

Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Johns Hopkins University Press Podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the JHU Press Journals division. Joining us today is Paige Gray, to talk about her work researching "The Defender Junior" a children's section of *The Chicago Defender* newspaper that flourished in the 1920s. Paige is a professor of liberal arts and writing at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Atlanta. She approaches the study of children's and young adult literature as a means to explore questions of voice, agency, and creative expression. She is the author of *Cub Reporters: American Children's Literature and Journalism in the Golden Age* from SUNY Press. Before returning to graduate school for her Ph.D., Paige was a newspaper reporter and editor.

Thank you so much for joining us, Paige. I was just hoping you could give our listeners a little history lesson on *The Chicago Defender* and "The Defender Junior" and what an incredible impact it had on African American children in the early 20th century. What it was, how it came to be, and especially for folks like myself who did not know this existed until I read your fascinating piece, just kind of the abstract version of what the paper was and what it meant?

Paige Gray

I want to say too that there have been many scholars from many disciplines that have written about *The Chicago Defender* and they've done some great work, and so, you know, I'm not treading new ground there. But I knew about *The Defender* from when I was in Chicago, I did my master's in journalism in Chicago, and I lived in the South Loop, but I remember in my building there was always the weekly *Defender*. So, I knew what *The Defender* was. At that point, it was still printing its weekly paper. It's now ceased print publication, but it still has its online arm but it was a hugely influential paper beginning, like, in the early 1900s, the early 20th century and really started as kind of proudly, at the time they called it a race paper, and basically this is to promote and kind of tell it like it is and it was a vehicle for social justice and proudly so. Whereas you wouldn't today, many kind of standard journals, outlets, presses, wouldn't necessarily want to think of themselves as social justice papers. Some do, some see that as part of them. Some, you know, do not want to kind of feel like that their leaning one way or the other but *The Chicago Defender* was to promote and uplift African Americans and what happened with *The Chicago Defender*, again it was a weekly and many African Americans were moving into industrial cities in the north: Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, and they would either, you know, read the paper and kind of tell relatives in the south or recommend that their relatives subscribe to *The Defender*. So, *The Defender* was circulated all over. It was not just Chicago. So, you know, I found letters from kids in Wyoming, all these crazy places. Not crazy, but-

Mary Alice Yeskey

Not just Chicago.

Paige Gray

Not Chicago and many places you wouldn't expect. Many a scholar suggest that *The Chicago Defender* and other Black weeklies helped spur the great migration. We had this massive gradual move of Black Americans from the southern states to kind of northern industrial cities, and so that's, you know, the first four or five decades *The Defender* was huge. Again, its legacy continues; it's still an online entity but huge impact in terms of the course of not only African American lives but then how they, you know, how they changed the cities of these industrial centers.

Mary Alice Yeskey

What was "The Defender Junior" and how was that different from any other sort of children's insert or page that any other papers in that time were doing?

Paige Gray

I've come across several different children's sections. There's lots of fun to be had looking at the *St. Nicholas* periodical. There were many periodicals for children at this time. I'm sure, do you remember *Highlights*?

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh yeah. My children currently still get *Highlights* (laughs). They still have it.

Paige Gray

I just remember, like, at dentist's offices.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Totally.

Paige Gray

Well, back in the 1870s and 80s they had *St. Nicholas*, they had several different kinds of youth periodicals aimed at white children and so I was thinking, there has to be something, is there something for African Americans? And then, *The Brownie's Book*, there's been lots of great writing on *The Brownie's Book* everything from Michelle Martin to Katharine Capshaw, like they've written great things. And so, I know about *The Brownie's Book*, but I was like I don't want to write about *The Brownie's Book*, I mean I kind of wanted to look at it, but I didn't think I had anything more to offer on it, but I thought there had to be something else. And the thing about *The Brownie's Book* too, is that even though it's hugely influential, it wasn't necessarily

widely accessible cause often the people reading *The Brownie's Book* were the sons and daughters of members of the NAACP, so a distinct class of Black Americans.

