A Noose Only Glimpsed: Lynching in American Middle Grade Fiction, 1976—2018

"But some trees do not speak…They do not speak because they are ashamed. At least ones in the South are. They were used for evil. Even though they could not defend themselves, they were still ashamed. Sometimes when the wind caresses their leaves, they whisper to the breezes, telling them what they have seen and heard, telling those invisible messengers how they were used as accomplices in evil…But there are times when a tree can no longer withstand the pain inflicted on it, and the wind will take pity on that tree and topple it over in a mighty storm. All the other trees who witnessed the evil look down upon the fallen tree with envy. They pray for the day when a wind will end their suffering." —Julius Lester, from *Guardian*

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For the privileged children in America who have access to the nearly endless options of reading material directed at and written for them, the topics of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement are extensively covered and often—though not exclusively—are quite sophisticated. Though distribution of factual and engaging books about some of the gravest subjects in American history are not always available for all readers due to the resources and limitations in their regions, there nevertheless exists a robust, extensive canon of Black fiction for young readers in the United States. Fueled by the creation of awards and honors explicitly for writers and artists of color, such as the 1970 foundation of the Coretta Scott King Award, the genre has only grown with time. Yet, despite the diversity in theme, tone, and aesthetics of the various publications, one facet of the Black experience in U.S. culture seems to remain taboo in middle grade children's fiction: lynching. While the specifics of brutal abuse, family separation, plantation and slave ship life, sexual assault, and other violence inflicted on people of color in this country are frequently documented and exposed, lynching often remains unseen or merely hinted at. The image of the noose sometimes seems omnipresent, yet the *story* of the noose is not. Rejecting the surface-level analysis that would cite lynching as overly traumatic for the eyes of children as the cause for the dearth of the subject, it is argued here that it is actually the failure of our shared historical memory about lynching in the United States that keeps the adult publishers, acquisitions editors, and literary agents who facilitate children's fiction from producing content on the topic. While writing about lynching for young readers is indeed complex, it has been and can be done with aplomb, but those involved in the production process require previous education about the subject, which is missing from many history classes and popular narratives. Indeed, the very nature of lynching is itself a disappearing act, making its

visibility for children in early stages of life that much more vital. Alongside an exploration of the lack of lynching in middle grade fiction—here attributed to underrepresentation in the publishing industry and flawed historical memory—this project will present six case studies from 1976 to 2018 which contain explicit references to lynching intended for an audience of children from the ages of eight to twelve. This chronology will depict an evolution of thinking about lynching in microcosm, while simultaneously revealing that the presence of lynching in published books increases as time progresses forward. Nevertheless, lynching is still a rarity in children's middle grade texts about the country before and after the Civil War, despite a preponderance of other narrativized racial and sexual violence in the same genre and for the same audience.

While a standardized, universal definition of "middle grade literature" does not exist, in a 2018 issue of *Publishers Weekly*, Shannon Maughan wrote that the genre consists of "…books intended for readers eight to twelve years old. But as with most things pertaining to children's books, there are gray areas to consider and oft-debated exceptions" (np). This paper will make use of Maughan's suggested age range—one which is broadly accepted by the publishing industry, writers, teachers, librarians, and booksellers—while also acknowledging the ambiguity of many works that defy strict age demarcations. The very structures that determine these types of age boundaries are typically the ones that also dictate who reads what; books are channeled through myriad filters before they reach the hands of a child, and every step is overwhelmingly homogenous in race. In *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?*, Philip New writes: "The Whiteness of children's publishing Whitens what kinds of stories get told, and consequently what kinds of stories we are inclined to imagine. According to *Publishers Weekly*'s 2015 survey, 89 percent of people employed in the industry identify as White or Caucasian…In 2014, only 11 percent of

