



The Dragon Lode

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*Author and Illustrator*

[Synthia Saint James was the featured author/illustrator at the Children's Literature and Special Interest Group, 1999 IRA Convention in San Diego, CA.]

### Where is my reflection?

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As a small child in the early fifties I don't remember a single book that I could easily identify with. Yes, there were the Dick and Jane type books, and stories about animals always appealed to me, but I never had a chance to identify with a character in a book that looked even vaguely like me.

We all watched Engineer Bill and played "Red Light, Green Light,"--the game in which you drank your milk only on the green light and always stopped on the red, even if you came from a large family like me and were really only drinking water.

There was the Mickey Mouse Club but I never remember seeing any children of color as members. But I feel that most of us girls of color identified with Annette Funicello, not only because of her vibrant personality, but mostly for her dark beauty.

In school we were never taught about accomplished African-Americans who are scientists, inventors, writers, artists, or any of our history, other than that we used to be slaves, which only seemed to further a possible low self-esteem and quell any of our high ambitions.

My first memory of anything in school that had to do with African-American history was in high school in the 10th grade, that was in 1964. There was The Negro History Club at Los Angeles High School which was an extra-curricular activity and in my English class we were required to read and do a report on Richard Wright's *Native Son* which greatly moved me.

Well, so far I've barely scratched on what was happening within me, in spite of what was



happening or not happening around me. I knew that I wanted to be an artist since I was five years old and truly knew that I also wanted to be a writer when in Junior High School I wrote my own music column for the school paper.

When I first saw the movie *Moulin Rouge*, I was certain that I would one day live the life of an artist, and then again at about twenty years old reaffirmed this desire in myself with a decided twist. My work would one day fully take care of me and I would lead a full happy and healthy life, thus learning from the mistakes of some of my favorite artists, such as Van Gogh and Lautrec, while keeping my artistic passions.

While working as a bookkeeping clerk for a mortgage insurance company in New York, I started teaching myself to paint with oils and acrylics. I had my first commission from a lawyer in my office to do an abstract painting. At the time it felt very strange to receive money for what you truly enjoyed doing. The commissions kept coming after that, so I enjoyed

painting most weekends.

Upon moving back to Los Angeles my painting took a backseat for the first year that I worked in the Record Business. I left as Assistant General Manager and worked for a short time for a writer at Paramount and that is where I began painting and writing again with a fury.

Since that time I have been able to establish myself as a fine artist internationally. Yes, I got that exhibition in Paris, and even spent an entire evening at the Moulon Rouge in 1980.

Turning points and a partial list of highlights since have been further developing my own distinctive style of painting, receiving major corporation commissions from The House of Seagram, Maybelline and The Coca Cola Company and organizations such as The Girl Scouts, USA, American Library Association and UNICEF, and from the U.S. Postal Service for the Kwanzaa stamp; acquiring an extensive list of collectors which include award winning writers like Alice Walker and Charles Fuller, entertainers such as Richard Pryor, Jenifer Lewis and Randy Crawford, and Attorney Johnnie L. Cochran; and designing a 150-foot mural for Ontario, California's International Airport terminal, a multicultural image, which was fabricated into tile.

To date, I have received quite a few awards nationally and internationally such as a Coretta Scott King Honor for illustration, a Parents Choice Silver Honor, a YWCA Silver Achievement Award and one from UNICEF, to name only a few.

How I ended up in the book business? I say that I came in through the side door. My first book cover was for Alice Walker at her request (a BOMC trilogy), the second came from a phone call request from Terry McMillan to use one of my existing images, "Ensemble" for the cover of *Waiting to Exhale*.

Since that time I have completed over 50 book covers and many of McMillan's international covers in Japan, France, Spain, Finland, Germany, and the UK.

During a special promotion at Penguin one of the employees there asked if I had an interest in illustrating children's picture books. She told me how much she loved my colors and that she thought I'd be great at it. Soon after I signed my first illustrator's contract with Dial Books for Young Readers, a second contract with Orchard Books/Richard Jackson followed and became my first book released, *Tukama*

*Tootles the Flute*.

Then came my first opportunity from Albert Whitman & Company to write and illustrate my own book, *The Gifts of Kwanzaa*. I am currently working on my eleventh book and actively seeking a publisher for other picture books that I have written. In addition, there are my adult books of poetry and prose, my multicultural cookbook (yes, they are my recipes), and most recently I became a member of BMI, Synthia Saint James Music for a song I co-wrote with Grammy Award winning songwriter, Bunny Hull. It's called "Happy, Happy Kwanzaa" and it celebrates the principles of Kwanzaa for children of all colors.

So now I look back on that little five-year-old girl who seemed to be practicing the Kwanzaa principle of "self-determination" before she knew what it meant, somewhat in amazement. I look at all the wonderful multicultural books that are available today and long only for more.

And when I look into the eyes of the children, all the children, I see brightness, joy and their eagerness to learn. And I am happy that through that side door, I have joined with all my fellow authors and illustrators to continue to give them more books, books about all cultures.

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