

“Can the Subaltern “Children” Resist?”

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Exploring Mildred Taylor’s, *the Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* from a Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry* (1976), a realistic and historical novel written for children whose central idea came into Taylor’s mind after her father had told her about real events he witnessed during his Mississippi childhood. It shows how Taylor empowers her child character, Cassie, to play an active role in her world. Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder* is a classic of children’s literature in which she explores the impact of segregation on the psychological development of African-American children. From a post-colonial perspective, the novel reflects not only racial discrimination by the whites but also how children from Taylor’s African-American community have tried their best to protect their dignity, freedom, and welfare through their resistance.

Keywords: African American children- Mildred Taylor- resistance- subaltern- racism-Postcolonial.

“هل يستطيع الأطفال المهمشين أن يقاموا”:

قراءة ما بعد الاستعمار لرواية “أيا صوت الرعد- أسمع بكائي” للكاتبة ملديرد تايلر
مستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة صورة الأطفال أصحاب البشرة السمراء في رواية “أيا صوت الرعد- أسمع بكائي” للكاتبة الأفروأمريكية ملديرد تايلر (١٩٤٣-). وقد اقتضت طبيعة البحث استخدام المنهج ما بعد الاستعمار. ومن أهم ما توصل إليه البحث من نتائج، أن تايلر قدمت صورة إيجابية للسود حيث أن شخصيات الرواية لم يستسلموا للتمييز العنصري الذي انتشر في المجتمع من جانب الشخص الأبيض حينذاك بل قاوموا وانتصروا في نهاية المطاف.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاطفال السود، ما بعد الاستعمار، التمييز العنصري، المقاومة
ملديرد تايلر

Mildred Taylor is part of a long line of African American women writers. Her work in historical fiction is well recognized. She sits alongside Maya Angelou, Octavia Butler, Jacqueline Woodson, Alice Walker, Lorraine Hansberry, and Jamaica Kinkaid to name a few. Taylor's work primarily deals with historical fiction. She is re-articulating history from the position of the subaltern or the oppressed voice. Taylor's works explain a series of her family's history and a series of segregation that faced her family. Taylor's experiment and glory in her heritage led her to attempt to create a new representation of African American culture. She created strong African American characters, especially children, who were proud and optimistic, and full of hope. Taylor has written children's books because she hopes "the children who read my books, the Logans will provide those heroes missing from the schoolbooks of my childhood, Black men, women, and children of whom they can be proud" (Taylor 6).

Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, hear my Cry*, which will be pointed to as *RT* in the course of this paper, is a masterpiece that reflects a time of severe economic struggle both for financial elites and for poor farming communities, in which discrimination and segregation both play a crucial part. To help with the full understanding of the portrayals of interactions between Whites and African-Americans, the novel will be summarized. The story, set in rural Mississippi in the 1930s, revolves around the intact loving black Logan family during a decade when the Great Depression was at its peak. Even though this worldwide economic crisis affects both rich and poor people, poor whites try to prove they are not of the lowest class in society by humiliating, oppressing, and belittling blacks, including the Logans, the only black family that owns the land. Rich men also attempt to deprive the Logans of their land simply because they cannot tolerate the idea that land near theirs is owned by a black family.

“Can the Subaltern “Children” Resist?”

The story is narrated by nine-year-old Cassie Logan, the only female child in the Logan family. Through the course of the story, this independent young girl discovers the importance of owning land for maintaining family survival, unity, dignity, and financial support, making land ownership an essential tool of resistance in their fight against injustice. She encounters issues related to racist laws in the Jim Crow South, with Black kids having to walk to school while White kids ride a bus. Cassie and her family own 400 acres of land in rural Mississippi, and because she and her brothers attend a school for Black children, they are unaware of the true extent of intense racial hatred and prejudice that exists in their society. Cassie is angered when she learns that many White people consider Blacks to be inferior to them.