But it was influential and so I was curious, and I was just kind of batting off ideas and I kind of just wondered, well there has to be some kind of, kids being addressed in these newspapers, cause I knew about *The Chicago Defender*, and so I kind of just started looking through, thank goodness we have digitized historical newspapers, and there's a great resource through ProQuest about historical Black papers and I just kind of started doing some searching and I kind of just found Bud Billiken. Bud Billiken is the kind of mascot of "The Chicago Defender Junior". This is not necessarily sexy work, this is, like, a lot of opening and looking at PDFs and scrolling and you become very familiar. I've learned to kind of mistrust word searches sometimes because, maybe I'm just kind of superstitious, but I'm just scared something won't be found in old print and so I kind of like, I will go through the weeks and you kind of learn the set-up. Like, okay, week six, every week it's gonna be the sports report, like I figured things out.

And so, I kind of started looking and trying to pin down things and I kind of stumbled upon "The Defender Junior". Right, this is a space for these kids to kind of come together but they are also creating it themselves, through letters, right, and the encouragement and sense of agency that they could find in submitting to this. They could become a member and that was, they had to kind of fill out this little thing that said their name and send it in, and it wasn't anything super official I don't think but as a kid that's so important. I can even remember similar things when I was a kid if you could see your name in print, but for an African American child in, you know, 1922, there's a much greater weight, I think, associated with having your name in print when you think of the history of African Americans and, you know, not given the right to read, they are stripped of that privilege to read, it's outlawed. So, so much of their history and their family records were not recorded, so there's an extra power to having your name in print and having that legitimacy and so even to see your name in this, that was probably the most amazing thing.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, really reading your paper that was what I was most taken with. I remember that feeling as a kid growing up in suburban Maryland in the 1980s that was a thrill to me, to see your name on a piece of mail or just in anything. So, to have someone in that time, in that place, in those circumstances, it must just have just been so powerful and also just the other thing I wanted to ask you about, reading about how all of the submission to "The Defender Junior" were provided by their readers, you know the children and the young readers sent in all the poems and sent in all the thoughts and ideas. Since you just mentioned you were kind of knee-deep in the original source and reading it as far back as you could go, did you get a sense that there was almost a serial nature to it? Did they answer each other? Or was it more... was there a conversation going on?

Paige Gray

Yeah, and sometimes you'd see repeat senders.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, nice.

Paige Gray

You didn't answer me, and they'd also address Bud as child editor. He was kind of named Bud. He was a real kid. His name was Willard Motley, and so a lot of times the kids would say "Hey Bud" and everything was kind of addressed to Bud and occasionally there were several names I came to know through reading it several times, and kids, you know, very young kids, and some so young you wonder if maybe the parents wrote it cause it's like, and I wouldn't doubt that. We all know the parents got really excited about seeing the kid's name in the sports section or whatever.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Some things never change (laughs).

Paige Gray

Yeah, and so I wondered if there was some of that happening, and I don't think this is specific to *The Defender* but there were notes of parties and addresses. So, "Hi, my name is such and such and I will be giving a party" or "such and such gave a birthday party at this address in Chicago" and I thought that was fascinating. Like, listing the addresses and almost essentially inviting people to come, and I think now, like, we would never do that now. But and so I think for a lot of kids it became a way of building community and kind of making contacts even outside the newspaper. Again, if they were in the Chicago area oftentimes you saw kids that said they were very lonely. There were lots of letters "I am very lonely; can you please write me at this address?".

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, wow, and it fostered those pen pal relationships?

Paige Gray

I hope so. I think for some it did.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah. It would be interesting to see if someone somewhere has got to have a stack of letters, you know, squirreled away that might have been a result of this. Wouldn't that be magical to find something like that?

