

Disrupting Cultural and Historic Images of Black Childhood: Christopher Paul Curtis's *Elijah of Buxton*, *The Madman of Piney Woods*, and *The Journey of Little Charlie*

by Anne W. Anderson

Stories offer an extended opportunity to explore perspectives other than one's own, and they also build a collective image of a nation's history. Three of Christopher Paul Curtis's more recent books offer culturally and historically disruptive images of Black childhood that challenge other representations. In this paper, I draw on Birgit Neumann's (2009) discussion of cultural and historic imagology in literature as shaping the rhetoric of a national character to discuss Curtis's *Elijah of Buxton* (2007), *The Madman of Piney Woods* (2014), and *The Journey of Little Charlie* (2018), all told as first-person narratives.

In *Elijah of Buxton* (2007), a Newbery honor book and winner of the Coretta Scott King award, Curtis crosses national borders as eleven-year-old Elijah, the first free child born in Canada to a community of escaped former slaves, travels to the United States to help a still-enslaved family escape. In *The Madman of Piney Woods* (2014), set in 1901, Curtis explores cognitive borders as he presents two very different explanations for a set of events—one written in the voice of a black Canadian child, the other written in the voice of a white Irish immigrant child. In *The Journey of Little Charlie* (2018), Curtis, a black man raised in Michigan, challenges cultural borders as he writes in the voice—and dialect—of a poor, white child in pre-Civil War South Carolina. Further, Curtis disrupts notions of an appropriate tone in which to present stories involving racial conflict by incorporating sometimes outrageous humor in each story.

Anne W. Anderson is a doctoral candidate in Literacy Studies at the University of South Florida, Tampa, and she works at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg. Her work has been published in *Children's Literature in Education* (2018), *The Early Reader in Children's Literature and Culture* (Routledge, 2016), and *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies* (2013).

Work Cited

Neumann, Brigit. "Towards a Cultural and Historic Imagology: The Rhetoric of National Character in 18th-Century British Literature." *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2009, pp. 275-291.