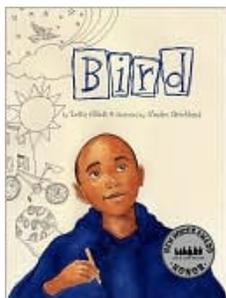


Children's Book Review

Elliott, Zetta with Strickland, Shadra (illustrator) (2008). *Bird*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books. 41pp., ISBN: 978-1-60060-241-2 (hc), \$19.95 (Ages 8-13).

Reviewed by Donna M. Basile, Samuel H. Daroff Elementary School & Eastern University, U. S. A.



Makhai, affectionately known as Bird, loves to draw. His much-adored older brother, Marcus, is his teacher as he learns to draw and use drawing to explore his world. Young Makhai is an inner-city boy who experiences the very real issues that often confront African American children. His beloved Granddad passed away, and brother Marcus has fallen into the world of drug addiction and eventually dies. Both Makhai and his family feel the deep and painful impact of their reality. As Makhai struggles to make sense of these very confusing times in his life, another “bird” is made known to him. Uncle Son, his Granddad’s best friend, takes the young boy under his wing and offers him physical, emotional, and spiritual support. Uncle Son spends time with Makai and provides an attentive spirit and a listening ear for the young boy to process his thoughts and feelings. As their relationship grows, Uncle Son freely offers his wisdom to Makhai in the everyday, ordinary experiences of their encounters. Additionally, Uncle Son continues to encourage and affirm Makhai’s gift for drawing. Makai’s drawings provide him with a means of escape, act as vehicles to help him cope, and serve as bridges to help him connect with the people who seem lost to him. With the help of Uncle Son, Makhai begins to realize that drawing is his own special something. In the end, he finds that the name Bird not only refers to how he ate as a baby but also to how he is now given wings to fly.

Bird is a story told with utter grace and authenticity. While it speaks of issues that might leave the reader/listener heavyhearted, it voices even more clearly the resiliency of the human spirit, especially that of an urban child. This is a story of profound loss and deep grief told through the eyes of a child. However, it does not end there but unravels into a journey of insight, identity, healing, and transformation, channeled through a wise old man and Makhai’s drawing. It is intense, and yet there is a thread of spiritual hopefulness that draws the reader/listener to stay until the end. The end also becomes a beginning as it provokes thoughts and feelings that can stimulate reflection and discussion both with adults and children.

From multicultural perspectives, *Bird* is a “monocultural” story written in an urban African American context. However, this beautiful story has an enormous value in enlightening the reader/listener about characters, settings, and daily realities of an urban African American family, not in a stereotypical

portrayal. Upon close analysis, questions may arise about the author's and illustrator's perspective on gender in the family context of the story. It is typically understood that male adults are often absent, or are background figures, and female adults are usually the driving force and the glue that holds the family together in African American families. Yet the author portrays the brother, grandfather, and uncle as main characters in the text and illustration of the story. Additionally, although fathers are absent in these families, the illustrator includes a father character in the background of her illustration. In this story the mother is clearly portrayed as a quiet figure comforted by the father.

Language is another multicultural aspect that needs to be addressed. The author gives a beautiful voice to her characters but mostly uses "standard" English in speaking. Urban African Americans are often seen as using a fair amount of "Ebonics" and family-rich endearments to make their voices known. The author includes very few words of African American dialect and hence makes this a story appear too cleaned up.

I wonder, therefore, who the audience is for this story. As an African American writer, the author is telling an African American story, her story in a way. She sees the value in having African Americans see themselves in her book. She does include many people, places, and things that would be familiar to African Americans. However, there seems to be something else at play here. Perhaps her attempts to step out of the box and broaden the African American experience were intentional. Since multicultural education has everything to do with connecting people, maybe the book can somehow be a bridge to connecting people and affirming diversity. The themes touched upon in this book are universal. Coping with family, death, grief, drug addiction, and adolescent issues is familiar to all peoples regardless of their culture, class, race, or ethnicity. I celebrate the author's efforts to provide a book that allows us to see ourselves in the faces of others.

Bird, the recipient of Lee & Low's New Voices Award Honor, is the first picture book of both Zetta Elliott, the author, and Shadra Strickland, the illustrator. As an elementary teacher of literacy in urban America, I read the book to my 5th through 8th graders who are predominantly African Americans. The book evoked much reflective discussion and self-discovery. My students and I enthusiastically recommend this book to all teachers and students.