The little girl wanted to learn about the history of her culture, which is what the 2nd objectives attempts to achieve. The little girl also possessed hatred to White people and the 5th objective wants to take that little girl's "hurts and resentments" and turn them into "ambition and love." This was a time when the canonical texts and White voices were bringing down and diminishing the attitudes of young colored children. This book and these objectives/values helped prepare its readers to not have the same hate in their hearts that the Whites, at the time, had for people of color. Children of color were going to come out stronger than their oppressors and shine brighter as "the children of the sun" (Vaughn-Roberson & Hill 497).

"As the Crow Flies"

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One of the recurring columns in *The Brownies' Book* was, "As the Crow Flies." This term is an idiom for the most direct path between two points. A section which reports news stories, "As the Crow Flies" connected the child reader with the knowledge they gained about the world around them. "As the Crow Flies," written by DuBois, prepared readers to become knowledgeable about world issues as well as to educate them about the "Negro race" (objective 2) and to "inspire them" (objective 7). The first column of "As the Crow Flies" began with a description of the animal figure in which the column was named after, "The Crow is black and O so beautiful, shining with dark blues and purples, with little hints of gold in his mighty wings. He flies far above the Earth, looking downward with his sharp eyes" (qtd. in Harris 195). There are a ton of parallels with choosing the crow as the central figure for this column. The Crow is generally not a bringer of good news, nor is it generally considered favorably from other sweet sounding birds. Crows are black birds known for their intelligence and adaptability, and for their loud, harsh "caw." But in this column, The Crow's black color is described with positive attributes. The Crow also brings good news instead of the bad news that is usually associated with them. Because the news is global, this furthers Du Bois' statement that the Crow flies "above the Earth." "In a subtle way *The Brownies' Book's* readers were encouraged not to equate blackness with negativity; quite the opposite, blackness, they were persuaded to think, was associated with love, intelligence, caring, kindness, duty, and empathy as exemplified by the Crow's behavior" (Harris 195). The Crow is a black intelligent animal who has a duty of care to bring news to the children.

In this specific issue, one of the topics mentioned include, " A great strike of clothing makers is in progress in New York because the employers want to pay by the piece instead of by the day" (Du Bois 346). The news story regarding the workers' strike was not only informational but instructional. This story taught its readers that if one wants to create change, they will have to fight for it. This fulfilled the magazine's 7th objective, " To inspire them to prepare for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice." In this scenario, by choosing to embark on a strike, the employees risked losing their jobs but were willing to take the chance in order to succeed in getting what they wanted. This news story was preparing children for the world around them and how they, too, could become involved in society. If they were not happy about the racial issues that they faced, at the time, then they had the power to try and fix it. Again, this magazine was preparing children in constructing a brighter future by creating strong, independent leaders and professionals. In the professional world, they might need to become leaders in order to bring about change. " As the Crow Flies" reported problems and successes that people of color were facing, and this not only exposed children to the obstacles Black people faced around the world, but on ways in which they could help resolve these issues. This was a huge stride for people of color within the literary world where the dominating views were from White people. Before the Harlem Renaissance, very few works by Black people were published.

" Little People of the Month"

The " Little People of the Month" column, written by Du Bois, highlighted the amazing educational accomplishments of young people of color (Du Bois 354 <https://assignbuster.com/the-brownies-book-for-civil-rights/>

& 355). This article, particularly, showcased the success of 4 high-school students: Doris Madeline Johnson, Kenneth Randall, Alverna Blanchard, and Annie H. Coffey. Both Randall and Blanchard graduated high-school with the highest grade of their graduating class. Ms. Coffey was the youngest student in her entire county (among both white and colored students) to take the 8th grade examination at the age of 11, only to then go on to graduate high-school at 15 years old—she was in college upon the issue's release. Lastly, there was Doris Johnson who won a music competition and as a result, conducted an orchestra of 70 instruments to play the graduation ode.

This section of the magazine created a positive association between being colored and being successful. The message being expressed was that you did not have to be a White child in order to be educated, winners of competitions, or the brightest in your class. This article promoted the idea that the talents one possessed should not be undermined based on the color of one's skin nor is it a reason to not try your best. With being dedicated and determined came triumph. There were other ways to create change in society—proving that people of color could be smart and creative was one of them.

This section fulfills objectives 2 and 3 of the 7 DuBois created. With the second objective, " To make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race", Du Bois made children familiar with the achievements of those within their own race—by exhibiting the successful triumphs of the 4 Black children featured in the article. With the third objective, " To make them know that other colored children have grown into beautiful, useful and famous persons", Du Bois showcased 4 students

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graduating high-school, which is a big educational milestone. One day the younger readers of the magazine will also attend high-school and this article proudly showcased 4 high-school graduates who have grown into beautiful and useful people. Madeline Johnson had grown into a beautiful musician, Kenneth Randall and Alverna Blanchard had grown into two beautiful smart students, and Annie Coffey had grown into not only a beautiful high-school graduate, but a college student, too. By fulfilling these two objectives in this section of the magazine, children were preparing to become strong, independent students. Despite the challenges they would face in school, they could still thrive in the world of education.

