

## YOUNG READERS AT RISK: QUILT PATTERNS AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

by Deborah N. Foley



Gradually introducing young readers to difficult historical events and traditions through children's literature is a valuable tool for parents, teachers, and librarians. Well written stories excite children's imaginations and help broaden their world beyond time and space. However, in writing for impressionable young children, how important is authenticity when dealing with grim subjects? Nina Mikkelsen (1998) asserts in her article, "Insiders, Outsiders, and the Question of Authenticity: Who Shall Write for African American Children?" that we should ask, "What makes a story good? Replicating reality to the fullest? Getting the facts and feelings right? Suppressing or distorting reality to make us think and feel differently?" (p. 33). Mikkelsen ends her article by challenging African American story tellers to "get it right" (p. 48). No matter how authors justify the construction of a good story when writing fiction, historical fiction falls into another category where authenticity becomes necessity, especially when writing for impressionable young children. Although librarians hesitate to censor, the need to critically evaluate these selections becomes imperative. The story may become so distorted that the truth is lost. A disservice is done to what Mikkelsen calls "inherited cultural imperative" (p. 37). An example of this situation is the Underground Railroad quilt myth.

Gradually introducing children to the grim realities of slavery in America is a daunting task that walks a fine line of informing without horrifying young minds. Nowhere does this become more apparent than with stories of the Underground Railroad. Many authors and illustrators do an outstanding job of transforming historical reality into wondrous journeys of imagination. Unfortunately, there has been a recent trend to distort the facts as to how the dangerous trip to freedom was accomplished. This is seen in the way the topic of quilts is dealt with in various books. Some authors assert that quilts were used as signals to alert runaways to a safe house or "station" on the Underground Railroad.

### HIDDEN MYTH OR TRUTH?

Some authors have chosen to portray these quilts as facts based on historical evidence. *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* by Tobin and Dobard (2000) has created a disturbing trend found in children's books, maps, history projects, and art and craft projects that reinforces children's belief in secret code quilt patterns. To help validate the "secret code" theory, which throughout the book is very vague, Tobin bolsters her book by co-authoring with Howard University art history professor Raymond G. Dobard, Ph.D. Even Dobard cannot convincingly get his point across when practically every other sentence ends with a question mark.

Were there any real connections here? And how did these patterns function? (p. 28) . . . Was there an African American equivalent? . . . Might there be a connection between the Prince Hall Masons, the Underground Railroad, Ozella's story code, and what appears to be shared interest in a geometric language? And what of the stories told about the Prince Hall Masons? (p. 29) . . . Might not patterns on a quilt top have a similar function? (p. 30) . . . Is Ozella's story-code a cultural hybrid, mixing African encoding traditions with American quilt patterning conventions? (p. 31)

Tobin and Dobard fall short on answering any of the questions. The authors shamelessly name-drop throughout the book mentioning, among others, respected quilt historian Barbara Brackman and African American scholar John Michael Vlach, both of whom refute the "secret code quilt patterns" theory.

In 2001 Vaughan wrote *The Secret to Freedom*. Although it is an Underground Railroad story with a heartwarming ending, within this story the author talks about secret codes used in quilts to help facilitate the escape. Vaughan has an Author's Note at the back of her book that specifically describes eleven of "the most important quilt patterns in the Underground Railroad code" with pictures of these patterns illustrated on the

back cover of the book. One of Vaughan's sources is the before mentioned *Hidden in Plain View*.

Several other children's books were recently published that promoted the "quilt myth" including Jacqueline Woodson's (2005) book *Show Way*. Also Mary Kay Carson's book *The Underground Railroad for Kids: From Slavery to Freedom With 21 Activities* states as fact that quilts were used to help runaway slaves. In her "Make a Paper Quilt Block" activity, Carson (2005) encourages readers to "create a quilt block pattern . . . create symbols or scenes that might help runaway slaves escape to freedom" (p. 105).

Both *Show Way* and *The Underground Railroad for Kids* are recommended in 2005 by Best Children's Books, Booklist Book Review Stars, Children's Editor's Choice, Kirkus Book Review Stars, Publishers Weekly Book Review Stars, and School Library Journal Book Review Stars. *Show Way* was a Newbery Honor book as well.

## HISTORIAN AND QUILTMAKER REFUTE SECRET CODE THEORY

A number of authors and historians take the opposite stance. When asked about the "secret code quilt patterns," John Michael Vlach, author of *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, was adamant that there was no evidence from primary sources to support secret quilt patterns (Vlach, 2004). Another author and leading quilt historian Barbara Brackman (2000) comments:

As a quiltmaker I've always loved the pattern and the secrets hidden in the name. But as an historian I've come to realize that there are no known quilts in this pattern dating back to the days of the Civil War or to the decades before the War when the Underground Railroad flourished. The pattern is common, but the quilts made in the design date from the 1890s or later. (p. 1)

## ENCOUNTERING THE MYTH BEYOND BOOKS

During the summer of 2004, as part of a National Endowment for the Humanities workshop, I visited the North Carolina Museum of History. One of the rooms featured Tar Heel Junior Historian Association award winning history projects by North Carolina students. I was surprised that among the winners was a child's small hand-made quilt that used the "patterns" with a detailed explanation of the "secret codes." I spoke with the Junior Historian Coordinator about this display. She told me that one of the judges, also a museum curator, had explained to the student that this project was based

on an unproven theory. Although historically unsound, the quality and craftsmanship of the project was excellent and the student received an award.

The NEH workshop also took me to the Historic Stagville Plantation in North Carolina. Vaughn's *The Secret to Freedom* is available in many public and school libraries; however, I was surprised to find the book for sale at the plantation gift store with a quilt-style wall hanging that explained the "code." *Hidden in Plain View* was on the shelf alongside scholarly books about the Antebellum South.

## CONCLUSION

Adult readers are free to decide whether they will embrace the controversial *Hidden in Plain View*. However, young students should be able to trust that fiction and non-fiction material on the library shelf has been selected and evaluated by knowledgeable adults. Rather than censor, librarians should carefully select. The challenge is to critically evaluate these selections. This is not an easy task with the recent glut of information in our technological world. The flood of books hot off the press is overwhelming and it may be several years before misinformation is discovered and corrected. Let us also challenge authors, as Mikkelsen put it, to "get it right" (p. 48).

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