children's books published that year were about people of color—and the number by people of color was only 8 percent" (168). That the majority of decision-makers who approve the distribution and acquisition of texts are self-identified as White constrains the perspectives that will be shared, and if they aren't fully educated or aware of race-based lynching atrocities, their ability to then get those books out into the world diminishes. Black people in the United States have had no choice but to know the history of lynching (past and present), which makes it unsurprising that the writers in the chronology presented in this paper are almost exclusively of color, with only a single exception. In *Embracing, Evaluating, and Examining African American Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Michelle H. Martin begins by quoting Carter G. Woodson, an early pioneer of books for young Black readers, on the importance that memory plays in the writing and production of children's literature: "[He]…wrote in the *Journal of Negro History* in April 1926: 'If a race has no history, if it has no worth-while tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated'…By the same token, if a literary genre has no history—or enables contemporary readers to believe it has none—that genre, too, becomes a 'negligible factor' within the literary world at risk of extinction" (66). Thus, it is *how* we remember people and events, as well as the types of things that are *allowed* to be remembered, which become some of the defining features of why lynching in middle grade novels is so rare. Attempts at covering up the bleakest lows of White supremacy in our collective history trickles down into youth literature, and the longer it continues, the harder it becomes to resurrect. Lynching is so often absent because many White adults (the majority in the publishing industry) don't have the history they need in order to tell those stories,

and the Black authors who know the history *and* lived lynching have regularly been shut out of employment and publishing by mainstream houses, agencies, and distributors.

Prior to the 1970s, there was little in the way of novels for middle grade readers that represented the Black experience not only through strong, complex, narrative prose written by Black authors themselves. Much of the material directed at young readers by writers of color was often more instructive or pedagogical in nature, such as W.E.B. DuBois's *The Brownies' Book* periodical and Black Panther texts for branches that pursued child literacy and education programs. There of course existed poetry, plays, short stories, and picture books for readers of all ages—including contributions from luminaries such as Langston Hughes—but long-form novels with wide distribution directed specifically at an audience that exists between childhood and late adolescence—and particularly those targeting a Black readership—were not widespread or commercialized. While various forms of narratives for Black children in the U.S. have existed in one way or another for centuries, it wasn't until the end of the twentieth that the genre began to emerge, especially as publishing houses took more risks and a post-*Brown v. Board* world opened up new possibilities for Black writers (with subsequent challenges along with successes). Of all these varied publications, lynching occurs even less frequently, although more radical literature outlining the stark horrors of the extrajudicial violence was available. That said, not all Black readers (or readers in general who would benefit greatly from the lessons, too) had equal access to these resources, making education uneven based on factors of environment, class, and proximity to cities.

There is no singular explanation for the rise of both attention to middle graders as consumers of their own genre or the increasing interest in amplifying voices of color, but second-

wave feminism (even with its deep lack of intersectionality), the long road of the Civil Rights Movement, the fallout and anti-war activism of the Vietnam War, and rapidly advancing media technology all created a cultural climate that opened up presses and people to Black points of view. In "African American Children's Literature: The First One Hundred Years," Violet J. Harris illuminates additional context about the impact of economy and social mobility on the rise of literature for Black children: "The expansion of the new literary tradition awaited the development of an educated African American middle class which demanded culturally authentic literature for African American children. Enhancement of the new tradition also necessitated the emergence of an educated group of persons interested in writing as a vocation or avocation. It also depended on the further development of African American publishers and changes in attitudes among White publishers" (545). Harris also observes that "…the list of [Black] writers who have created culturally conscious literature in this period [1970s and beyond] surpasses the total number of writers in all the previous periods" (550). Similarly marking the decade as a turning point, Harris also makes a connection between financial capability and the emergence of a more robust children's literature output from Black creators, both in terms of content and the actual production of the materials from publishers owned by people of color. Black American voices which sought out middle grade audiences—and were published accordingly—began to be widely circulated by the early 1970s. Alice Childress's 1973 novel, *A Hero Ain't Nothing but a Sandwich*, about a thirteen-year-old heroin addict told through various perspectives, was published by the now-dissolved Coward, McCann & Geoghegan. Though not confronting lynching directly, Childress is relentless in her depictions of Black urban life as stark and stripped of sentimentality. Two years later, Dial Press (since absorbed into Penguin Random

