



What Teachers Can Learn from ‘Jingle Jangle’

By Educator Barnes – November 29, 2020

“Jingle Jangle: A Christmas Journey” is a new Christmas movie on Netflix that premiered earlier this month. The movie begins with two children sitting in front of the fireplace and then their grandmother, played by Phylicia Rashad, enters the room to read them a story.

“Ready for storytime?”

"Can we please read 'The Night Before Christmas?'"

"I think it's time for a new story. Okay. Don't just stand there. Come on. The Invention of Jeronicus Jangle"

"Look at that ... never read us that story before."

"I've never read anyone this story."

At 37-years-old, a place in my childhood was filled after watching "Jingle Jangle." I love Christmas. I enjoy watching various Christmas movies and specials. Each year, I normally watch "A Charlie Brown Christmas" and read "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens. Last year was the first time I read "A Christmas Carol" with my sons. We listened to an audiobook of the original text, read a graphic novel version, and saw a dramatization at the Indiana Repertory Theatre. Although I will still probably read that novel and I'm definitely going to watch "A Charlie Brown Christmas," there was nothing like seeing Black representation on the screen when I watched "Jingle Jangle."

Although the story centered around Jeronicus Jangle's inventions, the star of the movie was his granddaughter Journey. This Black female protagonist was creative, smart, and loved science. This might not seem like a big deal, but it is. The hole I had in my childhood from not seeing representation like this in Christmas movies as a child is the same hole I have from not seeing representation in the stories and texts I had to read as a student in the classroom.

I agree with the grandmother. "It's time for a new story." The problem is resistant teachers do not want to incorporate new novels or new curriculum into the classroom. They are stuck carrying out traditions like the grandson who was ready to listen to "The Night Before Christmas" because that is what they always read.

For the majority of my career, I have been an English teacher. Now, I supervise English teachers. The battle I have with English teachers is this need to not let go of Classic texts or the literary canon, which are texts that are considered significant, important, and influential. Here's my problem. We know systemic racism exists. Classic texts and the literary canon lack adequate representation. What books were ignored that are significant, important, and influential that are not part of this list because of racism?

Then, I normally hear: "I can cover all my standards with those books." That's true. What is also true is that teachers can cover those standards with other texts if they are willing to let go of tradition and sentimental feelings and read other books. I love "A Christmas Carol," and I have used it in the classroom before. Even though it brings joy to my life and I could cover the English standards, it is not the only novel I could use.

As my career as an English teacher progressed, I was willing to read new books. Then, I created lessons around those texts. One text I used was "Fallen Angels" by Walter Dean Myers. It follows the Black protagonist Perry during the Vietnam War. War stories don't necessarily bring joy like a Christmas story, but I'll never forget the students who commented that they had never read about war from the perspective of a Black person. That year, I had eighth graders. Did they read anything else from a Black perspective after my class? I don't know. That's a problem.

The grandmother in "Jingle Jangle" said, "I've never read anyone this story." I had never used "Fallen Angels" before that year I used it with my eighth grade students. No one other English teacher in my building used it either. Yes, it is scary to use a book you have used before to teach the standards and to create the resources that go along with the novel. It is a lot of work, but aren't our students worth it? Maybe that's the issue. Maybe some teachers do not think it is worth their time to diversify the curriculum and let go of activities or novels they love from their childhood in order to give the children in front of them a better childhood.

It is not just the white teachers I have had a hard time convincing. Black teachers have been difficult, too. "We aren't setting our kids up for success if I don't teach (fill in classic text)." In other words, our students can't learn from a Black author? Maybe, it is that they are uncomfortable creating lessons around text where there aren't lessons already made that can be found with a Google search. Whatever the issue, our students deserve more.

There are Black children in classrooms around the United States waiting for a "Jingle Jangle" moment. They are waiting to be seen. They are waiting for their stories to be told. They are waiting for the moment where they are the protagonist. They are waiting for the moment that they are not only the protagonist but a smart, talented, and inspirational protagonist. Not only is this important for Black students, but it is also important for students who aren't Black. It's an opportunity for them to learn about other perspectives and know that stories centered on white people aren't the only good stories.

It might not feel like it, but 2021 is almost here. I'm challenging teachers to consider including something new in their classroom beginning next year and letting go of something. Students might be enjoying your class the way it is, and hopefully, they are learning, too. However, wouldn't it be great for them to be seen in the curriculum, too?