



Ashley Bryan

**Author Program In-depth Interview
Insights Beyond the Movie**

Ashley Bryan, interviewed in his home in Little Cranberry Island, Maine, August 24, 2008.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You tell a lovely story about the first book you ever created.

ASHLEY BRYAN: I grew up in the Bronx during the Depression. When we were learning the alphabet at school, we created a picture for each letter. After we reached Z, the teacher asked us to sew the pictures together, and she said, "You've just published an alphabet book. You're the author, the illustrator, the binder, and the distributor. Take it home."

TEACHINGBOOKS: Have you always been an artist?

ASHLEY BRYAN: Yes, I have been drawing and painting since before kindergarten. During the Depression, the government created free art and music classes to employ artists throughout the country in the communities. My parents had six children of their own to raise, as well as my three cousins. They could feed, clothe, and house us, but they could not pay extra for drawing, painting, or music. So they sent us all out to the free programs.

I was always encouraged to create art, and I won awards for my artwork. But I thought I would become a doctor, a lawyer, or a teacher. It was only in high school that I decided to apply to an art college. When I took my portfolio to one of the major art schools, I was told, "This is the best portfolio we have seen, but it would be a waste to give a scholarship to a colored person."

My high school advisors said "Take the exam for the Cooper Union School of Art and Engineering. They do not physically see you when you apply there.

They had you complete an entrance exam and put your work on a tray with your name and address on it. The exam involved drawing, creating a sculpture from clay and some architecture exercises. I was one of a small group that was selected to Cooper Union that year, and I was the only black person in my class.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You're always teaching and encouraging people to see art in their lives. You taught in schools. You spent many years as an active professor and then Chair of the Art Department at Dartmouth College. When did you decide to start teaching art?

ASHLEY BRYAN: I grew up in a neighborhood church--the St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church. It's community in the Bronx was German, Italian, Irish, and Jewish. When I was in my early teens, the people of the church said, "Ashley, you have a talent. You must share it with others." They gave me materials and set me up for teaching there.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are some of the things you try to convey to your art students?

ASHLEY BRYAN: When I'm working with people, I try to open up their ability to face something demanding, and to experience the joy of realizing something unexpected in themselves.

I am so excited about the tradition of creating. Black slaves, for example, worked from morning until night. But in the freedom of their minds they created song. They gave us thousands of spirituals.

How does one persist in becoming whatever one wants to be? You have to overcome obstacles to realize what's important to you.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Poetry is at the heart of so much of your work. Will you say a few words about your book *ABC of African-American Poetry*?

ASHLEY BRYAN: I love Keats, Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Blake, Houseman; Emily Dickinson, Whitman, Frost, Sandburg. But I work with the black American poets because my writing of the African folktales is based on those voices. Also, I use this poetry to open the feeling of the African oral tradition.

The *ABC of African-American Poetry* has brought black American poets to schools throughout the country. I included one poem for each letter of the alphabet. Sometimes, I used a complete poem, and at other times it was just a few lines, which allowed me the space for the illustration. There is a bibliography in the book, too, so that readers can get to know more about whatever poets they like.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Let it Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals* is one of six books you have created based on African-American spirituals. Why is this music so important to your work?

ASHLEY BRYAN: Black American slaves created the spiritual tradition during a time when it was a crime to teach a black to learn to read or write. They came up with a language, voice, and song that was so original, beautiful, and rich, that it is just incomparable. Black slaves were laughed at for their language, for the way they spoke. And yet, they chose extraordinary vocabulary in their songs. They are very, very moving, and it's why people identify with them.

When I visit schools, I ask the children, "Anyone here know a spiritual?" No hand goes up. Then I will say, "He's got the whole world in . . ." and before I get to "his hands," the whole audience is singing. I say, "That's a spiritual." Knowing where songs come from adds to kids' enjoyment of them.

Everybody has experienced the feeling of "Sometimes, I feel like a motherless child," or "Oh, by and by, by and by, I'm going to lay down this heavy load."

