



Filiz Shine Edizer

State University of New York, NY

Revisiting Nightjohn

I was first introduced to **Nightjohn** by Gary Paulsen in a multicultural literature class while I was a doctoral student. The book had such a profound impact upon me that I use it frequently in my language arts, social studies, and children's literature undergraduate and graduate classes. For those of you who are not familiar with **Nightjohn**, a brief synopsis of the story follows.

Nightjohn is a story about a young slave girl named Sarny in the south and her trials and tribulations. **Nightjohn** is a slave who is brought into the plantation in a fashion not fit for humans, but he is a catalyst for change and ends up teaching Sarny one of the most powerful tools that can help her, which is reading. This is an empowering book filled with hope and courage and the strength of the human spirit.

I have always believed that **Nightjohn** deserves more credit than it given. Many of the teachers that I have interacted within courses I teach do not use **Nightjohn** in the classroom. Consequently, I was inspired to find out why **Nightjohn** is not used more often in the classrooms. To do this, I collected informal data from rural undergraduate and graduate students, as well as urban graduate students. All these students hail from New York State and are attending college in Western New York.

A MINI-STUDY

This mini-study is qualitative in nature. The data were collected from three classes. My primary purpose for this mini-study was to contribute to the field of knowledge by illuminating my students' responses towards **Nightjohn**, which showed per-

ceptions towards linguistic diversity as one of the reasons why they would not use the book in their classroom. The data collected consisted of written responses to **Nightjohn**. I had 70 participants--30 preservice teachers and 40 who were either teaching, tutoring or substituting in the schools. In addition to the written responses I also interviewed students for additional information in order to validate my data analysis and interpretation. The question I asked my students to respond to after having read **Nightjohn** was: "Would you use **Nightjohn** in your classroom? Why or Why not?" This question generated quite a few significant patterns of response which I am going to discuss in the sections that follow.

DIALECT USAGE

The written responses showed that all students were concerned with the use of dialect and realistic/graphic imagery in **Nightjohn**. Dialect was predominantly a reason why they would not recommend using the book in the classroom.

While the rural undergraduate students were excited and moved by the story, they were hesitant to use the book in their classroom. One student wrote, "I could never use this although it's a good story the English is incorrect and poor." We hadn't yet talked or discussed dialects in the class and it occurred to me that they hadn't discussed this topic in their previous education classes as well. Another student wrote, "I loved **Nightjohn** but due to its bad English I would never expose my students to that kind of English." Thirty students agreed that the dialect was problematic and they stressed the dialect issue as one of the primary concerns for not using **Nightjohn** in their classroom.

Similarly, nineteen out of twenty-one rural graduate students supported the idea that the use

of “incorrect” English in the book does not provide a good model for writing. One of the students wrote, “I would never share this book in class, the English is very low.”

Seventeen out of nineteen urban graduate students (these students live in an urban area and teach in an urban or suburban school that is close to the city) believed that *Nightjohn* would be difficult for their students to read and understand because of the type of dialect that is used in the story. However, many of these students stayed away from referring to the dialect as incorrect English. One of the students wrote, “Even though the book is written in fourth grade readability it is in slave dialect. That may be difficult for students to read.” Another student wrote, “Comprehension of this book would be complicated due to the way that it is written. Not all students comprehend various kinds of dialects.”

REALISTIC/GRAPHIC IMAGERY

A secondary issue that the students raised was the fact that *Nightjohn* is too graphic for upper elementary children and middle school children. In fact, twenty-five out of thirty rural undergraduate students felt that the book is too realistically presented and that children need not be exposed to the whole truth. One of the students responded, “I think Gary Paulsen overdoes the issue by writing in detail about the chopping of *Nightjohn*’s toe. Children do not need to know the gritty details of the truth.” Another student wrote, “I think this is way too much for children to know about. Some of this stuff that Gary Paulsen writes about should be softened and fluffed.”

This issue was also raised by seventeen out of twenty-one rural graduate students. One of the students wrote, “I know that I would not use *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen in the classroom because my own gut instinct is to avoid literature that is gruesome or troubling.” Another student wrote, “*Nightjohn* is not appropriate for the upper elementary or middle school students because there are too many graphic images displayed vividly to the reader.” Yet another student felt that the book is appropriate only for the high school students, and that the book is too descriptive in nature. She went on to say that many scenes graphically depict violence and that it may be disturbing even for the average adults.

The students felt that they would only use this book with 9th graders or higher and that a note should be sent home to the parents before attempting to share this kind of book.

Thirteen out of nineteen urban graduate students echoed the same sentiments about *Nightjohn*. The students suggested that the book might even be too graphic for upper elementary and middle school students, particularly in its depiction of slave life. Among the students’ comments are as follows:

“The violence is too graphic and the sexual content may not be understood or may be too scary for younger children.”

“Due to the graphic descriptions in the book I believe that the parents of students reading the book would have a problem with it.”

“An overwhelming feeling of intrigue, disgust and sincerity came over me while reading the book *Nightjohn*. My emotions were stirred and I felt that it was a riveting story about slavery with many layers. However I would not share this book with my fifth graders due to its graphic nature.”

Many students in this group felt that the eighth grade (12 out of 19 students) would be an appropriate level to introduce *Nightjohn* and they didn’t feel that a note should go home in regards to obtaining permission from parents or for informing parents that *Nightjohn* was being used in the classroom.

