

Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Johns Hopkins University Press Podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the Hopkins Press Journals Division. Joining us this week is Dr. Freeden Blume Oeur associate professor of sociology at Tufts University. Dr. Blume Oeur is the author of *Black Boys Apart: Racial Uplift and Respectability in All-Male Public Schools* from the University of Minnesota Press. He was the 2018 recipient of the Tufts University Recognition of Undergraduate Teaching Excellence award, a 2013 recipient of the Tufts Teaching with Technology award, and a 2013 faculty fellow with the Tufts Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. He is a book review editor for *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, is an associate editor of the *Critical Perspectives on Youth* books series with NYU Press, and an editorial advisory board member for the *Critical Studies in Gender and Sexuality Education* book series with Routledge Press. Dr. Blume Oeur was guest editor for the most recent issue of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, a special issue commemorating the 100th anniversary of the groundbreaking children's magazine *The Brownies' Book*.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Freeden. The first question I like to ask our guests is what is your academic origin story?

Freeden Blume Oeur

Sure, well first thank you so much for having me, it's a real pleasure to be taking part in this conversation. Yeah, that's a terrific question. I think I got into sociology through anthropology. I actually, like, tell people that while I'm a sociologist by training I'm still a bleeding-heart anthropologist. I majored anthropology in college and attended a small liberal arts college where sociology and anthropology were in the same department, so it was called the department of anthropology and sociology. And so, through course work in anthropology got to know sociology, students, majors, and get to see just the really interesting kind of affinities between the two disciplines.

Thought at some point I would actually grow up to become an archaeologist and that didn't quite work out, and after college I worked as a sixth-grade public school teacher in Philadelphia with Teach for America, and it was there that I think I began to sort of sharpen my interests in the study of the social world, the human condition, and, you know, as those issues played out around, you know, trying to understand power, inequality, access, and opportunity in urban education. Decided to pursue a PhD in sociology and that's how I got into sociology, and I now teach courses in sociology and education and while doing my graduate work kind of transitioned a bit from studying issues strictly around race and racism to the ways that those issues interface with gender, gender inequality, masculinity, and feminism, which led me to the

topic of my dissertation and my first book, which was on why communities that have historically been very underserved and historically, you know, predominately African American have turned to all boys schooling to sort of solve a perceived set of issues facing their young men, and then through that work I sort of became re-introduced to the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois which led me down to the path for this project on *The Brownies' Book*.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Excellent, which is a perfect segue for my next question, and I will fully admit that before I started working at JHU Press I think I vaguely may have heard reference to *The Brownies' Book* but just in the last year and a half I've learned so much about it from this journal and just from a couple other journals and papers and talking to other scholars about it, and it's just so fascinating. But, in the interest of full disclosure and knowing that some of our listeners might not know, can you tell us a little about what *The Brownies' Book* was and who created it and who was it for?

Freedden Blume Oeur

Sure. Well, first, thank you for sharing that with me. I will say too, in full disclosure, that before a few years ago I had heard of it but had certainly never read *The Brownies' Book* before, and *The Brownies' Book* is just this extraordinary publication and I will say I am so happy to hear that you've had a chance now to see it, and given that the magazine is celebrating its 100-year-anniversary, so it ran for 24 issues between 1920 and 1921. It was founded by just this unbelievably talented team comprised of W. E. B. Du Bois, who was the editor of the *Crisis Magazine*, the official organ of the NAACP, Augustus Granville Dill, who served as business manager for the magazine, and just the extraordinary Jessie Redman Fauset, who was the literary editor, and this trio together, this just groundbreaking periodical focusing on the needs, desires, talents, accomplishments, of Black children.

And the periodical grew out of what the team saw as, I think, sort of an absence of this very thing which was, you know, a dedicated space to celebrating the lives and accomplishments of Black youth, and it came about ten years after the NAACP was founded, and Du Bois as part of his work with the *Crisis Magazine* would occasionally publish what were called numbers issues which were dedicated to special topics on labor, for example, but also including children and Black children, and in 1920 Du Bois, Fauset, and Dill really saw just a great need in the wake of the Spanish Flu, Du Bois' own sort of pandemic moment, a lot of really just awful things happening around the country and saw it really as a an urgent need to create this magazine which is full of games and stories. Polished just extraordinary photos of Black children, images of Black kids playing, fiction and non-fiction, just a menagerie of really great things. Just you know, 24 issues that really can't be, you know, sort of quickly summarized, and it closed sadly because of financial reasons. You know Du Bois I think was struggling to raise money for a number of his projects and sadly closed down after 24 issues, but really its legacy has continued

to live on and has influenced a number of people including myself, and I'm just so excited to be able to share the magazine with the readers here.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Thank you so much, that was a really great summary. How did this special issue of *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth on The Brownies' Book's* 100th anniversary come about?