The story includes many other characters, including Papa David Logan (Cassie's father), Mama (Cassie's mother) Mary Logan, Big Ma, (Caroline Logan) David's mother, uncle Hammer Logan, 12-year-old son Stacey, and two younger boys, 7-year-old Christopher-John and 6-year-old Little Man. T.J. is a child who becomes the focus of a major event in the story. The family land was inherited from their grandfather, Edward Logan. Even though most Black families suffer from severe poverty and fear the consequences of boycotting the Wallace store owned by the brothers Deuberry, Thurston, and Kaleb, the Logans organize such a boycott, exposing them to many acts of violence. While the boycott represents a protest by African-Americans against the whites, i.e., a peaceful effort against injustice by the Logan family and other black families, since the Wallaces own the store and Harlan Grange owns the land on which the store is located and therefore shares part of its income, they do not accept the African-American protest and act violently to prevent it, with the Wallace, Harlan Granger, and Charlie Simms family all participating in either directly as racist murderers or by turning a blind eye to such murder.

The most crucial event occurs when the whites accuse T.J. of robbing and murdering Mr. Jim Lee Barnett, a white racist who runs the mercantile store in Strawberry. When a lynch mob takes T.J. out to hang him, the father David starts a fire to create a distraction, and the men rush to fight the fire and save their crops. A local lawyer Mr. Jamison tries to defend T.J. as the sheriff arrests T.J. and takes him to Strawberry to await his fate. In the course of this novel, the Logan family succeeds in their fight against racism and injustice, with each of the Logans using his or her unique approach to struggle and resistance. As Fanon puts it "I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth" (164).

Taylor wanted to share her historical knowledge with both black and white audiences because she thought both most likely were relatively unenlightened about generations in southern America who, while officially freed, were still humiliated, mistreated, and oppressed. Moreover, she realized that there was general unawareness that without the much-ignored suffering and resistance of black generations during the 30s, 40s, and 50s, the 1964 Civil Rights Act (CRA) would never have existed.

The title symbolizes the novel's focus on the catastrophic events experienced by the Logan family and their small rural community. Their pain, expressed in both cries of grief and cries of protest, emerges from a rising consciousness of oppression and unjust domination over their individual, family, and social existence. As Cassie's father David said, "We keep doing what we gotta, and we don't give up. We can't." (Taylor, 2001, p.206) In this way, the novel symbolizes a protest against prejudice and racism, becoming a symbol of both dissatisfaction and strength.

Choosing a child to narrate the story is considered a strong point helping to assert resistance. The title of the novel refers to things unacceptable to African-Americans and that they can no longer bear. The title was inspired by a song of resistance called *Spiritual* that was sung by African-Americans during the days of

“Can the Subaltern “Children” Resist?”

slavery: “Roll of thunder/Hear my cry/Over the water/Bye and bye/Ole man comin'/Down the line/Whip in hand to/Beat me down/But I ain't/Gonna let him/Turn me 'round,”(Taylor 43). This song speaks to the resilience and determination of Black people to not be dissuaded by obstacles they may confront, symbolizing and reflecting the main themes of the book, racism, and resistance. It also showcases the indomitable spirit of resistance against slavery and discrimination and portrays blacks' refusal to be enslaved. Since thunder is a loud noise, a semi-message from an immensely powerful source preceded by lightning and followed by rain, it symbolizes a change in the situation. The condition before the rain is different from that after it rains, symbolizing the positive image of resistance and struggle.

The title of the novel also plays an important role by calling for protest. Thunderbolt represents a sign of continuing life and ignites the cycle of living, and Frantz Fanon and Edward Said emphasize the process of resistance: “it is not a step that follows anti-colonial struggle but is, itself, a resistance,” (Said 274). Edward Said observed in his book *Culture and Imperialism* commenting on Fanon’s concept of liberation: “the case for *Liberation* as a process and not as a goal contained automatically by the newly independent nation,” (Berlin 82). Liberation in the text suggests that you must seek and defend your rights, and this can be achieved only by following many processes of resisting and struggling against discrimination.

Taylor realized that black people would be never likely to fully appreciate the freedom they cherish and not be appropriately proud of their ancestors unless they knew the true history most often ignored or misrepresented in literature written by whites. Since it described how this misrepresentation negatively affected the formation of black young identities, *RT* is considered a documentary historical work of fiction capable of

healing wounds caused by racial oppression, thus helping move toward the anti-racist world of equality sought by humanists.

