

A Dream Conferred

Ashley Bryan leads kids across cultural bridges with his rousing gospel of poetry and art.

by Amy Rawe



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"Whatever is beautiful for a child is beautiful for all ages," says Ashley Bryan, professor, storyteller, illustrator and poetry cheerleader.

"Whenever I visit a school where he has been, there is a joy, still shining in his wake—a passion for words and art, a belief that the voice and vision matters."

—Naomi Shihab Nye

STANDING ON STAGE IN FRONT of a squirming mass of elementary school kids, seventy-eight-year-old Ashley Bryan whoops, hollers, glides from side to side, widens his eyes. "S i i I I I N N n n g to the sun, it will LIS-ten, and warmmm your words. Your joy will R i i I I I S s s e." The kids stop fidgeting and fix their gazes on this lean, cotton-haired man whose passion demands their attention. For Bryan, it's not a show—it's a tribute, a worship even, of language and African culture. Bryan—author and illustrator of more than thirty children's books, painter, puppet-maker, and storyteller—brings African history alive for kids. His book, *Beat the Story Drum*, *Pum Pum*, won the Coretta Scott King Award for illustration.

Three other books—exploring African American spirituals, the Christmas story in black spirituals, and African American poetry—were named Coretta Scott King Award Honor Books. Bryan has also received the Arbuthnot Prize, an international lifetime achievement award in children's literature. "Ashley Bryan is a quiet genius and a scholar of his art," says Dr. Henrietta Smith, Professor Emerita at the University of Southern Florida and editor of *The Coretta Scott King Awards Books*. "His medium fits the mood of each work. It is not by chance, for example, that the woodcuts in Bryan's book of African tales are done in the earth tones of *Mother Africa*. The use of flowing lines in the *Dancing Granny* were influenced by his study of the master eighteenth-century Japanese painter Hokusai."

He also draws inspiration from poetry, folktales from West Africa, the English Antilles, the West Indies, and African American spirituals. "When I share with a group of people—adults or children—I always start with poetry," says Bryan, "to honor the sound and rhythm." Bryan then reads from one of his stories based on folktales, relaying the universality of the human spirit. "Then I go to the spirituals, which are at the heart of all I do," he says. Whatever the source, Bryan's work illuminates the spirit of perseverance and celebration.

"There are over 5,000 slavery songs, and they teach us that even under deep suffering we still have to create richness and beauty in ourselves," Bryan says. "When we are centered in the gifts our people have offered, we become rooted in who we are and can stand up to any challenge. I hope that my work with the African tales will be, by the very nature of storytelling, like a 'tender bridge' reaching us across distances of time and space."

Though the connection may be tender, it is by no means fragile; this is a sturdy bridge for shouting and stomping. "You know where I get most of my inspiration for stories and paintings?" Bryan asks from the stage. "Poetry!" he belts out, as they groan. But by the end of the hour, the kids are yelling lines from Langston Hughes or Gwendolyn Brooks in unison, shrieking with laughter as they attempt to imitate how he pops some words up in a high voice or draws others out long and low. His trademark punctuation is rhythmic "uh-huh's." Some kids maintain that it's not an "Ashley Bryan story" if the text is void of uh's and huh's.

"It's important that they hear—and I mean *hear*—the

words on a page. Otherwise they don't realize how alive it can be." Bryan's delivery is both playful and polished, equally childlike and wise—think Bill Cosby meets William Shakespeare. The kids are hooked. "I wish every student in the world would have a chance to hear him," says Naomi Shihab Nye, a poet, novelist, and anthologist who has led poetry workshops in classrooms across the country since 1974. "Whenever I visit a school where he has been, there is a huge gleaming magnificence, a joy, still shining in his wake—a passion for words and art, a belief that the voice and vision matters."

HIS INFATUATION WITH LANGUAGE is something that Bryan has felt nearly all his life. As a child in the 1930s Bronx public school system, Bryan was drilled in elocution. "Everyone would choose a poem," says Bryan, "and we were given three weeks to a month to deal with the words expressively. We were taught that a poem only lives by the voice, so every day someone would be standing in front of a class reciting poems." On Fridays, all elementary grades came together for assemblies, and Bryan remembers feeling terror before performing poems for a large group of peers.



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Illustration from *Sailing the Ocean: 100 poems by young poets*, by Naomi Shihab Nye (Greenwillow, 2000)