House) began releasing Mildred D. Taylor's novels. Her second, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, won the Newbery Medal after its publication, and has become, ironically, one of the most celebrated and most divisive books for young adults. Addressing lynching head-on in language that is straightforward and unwilling to hide the constant threat that people of color face(d), Taylor would become one of the first published voices directed specifically at a young readership who portrayed the blunt realities of vigilante "justice" and the very real dangers posed by Judge Lynch.

***Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor—1976**

An extrajudicial hanging is narrowly avoided in Taylor's seminal and game-changing novel, which follows the Logan family as they navigate the Depression-era Jim Crow South. From a family of slaves emerge descendants who now own the land they once were bound to by force, a potent metaphor for Taylor as well as a realistic depiction of the types of Black people targeted for lynchings. The murder of a character is avoided both by intervention from local law enforcement ("Y'all decided to hold court here tonight?…Let the law decide whether or not he's guilty" [254]) and a selfless but destructive act from the Logan family's patriarch, the ultimate fate of the near-victim is ambiguous and Taylor heavily implies that his survival is not likely:

> Papa studied us. "He could possibly go on the chain gang…"
> "Papa, could he…could he die?" asked Stacey, hardly breathing.
> "Son—"
> "Papa, could he?"
> Papa put a strong hand on each of us and watched us closely. "I ain't never lied to y'all, y'all know that…I wish I could lie to y'all now." (275)

Much like Papa's diction, the verbiage of the entire text is straightforward and unvarnished, and assurance of a fair trial—or even a trial at all—is distant. Throughout the novel, characters

encounter different types of violence and discrimination, but it is the prospect of a lynching occurring off the page, outside the narrative confines, that is perhaps most disturbing. It lingers in the final two lines: "I cried for T.J. For T.J., and the land" (276). The uncertainty in particular stings, as lynching itself has always been marked by its omnipresent lack of certainty; the unpredictability of mob violence is a large part of its power and ability to control. The plot, with its extensive backstory and development of Black and White characters over almost three hundred pages—written by a Black woman—is one of the first of its kind for mass distribution. With its avoidance of a concrete ending, the novel challenges readers to confront the chaos around them and embodies a hardy virtue in the face of instability. While it may be bleak to some, it *did* reflect the real experiences of a lot of Black children (and adults) who were often neglected in widespread publications. Nuanced fictional representations of the Black American experience in children's literature, even if complicated, nonetheless encourage a relationship between Black youth and books, a vital component for development and resistance. Even though Taylor's novel did not open floodgates immediately, her work is quite literally groundbreaking. There are very few titles from this time which meet the same caliber of character development, stylistic prose, international critical praise, and wide reach that *Roll of Thunder* had, has, and likely will continue to maintain.

While this project did not discover a middle grade novel about lynching from the 1980s, Violet Harris reminds us that the decade was not an empty vacuum devoid of progress in the genre. While further research will need to dive into the 1980s more closely, Harris presents a timeline of children's literature created for and by Black artists and authors for the interval between Taylor's Logan family series in the 1970s and the acceleration of lynching

representation (and the commercialization of middle grade literature overall) that began booming in the 1990s:

> Several new writers have emerged during the 1980s whose work suggests that African American children's literature will remain a viable, vibrant tradition, albeit one that remains unfairly neglected. From the bedtime story ritual featured in *Tell Me a Story, Mama* (Johnson, 1989), to the day-to-day activities of a middle-class African American family related in *Whose Side Are You On?* (Moore, 1988), and to the frank discussion of the issue of colorism in *The Shimmershine Queens* (Yarbrough, 1989), these books present a range of experiences and intimate portrayals of African Americans. They read as if they were written for African American children. Via the language, nicknames, foods, and other aspects and nuances of culture that they present, they implicitly inform their readers that the stories are from the African American community, "the 'hood." There is a naturalness about them—these books do not scream messages or didacticism other than those which inherently stem from the affirmation and celebration of African American culture. To their credit, they also justly criticize negative aspects of African American culture, but not in formulaic fashion. (552)

