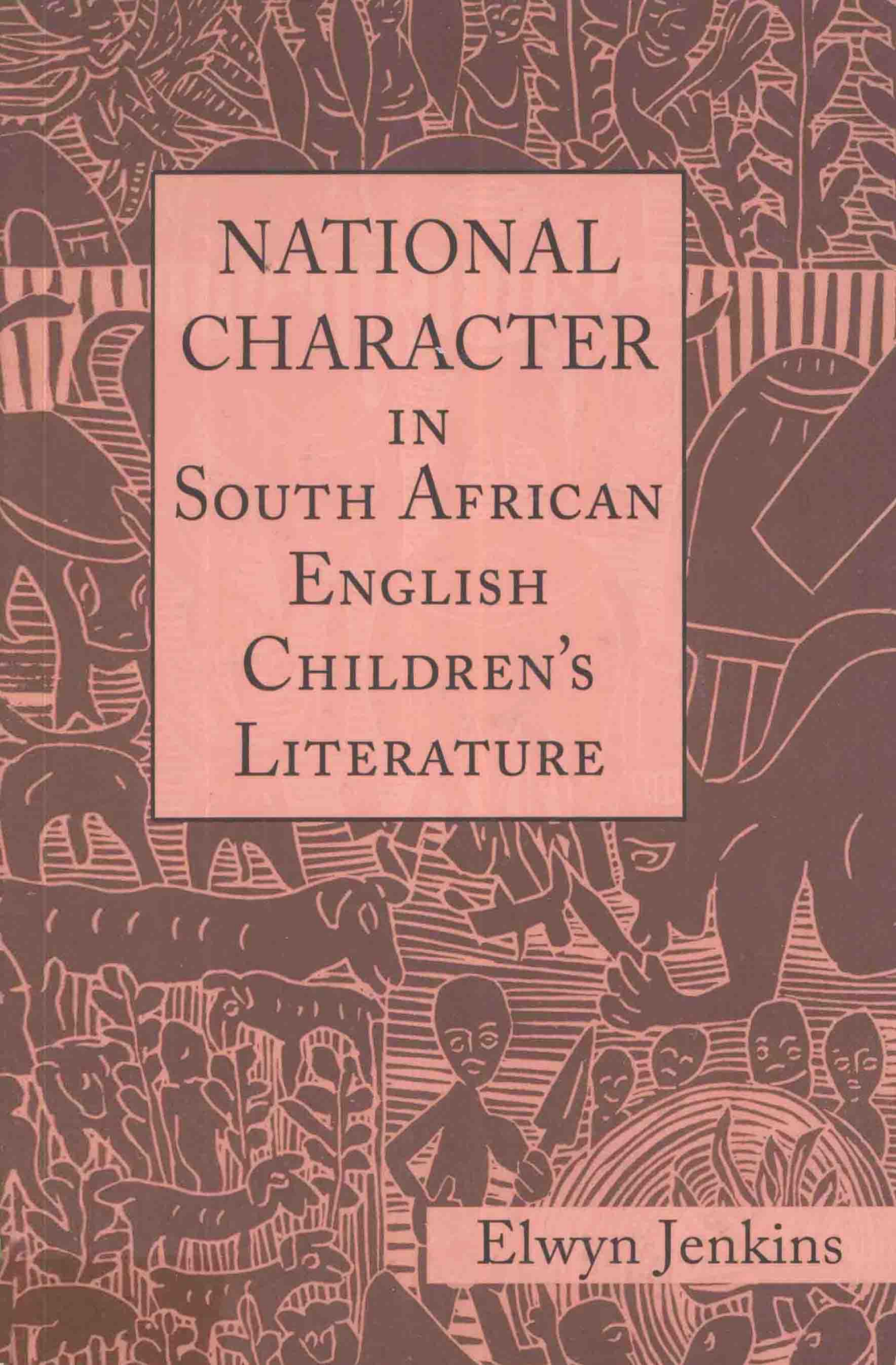

NATIONAL CHARACTER IN SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Elwyn Jenkins

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INTRODUCTION

In a continent where national borders were arbitrarily created by colonial powers and colonists in the nineteenth century, in a country in which literary histories that seek a grand narrative of national emergence have been discredited, in the twenty-first century, when globalization is making the concept of the nation state increasingly problematic, the use of the term "national character" in a new book needs explanation.

When Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka visited South Africa in July 2005, he replied to a question about divided societies, "There will always be differences within society. There can be several national characters, within one nation, that sometimes seem to be at war with one another." South Africa, he said, was handling this multiplicity well.[1] Participants from several African countries at a writers' conference in Pretoria in 2003 were adamant that to try to define a national literature was a false problem, and that "national consciousness" was a romantic, poetic notion. Problems that writers encountered, they said, were the problems of *writers*, not *Africans* — *blacks* or *whites*. National consciousness was a jigsaw puzzle, an ongoing project of liberation. They warned against chauvinism, saying that what was important was that writers should voice their experiences.[2]

Most children's books in South Africa have been written by white people in English or Afrikaans, with relatively few by black writers. A significant proportion of them are versions of indigenous folktales. Some are written in the languages of black South Africans, and some that were written by whites have also been translated into these languages.

In this book I consider only children's books written in English. Following Soyinka and the writers at the conference, I regard them as

simply *some* literary versions of what it was or is like to live in South Africa and be a South African.

In my search for national character in English-language children's books, I go back to the earliest written by South Africans, beginning with Mrs. Mary Carey-Hobson's *The Farm in the Karoo* (1883)[3] but really taking off in the 1890s, and I give considerable space to those published up to the 1950s. I do this deliberately, because until recently it was common to read or hear that almost no English-language children's books had been published in South Africa until after the Second World War.

Since I wrote in *Children of the Sun* in 1993, "We are not yet ready for a critical history — a complete survey — of South African children's literature in English, for we have too few critical signposts,"[4] a number of scholars have worked on documentation and historical and critical studies, there have been many exhibitions that have entailed a critical selection and a recent book on Afrikaans children's literature has provided a much-needed source for comparison and explication.[5] Book illustrators and picture books have been particularly well attended to. Critical studies of young adult fiction have concentrated on its political content from the 1970s onward, during the last years of apartheid and the country's transition to democracy. Studies of adult South African literature provide a further frame of reference for the study of juvenile literature. These developments in scholarship have freed me from the expectation to be comprehensive in the present book, so that in the limited space available I can explore some byways and topics that have not received much attention.

Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban, Bloemfontein and Pretoria are the cities that nurtured the publication of children's literature in English in the first half of the twentieth century, being the home of publishers such as Juta, Maskew Miller, Voortrekker Pers, Knox, A.C. White, van Schaik, Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel, Unie-Volkspers and many small presses now forgotten. Far less English literature would have appeared if it had not been for Afrikaans publishers, who were the strongest in the country because they were community driven and were often subvented by the government. Translating books from English into Afrikaans and vice versa has long been a lifesaver for children's books in this country, with translations into other African languages joining them in recent years, adding to their economic viability.

Some of the earliest South African children's literature appeared in English-language papers in the late nineteenth century at the same time the magazine *Ons Klyntji* was pioneering writing for children in Afrikaans. Much is owed to the newspapers and magazines which, until the 1950s, published children's stories and poems, many of which were

republished in book form. Their names form an honorable roll call: *Cape Times, The State, The Argus, The Star, Rand Daily Mail, Standard and West Rand Review, Sunday Express, Natal Advertiser, Sunday Times, Advertiser, The South African Woman, The Capetonian, Diamond Fields Advertiser, The Outspan.* The South African Broadcasting Corporation ran children's programs and serials that first broadcast material that was later published. No doubt the very existence of these channels served as an incentive for people to try their hands at writing.

