



Ashley Bryan

TeachingBooks Original Movie Transcript

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

This is a transcript of the movie available on TeachingBooks.net. It is offered here to give you a quick assessment of the program topics, as well as to enable people with auditory disabilities access to the words.

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I was always drawing and painting. I can't remember a time when I've not been drawing and painting.

Color is always an important part of anyone's life. That's what the sun means, opening up the glow of the world in different color. So throughout the summer I'm outdoors painting

Words to My Life Song was conceived as a colorful book. It was about how art and environment and community has sustained me.

I grew up in New York during the Depression years. And during that time, the government created free art and music classes to employ artists throughout the country in communities. My parents sent us all out to the free art, free music. We all were drawing; we all were painting through those years.

On African American Spirituals

The spirituals are in the hymnbooks of all denominations. Often, though, it says traditional or American folk tune. So the singers still don't know they're from black American slaves.

As I visit schools, I ask, the children, "Anyone here know a spiritual?" No hand goes up. "A Negro spiritual, African-American spiritual, black American spiritual?" No hand goes up. But if I then will say, "He's got the whole world in ..." before I get to "in his hands," they're all singing, the whole audience. I say, "That's a spiritual." Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills, they know the songs. They love them and they sing them. But I thought also knowing where they come from would add to that sense of enjoyment.

Let it Shine I call my heart's soul work. The illustrations for *Let it Shine* are in collage. Collage is natural to the children, the tearing and cutting and pasting of papers.

In the song *This Little Light of Mine* the final verse is “Everywhere I go, I’m gonna let it shine.” Every picture I personify those lights. You have them on bicycles in the boats, in the airplanes, in the cars, in the carriages and they all have a little light of some kind, a candle a flashlight, because I wanted to get it across to the child that this little light was something you could play with also.

On Poetry

Poetry is at the heart at everything I do. I believe in poetry in the sense of the voice, so I always begin with Black American poets because my writing of the African folktales is based on that voice. I am working from a tradition that is oral, and through the poetry I can get the feeling of the rhythm and the play. My prose is filled with poetry so that the young reader can really hear the voice.

I had read so many stories growing up of black as a lousy color. You come last. That’s all that’s left, and you take that. Here was a motif where the birds of Africa are all colors, and they come together, and they ask who is the most beautiful? And all the birds cry out blackbird is the most beautiful. How very black he is. I was so happy to come upon that motif, I could do a story just based on that, that black bird is the most beautiful, how very black he is.

Art from Discarded Objects

I have always enjoyed working with things cast off, neglected, not considered of any worth or value. The puppets have come about from walking the shore, picking up what is brought in the tides of the sea, every day bringing in new materials new things. Of shells, of bones, of driftwood and these are all hand puppets. They all become alive through just the combination that will create the character.

And because in working with materials that are washed up from shore you are not confined to eyes, nose, mouth. Whatever you do that becomes a kind of personage.

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 McGuinness), 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 Wondy 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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