While not exhaustive, Harris provides a starting point for navigating the eighties, during which the War on Drugs, AIDS epidemic, and Reaganomics drastically and disproportionately impacted people of color. And yet, the production of literature for children from the Black perspective continued. The decade complicates easy generalizations about progress, and while the sample size presented in this paper is limited by the very nature of the topic, research conducted here supports preliminary findings that lynching in middle grade literature declined in the 1980s. No assumptions will be made based on these early suggestions, but with the onset of the nineties, it does at the very least get easier to find substantive, varied portrayals of lynchings that are published by high-grossing publishers, despite internal and external limitations from majority-White institutions.

***The Dark-Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural* by Patricia McKissack—1992**

In spite of rare middle grade fiction depicting lynchings, McKissack resurrects memories of the past in her tale of a lynched Black man returning from death as a ghost to exact the justice he was denied in life on his White murderer. The aptly named "Justice" doesn't flinch from the visual horror of the lynching, describing how the victim, Alvin Tinsley, had a "…Klansman put the rope around [his] neck…Then [they] kicked the stump from underneath Alvin, snapping the man's neck instantly" (34-35). Past sins aren't actually in the past at all, and they reverberate well into the present, a particularly relatable message for young Black readers who face jeopardy in an unjust world in their lives outside the pages of the tale. Here, historical memory functions as a way to preserve stories of mob violence, and its publication allows children and adults to easily absorb overlooked stories (especially when peddled as "tales of the supernatural"). The many decades of vigilante lynchings that are a hallmark of postbellum U.S. life are infrequently taught in classrooms, and the duration of their spectacle well and far into the twentieth century is often downplayed, covered up, and ignored—even in some of the most progressive middle grade books about race relations. The "tales" step in to fill that gap.

Part of what distinguishes McKissack's narrative—both from others like it and on its own—is the psychological probing of the White supremacist himself: Hoop, the hangman and primary antagonist. The author gets right into his head by inhabiting his point of view: "Hoop loved the white robe of a Klansman. Wearing it made him feel powerful and strong—even safe. He pulled the hood over his head and hurried out the door. A passing pickup slowed down just long enough for him to jump aboard" (34). After the lynching, McKissack continues to portray his interiority: "At first Hoop reveled in knowing he'd finally presided over a Klan lynching, savoring the excitement and power he felt. He'd carried himself well in front of the others. Why,

he might even run for Grand Imperial Wizard, or maybe for mayor next election. He had a good chance, knowing what he knew about certain prominent citizens" (36). Though he is haunted by nightmares and is tormented supernaturally, Hoop maintains his right to have carried out the lynching and only turns himself in to the police to rid himself of his ghost. McKissack subverts the idea of the guilty finding penitence in admitting their wrongdoing by maintaining the villain's racism even when up against (im)mortal danger. His "…fury that had raged inside him [at the lynching]" (42) could not be extinguished, even when confronted with the impossible. Here, the author shows how strongly prejudice and hatred can persist. This chilling but necessary lesson sits underneath the plot, which involves detailed disputes over property ownership,[1] just as in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. McKissack would continue to write about Black issues for middle grade readers for decades, and revisited lynching eight years after she released *The Dark-Thirty.*

Color Me Dark by Patricia McKissack—2000

Lynching permeates McKissack's first-person journal contribution to the *Dear America* series, a popular run of books launched by Scholastic in the mid-1990s that dealt with a vast number of historical scenarios with a diverse selection of characters and stories that offered representation for many marginalized groups in American history. Offering notes in each installment about the true-life events that inspire every story, the *Dear America* books gave readers and authors of color the chance to contribute to and be seen by large audiences. Scholastic's reach into the education system nationwide also allowed an opening for more variants to emerge. It is hard to overstate the drastic change from the radio silence of the 1980s to

[1] In *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence*, Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart E. Tolnay point out: "Higher social standing was found to increase the risk of lynching primarily in those communities where fewer higher-status Black men resided. This was true with regard to literacy, **farm ownership** [emphasis mine] and 'mulatto' status" (209-210).

the emergence of the *Dear America* series less than twenty years later. The hyper-fast evolution in technology allowed more groups to access material and join the fray, although lynching would be—and still is—hard to come by in middle grade fiction.