The novel talks about how Black people struggle for their rights, with their actions casting them as players in history. It discusses the Blacks' determination to survive and succeed while not accepting any second-class citizen status. Eventually, they are heard as a clap of thunder that can act and resist, with the thunder sound reflecting their feelings and anger. They are strong like the thunder sound and they can face injustice. Both thunder and cries are considered to be reactions, symbolizing challenge, and a plaintive cry is a symbol of strength. Thunder and cry are sounds or voices in the face of injustice that also represent courage and pride in the face of racism. It is a plea for help from God to aid them in resisting oppression. Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" explores the degree to which individuals can be classified as subalterns. She assures us that subalterns can speak for themselves (Morris 137) and shows how children can turn upside down the idea that subalterns can be heard only by their masters. African-American children reject the assumption that the oppressed cannot speak up and therefore refuse to be passive. They do not perceive themselves as "subalterns" and since the message is delivered through the voice of a black child, the subalterns are made to speak for themselves. Binebai Benedict comments on this argument by saying:

Spivak argues that subalterns are not people who can be represented by privileged people. They are subjects who should speak for themselves. They should be inventors and masters of their voices. It is only when the subalterns speak for themselves that they can cease to be subaltern subjects. (Morris 208).

This quote clarifies the African-Americans' situation in the text. They are active because they speak for themselves, they reflect their reality, and they participate in solving their problems, so they will no longer act as subalterns, they indeed are privileged. While children contributed to all events taking

“Can the Subaltern “Children” Resist?”

place in their community, African-American children reflected in the text cease to be subalterns as they act, speak, think, and participate on different occasions. In this way, they show their strength as well as their determination to achieve their goals and manage the different circumstances they face.

Thunder and crying both emit strong sounds representing warnings of something about to happen and in this post-colonial novel giving a voice to the voiceless means giving them a chance to be heard. Taylor presents the narrator, an African-American child, to express, speak, and explore herself and the world around her. *To hear my cry* suggests the ability to raise one's voice, and consequently, you will be helped. Thus, crying signifies the condition of the oppressed who were locked up for a long time and now have a chance to tell their story of suffering and wretchedness. Since their parents know that their children are not passive or silent, they qualify them for action by giving them the required knowledge.

Using a Child as a Narrator in a Postcolonial Novel

Taylor's work adopts the perspective of oppressed people in society, exposing the systemic discriminatory practices of that society and how they harm the oppressed. Since the novel is narrated from the point of view of Cassie, it is important to discuss the significance of using the child as a narrator. Children are most often considered honest and pure, with emotions free from hatred. By telling the story from Cassie's point of view, the text will be given more credibility and honesty and make it closer to readers' hearts. Cassie is an active girl, intelligent, outspoken, self-confident, and always ready to act. In his thesis *Crying for the Land*, Cobb comments on Taylor using the first-person narrative:

Taylor's extensive use of the first person gives her novels a sense of certainty based on her personal experiences as well as those of her immediate and

extended families. Taylor's first-person narrative voice blurs the line between fact and fiction and substantiates the elements of social realism in her work (11).

In this text, a child's perspective is used to portray difficult themes such as racism, resistance, and prejudice, making the text simple, partial, and easily reachable despite the unpleasantness of the topics. The text reflects Cassie's outrage and cheers her courage as she faces racism and violence in this compelling story. In this respect, Maher Ben Moussa describes using a child as a narrator saying, "The novel depicts the necessity of child agency as a form of resistance for oppressed cultures" (220).

Thus, using a child as a narrator is considered a strong supporting element for oppressed people. Cassie is an innocent black child who knew nothing about racism, and as a child, she does not understand the difference that skin color makes in white people's minds. Her belief in equality that all people are the same and should have the same rights allows her to be used as a strong resistive and supportive element against injustice. Since the book is first classified as a children's novel, choosing a child to tell the story might be a smart choice of the author because it pushes children to appreciate and empathize with what Black children had to face in the past. Children may understand these feelings well and be encouraged to have a sense of belonging. In his article, Alexis Kienlen writes, "Children and teenagers have intense emotions, and are establishing their identities, which gives them a unique perspective on life and a certain tone to their narration" (168). When the narrator is a child, a story's events can affect other children who connect the story they read with their own experience and find a degree of reality in the story. Furthermore, as Michael Seraphinoff pointed out, there is a vast number of Macedonian writers who have made use of a child as a narrator in their books to address the issue of a state's oppression. To quote his excellent argument:

“Can the Subaltern “Children” Resist?”