The books were often illustrated by well-known artists, some of them associated with public projects or the popular art of their day that embodied the essence of white South African culture: Cythna Letty, the botanical artist who later designed the flower motifs for the country's first decimal coins (see Figure 5); wild-life artists C.T. Astley Maberly and Hilda Stevenson-Hamilton; Sydney Carter, popular artist of typical South African landscapes, especially his bluegum trees; Ernest Ullman, sculptor and painter of art works for public buildings such as the foyer of Auden House, headquarters of the South African Institute of Race Relations; Ivan Mitford-Barberton, sculptor of public works such as the monument to the 1820 settlers in Grahamstown and the statue of Jan Smuts in Adderley Street, Cape Town; Walter Battiss, innovator and *enfant terrible* of the art scene for years, who gave respectability to the rock art of the San; Townley Johnson, an artist who was also well known for his copies of San rock paintings; and Dorelle, artist of the covers of the books of Lawrence Green, the prolific writer of popular books on the history, people and places of the country. Jan Juta, son of the Judge President of the Cape, Sir Henry Juta — both of whom wrote a children's book — was a prominent artist whose most famous murals were those for South Africa House in London and the Cunard liner *Queen Mary.* Sima Eliovson, popular author and illustrator of books on wild flowers and gardens, wrote and illustrated her own children's picture book.

Many of the illustrators also have a reputation as artists in their own right, among the significant ones being Gerard Bhengu, the pioneer black artist of traditional rural domestic life whose reputation is greatly respected today; Frans Claerhout, a Roman Catholic priest of Flemish origin, known for his expressionist and naive paintings, murals and stained glass windows featuring African people. Azaria Mbatha, famous for his linocuts (see Figure 6), and Durant Sihlali, a founder member of the Fuba Academy for training black artists, have both had their work exhibited in many countries overseas. In recent years, children's book illustration and picture books have been dominated by professional illustrators whose work can be found in books of all languages.

As if all this South African background were not enough, from the nineteenth century until the present, the peritexts of South African books are packed with background information and messages from clergymen and politicians substantiating their authenticity as truly South African products.