I'll sing, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it . . ." and the kids all pick it up and go with it. We sing the words, and repeat them to let them set in. "Everywhere I go, I'm going to let it shine." The idea of this particular song has been a very important motif for people—that nothing is going to blot out the gifts you have. We all will find some way to keep our gifts alive and glowing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is your process of illustrating these spirituals in your books?

ASHLEY BRYAN: I have used various media in interpreting the spirituals, from original block-print books to watercolor and tempera paint. In a number of my books, including *Carol of the Brown King: Nativity Poems*, I use the influence of the illuminated manuscripts—early French hand-painted books. My very first two titles, *Walk Together Children: Black American Spirituals* and *I'm Going to Sing*, used block prints. I cut them in the style of early religious block-printed books. I wanted them to relate to medieval times, when it is said that all art was created for the

greater glory of God. The cathedrals, the stained-glass windows, the ritual drama, and the illuminated manuscripts—all art was in that spirit.

It is believed that the only incidence of that spirit of creative dedication to occur again in Western culture was the thousands of spiritual songs from black American slaves. I illustrated my books that way because of that relationship.

The illustrations for *Let it Shine* are in collage. I wanted to present them in materials that children also work with, and collage is natural to children. The final verse of *This Little Light of Mine* is “Everywhere I go, I’m going to let it shine.” I illustrated it with images of kids on bicycles and boats and airplanes and cars and carriages. They all have a little light of some kind, conveying that spiritual aspect of light.

When I was creating *Let it Shine*, I would listen to our great singers—Mahalia Jackson, Jessye Norman, Kathleen Battle, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson—before getting to work. People who came to see to my work in progress would often get tears in their eyes.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your range of colors varies considerably in your books, and it appears that your recent work is particularly vibrant. How do you make decisions about color?

ASHLEY BRYAN: My pictures evoke what the text asks for. Lately, I’ve been working with texts that are open and joyous in spirit – so much color makes sense. My book *Turtle Knows Your Name*, about a spirited little boy with a very long name that is set in a tropical area, was very colorful, too, in keeping with the spirit of the book, in which the boy trying to teach the animals and his playmates his name.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are some of your inspirations behind *Beat the Story-Drum*, *Pum Pum* and *African Tales*, *Uh-Huh*?

ASHLEY BRYAN: Those books came about through my editor, Jean Karl. I had done my first book for her, and she said, “I want to use some of those African folktale illustrations that I saw in your studio.” I said, “Jean, I’ve created those from just the bare bones of stories.”

She said, “Tell them in your own way.” And that’s how I began writing African folktales. I wanted for those folktales to bring alive the African oral tradition in book form.

In creating *African Tales*, I was excited about making the stories come alive with poetry. The motifs in these tales are often basic to all cultures. You have the trickster, like the Spider Ananse. You have those feelings of how the small one outwits the larger. Working with these stories was a way of opening up aspects of black culture. That has been my life’s work, to make black culture feel as natural as other cultures in our United States, and to have reading these stories be experience for children.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please elaborate a bit about the importance of presenting oral tradition in your books.

ASHLEY BRYAN: African stories come from an oral tradition. They were not written down. And it is important to realize that the oral tradition exists in every family. All children want to know. They often say, “Now tell me that story again, Dad—about when you went to the zoo, and you were lost, and they were looking all over for you, and they couldn’t find you.” This is the oral tradition.

People often ask me whether I heard a lot of storytelling when I was growing up. Yes, I did. In my Bronx community, people would sit out on the street in the good weather. The elders

would talk about their childhoods—about growing up before things like airplanes, radios, and automobiles were common. Listening is a most important part of an oral tradition. The stories you hear become wonderful material for your work in class compositions, novels, social studies, or whatever.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did your book *Beautiful Blackbird* come about?

ASHLEY BRYAN: I read so many stories while I was growing up that described black as a lousy color. Here I wanted to convey something affirming about black. In *Beautiful Blackbird*, the African birds of all colors come together and ask, “Who is the most beautiful?” An in unison they cry out that the blackbird is the most beautiful. “How very black he is.” All the other birds, who are very beautiful colors, want to be touched by the black as well.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What inspired you to write your latest book, the autobiographical *Words to My Life’s Song*?