A subgroup consisting of Secondary Special Education teachers said that they would definitely use *Nightjohn* in the classroom because it’s readability level of fourth grade was low enough for their students yet, the content was for a mature audience. These teachers categorized the book as low reading level and high interest book. One student wrote:

“As a high school resource room teacher, I feel comfortable using this book, even with its disturbing events and topics (ownership of man, man being treated like an animal, murder, torture, rape, etc.) because they are a very real part of our history. Connections to other books, even current events, can easily be made by discussing themes such as hatred, ignorance, human determination and the ability to overcome personal horror and tragedy, and ultimately the importance of literacy.”

DISHARMONY

A third issue arising from students' responses to **Nightjohn** was that the book would not seem to be a source of harmony, but instead a potential cause of unrest and tension among students in the classroom. Nineteen out of thirty rural undergraduate students believed that this would not be good for race relations and that it would lead to disunity in the classroom. One of the students wrote, "I love this book but I think it would create problems in the classroom, kids would fight with each other more after reading this story." She continued to say, "I don't know why we need to keep bringing up these issues. It is time we moved on."

GLIMPSES OF INSIGHT

In one sense I was surprised by the students' responses. **Nightjohn** does use dialect but the dialect adds to the authenticity of the story. When looking at the criteria for historical fiction it is important to remember that in order to present an authentic representation of a culture the author needs to understand and portray the language, thoughts, concerns, and emotions of her[his] character rather than shaping the character to fit the general point of view (Huck, C.S., Hepler, S., Hickman, J., & Kiefer, B.Z., 2000). For example, when Sarny introduces herself she states, "I'm Sarny and they be thinking I'm dumb and maybe up to witchin' and got a stuck tongue because when I birthed they say I come out wrong, come out all backwards and twixt-and-twinst" (Paulsen, p. 14). One of the reasons why this statement is so powerful is because it lends credibility and authenticity to the story. The dialect makes Sarny and her life believable.

The **Literacy Dictionary** (1995) defines dialect as "a social or regional variety of a particular language with phonological, grammatical, and lexical patterns that distinguish it from other varieties." I think that it is important for educators to remember that linguistically all dialects are equal. They are all rule governed. However, we know that politically dialects are not equal in that, society looks upon standard English as "good" English and specific dialects are looked upon as "bad" English. The dialect favored is usually the dialect that is spoken by those who have positions of power. To refer to dialect usage as "bad" English or "incorrect" English is not linguistically accurate. According to Wolfram, Adger, and Christian (1999) dialect differences represent one of the most commonly misunderstood areas of diversity. Wolfram et al. (1999) states that, "Popular myths

view vernacular dialects as conceptually improvised, linguistically unworthy approximations of Standard English that have no rightful place in English. In reality, vernacular dialects of English are intricately patterned linguistic systems, possessing a distinctive array of linguistic rules framed within a unique sociohistorical background" (p.29).

To characterize dialect as "bad" English carries with it political, social and racial values. These types of perceptions are also carried into the classroom, which has a negative impact upon children (Shine-Edizer, 1995). Further, Wolfram et al. states that language prejudices seem to be the one area that is most resistant to change. People, who would normally rally for equality in other social and educational arenas, may continue to reject the legitimacy of other dialects (Wolfram et al., 1999). We do know, however, that linguistic diversity is an area which should be embraced and welcomed into the classroom. Attitudes about language can carry numerous sets of stereotypes and prejudices based on social and ethnic differences (Wolfram et al., 1999). **Nightjohn** lends itself to the discussion of dialects and register switching. It provides opportunities for students to talk about language usage for various purposes and settings.

The graphic scenes portrayed in **Nightjohn** seemed to deter many of the teachers. To some degree that is understandable, however, history needs to be portrayed accurately and authentically (Huck et al., 2000). Although some of the descriptions of scenes are uncomfortable, these scenes paint a picture that is essential to the development and understanding of the story and its time period. One of the purposes of this story is to make the reader feel uncomfortable. Gary Paulsen did not want to write a watered down version of slavery.

The racial composition of the students who responded to **Nightjohn** is white. I was surprised that the issue on who gets to write multicultural literature did not come up. The fact that Gary Paulsen was an outsider did not seem to create any discomfort for the students. It was interesting to note that the teachers did not bring up the subject of when they might be uncomfortable using the text and whether the make-up of the class could be a factor. Would it be more uncomfortable for a white teacher to use **Nightjohn** in a classroom where the majority of the students are African Americans? Or, would it be more difficult to use the book in a classroom where the majority of the students are white and only a few are African Americans?

I was pleased and surprised with the findings that emerged from the Special Education students subgroup. Reading level and interest seemed most important to them. Dialect to these students was not an issue at all, although these teachers agreed that **Nightjohn** would be appropriate for 9th grade and above.

CONCLUSION

Perceptions towards linguistic diversity always amaze me. It is disconcerting to realize that one of the major reasons why teachers do not or would not use **Nightjohn** in the classroom is due to the dialect usage. Teachers should not dismiss a book because it is written in dialect form. As to the issue on the graphic nature of the book, teachers should understand the nature and characteristics of historical fiction and should promote its appreciation among our students.

I still propose that **Nightjohn** is a remarkable story and that this book is appropriate for upper elementary through high school. One of my graduate students shared her daughter's comment about the book when she [the mother] told her that she was writing a response about the book and that she was not recommending

it for upper elementary or middle school students. Her daughter gasped and exclaimed, "You must let students read it because it is a great book!"

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