A child narrator can, among other things, create a degree of distance between the adult author and his or her message that serves to lessen hostility to that message. Readers tend to be more accepting of a child rather than an adult who gives voice to certain uncomfortable or controversial truths. (Kattou 88)

Children are neutral and tend to transfer observed incidents as they are. The use of the child’s narration in *RT* effectively draws the subject matter closer through emotional connections. The novel seeks to empower children to participate in the ongoing movement for racial justice. As said by the American talk show host Art Linkletter (who made a career out of publicizing children’s utterances) “Kids say the darndest things” (Taylor 12). Through literature, children can clearly express their situation and fairly represent themselves to the world. As Tammy L. Mielke explains, “The literature offers African American children the chance to see themselves as perceived by the adult world - both the Black and the White sections of adulthood” (25).

Significance of African-American Children

RT portrays African-American children as essential members of society trying to deal with their problems and cooperating to help one another understand the world around them. Children nearly always tell stories of their daily life innocently. For example, when Cassie tells uncle Hammer of her experience in strawberry and how Mr. Simms was cruel to her although she did nothing wrong, Big Ma does not want her to tell him (Taylor 121). This indicates that children are more likely, to tell the truth than adults who may be more likely to hide it. This does not necessarily mean that adults are liars, but that their superior wisdom and knowledge sometimes cause them to hide some information for the sake of everyone. For example, an elderly black man often cannot speak to a white man openly because he fears the consequences, while children tend to say

whatever comes into their minds without considering the consequences. They do not mean to be brave or to harm anyone, but often lack the circumstantial knowledge that might prevent them from thinking of such consequences. For example, when Little Man, Cassie's younger brother, reads the label on a school book he has received from the teacher, he refuses to take it and throws it on the ground, not meaning to be rude in front of others, but just doing what comes first into his innocent mind because of receiving a dilapidated book. The use of the child as a focal point in Black writing can highlight the struggle to be heard further in the world. Fanon admits:

From time to time, he fights for liberty and justice, but it's always for white liberty and white justice, in other words, for values secreted by his masters. The former slave, who has no memory of the struggle for freedom or that anguish of liberty of which Kierkegaard speaks, draws a blank when confronted with this young white man singing and dancing on the tightrope of existence. (152).

For this reason, Cassie, the narrator, can reflect on many incidents about various people and events. Cassie's narration describes her awareness and knowledge about more than she chooses to reveal. Cassie, like most people, believed in having the right to be treated with respect and not to be humiliated, as represented in several situations, such as when Cassie goes to Strawberry with Big Ma, T.J., and her brother Stacy and rejects Mr. Barnett's attitude toward them, saying:

I was hot. I had been as nice as I could be to him and here he was talking like this. 'We been waiting on you for near an hour...while you 'round here waiting on everybody else. And it ain't fair. You got no right,' (Taylor 111).

In this quote, Cassie says that while she tried to be nice, what Mr. Barnett does to her drives her crazy and she feels disappointed with his mistreatment. When she screamed in his face, (a very rude thing to do, but done out of anger), he says:" Well, you just get your little black self-back over there and wait

“Can the Subaltern “Children” Resist?”

some more". (Taylor 111). She is not afraid to answer him, screaming in anger and humiliation, “And you ought not to be waiting on everybody 'fore you wait on us,” (Taylor 111). This is a racial message from a white adult man who exposes Cassie to racism and affects her identity, causing her to start questioning her identity and her situation in society. This quote also reflects Cassie's strength. Even though she was surprised by the humiliating treatment, she does not merely stand passive but defends her right. These words “little black self-back over there” (Taylor 111), make her wonder, "What does it mean to be a young black person?" During the great depression many Black children were led to wonder about the good way to act in similar situations, and many parents tried to keep them at a distance from a dominant group to protect them from such psychological assaults of racism.