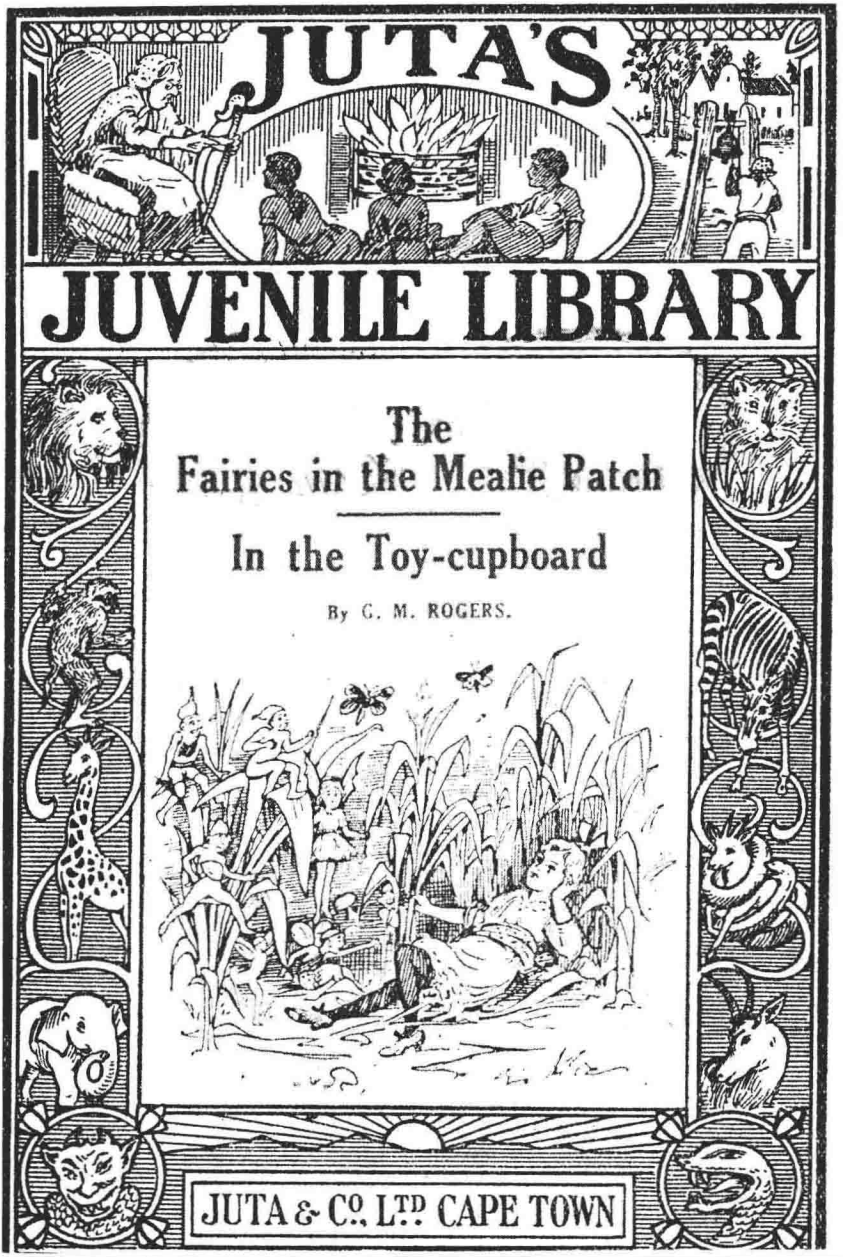
In the first half of the twentieth century, prefaces were provided by people such as the bishop who signed himself "Arthur Johannesburg." Since the Second World War, writers, illustrators and publishers have been far less homogeneous, but the hankering after authenticity continues. Black writers have assured us that they heard their traditional tales from their grandmothers; white retellers of indigenous folktales have invoked Alan Paton, Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Archbishop Desmond Tutu to vouch for their authenticity, and the publisher of the novelist Jane Rosenthal recently assured readers that she is "a South African with, as she puts it, 'ancestors born, married and buried in dorps from Jo'burg to Cape Town'."[6] Perhaps in the twenty-first century this lingering insecurity will pass away, and South Africans will write and publish without any need to defend themselves.

In the 1920s the prominent Cape Town publishing house of Juta, which concentrated on educational books, published a series of storybooks for young children called Juta's Juvenile Library. The title page for each book was decorated with the same design of a frame of pictures that provides a template for the literary expression of national character by white English-speaking writers for children in the first half of the twentieth century. (See Figure 1)

The motifs of the frame are a combination of European and African elements. Three of the four corner ones are European: an old woman in archaic mobcap and shawl, telling stories to children at her feet before a hearth; a mythical, serpentlike monster; and a faun. In the bottom center is the radiating sun rising behind a range of hills.

The last two of these images are among the popular international design motifs of the 1920s that Bevis Hillier identifies in *The Style of the Century.*[7] After mentioning, among others, the faun, Hillier goes on, "And above all the sun-ray, which appeared on almost anything from gramophone needle boxes to suburban garden gates. This last motif no doubt had its origins in the sun-bathing, sun-worshipping craze which began in the early 1920s ... but the motif came to have a wider, more political symbolism. It was the symbol of New Dawns (whether fascist or communist), and also evokes worthy 1930s hikers, the gambolling nordic nudes at Hitler Youth camps, and the Nazi Strength through Joy movement" (Hillier, 90).

South Africa shared in the universal spirit of the age — it had its share of Nazi sympathizers — but it also naturalized this image: the sunburst



1 Title page from *The Fairies in the Mealie Patch* by G.M. Rogers and title page design for the Juta's Juvenile Library series (Cape Town: Juta, 192-), n.p.

was the logo for the popular Sunrise toffees, it was part of the design for a postage stamp commemorating the silver jubilee of Union in 1935 in which rays radiate from the head of the King, and it was incorporated in garden gates, burglar guards and window and glass door frames. The Afrikaans publishing house HAUM published a series of Afrikaans school readers for many years called the Dagbreek ("daybreak") series, which featured a full-page black-and-red picture on the cover of the radiating sun rising over the veld.