Not only is lynching the primary motivating factor for the family of the protagonist of *Color Me Black* to leave Tennessee for Chicago—it is also the psychological echo that follows Nellie Lee Love and her relatives to an urban hub up North. Nellie's uncle is heavily implied to have been a victim of lynching, which is committed off the page, although there is little ambiguity in McKissack's choice of language and contextual clues:

> …we tiptoed downstairs and got the February issue of the *Crisis*…Inside was an article: "Lynching Record for the Year 1918." And it listed month by month all sixty-seven lynchings that had been reported. No wonder Daddy had not shared this article with us. It is too horrible to imagine. I don't believe Uncle Pace was hit by a train…one day it will come out. Uncle Pace was killed. (44)

The subject comes up continuously over the course of the novel, as Nellie becomes involved in anti-lynching activism in Chicago. (Indeed, McKissack gives a nod to adult readers by the inclusion of a "Papa Till" character, who clearly is meant to serve as a metatextual reference to Emmett Till.) The memories of the violence of the South are continuously kept alive through the crusading of the characters in the book and through the act of writing and publishing the book itself.

The back matter of the book contains reproductions of real-life photos, recipes, maps, song lyrics, book covers, illustrations, and other media related directly to the Great Migration and lynching. Information on Ida B. Wells-Barnett and historical notes provide young readers an opportunity to further explore the events that inspired the story, and encourages them to think about how things have (and haven't) changed. Engagement with supplementary materials like

those present in all of the *Dear America* books marks an evolution in how history could be presented to children: fictionally, first, then followed by academic source citations and upwards of dozens of pages of additional reading material; a balance between pastime and pedagogy.[2] Introducing the kind of critical thinking that distinguishes fiction from reality and using an interdisciplinary mix of archival ephemera, *Color Me Dark* works as a story of and about lynching, while simultaneously exemplifying how the genre had become flexible to the varying interests and needs of a classroom-oriented approach to reading by the turn of the century.

***Witness* by Karen Hesse—2001**

The sole White author in this chronology, Hesse weaves her tale using multiple perspectives: adult, child, man, woman, Black, White, Christian, Jewish. Taking place in Vermont, where a Jewish man is lynched after the appearance of the KKK, Hesse reckons with intersectional violence and the alliances that can arise between different oppressed groups. In stylized prose, Leanora and her father, Black residents in the town of the novel, address the omnipresent threat of White-on-Black vigilantism:

> i feel that old rope of dread
> dragging up the ridge of my spine
>
> daddy, i say
> the klan burns down a negro church in illinois,
> they rob a catholic church in Burlington,
> they try killing a jew right here,
> well, they're just giving white folks a bad

---

[2] An excerpt from the nonfiction verbiage in the back matter reads, "Lynching was the arbitrary and illegal hanging of a person by a mob. Often, African Americans were the victims of white lynch mobs. The growing dissatisfaction of the black people led them to present a united front against lynching. The determination of the black community to organize and protest on this level marked the beginning of the national Civil Rights Movement that would eventually guarantee black Americans the same rights under the Constitution as all other Americans" (207). Aside from the misleading use of the word "guarantee" and the inaccurate statement that a lynching has to involve a "hanging," the information is still communicated well and hopefully starts—rather than ends—a conversation about the topics covered.

name.

giving white folks a bad name, daddy repeats
and he starts to laughing, and then,
i'm laughing, too,
until the laughter turns on us and we are wringing grief… (126)