Throughout the novel, Cassie is learning the reality of the place where she lives. The reader can see how the characters evolve as the story continues, and the reader's understanding of the story and Black life evolves accordingly with her. This explains why the writer chooses Cassie out of the other characters, i.e. because she is developing from a naïve and vulnerable character into one with agency and empowerment through experience. The text reveals that all people, White or Black, are born free and equal, that Blacks are just like White people, and that color does not matter when you are a good person. Both Taylor and Fanon made it clear that color is the reason behind racism. Taylor rejects this idea by presenting a conversation between the mother Mary Logan and her daughter Cassie that is related to what Fanon says: "In no way must my color be felt as stain" (Fanon 63). As the novel shows

It is something, Cassie. White is something just like black is something everybody born on the earth is something, and nobody, no matter what color is better than anybody else. (Taylor 127)

Fanon asserts black equality with whites when noting:

“By appealing, therefore, to our humanity—to our feelings of dignity, love, and charity—it would be easy to prove and have acknowledged that the black man is equal to the white man. But that is not our purpose. What we are striving for is to liberate the black man from the arsenal of complexes that germinated in a colonial situation (26).

The text also hints at this by showing that being born black or white is not as important a thing to mention as what one makes of himself or herself. Mary Logan says to Cassie, “Baby, we have no choice of what color we're born or who our parents are or whether we're rich or poor. What we do have is some choice over what we make of our lives once we're here,” (Taylor 129).

Racial Discrimination

Fanon comments on the idea of color that it should not be an obstacle or a shamefulness for blacks, saying that “in no way must my color be felt as a stain. From the moment the black man accepts the split imposed by the Europeans, there is no longer any respite.” (Fanon 61). Fanon wants to improve the image of the black man to himself. He argues, “I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth.” (Fanon 36). Thus, the whites evaluated other people according to their colors and for them the white is superior. They use to feel better about themselves because of their color, as Mama tells Cassie in the novel “Because he's one of those people who has to believe that White people are better than Black people to make himself feel big,” (Taylor 78). This quote clearly describes the concept of white supremacy. Through the portrayal of a young character, *RT* conveys her ways of expression, stating that African-American children can express their knowledge and history. Tammy L. Mielke, who specializes in children`s and youth literature, declares that a child is influenced by these issues at his early age,

“Can the Subaltern “Children” Resist?”

making him or her more able to reply and resist, arguing that “the Black child was invisible yet became visible, silent yet voiced, and typified by both negative and positive images,” (Mielke 10).

Taylor tends to portray a black child as visible, voiced, and positive, capable of discovering the reality of a situation and accurately expressing what he /she sees or hears, as when Cassie describes Mr. Berry after Wallace burned him, "The face had no nose, and the head no hair; the skin was scarred, burned, and the lips were wizened black, like charcoal. As the wheezing sound echoed from the opening that was a mouth" (Taylor 97). Hence, *RT* points to the importance of a set of ideals such as courage, pride, resistance, and dignity for Black people that had spread throughout American communities. It is important to learn these morals carefully and remember African Americans' formal or informal history, as spoken by Logan's children who acquired this information verbally from their parents. Through the narration, it is obvious that African-American children resisted racism and fixed ideas of White supremacy to figure out their present and enhance their future. This is what Taylor tries to teach children, and she uses fatherly advice to do so, as when Papa tells his daughter Cassie why he had to go away to work, referring to their land as the most important thing they had to protect. The writer narrates this through the voice of Cassie:

I asked him once why he had to go away, why the land was so important. He took my hand and said in his quiet way: 'look out there, Cassie girl. All that belongs to you. You ain't never had to live on nobody's place but your land and long as I live and the family survives, you'll never have to. That's important. You may not understand that now, but one day you will. Then you'll see(7).

They must believe in themselves and adhere to their equal rights to live. This quote sends a great message, that you are a slave only if you let people treat you like a slave. They lived on

their land equally with others, and they have the right to protect their possession. One sees that when T. J. becomes friends with the White guys R.W. and Melvin, they treat him badly, and he allows them to do so because he thinks they are better than he is because they are white. T. J's character might be considered contrary to that of Cassie, who believes that White people are not better than Black people and who revolts against anyone who thinks it acceptable to treat her with disrespect.