The fourth corner picture in the Juta frame shows a slave and a slave bell in front of a Cape Dutch house. The building, in the distinct "Cape Dutch" vernacular architectural tradition, gives prominence to the Western Cape and Cape Town, the "Mother City," as the home of Juta and South African white culture. Down each side is a small selection of some wild animals of Africa: only two of what the modern tourist industry has decided are the "Big Five," namely lions (shown twice) and an elephant; the colorful giraffe and zebra; an antelope; a monkey to suggest mischief, though it is not a very common animal in South African stories; and a python crushing a buck, suggesting the sensational animal world of wildest Africa. None of the birds or smaller animals that feature so frequently in South African stories are included. Most markedly, no Africans are to be seen in the entire design.

These motifs, the themes that they represent, and the gaps and silences between them, are recurrent reference points in this book, not only for the literature of the first half of the twentieth century but to the present day.

I look at children's and young adult literature in relation to the physical country, its landscapes, flora and fauna and economic exploitation; books and authors that public opinion has decided are important or famous; the past, national symbols and myths; patterns of possession of the land, domicile and population movement; oral and written literary traditions; architecture, towns and cities; material culture; the symbolism of cultural identity; schooling, books and the arts.

Of course, much of the literature that I am looking at is slight. The books were written for little children or some vaguely conceived young readership. Usually they were written for fun and entertainment, and they were often badly written by unskilled writers and crudely illustrated. Many are ideologically naive. Whether nonfiction or fiction, many have an obvious didactic purpose. Whatever their quality, they are the record of how, from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century, certain individuals conveyed in writing and illustration to young readers their interpretation of life in a complex society.

SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Dedicated to furthering original research in children's literature and culture, the Children's Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children's literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

Children's literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term "children" to encompass the period of childhood up through adolescence. Because the notion of childhood has changed so much since the origination of children's literature, this Routledge series is particularly concerned with transformations in children's culture and how they have affected the representation and socialization of children. While the emphasis of the series is on children's literature, all types of studies that deal with children's radio, film, television and art are included in an endeavor to grasp the aesthetics and values of children's culture. Not only have there been momentous changes in children's culture in the last fifty years, but there have been radical shifts in the scholarship that deals with these changes. In this regard, the goal of the Children's Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world.

Jack Zipes

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1

COUNTRY CHILDREN

In 1926, Annette Joelson opened a story for children, "In the very heart of the Cape Karoo, which again is the very heart of South Africa, where the sunshine is ever bright and warm, and skies are always blue, there lived a little girl in a very big farm-house, on a very, very big farm."[1]

Until late in the twentieth century, there were only two significant contenders for the spiritual heartland of English-speaking white South Africans: the Karoo, a semidesert region of plains and flat-topped hills covering most of central South Africa, and the bushveld of the north and northeast. Early British writers, relying on their reading, set their adventures in the Karoo. Typically, in 1856 Thomas Mayne Reid wrote *The Bush Boys; or, The History and Adventures of a Cape Farmer and his Family in the Wild Karoos of Southern Africa*.[2] A century later, its reputation continued in England: an English writer, Jane Shaw, who sends an English family to settle in Johannesburg in *Venture to South Africa* (1960), has them drive from Cape Town through "the famous Karoo."[3]

The South African children's writers who took over from the British turned the Karoo, or more broadly the wide open veld, with its blazing sky, its droughts, its windmills, its thunderstorms and its veld fires, from a setting into a mystic homeland. The very first full-length children's novel written by a South African was called *The Farm in the Karoo* (1883).[4] Mabel Waugh, author of *Verses for Tiny South Africans* (1923), apostrophizes it in "The Karroo" (using an alternative spelling):

> Great, big, wide Karroo,
> How *did* you get rolled out so flat...
> A farm, a kopje, or a windmill
> Are the only things higher at all...