Paige Gray

I was doing some further research into some newspapers to see, I was trying to find people remembering "The Defender Junior" and later issues of *The Defender*, and one of the writers

for *The Defender* was looking back and she remembered being a kid and what was most exciting was getting *The Defender*. Every Saturday when *The Defender* would come they looked forward to seeing Bud, and what Bud said, and having their name, and that was what kids looked forward to. Cause, I mean, kids got excited just for *The Defender* in general but then they really got excited for seeing if their name was going to be in the section that week.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, I mean it's gotta be, I think about, well especially now, now being now in the now times, I just think about communication and kids and social media and the detachment that we're all kind of feeling right now and the weird parallels in terms of like because in a strange way we're isolated in our own odd 2021 kind of way, but that thrill of getting a piece of mail or having something addressed really directly to you is so rare.

Paige Gray

Yeah, and in some ways there are so many parallels when you think about it with social media but in some ways it's just a different way to experience things and I think the one thing that changed from when we got our information or communication from the newspapers is opening up the newspaper and looking through and kind of that is what you had to look at and you kind of at least had some exposure to other parts of the newspaper. Social media, it's much more curated.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, I was gonna say just fleeting. I mean, the newspaper's also just a tangible thing and the next day you can pick up and read it again and be thrilled at seeing your name again, you know, it's not just click a heart button and then it's over, it's gone. It's tangible.

Paige Gray

And again, it's hard because now we have a kind of democratization of media and everyone can kind of make their own newspaper online.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Exactly.

Paige Gray

And so that's great. I mean, I wonder with some kids if the idea of, well, I can always see myself in media, but I still do think the permanency and kind of again for better or for worse the legitimacy, because in some ways when you have, you know, a newspaper and it's making its choices who is it leaving out? There's always that kind of, that problem, but you kind of trust it, you know.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, there's a value placed on it.

Paige Gray

And I do think it's a little bit different than *The Chicago Defender* even though it was a weekly and it was mailed everywhere, it was still very much small in terms of the community trusting and going to it. So, having that small town local feel even though it was a paper that was circulated around the country.

Mary Alice Yeskey

When did "The Defender Junior" segment stop?

Paige Gray

This is a tricky question, and I haven't had a successful kind of pinpointing a date exactly because what happens is it didn't necessarily stop. It would maybe, it kind of just flowed into something different, and from what I could find doing my research, it kind of transitioned into more what we understand now when you pick up a paper and you have, like, your high school section, right. It kind of turned more into that, and kind of like the Bud figure fell away, and kind of the children's letters, and it became more of a space for these are children's events happening at school. So, when you have more regularity and things happening with the schools, I think it kind of became less necessary a little bit. I'm not saying they weren't necessary but it lost its popularity, or whatever the role it was filling for many children's lives in the 1920s and 30s, other things, I think, supplanted it.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Resources became more readily available. No, that makes sense, that makes sense, and it sounds the way you described it too it almost sounds like it just grew up a little bit, you know what I mean?

Paige Gray

Yeah, and the one thing that did last was the Bud Billiken parade.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, can you tell our listeners about that?

Paige Gray

Yeah, yeah. So, after the section had been around for a little bit it started to wane in popularity, and as publishers do and when you have any kind of newspaper or media organization you have a great marketing team, and marketing wasn't a term that was used then, but how can we, kind of rev up the section again and they decided to have this parade, the Bud Billiken parade, and it started back in the day and it was called the Bud Billiken parade. It is still around in Chicago.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That was the part that just blew my mind reading your paper. That literally last year was the first year it didn't happen and that was just because of the pandemic.

Paige Gray

Yeah, it's a huge thing in the Black community and in Chicago in general and different years have different kind of grand marshals, you know. When I was kind of doing the research, you know, Chaka Kan had recently been a performer. Yeah, so it's a big deal there and still a huge part of the community.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's such a fantastic legacy. That's just the coolest, I hope to make it to Chicago to see it someday (laughs). Can you tell us about your book and what you're working on now and sort of what your next steps are research wise?