A Reflection of the Novel

From a postcolonial perspective, *RT* defines racism and clarifies that racism leads to the disintegration of American society. It also leads to more violence and oppression based on the notion of superiority and inferiority. A lot of grief can be caused when black people stop believing that they are inferior to white Americans and the consequences can be hard. However, black people, particularly children, encounter these images of humiliation through love and courage. They do not surrender. They could rise above the indignities of racial discrimination. They struggle a lot until they get these rights. For example, Cassie learns from her parents how to face racial and economic adversities or rather how to succeed in her life.

By displaying the generations and their ways of dealing with racism and different strategies of resistance, struggles against injustice are differentiated from one another and from generation to generation. The African-American children prove that they can continue their lives while working to protect their land and their family (Ranger 126). They can also develop their knowledge to help them assert their identity. This text provides hope and suggests the possibility of making a good future and reducing hardships through persistence and determination.

RT explores the relationships among the young characters with historical background events. The most important thing Taylor presents is the way black children resist the racist environment in which images of black and white seem to be

“Can the Subaltern “Children” Resist?”

opposite to one another. The text offers African-American children the chance to see themselves as they are perceived by the adult world concerning both black and white sections of adulthood. The text also discloses the bad aspects of racism and how it also affects racist people. Racism works as a driving force for children seeking a deeper understanding of their environment and how to fight constant racial discrimination. They find themselves working through these problems while getting an education in a setting and process that did not originally take them into account. The text seeks to make their marginalized cultures better known and valued both for the past and present. This text also examines what children can learn from history in to help them understand the workings of racism and resistance, and offers a new perspective focusing on children and their struggle for racial justice. It highlights the marginalized characters' efforts to reach a world beyond a race by facing racial issues and is particularly concerned with the depiction of children`s resistance. It also examines the quality of black characters` suffering under racism, especially within a system of white supremacy by illustrating inhuman conditions suffered under slavery while on the other hand showing aspects of racism after slavery.

Since the African-American condition is different from that of White people, the novel depicts black people`s oppression in several forms, focusing especially on children`s situations during the Great Depression. These forms of oppression are opposed by several forms of resistance, including standing up to peers, organizing a boycott, speaking at a protest, making plans, and playing the role of a trickster. Finally, the text highlights the problems of racism and child mistreatment in the U.S.A 1930s, with its characters shaping the novel as a whole, both in form and content. Their resistance-oriented actions appear in the title, in the tone, in their points of view, and in their interactions with whites.

Taylor's *RT* teaches resistance against widely-accepted norms to give voice to the oppressed members of society depicted, thereby empowering her implied readers. Taylor utilizes several strategies in empowering African-Americans in general and young black children in particular, including retrieval of the neglected history of slavery to show that agency is still possible, and revealing the ugliness and humiliation of racism by putting readers into Cassie's shoes. It demonstrates the importance of family and land in sustaining financial security and provides children with a keen awareness of their environment so that they might make wiser decisions. It unveils power structures and provides both female and male role models of resistance (Ranger 136). Taylor's *RT* teaches by inviting readers to enter the lives of the Logans, and through this identification readers of all colors can be led to a deeper understanding of racism.

From a postcolonial perspective, Taylor's *RT* succeeds in exploring relationships between the young characters and the historical background events. The most important thing Taylor presents is how black children can resist a racist environment. The text not only offers African-American children the chance to see how they are perceived by the adult world, but it also reveals the evil side of racism and how it affects young people. Describing such racism works as a driving force for giving children a deep understanding of their environment and the need to constantly fight racial discrimination. They can find themselves working through these problems along with getting an education in a setting and process that did not originally take them into account.

Mildred's novel seeks to make their marginalized cultures known and valued both for their past and their present. It also examines what children seeking to understand the workings of racism and resistance can learn from history. A new perspective focusing on children and their struggle for racial justice is offered, highlighting marginalized characters to reach a world beyond a race by going through the race. Thus, the novel depicts

“Can the Subaltern “Children” Resist?”

opposition to the oppression of black people, especially black children, during the Great Depression, through several forms of resistance ranging from standing up to peers organizing a boycott, speaking during a protest, making protest plans, and playing the trickster role. The problems associated with racism and child mistreatment and resistance to them highlighted by *RT* are reflected in the title, the tone, the points of view, and the interactions between Blacks and their White counterparts.

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