Freden Blume Oeur

Yeah, so again, I only recently kind of discovered the magazine in earnest through conversation with another sociologist by the name of Michael Murphy a few years ago, finally actually opened the pages of the magazine. So, it's freely available online and you can find it on the website for the Library of Congress, and you know, it's just this immersive world, and I was just stunned by what I saw, and then a few years later, closer to actually the start of the pandemic, knowing that we were getting closer to the centennial, the publication of the periodical, just had this idea that I would love to, you know, help introduce the magazine to new people, to try to bring it together a lot of talented folks writing across disciplines just to share their thoughts on the magazine, and pitch this idea to the journal editor Linda Mahood who's just been super supportive and has really believed in the vision, you know, and I can't thank her enough for just believing, you know, in the vision and in us, and it came together actually pretty quickly. I think because Dr. Mahood, I think, understood that this was, you know, a magazine that deserved this kind of attention, but also because we really wanted to try to get the issue out before the end of 2021, and, you know, it was also coming together at a very hard time with the pandemic, and it's also, I guess it's on the smaller side for a special issue with only a few kind of original contributions. But I think, you know, I'm so lucky to have had a chance to work with my authors for the issue, and Dr. Mahood was also very generous in allowing me to curate for myself the roster for authors, so there wasn't an open call or anything. I had actually never, I still haven't met any of these people in person (laughs).

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's always strange, yeah (laughs).

Freden Blume Oeur

Which is one of these funny realities of doing this kind of work during a pandemic. But I was familiar with the work of Katharine Capshaw, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Brigitte Fielder, and Crystal Lynn Webster, you know, scholars who write on Du Bois and children's literature and other related issues from a range of different backgrounds, and, you know, I wanted to have fun with it and make sure that we were spotlighting different disciplinary angles, and so, people represented from fields including education and comparative literature and history, in my case, sociology. I think that's actually just evidence of how *The Brownies' Book* as this really just intriguing text draws the interest of so many different kinds of people and for that reason

there's so many different ways of interpreting it and making sense of why it mattered 100 years ago and continues to matter today.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Great answer, thank you. What surprised you the most while you were working on putting the issue together?

Freden Blume Oeur

What surprised me the most? I think, you know, a few things. The first thing that comes to mind is, the issue was, is really, and it's worth mentioning, is building on, you know, the pioneering work of I think a number of scholars and writers who have written on *The Brownies' Book* before and, you know, it's worth acknowledging who these folks are and Rudine Sims Bishop and Michelle Martin and Violet Harris and Fern Kory, Dianne Johnson-Feelings and I think I had a sense through the writings of what made the periodical so remarkable, but I think you really need to sort of spend some time with it to sort of lose yourself in the magazine, and I couldn't believe how much I was learning each time I went through the issues. And again, I just really think you need to see it in front of you, the actual scanned pages of the text, to see how, you know, the juxtaposition of images with, you know, the articles, and the brainteasers with the games, trying to understand what it meant that so many incredible Black writers at the time including a number of leading figures in the Harlem Renaissance movement. Langston Hughes most notably but also folks like James Weldon Johnson and Nella Larson and Effie Lee Newsome, you know, had their start for some of them in the magazine right, and here was a magazine that in so many ways inaugurated just this great thinking around Black culture and helped to kind of encapsulate so much, but it's really a world that's sort of unspeakable in its own way because it's so joyous and captivating. I wish we had, you know, ten more issues that we could have put out because there's so many things that I think we could have added to the special issue, and so just to summarize here I think I was just surprised by how I'm still learning so much about the magazine and I think others will find that, you know, once you get into it it's hard not to put it down and to find so much that's relevant to that.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I think that, and I certainly haven't sat down and looked at the scanned pages of all 24 issues, but I have spent some time cause it does sort of suck you in, you know, you hear 1920s magazine for Black youth and in my head I'm, like, okay, well, I'll look at that from a historical perspective, but then you start looking at it and reading it and really you realize that it's something quite extraordinary and it's not something like what you would think of kid's magazine these days. Which kind of leads me to my next question, which is that in the introduction for the next issue, you talk about how the mix of genres in *The Brownies' Book* did not shy away from, you know, what we might consider mature themes; they addressed issues of violence, and trauma, and political activism, but at the same time providing, as you said, games, fantasy pieces, you know, real pieces on kids and their lives. Do you think there's any

publication today, or platform, 100 years later that comes close to this fully integrated and authentic range of content for young people from any background?

Freeden Blume Oeur

Yeah, so I think there are a few ways of answering this question, one I really appreciate, and the first is to say that I think that in some ways the magazine is so contradictory because it has this combination of so many things, and I think one way of interpreting it is others have kind of reflected on how the magazine, although explicitly geared to Black children, was also one that was written for adults right, and so, we can imagine, you know, 1920, 1921, not only kids picking it up and playing the games and, you know, much in the same way children are today when they open a magazine that captivates them, but also at the same time, it's not hard to imagine a lot of parents also sitting down with their kids to read the magazine or possibly even teachers including it as something that they have in their classrooms too. And so, I like to imagine just a lot of ongoing conversations between kids when they're reading the magazine but also between adults and older people in the magazine too, and Katharine Capshaw and others have called this writing a form of cross-writing, it's really speaking to both kids but also to older people.