Hesse writes Leanora's situation with multiple cultural, religious, and racial layers which make it difficult for children to come to simple conclusions about what they read, rather than dictating a lesson or spelling out the moral clearly for readers. Klan members and racist characters are given nuance, without having their actions condoned. Children are invited to analyze the same situation from a variety of angles. That the story takes place outside of the South also admits the presence of racism and the history lynching across the entire United States, a narrative that is both unusual for its time and in the present day, where the topic is still covered only sparsely and Northern complicity still has yet to be clearly enunciated in middle grade fiction or in children's history books overall.

Witness is a manifestation of more and more experimental techniques and styles that were being written and distributed by mainstream publishers for middle grade readers by the 2000s. As time moves forward, this willingness to handle hard issues with young readers poetically and factually matures into an industry of its own; Scholastic, the publisher of several books in this chronology, is a giant in the field of fiction and nonfiction specifically for children. The genre was brought into the digital world with the expansion of social media and the internet, which made foundational changes to literary awards, marketing, and minority representation. While readerships evolved, publishing houses met the demand of print runs, but demographically, leadership remained stagnantly White, which heavily limited what could be read and the authors

that could do the writing. By 2001, works like Hesse's were becoming easier and faster to print—with diverse audiences ready to buy books that depicted their histories—although mob violence and lynchings then and now are continuously elusive. Little about the status quo can change if racial homogeneity in the publishing houses is maintained.

***Guardian* by Julius Lester—2008**

Lester, like Hesse, brings a sensitivity to the subject that is capable of creating real connections between the audience and the characters in the text. *Guardian* is narrated by a White child named Ansel, who witnesses the lynching of Big Willie, the Black father of his close friend, firsthand—as do the readers, who face what Ansel does head-on. The use of imagery is pulled directly from reports like those of Wells or Weldon Johnson and is meant to be impactful. As the author says in an afterword, "…the [lynching] described here is…dramatic" (127) but still heavily reliant on true accounts and eyewitnesses across the decades:

> Big Willie stands on a tower of wooden crates, the thick noose around his neck, the other end tied to a thick limb of the oak tree…He looks at the faces in the semicircle before him. No one will meet his eyes…Reluctantly, Ansel follows his father out of the store, but he does not watch. He hears the wooden crates being kicked away, and the crowd's cheers. When he finally opens his eyes, he sees the body of Big Willie hanging from a tree limb. His head is on his chest. The flames from the bonfire are licking at the soles of his feet. People stand in front of the body to have their pictures taken. Eventually, the bonfire ebbs. As it does, a stillness slowly comes over the crowd. From somewhere there is a breeze. Big Willie's body sways slowly back and forth. The rope makes a squeaking sound as it rubs against the limb. People start moving away. It is as if they have been in a stupor and only now are waking up to wonder where they are, and who did this awful thing. They know they didn't. (68-88)

Seeing it close-up with Ansel, and having developed a relationship with Big Willie, the emotional separation between the victim and the reader's avatar is easier to break down. Unlike previous representations of lynchings, many of which are allusive, elliptical, or metaphorical in

how they are written, Lester removes any ambiguity about what lynchings were and are about, marking a change in what could be permissible for young audiences.

While there are many grotesque moments and elements present in children's literature across time—especially in stories about slavery and Civil Rights—it is unusual to come across descriptive episodes about lynching. This is remarkable in a genre otherwise so flush with graphic physical and psychological violence. Lynchings are not qualitatively or quantitatively more macabre than other types of corporal morbidity in middle grade fiction, but they seem to occupy an untouchable space in the way the history of race is remembered in the genre. Given how lynchings often involve the complicity of law enforcement and political officials, finding rationales for children in a world that raises many of them to believe that the legal and justice systems are reliable is tough—but not impossible. Indeed, the mobs of thousands of great-grandfathers and grand-aunts and great-great-grandmothers around Jesse Washington in 1916 are much harder to explain to young children than the violence aboard distant slave ships, the beatings on dissolved plantations, and the now quieted auction houses. Mass participation in public spectacles from recent ancestors whose relatives still live in the towns where lynchings occurred disrupt useful images of Black people as slaves in the past, rather than as corpses hanging from nooses in the 1930s that were viewed by tens of thousands and reproduced in newspapers. The books here represent those few that were able to transcend the many publishing roadblocks in their way. There is clearly a canon of writers willing to scrutinize lynching in a serious capacity, and it is because of the limitations of an industry, rather than the genre or its contributors, that only a certain number of stories are released.

***Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes—2018**

The past and present collide to connect a police shooting in what is presumably modern day (~2018) with the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955. Parker Rhodes is among a chorus of contemporary authors looking—and being allowed to—confront slavery, lynching, and all of the consequences therein. The novel works in a tenor similar to that of Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give,* noted here due to Thomas's praise of *Ghost Boys* and their acquaintanceship in the genre and topic. Parker Rhodes aims at a younger reader group than Thomas, however, using simpler prose but still retaining a depth and maturity in the text that takes the age group seriously. We enter the minds of the protagonist, Jerome, and Emmett himself, both two Black children killed by White adults under egregiously dubious pretenses. While separated by time and space, the boys are connected in order to show how lynching has morphed over time into institutions—like the criminal justice or law enforcement systems—that oppress just as heavily as the chattel slavery system, although in superficially divergent ways. Parker Rhodes makes explicit comparisons in the way she styles her prose (italics for Emmett, Roman for Jerome): "I don't want to see this. I pull back. How many times has Emmett shared this tale? Hundreds? Thousands? I inhale, deep. Staring into his eyes, I am inside again. The film rolls. *The Tallahassee River glows silver. Lightning bugs blink; fish splash, leaping for moths, flies. Emmett is dragged from the truck*…I can't look. I can't help but look. *A gun. Emmett isn't moving.* Seeing his body on the ground, I see myself" (158-159). As time progresses and moves forward and away from the twentieth century, conversations about systemic abuses, the racist constructs of the aforementioned institutions (civic and otherwise), and the consequences of past and current wrongs have become more widespread in children's literature, particularly for young

adults. The emphasis is often less on the individual and more about the collective. Early depictions of lynchings outlined here were heavily dependent on (sometimes) convoluted plot lines that involved community-level problems, individual crimes, and interpersonal relationships, whereas later works emphasized the mob mentality and overarching societal reasons for why lynching occurs. More still, the up-close perspectives in *Ghost Boys* and *Guardian*—seeing and visualizing the lynching as opposed to reading or hearing about it secondhand—makes the literature less abstract and more tangible for middle graders who should be able to turn to books to help them understand their world in nuanced ways.

In 1990, Violet Harris had an optimistic view of children's literature, stating from her perspective that the "…future seems promising" (552). Indeed, two decades later, more authors of color than ever before have worked to create exceptional works against a system that often overlooks, misunderstands, or outright censors their voices. Options abound that many in the 1970s could only dream of (and many did, in fact, dream of those days). The recognition and publication of diverse voices is becoming more widespread in the industry, although publishing has a lot of internal work ahead when it comes to hiring and elevating narratives across all racial and ethnic spectrums. Access is not equal, though, and despite the encouraging plethora of choices for middle grade readers (and everyone) in 2021, the U.S. still needs open-minded teachers and librarians (and well-funded schools and libraries) to encourage young minds, parents able to afford or be near places with books, and the time for children to actually *read*. There are a lot of obstacles still ahead, but more so than in 1990, there is reason to be hopeful about the trajectory of lynching's appearance in Black fiction (preferably written *and* produced by Black writers and editors). The more that research becomes common knowledge and as we

expand education across race and class wherever possible, people from all backgrounds will learn the history of lynching, and then be able to translate it better and better for the generations after. In the book world, that is the best-case scenario.

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