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**THE BOSTON GLOBE article:  
New Storybook Reopens Old Wounds  
By Louise Kennedy, Globe Staff, 12/14/2003**

**For Christopher Bing, the text he chose to illustrate as his third book is “the perfect story.” “It’s got everything,” Bing says. “An exotic hero, an exotic location. It’s got danger — the tigers — and then he outwits them. And for a kid in America, the best thing of all: It had pancakes coming out the ears.”**

But this story also has, as Bing acknowledges, a deeply troubled history that starts right at the title.

It’s “Little Black Sambo.”

Published this month by Handprint Books of Brooklyn, N.Y., this 40-page hardcover version reprints the original 1899 text by Helen Bannerman with new illustrations by Bing, an award-winning editorial illustrator who lives in Lexington and whose work regularly appears in the *Globe* and elsewhere. It has been selected as one of 40 children’s books on the Kirkus 2003 Editor’s Choice list — an accolade from a respected industry publication that Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint of Harvard calls “outrageous.”

“A handsome restoration of the classic story,” the Kirkus citation

reads, noting “the transformation of its original protagonist from a stereotype to a beautiful African child living in India.”

Poussaint, who directs the Media Center at the Judge Baker Children’s Center in Boston, says: “That’s ridiculous. It just shows you how even in this day and time, you can get white people coming down — they sit in their little boardroom and say, ‘If it’s offensive, it’s their problem.’ No, no. No good.”

Karen Breen, children’s book editor at Kirkus, says, “The story is just such a wonderful story and it needed to be rehabilitated, I guess the word would be. And the art in it is extraordinary.” When told of the negative reactions from Poussaint and others, Breen says, “It could be entirely possible that I am wrongheaded about this.”

The polarized reaction speaks not only to the gulf of mutual incomprehension that splits apart many discussions of racial issues in this country, but also to the divisive history of “Little Black Sambo” — a history that already has stirred debate over the new

edition in Lexington. Despite decades of protest that it contains racist caricatures and a derogatory name, its story of an African boy in India who outwits some tigers has never gone out of print; its sales on Amazon.com rank well above many children’s classics. The book is a century-old lightning rod that is still hot to the touch, an icon beloved and loathed.

Although historians generally agree that Bannerman, a Scot living in India, probably chose the name in ignorance, the word “sambo” has a long history as a racial slur. And the book itself, when reprinted in many pirated editions, often became an overtly racist tract.

Bing says that only the caricatures in those later editions were racist. The name “wasn’t meant to be derogatory,” he says. “I think the reason it doesn’t have the sting for white people is that many of them don’t encounter [the term] ‘sambo.’ . . . We look at [the story] with affection.”

Poussaint counters: “I don’t see how I can get past the title

and what it means. It would be like him trying to do 'Little Black Darky' and saying, 'As long as I fix up the character so he doesn't look like a darky on the plantation, it's OK.'"

David Pilgrim, curator of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich., has studied the word's history. "If you say 'sambo,' " he says, "it's not as bad as 'nigga,' but it's certainly as bad as 'darky' or to some extent, 'pickaninny.' . . . How can you write a book whose central character has a name that you would not call a black person?"

While acknowledging that "I live in the cocoon of my studio," Bing, 44, says that when he has mentioned the project to others, the reaction has been almost entirely positive. "I would love for the black community to be able to take this image and this original story and make it a positive," he says.

When he first began working on it nearly two decades ago at the Rhode Island School of Design, he says, one professor objected. "I listened to it, but again, it was, no pun intended, it was a minority opinion among my black friends."

Henrietta Smith, professor emerita at the University of South Florida School of Library and Information Science, says she grew up hearing the story and never felt demeaned by its images. Bing's version "is almost like a classic reproduction of a story that you've always loved," she says. "I'm still concerned with the name, but that can't be changed."

Others also have objected in the past to the names of the character's parents, Black Mumbo and Black Jumbo. But Bing says Bannerman chose all the names simply by sound or by chance. As for "little" and "black," Bing says they're in the tradition of other children's story titles — "Little Red Riding Hood," say. "It was just sort of defining them," he says, "and not racist." But why would the child's race be his defining characteristic?