And to answer, you know, your question, I will first say here my own training is in sociology and I'm not by any means an expert on children's literature and there are folks who have written extensively on this just incredible history of writing for Black children that even pre-dates *The Brownies' Books* and certainly a legacy of things that follow the magazine, and I don't know of many contemporary examples, nothing sort of like this, but there have been, you know, certainly efforts to try to do something like it. One thing that comes to mind was another magazine that only lasted for about ten years, which was *Ebony Junior*, founded in the early 70s as an outgrowth of *Ebony Magazine*. This is an important period in African American political history, the early 70s were the twilight years of the civil rights movement, around the same time we have the emergence of the first African American studies and Black studies programs and Black studies is sort of crystalizing as a discipline and, you know, people that are leading this movement are sort of understanding that a periodical dedicated to Black children was needed and *Ebony Junior* like *The Brownies' Book*, you know, combined cartoons with short stories on Black history and culture, had a very strong educational component to it too. And most recently, I was actually in preparation for the interview I wanted to sort of scout what other people have been doing and I saw that there is an effort underway to create a magazine for Black children in the UK, started out of London, it's called *Cocoa Girl and Cocoa Boy*, and I think the goals are very much the same, you know, as those of *Ebony Junior* and *The Brownies' Book* which is to, you know, provide a dedicated space to Black children to celebrate their accomplishments and to have a strong, you know, teaching component too, and I think given that so much of young adult literature, children's literature, still racial diversity still continues to be a major problem in these fields. Among the pieces in our special issue, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's piece really covers this issue beautifully, just the need to diversify and think about

representation, and so it's a struggle that's ongoing, but I think we think about how it's a struggle that's been happening for a long time, we can look to history as a guide, but *The Brownies' Book* has so much to offer.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, I mean, just so ahead of its time in every way, and what's strikes me every time I read more about it is how because some of the content was reader-submitted, you know, letters and stories, it's not just adults creating something aspirational, do you know what I mean? It's truly footed in the lived experience and it's not shying away from that, and I think that's true for all children's literature and has been for all time that sometimes there's just this disconnect that the grown-ups are creating the content that you are to read for whatever reason, to make you learn something or to make you, you know, more polite or to, you know, tell you things you could do when you're a grown-up, but this one, it was just so ahead of its time in the sense that it said here's all of that, but also here's some hard truths, but also here's a funny poem that 12 year-old wrote. I don't know, it's just, it's so, all the way around, 360 degrees of their lives, and I just don't think that there's any publication that comes close to that, it was just so ahead of its time.

Freden Blume Oeur

Yeah, and you know I see it very much the same way and I think certainly in sociology and as someone who studies childhood and youth, you know, there's a way certainly that a lot of scholarship and writing by adults, by researchers, tends to frame young people as adults in the making, you know, as sort of on certain trajectories in life, but I think this perspective is important because if we think about it, then we can say, well, certain trajectories are foreclosed to certain populations, right. Who is allowed to grow to be something, or someone? But at the same time, you know, children aren't just preparing for life, as my advisor in graduate school used to say, you know, childhood is life, you know, it's full of a lot of things that, you know, adults might think young people are immune to or insulated from but it's not the case at all and I have to say to I'm speaking here as the father of two small boys and it's as incredibly beautiful, complicated, fraught, deeply, you know, emotionally evocative world, and I think Du Bois understood that and I think he and his team understood that, well, a lot of adults will read, the grown-ups will read the magazine and you have your dedicated corner, it's the grown-ups corner, but the young people's contributions and their letters were included in the section called "The Jury", right, which I think sort of implies that, you know, the final arbiter for issues that matter reside with young people in this magazine, right.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That word choice is just so key, yeah.

Freden Blume Oeur

Exactly, yeah, and some of the letters by kids sent into the magazine are just so, you know, they're vulnerable, they're delicate, they're beautiful. You know, the commentary there is worth a lot of discussion on its own.

Mary Alice Yeskey

What's next for you? What are you currently working on research wise?

Freeden Blume Oeur

Yeah, so a lot of my work now focuses on sort of two different kind of poles. The first is on Black masculinity and Black feminism and these are issues which I developed in my first book. And I have a number of research topics ongoing on W.E.B. Du Bois and some of this work was included in my own modest contribution to the special issue on the place of childhood and trauma in Du Bois' writings, and I've since tried to sort of take part in a number of really important conversations in sociology and African American intellectual history and politics on decolonization debates and sort of thinking about how a lot of major disciplines like sociology are sort of grounded in colonial and imperialist history and what that sort of means for how we think about knowledge and access and opportunity in our own disciplines, and I think Du Bois was very much an architect of that thread of thinking, and so some of my writing now is kind of contributing to that really important conversation.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I can't wait to read it. Thank you so much for your time today Freeden, this has been such a great conversation.

Freeden Blume Oeur

Yeah, of course. Thank you.