ASHLEY BRYAN: My current editor suggested that I create a book portraying the motifs that helped me through the challenges I’ve met in life. Art has sustained me, whether it’s in my current community in Maine, or in the Bronx community where I grew up. For this book I illustrated it with the motifs of the environment, earth, the sky, the sea.

I was drafted into the Second World War when I was 19-years-old, and in my third year of studies at the Cooper Union. When in the Army, I always carried my sketchbook, and I was drawing as often as possible. That carried me through. If we were working on a dock, and we had unloaded a boat, then I would take out my sketchbook. I actually kept it in my gasmask.

It was a segregated Army, which made it hard as a black person. They did not want us to fraternize with the white communities. How do you get past that? You’re fighting Nazism, fascism. And you, as an American, are facing these things from your own Army. So you have to have some way to sustain yourself in those kinds of situations, and drawing and art did that for me.

That has been the life of black people. They’ve always had to have that extra toughness and strength to persist in achieving what is most important to them. I hope that my book conveys something of what it means to persist in something you love to do.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you share your experience of creating the art in *Words to My Life’s Song*?

ASHLEY BRYAN: *Words to My Life’s Song* was conceived as a colorful book. We did not want staid words and pictures all the way through. The colorfulness, flair and excitement had to relate to the life.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You currently live on a small Maine island that is accessible only by boat—a very different environment than the one you came from in the Bronx, New York. How does this sense of place impact your work?

ASHLEY BRYAN: I love the city and all it offers. But growing up, I’d often go to the parks and find spaces where I would see only trees, bushes, grass. That was telling me something.

An island is a metaphor. We're all islands. In New York, I regarded the different communities as islands. Some of these communities look after and take care of each other. I'm not afraid of being isolated. The spirit of the environment sustains me.

Here on Little Cranberry Island, I can walk out through the woods if I'm having problems with what I'm doing in my studio, and my problems are gone. I come back and get to work again, because I'm reminded of what is essential--the earth, the sky, the sea.

In the city, it takes more effort to reach that quiet center. But I could take the spirit of the environment anywhere in the world. If I were in a prison cell, I could still tap it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What's a typical workday for you?

ASHLEY BRYAN: I regard everything as a part of what I do. There are no interruptions in my day. Whatever I've been put on this earth to do, I will do. And no one is going to hinder that. So my workday goes with whatever is happening. I am working right now.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

ASHLEY BRYAN: I talk to neighbors. I wander around or go through the woods. I sit by the shore and look out across the sea, the sky. When I come back to work, some clarification has come into my mind, and what seemed like a knot is unknotted. I just go forward.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

ASHLEY BRYAN: I'm more interested in what they have to offer me. When I worked with preschool, kindergarten, and first-graders, I would follow their lead. I simply would put down paper and the paint, and they would get to work.

People would ask me, "How is it that the children are so busy working? What did you tell them to do?" I told them, "I give them the paper, and I give the paint, and they know what to do." And they said, "Well, in our class, if we did not tell them what to do, they would sit there and look at the paper."

And I'd say, "Yes. When children are conditioned to be told what to do, they wait to be told. I only work with the possibility of exploration and discovery."

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers?

ASHLEY BRYAN: I try to get across the spirit in which I work and find out whether they are working to find that spirit with their children.

All I'm really interested in teaching is the African proverb, "He who learns teaches; he who teaches learns." It's an endless round. Any teacher who is learning from a student is a teacher I support.

Books by Ashley Bryan (bibliography created March 2009):

- ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL (written by Cecil F. Alexander), Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2009
- WORDS TO MY LIFE'S SONG (photographs by Bill Meguinness), Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2009