“ The Land Behind the Sun”

“ The Land Behind the Sun” (331-333), written by Du Bois' daughter, Yolande, is a story about a young, playful, oriental girl named Madalen who is told to go to bed early due to her mischievous behavior. While in her bedroom, she encounters a beautiful brown fairy named Topaz. Topaz whisks Madalen away to the land behind the sun and it is there where she encounters all of the brown fairies including the fairy Queen. The Queen asks Madalen to rescue the King from the Wicked Witch of Bogland which Madalen successfully does. Before she could attend the ball in her honor, Madalen awakes from her “ dream” and accompanies her parents at the dinner table where her father notices a weird star shape on her forehead where the Queen of the fairies kissed her. Although Madalen awakes from her “ dream”, she knows (as well as the reader) that the land behind the sun was real.

This story contains influences and themes from *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Hansel and Gretel*. Madalen and her adventure resemble that of Alice and Dorothy Gale as they all get transported into a different land in which they have to accomplish a specific quest/task. They each encounter an older, evil female character: The Queen of Hearts, The Wicked Witch of the West, and The Wicked Witch of Bogland. In the end, The Wicked Witch of Bogland lived in a cabin and asked one of her goblins to prepare a pot of boiling water so she could eat Madalen, just like the evil witch in *Hansel & Gretel*. Madalen was able to defeat the Wicked Witch by throwing water on her which causes her to melt, similar to how Dorothy defeated The Wicked Witch of the West. The stories that Yolande gained inspiration from were canonical. Unfortunately, these stories did not contain characters of color, nor were they written by people of color. By writing a fairytale with people of color inspired by stories as recognizable as the three mentioned above, "The Land Behind the Sun" spoke back to the canon and the racial biases that were evident in Children's Literature. Now, children of color could finally place themselves in a fantastical world that included characters that looked like them.

This story not only broke racist barriers within the Children's Literature community, but also contained positive messages that would continue to prepare its readers for the future. The fairies were "... different shades of brown" (Du Bois 332). Du Bois, in creating this magazine, wanted to emphasize the beauty and normality of being a person of color, which was his very first objective for *The Brownies' Book*. By creating fairies that were different hues of brown, Du Bois was showing its reader that every color was

beautiful and that it was normal to be a person of color, no matter what color that was. “ Numerous images throughout the magazine portrayed African American children of various hues—from light-skinned to dark skinned—as beautiful and appealing” (McNair & Bishop 30).

The story also fulfilled a couple of objectives which educated its reader on how to interact with others regardless of race. These objectives were, “ 4. To teach them a delicate code of honor and action in their relations with White children” and “ 5. To turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition and love of their homes and companions” (qtd. in McNair & Bishop 29). While Madalen was in the land behind the sun, she and Topaz encountered a fairy guard who almost fell on his face. Although both girls found the act to be comedic, “...the two girls were obliged to hurry on to keep from laughing and hurting his feelings. That never would have done, you know— it’s awfully unkind to hurt people’s feelings” (Du Bois332). Even though Black people would encounter moments in which their feelings were hurt by acts of racism, this story encourages children to do the opposite. It’s not nice to hurt someone’s feelings, showing the reader that what White people were doing was not nice, but they should not stoop to their level of cruelty. This story prepared its readers to not be mean or hurtful towards others, despite the unfair treatment bestowed upon them. This delicate code of honor and action is tolerance. People of color do not have to permanently endure the harsh mistreatments caused by White people, but tolerate it enough to show them that they are not affected by their negativity, just like the elf guard falling did not create a reaction from the girls. Although they wanted to laugh, they knew it would be the wrong thing to do. This also

prepared children of color to become strong and independent. If a White person was taunting a person of color, instead of reacting to it, just be strong and walk away. This story, like the magazine as a whole, sparked a literary moment which changed Children's Literature history.

A Literary Moment Which Changed History

During a time where literature was dominated by white culture, *The Brownies' Book* challenged the status quo and established Black Children's Literature—breaking stereotypes. In a time of harsh racism, the oppressed found a way to speak back to the oppressors while sending positive messages to the younger generations. The Harlem Renaissance was a time of creative freedom, the rise of Black businesses, artistic expression, etc.—Du Bois knew it was the perfect time to create *The Brownies' Book*. Because children of color were living in a time where racism was evident in their lives (in schools, St. Nicholas magazine, etc.), Du Bois needed to ensure they began their long journey on an uplifting foot where they flew above (like a crow), not dragging beneath the dirt where their oppressors said they belonged. DuBois aimed to use literature as a form of social protest against racism and to prepare children to resist and challenge racism in their own lives (Hughes-Hassel et al., 7). The objectives for *The Brownies' Book* were created to show young children that they were not what White people said they were, but that by being Black was beautiful. *The Brownies' Book* also expanded the amount of Children's Literature with Black children for Black children (which were scarce). That achievement, alone, was a historical moment for Black people during the early 20th century. By fulfilling these 7 objectives, as we have seen in their final issue, *The Brownies' Book* became <https://assignbuster.com/the-brownies-book-for-civil-rights/>

a way to prepare its readers (the younger generation) to become strong, positive, independent-professionals, leaders, and students. It is with positivity that change is made. Whether a children's story is preparing a child for death, adulthood, or positive attitudes for the future, children's stories can be utilized as tools used to prepare its readers for life outside of its pages.

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