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The Augusta Baker Collection of African-American Children's Literature & Folklore

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The Augusta Baker Collection of African-American Children's Literature & Folklore

THOMAS COOPER LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA
The Augusta Baker Collection of African-American Children's Literature and Folklore totals over 1600 volumes that highlight a wide range of subjects, genres, and formats of multicultural books for children, together with papers and illustrative material reflecting Baker's pivotal role in the field of children's librarianship. Coupled with the historical children's literature collection (3000 volumes) housed in Rare Books and Special Collections, resources for the study of children's literature and the history of books for children are plentiful at the University of South Carolina.
The Collection

The Augusta Baker Collection reflects the interests and concerns of someone deeply involved in children's literature and librarianship. Included in this group of titles from her personal and working library are significant twentieth-century children's authors and illustrators such as Madeleine L'Engle, Lee Bennett Hopkins, James Haskins and Maurice Sendak. Many books are presentation copies. The collection also contains important works by authors like Virginia Hamilton, Jerry Pinkney, and Tom Feelings emphasizing the African-American experience in twentieth-century children's literature. Also in the collection are numerous anthologies of folktales and stories from many cultures used by Augusta Baker during her career as a storyteller. The booklists prepared by Mrs. Baker in her work at the New York Public Library and her professional journals are also part of her collection.

The collection is strong in reflecting the changes in subject matter of children's literature during the late twentieth century, as racial and ethnic folktales and legends were told and retold in numerous illustrated editions for new audiences. Latino/Latina materials, Native American, and Asian American literature and folktales for young people are well-represented.
Augusta Baker, 1911-1998

Augusta Baker’s career spanned more than fifty years as storyteller, librarian, and authority on children’s literature. She was born in 1911 in Baltimore, attended the University of Pittsburgh and graduated from Albany (New York) State Teacher’s College with a degree in Library Science in 1934.

Baker’s first professional position was with the New York Public Library’s 135th Street Branch in Harlem in 1937, where she was persuaded by Anne Carroll Moore to work in the children’s department.

For the first seventeen years of her career, she stayed at the 135th Street Branch, perfecting her storytelling skills. While in Harlem, Baker founded the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of children’s books, a collection of books accurately portraying black children. From 1954 to 1961, Baker was Assistant Coordinator and Storytelling Specialist for the New York Public Library System, and in 1961 became Coordinator of Children’s Services for the New York Public Library. She remained in this position until her retirement in 1974.

As Coordinator of Children’s Services, Baker promoted children’s literature through radio, television, lectures, and workshops. She served as a consultant to “Sesame Street.”
She met and influenced uncounted numbers of children's authors and illustrators, including Ezra Jack Keats, Maurice Sendak, John Steptoe, Lee Bennet Hopkins, and Madeleine L'Engle. Baker served the American Library Association in various capacities including as chair of the Newbery/Caldecott Awards Committee.

In 1980 Baker was offered a position as Storyteller-in-Residence at the University of South Carolina, the first such position at any university. She retired from her USC position in 1994 and died in 1998.

Historical Children's Literature Collection

Rare Books and Special Collections also houses a historical children's literature collection of over 3000 volumes dating from the mid-seventeenth century. The collection is remarkably varied and contains a wide array of poetry, periodicals for children, boy's and girl's books, schoolbooks and primers, works of history, and early editions of all the classic works of children's literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
About the department

The Department of Rare Books and Special Collections is housed on the Mezzanine level of Thomas Cooper Library and contains over 125,000 volumes and significant literary and historical manuscript holdings.

The heart of the University's rare book collection remains the library of the antebellum South Carolina College, books purchased or donated during the early nineteenth century. This library was particularly strong in general and classical literature, modern history, travel books, and natural history. With later additions, these core collections illustrate the history of the printed book and its cultural role from the invention of printing to the twentieth century.

Other collection strengths include: natural history (Darwin, ornithology, botany and florilegia); British and American literature (Milton, Burns, Carlyle, Emerson, Whitman, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, James Weldon Johnson, Heller); historical collections (Garibaldi, aviation, World War I, tennis, medical history, AIDS); medieval manuscripts; travel and exploration; modern fine press editions and artists' books.

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