- LET IT SHINE: THREE FAVORITE SPIRITUALS, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2007
- MY AMERICA (written and co-illustrated by Jan Spivey Gilchrist), HarperCollins Publishers, 2007
- NEST FULL OF STARS, A: POEMS (written by James Berry), Greenwillow Books / a division of HarperCollins Publishers, 2004
- BEAUTIFUL BLACKBIRD, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2003
- HOW GOD FIX JONAH (written by Lorenz B. Graham), Boyds Mills Press, 2000
- SALTING THE OCEAN: 100 POEMS BY YOUNG POETS (edited by Naomi Shihab Nye), Greenwillow Books / an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2000
- ANEESA LEE AND THE WEAVER'S GIFT (written by Nikki Grimes), Lothrop / HarperCollins Publishers, 1999
- JUMP BACK, HONEY: THE POEMS OF PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR (written by Paul Laurence Dunbar), Jump at the Sun / Hyperion Books for Children, 1999
- NIGHT HAS EARS, THE: AFRICAN PROVERBS, A Jean Karl Book / Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1999
- ASHLEY BRYAN'S AFRICAN TALES, UH-HUH, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1998
- CAROL OF THE BROWN KING: NATIVITY POEMS (written by Langston Hughes), A Jean Karl Book / Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1998
- HOUSE WITH NO DOOR, THE: AFRICAN RIDDLE POEMS (written by Brian Swann), Browndeer Press / an imprint of Harcourt Children's Books, 1998
- WHY LEOPARD HAS SPOTS: DAN STORIES FROM LIBERIA (written by Won-Ldy Paye and Margaret H. Lippert), Fulcrum Kids, 1998
- ASHLEY BRYAN'S ABC OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN POETRY, A Jean Karl Book / Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1997
- SUN IS SO QUIET, THE (written by Nikki Giovanni), Henry Holt Books for Young Readers, 1996
- IT'S KWANZAA TIME! (written by Linda and Clay Goss), G. P. Putnam's Sons / an imprint Penguin Young Readers Group, 1995
- STORY OF THE THREE KINGDOMS, THE (written by Walter Dean Myers), HarperCollins Publishers, 1995
- WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD (written by George David Weiss and Bob Thiele), Jean Karl Book / Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1995
- CHRISTMAS GIF': AN ANTHOLOGY OF CHRISTMAS POEMS, SONGS, AND STORIES, WRITTEN BY AND ABOUT AFRICAN-AMERICANS (written by Charlemae Hill Rollins and Joseph Rollins), Morrow Junior Books / HarperCollins Publishers, 1993
- STORY OF LIGHTNING AND THUNDER, THE, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1993
- SING TO THE SUN: POEMS AND PICTURES, HarperCollins Publishers, 1992

- ALL NIGHT, ALL DAY: A CHILD'S FIRST BOOK OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUALS, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1991
- CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER: HEROES OF THE BIBLE IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUALS (edited by John Langstaff), Margaret K. McElderry Books / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1991
- POURQUOI TALES: THE CAT'S PURR, WHY FROG AND SNAKE NEVER PLAY TOGETHER, THE FIRE BRINGER, Houghton Mifflin School, 1989
- TURTLE KNOWS YOUR NAME (a retelling), Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1989
- SH-KO AND HIS EIGHT WICKED BROTHERS (illustrated by Fumio Yoshimura), Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1988
- WHAT A MORNING! THE CHRISTMAS STORY IN BLACK SPIRITUALS (edited by John Langstaff), Macmillan, 1987
- LION AND THE OSTRICH CHICKS: AND OTHER AFRICAN FOLK POEMS, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1986
- CAT'S PURR, THE, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1985
- I'M GOING TO SING: BLACK AMERICAN SPIRITUALS, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1982
- BEAT THE STORY-DRUM, PUM-PUM, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1980
- JETHRO AND THE JUMBIE (written by Susan Cooper), Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1979
- JIM FLYING HIGH (written by Mari Evans), Doubleday Books / an imprint of Random House Children's Books, 1979
- I GREET THE DAWN, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1978
- DANCING GRANNY, THE, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1977
- ADVENTURES OF AKU; OR, HOW IT CAME ABOUT THAT WE SHALL ALWAYS SEE OKRA THE CAT LYING ON A VELVET CUSHION WHILE OKRAMAN THE DOG SLEEPS AMONG THE ASHES, THE, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1976
- WALK TOGETHER CHILDREN: BLACK AMERICAN SPIRITUALS, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1974
- OX OF THE WONDERFUL HORNS AND OTHER AFRICAN FOLKTALES, THE, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1971
- MOON, FOR WHAT DO YOU WAIT? (written by Rabindranath Tagore, poems edited by Richard Lewis), Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1967

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