"'Black' was almost the only adjective possible in identifying a child of color," says Bing's publisher, Christopher Franceschelli, "and was done, I think . . . certainly with all the bias that a colonial, imperialist, educated British or Scotsman would have brought to it," but without the obvious edge of "by saying 'black' I have belittled or foreshortened." "

Author Julius Lester, who teaches at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, sees it differently. "Very unconsciously, with no malice aforethought, [Bannerman] was reflecting her times," Lester says. "And the fact that she was hurting black people never entered her mind. Which doesn't let her off the hook."

Lester acknowledges the power of Bannerman's story, in which a boy, pursued by tigers, appeases them with his fine new clothes; he watches as the angry tigers spin into butter, which his mother uses for pancakes. "This is a wonderful story," Lester says, but one that has caused a lot of pain.

His solution, in a 1996 retelling with Jerry Pinkney called "Sam and the Tigers," was to

name all the characters Sam and set them in the mythical Sam-sam-sa-mara. That same year, the late Fred Marcellino published "The Story of Little Babaji," with Indian characters.

"That worked fine for me, because he didn't carry the historical baggage," Lester says. "Baggage that has been buried doesn't need to be dug up again."

But Franceschelli says "the correct approach" is to keep the name. "Some people say it's gone, it's past, it should be forgotten and buried," he says. "I understand that, but . . . I see it as a dangerous path. We forget and we repeat."

Bing started working on the illustrations as a private project, simply because he "loved this story with a passion," he says. Eventually, he started showing it to others.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., who directs the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard, is thanked in the book; he referred Bing to his agent, who took the proposal to Franceschelli, then an editor at Dutton. Bing says Gates had planned to write an introduction, but "he was just buried in work." Gates did not return calls to his office.

After having "committed to publishing it on the spot," Franceschelli says, "I remember being extremely puzzled and even hurt" when one colleague said "she would rather resign than be involved with publishing this book by a white artist, but would have accepted it by a black artist."

When Franceschelli left Dutton to found Handprint, Bing followed him. In 2000, they pub-

lished “Casey at the Bat,” which received a Caldecott honor medal, and in 2001 “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere.” Both books use visual devices to comment on a familiar text — an approach, Franceschelli says, that carries through into “Little Black Sambo.”

“That attempt to work on these two levels is really what Christopher has done very well,” Franceschelli says. He adds that Bing’s “Little Black Sambo,” which includes a historical note, could serve as “a great introduction” to a troubled past.

For Bing, this project is an attempt to rehabilitate a misunderstood artifact. “I would like to dispel the cloud around it,” he says. “I don’t ever want a black child to pick up the book and look at the images and feel insulted. . . . I want a child to feel just the wonder I did as a child.”

The book has caused contro-

versy in Lexington, where a parent objected to a library-sponsored display of some illustrations. The parent contacted the Globe, which ran an article Oct. 8, as well as the head of the Lexington Montessori School, William D. Valentine, who has written letters to Lexington bookstores asking them not to sell the book.

Harvard Law School professor Randall Kennedy, whose book “Nigger” examined the painful history of that slur, argues that intent is important. Noting that he has not seen Bing’s book, Kennedy says, “If they’re educating people about the ‘Little Black Sambo’ controversy, then I don’t have a problem with it. We need to know about our history.”

For Pilgrim, of the Jim Crow Museum, the new “Little Black Sambo” is part of a larger trend. “There does seem to me to be a kind of backlash,” Pilgrim says.

In everything from postcards to collectible figurines, he says, he is seeing once-discarded images, such as Amos ‘n’ Andy, coming back to the marketplace.

“So this does not surprise me,” Pilgrim says. “People are more comfortable now saying, ‘Oh, I really like the story “Little Black Sambo,” and I think people would like reading it.’ Whereas 10 years ago you would be afraid of being called a racist.”

For Pilgrim, the book can’t be separated from its history. “I’m thinking if you really understand the history not just of the book but of ‘sambo’ the slur, then you realize you cannot divorce those. You may divorce those, but there’s a whole community of people that cannot.”

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