Paige Gray

Yeah, so the book and this chapter about "The Chicago Defender Junior" is part of my larger dissertation that will change into a book. It's called *Cub Reporters* and it was published in 2019 with SUNY Press and it's now in paperback so you can get it there. But it's kind of just different explorations, or my explorations, into the intersections between journalism and children's literature and, you know, to kind of not get too academic-y, but, you know, I was just asking myself an existential question when I left newspaper world to go back to school: Why am I so interested in children's literature? Why am I so interested in journalism and newspapers? And those were kind of like the basic questions I started asking myself, and I just started exploring that through my different grad classes and in projects and kind of looking at the way examinations of newspaper and newspaper culture can empower child readers in that it kind of shows that even the newspaper is a work of art that we help construct. Kind of looking at that idea of how we as adults and as children have agency to kind of, you know, construct. My academic-y term that I used in my book, and I don't want to get too academic-y, the idea of artifice and kind of reclaiming the idea of artifice and naturalizing the idea of artifice to an extent.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, I mean reading your paper I was really struck by that, and I think that's the whole hook for me reading about "The Defender Junior" was just that sense of creation, and agency, and just the fact that it was, and you know I mentioned this in my communication with you, I'm dating myself but there was a show called on *Zoom* on PBS which ended up being redone later but in the 70s it was like a new thing and when I was reading about "The Defender Junior" I was like, the sounds like *Zoom*, because it was the same thing: the kids would write in, they'd give you the address at the end of the show and all the segments were, you know, written in by the

kids, and I remember as a kid just thinking, like, to get your story selected for *Zoom* would be the greatest day in the history of your life. And it's that same feeling of excitement that you're creating this. You're doing it.

Paige Gray

Yeah, and I really wanted to be one of the kids on *Reading Rainbow*, and I think that kind of idea also, I remember being the kid in elementary school. I wanted to start a newspaper and tried to get my friends in second grade, and I assigned them stories. They would never do them. So, I would make my own newspaper which in making my own newspaper was getting, like, blank paper and kind of drawing lines that I thought looked like newspaper lines and writing a story about "Save the Whales" or like drawing pictures, and then going to school and getting copies on the copy machine. But at the end of the day, I'm creating something, and I can kind of contribute to that. I think that really fascinated me, again all research is personal so the idea of how do children and young people become a part of that? How can they get a sense of agency in a world when, again, children have a very limited range. Like, your parents have to drop you off, your parents have to tell you all that. So, how can kids find their own voice?

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, and I just imagine what that must have felt like in that day and age when your information was so limited and to suddenly have your world cracked open and realize that there's people just like you or people sort of like you but different like you mentioned in your paper. There were children from the country and wealthy children in boarding schools and children on farms talking about the chickens they killed and it's like all of that stuff, it just reminds me of that feeling you get when you find someone that is into the same thing you are as a young kid. There's sort of a manic excitement about it and that was the feeling I got reading about that.

Paige Gray

Yeah, and really showing the plurality of childhood experience, right. There's so many ways for a kid to be in the world. There's so many ways for a Black kid to be in the world, right?

Mary Alice Yeskey

Exactly.

Paige Gray

There are kids again, there's a kid in Wyoming, there's a girl from France, all over. I mean, urban, I remember one of the letters I really love is from a girl who's writing from Tuskegee and she kind of lives outside the college and would see the marching band, right. Just all these kinds of stories and there's no one way, and I think even as adults we get into this trap of there is one way to be, and I'm always trying to break that idea and that we have some ability to, and again we have agency, but it's limited, but what can we do in that sphere of possibility.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I just want to say thank you so much for joining us. This was such a great conversation, and we will post links to both your book and your paper so our listeners can check them both out.

Paige Gray

Thank you so much, this was really fun.